

# **African Wax Print**

## *A Textile Journey*



**Magie Relph & Robert Irwin**

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# Introducing African wax print fabric

## The journey begins

Utter the phrase ‘African fabric’ and what do you imagine? Chances are, you’ll see an image of an African woman.

She could be a market trader, sitting in the dust with her pile of tomatoes and onions in front of the mud-brick mosque of Djenne in Mali. Maybe she’s a *Nana Benz*, a big, buxom fabric entrepreneur in the grand *marché* in Lomé, the fetish-fixated capital of Togo. Or even a sauntering, seductive fashion model, swirling down the catwalk in Paris, London or New York.

Aside from the colour of their skin, what tells us that all of these women, similar but different, are African? What visual clue virtually defines their African-ness?

For the vegetable vendor in Djenne, it’s her simple cotton wrap-around, perhaps twinned with a second wrapper to strap her baby onto her back. For Nana Benz, it’s an elaborately tailored, fitted and ruffled three-piece suit, complete with matching head-tie. For the high-fashion model, it’s the latest cutting-edge design – bold, bright and beautiful.

From Mali to Manhattan, from market stall to *haute couture*, the common denominator for all of these women and their costumes is the cloth that has dominated the African fabric market for over a century. It’s the colourful, vibrant and distinctive African wax print.

So what exactly is African wax print? Where does it come from? What does it mean in the context of Africa’s diverse textile heritage? How do Africans use wax print in Africa? And how is it used in the wider world, in the UK, Europe and America;

by Africans and non-Africans; and by the many designers, quilters and textile artists who are inspired by Africa and its textiles?

To find out, let’s take a journey, from the origins of wax print in 19th-century Europe to the markets of West Africa and beyond. Along the way, we’ll see wax print being worn, cut up, stitched, quilted, cherished and enjoyed.

So welcome aboard. Next stop ... Africa (with a slight detour via Java, Holland and England).

## Where to first? You decide

Every journey has to begin somewhere, so we start with the history and development of wax print. It’s a fascinating and surprising story. But maybe you’re more interested in wax print design or how these fabrics are used in Africa and beyond. That’s just fine: you can start where you like. After all, it’s your journey.

*Bon voyage*

## Telling the story

When we started this project, we already knew quite a bit about African wax print. Over the years we’ve collected many books and articles. To those we’ve added information tracked down in cyberspace, plus notebooks full of anecdotes recorded from conversations in England and Africa.

Regarding dates, names and the like, we’ve done our best to be precise. But we must be honest: as our pile of facts, figures and sources got bigger, we found many contradictions and gaps.

*Image courtesy of  
A Brunnschweiler & Co.*



At first, we (mainly Bob) panicked and tried to resolve them. Then, we (mainly Magie) said, 'Get real.'

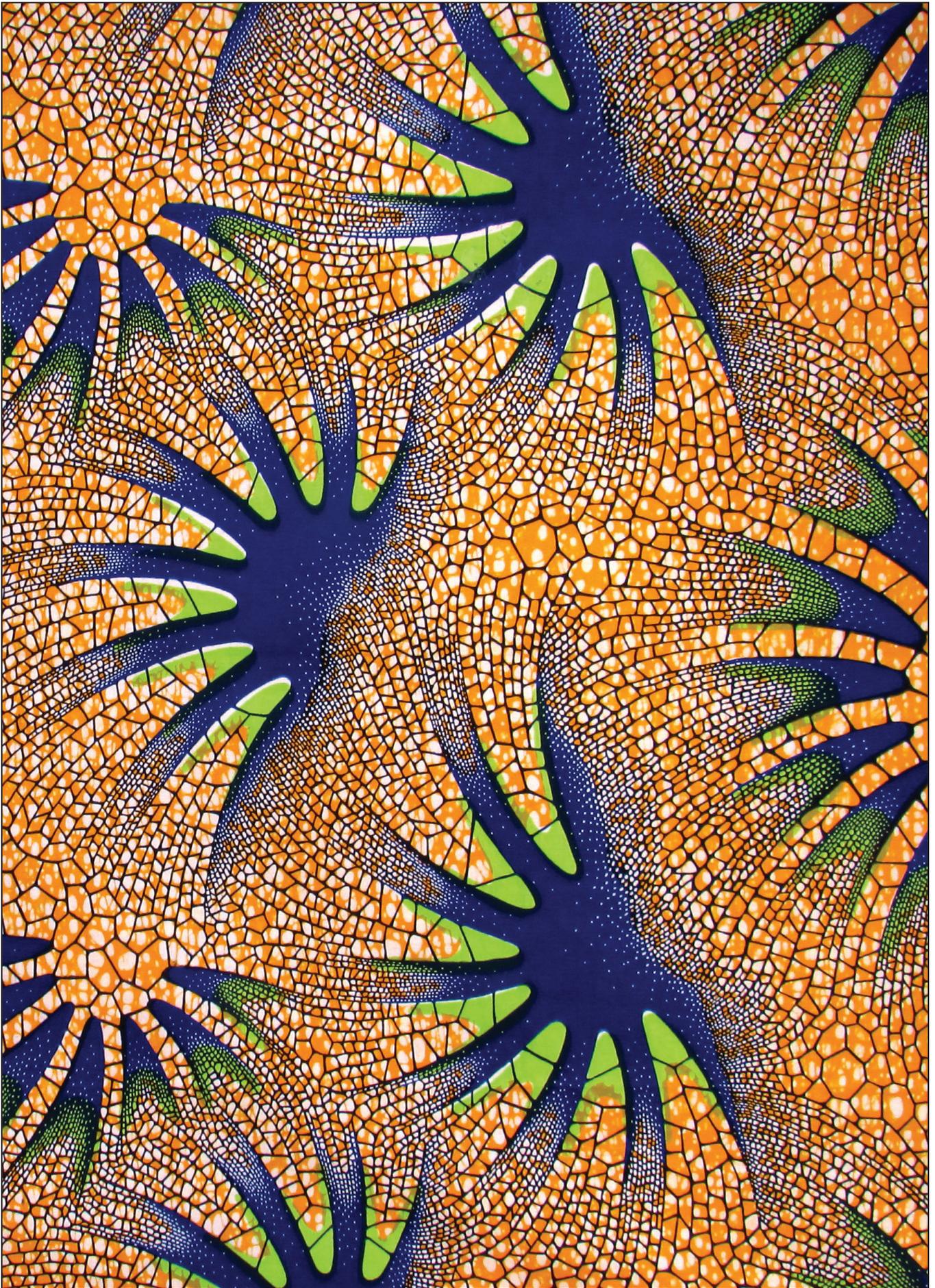
We thought about you, our readers. We realised that most of you are not scholars. You are textile artists, stitchers, weavers, spinners, dyers and embroiderers – quite simply, the community of textile lovers.

At that point, we said, 'Wait.'

We're not writing the definitive, last words on the subject of African wax print. That job is for academics. All we're doing is telling you a story. It's as accurate as we can make it. We hope it inspires you as much as the fabrics do.

*Waiting for the bus,  
Sikasso, Mali*





## About the authors



### *Magie Relph*

Magie Relph is a quilter, textile artist, teacher and author. Since 1984 she has wandered and wondered throughout Africa, studying, documenting and buying African textiles. In the 1990s she opened her battered cardboard suitcase full of wax prints to her quilt group, and her fair trade 'accidental business' – The African Fabric Shop – was born.

### *Robert Irwin*

Robert Irwin has only had malaria once, but he's had Africa in his blood since he was 10. For over 25 years he has travelled, photographed and written passionately about Africa, most recently with his wife Magie, about African textile traditions. He is The African Fabric Shop's web designer and full-time 'Saturday Boy'.

