

WAX ! Akwaaba wo Ghana !*

✋ Conceived by HEAR with anthropologist Anne Grosfilley, and co-produced with the Musée de l’Impression sur Etoffes in Mulhouse, the exhibition pays tribute to wax, a fabric of multiple origins - Asian, European and African - that has become an emblem of elegance and identity.

Through an immersive approach, the scenography weaves an original dialogue between transmission and innovation, from the industrial history of Mulhouse to the craft techniques of Ghana. Packed with anthropological and historical archives, the exhibition highlights a research and collection creation project carried out by six students in the Textile Design department at Haute École des Arts du Rhin (HEAR) in Mulhouse, in collaboration with the Ghanaian company AICL (Akosombo Industrial Company Limited).

Featuring some exceptional collections, the exhibition takes a different look at wax, celebrates the links forged between Mulhouse and Ghana, and takes visitors on an unexpected and exotic journey through a ‘fabric of elegance’, far removed from clichés and folklore.

Akwaaba wo Ghana ! Welcome to Ghana!

Exhibition curatorship

Anne Grosfilley and Christelle Le Déan

Collections

Anne Grosfilley

Group show

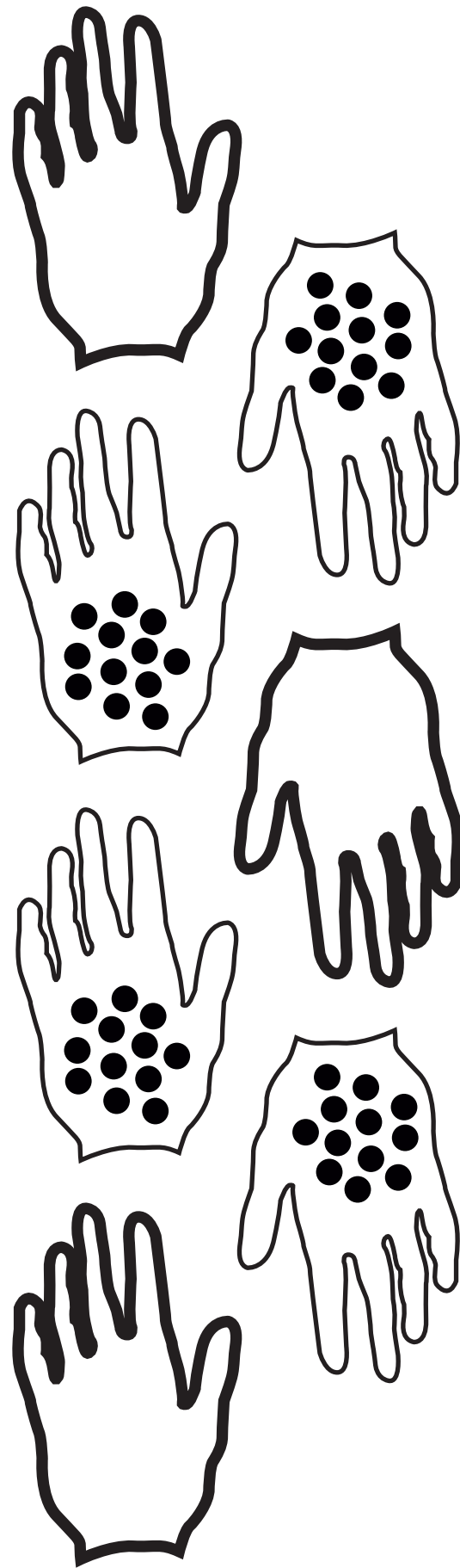
Louison Billy,
Perrine Caloin,
Maëlle Charpentier,
Marie Damageux,
Marguerite Outhenin-Chalandre,
Juliette Planchon-Clément,
Ninon Rousseau

June, 27th - November, 2nd 2025

Musée de l’impression sur étoffes

14 rue Jean-Jacques Henner - Mulhouse

From Wednesday to Sunday, 1 pm - 6 pm



HEAR MUSÉE DE L’IMPRESSION SUR ÉTOFFES
Mulhouse
With the patronage of **BARRISOL**

✋ Entrance — Corridor ↓

Opening the WAX ! exhibition under the banner of « The Hand » is an opportunity to delve into the history and the stories of this fabric. As the first wax print to arrive on the Gold Coast (now Ghana) in 1895, this iconic fabric has stood the test of time and become a carrier of messages. Once an allegory of strength in numbers, this design, now known as “don’t get married empty-handed”, urges feminism through financial independence. This hand also embodies the gesture of textile creation, from the sketch of the design to the manual printing, and symbolises those of 6 students from the Textile Design department at HEAR (Haute École des Arts du Rhin), who spent a week working at AICL (Akosombo Industrial Company Limited) in Ghana, printing an original collection. Bringing together the epic story of a global fabric and the adventures of young designers from Mulhouse, the exhibition extends a hand to you and invites you to take a journey through the world of wax prints, from their origins to their contemporary artistic variations. Akwaaba wo Ghana! *Welcome to Ghana!*

Welcome! Akwaaba !

4 frameworks illustrate the progressive anchoring of wax print in Africa

- 1 The first original version from 1895 was formatted to the measurements of a sarong, stopping at the knees (91 cm o 36 inches). African customers lengthened the wrapper by adding a strip of fabric, to obtain an ankle-length wrapper.
- 2 Vlisco therefore extended its strips to 1.20 m (48 inches) and completed the design with a row of fingers to make this fabric specifically adapted to African cultures.
- 3 From the 1970s onwards, the printing of “The Hand” by the Ivorian company Uniwax meant that this wax print became a Made in Africa product, with an economic impact on the continent (total value chain, cotton grown, spun, woven and printed locally).
- 4 This pattern has now become part of the tradition and incorporated into the glossary of patterns used by Ghanaian craftsmen, like this so-called “Obama” fabric.

✋ Ratti’s room ↓

Wax print, a global story

Considered today to be Africa’s most emblematic fabric, wax print is a blend of Asian, European and African cultures.

In the 19th century, textiles represented a major economic challenge, exacerbating competition between European nations keen to extend their areas of influence around the world. Following the example of Indian textiles, Western companies adapted foreign vernacular practices. Present in the Indonesian archipelago, Holland developed an interest in batik, which was industrialised by the company Prévinaire & Wilson around 1840. Its first industrial versions, marketed on the island of Java, did not fully reflect local aesthetic requirements and were only moderately popular for three decades. Convinced of the quality of this fabric, called “wax print” in reference to its wax printing process, the company looked for another market.

In the 1890s, the intuition of Scottish trader Ebenezer Brown Fleming marked the beginning of wax print, followed by the Swiss company Hohlenstein (1928-1974). In Mulhouse, the production of “fancy print” (a more affordable print inspired by the wax print style) became the preserve of Texunion. After independence in the 1980s, wax print production expanded in Africa with the support of European groups, notably in Ghana (ATL and GTP), Nigeria (UNTL, Nichemtex), Senegal (Sotiba Simpafric), the Democratic Republic of Congo (CPA Zaïre) and Côte d’Ivoire (Uniwax).

The opening up of textile markets by the WTO in 2005 led to a massive influx of wax prints from Asia (China, India, Pakistan), which now account for 96% of the market. Founded in 1846, the Dutch company Vlisco remains the only European company still in business. Africa has also seen the closure of many sites, with the exception of Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana.

3 shelves illustrate the history of wax printing and the creation of drawings

- Shelf 1
Indonesian batik inspired both the wax printing technique and certain iconographic elements. In Java, the use of the *cap* (copper strip stamp) increased the productivity of batiks originally decorated with *canting* (copper stylus for freehand wax drawing). For wax print, the design is transferred from off-set films and engraved on copper rollers. Additional colours are printed using wooden blocks covered with felt. The motif of the wings of the Garuda (the sacred bird of Vishnu) has many variants in Indonesia, and also serves as the inspiration for many wax print patterns, perceived by West Africans as a “snail out of its shell”, a “bunch of banana” or a “sea shell”. Another Indonesian-inspired pattern, known to European designers as the “Java mask”, is seen in Ghana as “the back of the turtle”.
- Shelf 2
The spread of wax prints to African markets can be traced back to the impact of the Scottish merchant Ebenezer Brown Fleming, who was advised by missionaries. A hand-woven *kente* and *adinkra* stamps illustrate the pre-existing role of draped textiles in expressing the prestige of the people of the Gold Coast.
The very first designs have become classics, linking generations over several decades.
The Indian print influence is reflected in the floral designs.
English production is inspired by the Dutch leader to appeal to African markets, and follows the latest innovations in terms of colour and style.
These competing companies are distributed by the same trading house, CFAO (Compagnie Française d’Afrique Occidentale), of which Qualitex is the textile division in the Ivory Coast (Côte d’Ivoire).
The emergence of local African industries is illustrated by wax printed in Ghana, Ivory Coast, Nigeria and Zaïre (Democratic republic of Congo).

- Shelf 3
The first wax print patterns are a form of vocabulary used to compose new designs. In this way, Vlisco is revisiting its heritage with great creativity.
At the initiative of the Gaia Foundation, the emblematic Hand motif has also been used to create a print in Mali to raise awareness of the dangers of Covid-19.
The glossary of old motifs is constantly being enriched with new successful designs, as demonstrated by the popularity of “wedding flower”, created in 1979 by Ton Van de Manakker, and now widely copied by the Asian industry.

- Desk
In order to target the cultural and aesthetic variety of African markets, each wax print design is available in several colour variations.

👤 Ratti’s room ↓

HEAR X AICL workshop in Ghana, and the technical exploration of wax printing

It all began in 2019 when teachers Christelle Le Déan and Mirjam Spooler from the Textile Design department at HEAR in Mulhouse started working with wax print and organised a trip to Helmond, the stronghold of Dutch wax print. In 2021, the project got a fresh start following a research seminar organised by HEAR and the involvement of Anne Grosfilley, a field anthropologist. This decisive encounter paved the way for a textile design project with the Ghanaian company AICL (Akosombo Industrial Company Limited), resulting in a collection of six contemporary designs conceived in Mulhouse and produced in Ghana. During 2021-2022, six students from the Textile Design department are taking part in a unique research project. They will design their models at HEAR and exchange ideas with the Ghanaian company to adapt their designs to the specific technicalities of the wax manufacturing process. These creations offer contemporary artistic expressions that have elective affinities with Mulhouse, its industrial history, the Indian prints, the tree of life or the representation of an ecosystem, japonism and the panoramic.

Louison Billy — *La Tisseuse de vie* ²³

Wax – a tool of non-verbal communication and a fabric of emancipation for the Nana Benz – is my chosen medium of expression. In this work, it is a cosmogony woven by a feminine power: the spider, Anansi, a legendary figure from Ashanti folklore in Ghana (in the Akan language, *ananse* means ‘spider’). Each interconnected element unfolds and regenerates. I wanted to question the status of contemporary women and challenge the stereotypes surrounding their fertility, their domesticity and their link to textiles in history. A symbol tied to the history of textiles and the Mulhouse region, the Tree of Life symbolised for the Persians the constant rebirth of beings and things, the cradle and interconnection between the different living elements, heaven and earth.

Perrine Caloin — *À vol d’oiseaux* ²⁴

This design is inspired by the many travels of Wax, an international fabric. Birds come from many different places and come and go as they please. For me, birds are like people who travel to explore new cultures and new landscapes. Here, although the landscape is imaginary, it draws inspiration from real elements, including Mont Blanc, Kilimanjaro and Everest.

Maëlle Charpentier — *Le Fauve à pois* ²⁵

This fawn polka dot was inspired by patterns I came across during a trip to Japan. There I learned shibori, a dyeing technique which, like WAX, relies on the principle of reserve to create patterns. This parallel between two cultures deeply moved me: Ghana and Japan, so far apart, come together through textile art, by inscribing memory onto fabric. My fawn becomes the symbol of this cultural fusion. Through this project, I am celebrating the dialogue between cultures and show how, despite their differences, they can come together to create and share knowledge and skills.

In February 2022, the 6 young designers travelled to Ghana to print their designs with the teams at AICL, the only company in the world to perpetuate manual block printing (a carved wooden stamp covered with felt), in the traditional process of the very first wax prints

The model drawings were transferred onto two offset films (with a mirror effect), then engraved onto thick copper cylinders. These print the design in negative onto the fabric, on both sides, using green wax (or resin) as a resist. A bath of indigo dye penetrates the unprotected areas and when the wax is removed, the areas that were covered appear white. The additional colours are block printed, to accentuate certain elements of the design. The slight discrepancy between the solid colour of the pattern, as well as the cracking (indigo veins resulting from the random cracks in the wax), contribute to the “perfect imperfections” of real wax print, each metre of which is unique.

Marguerite Outhenin-Chalandre

— *SIM - La Société industrielle mulhousienne* ²⁶

I construct my narrative by drawing on two textile heritages, Alsatian and Ghanaian. Here, the printing techniques of Alsatian heritage are brought into harmony with those of wax fabric, a legacy from Ghana. This pattern depicts the Société industrielle mulhousienne (SIM), with passersby of all generations moving through it, symbolising the transmission of know-how. The columns and climbing plants evoke the famous panoramas of the Zuber factory in Rixheim, while the graphic background, inspired by traditional WAX motifs, plays on mirror effects. The result is a play of tandem, a back-and-forth between two historical references - two techniques, two cultures.

Juliette Planchon-Clément — *La Danse de l’eau* ²⁷

A tribute to Ghanaian culture, weaving together nature, music, dance and traditional crafts. This dance features a jellyfish, a marine animal that can live both in deep, dark waters and in crystal-clear lagoons, moving effortlessly between warm and cold water. The jellyfish adapts perfectly to its marine environment and has the ability to merge completely with the environment in which it swims. It faces a fighting fish with imposing fins that churn up the water around it. Like Ghanaians, the jellyfish does not flee from the threat of the fighting fish but stands up to it. This traditional Wax stands for black and white, good and evil, dance and music, tradition and progress.

—

Ninon Rousseau — *L’Azuré des dunes et la fourmi* ²⁸

I’m harnessing the narrative power of wax and the possibility of creating an almost panoramic motif to tell the story of an endangered ecosystem in France – the life cycle of the dune azure This myrmecophilous butterfly (raised by ants) is found in Brittany and finds itself under threat, like so many other insect species. Ants rear the butterfly larvae that pollinate the dunes. The seeds sown by the butterflies, take root and stabilize the dunes. But with the destruction of the ant colonies caused by human behaviour (off-trail walking, littering, dogs not kept on leads), the butterflies are disappearing and the dunes are becoming increasingly fragile, even as sea levels continue to rise. These problems and the ecological challenges they represent form a bridge between Europe and Africa, as the entire globe is affected by the consequences of the loss of biodiversity.

Marie Damageux — Photographs

- Block printing workshop, AICL - Akosombo, indigo pattern
- Color workshop photograph, AICL - Akosombo, indigo pattern
- Six framed portraits, students, teacher and printmaking workshop supervisor, taken in the AICL printmaking workshop – Akosombo

Christelle Le Déan – Photographs

- Printing process, AICL – Akosombo, green pattern

👤 Tea salon ↓

From the market stall to the tailor’s workshop

The arrival of wax print on the market was the moment when it went beyond the status of a simple fabric and became the embodiment of women’s voice. As early as the 1950s, it was women traders in Togo who had the idea of associating names with the wax designs they had the monopoly on distributing. This highly lucrative initiative earned them the nickname of Nana Benz, as their wealth enabled them to acquire Mercedes Benz cars. From “the eye of my rival” to “money can fly”, from “wedding flower” to “Michelle Obama’s handbag”, it is often the message that drives the purchase of a design.

Wax print is sold in 6-yard lengths (3 x 1,80 m wrappers), and is intended to become a garment. Traditionally, the wrapper is draped around the hips like a long tubular skirt for women, and like a toga for men from coastal areas. Sewn garments reflects the imprint of monotheistic religions, for the sake of decency, like the Muslim-influenced boubou, or the flared mission dress (sometimes shortened to a blouse) introduced by Christian missions. For decades, the wearing of the wax prints remained highly codified, marking the social status of respectable married women who wore a “3 pieces suit” consisting of a bodice and two draped wrappers.

The end of the 1980s and the Golden Scissors competition organised by the Uniwax factory marked a fundamental turning point in the use of wax print, which became a fabric of elegance for both young women and men. Tailors became fashion designers, sublimating wax print into daring cuts that fitted the body. Workshops in working-class neighbourhoods are overflowing with wax prints left by their customers for weddings and parties. The tailors take their inspiration from magazines and adapt the models to the morphology of their customers, so that each elegant person has a unique model, cut freehand and sewn to measure.

Fashion designers

⁴³ At the end of the 1980s, Pathé’O became the first designer to develop a line of wax shirts for men from Côte d’Ivoire, sold across the African continent in a network of 15 boutiques.

⁴⁴ At the dawn of the 21st century, recognisable by its red stitching and visible label, Xuly Bèt is revisiting wax print for the Afropolitan markets of Paris, London and New York.

The luxury company Vlisco is developing collaborations with bold and innovative designers, such as Londonners Ozwald Boateng ⁴⁵ and Alexis Temomanin (Dent de Man) ⁴⁶. They celebrate their Ghanaian and Ivorian origins with refinement.

⁴⁷ It was with Dior that wax print became part of a worldwide history. With the Cruise 2020 collection, artistic director Maria Grazia Chiuri offers a conversation between Toile de Jouy and tarot card designs, and the wax printing technique. The excellence of the Parisian Haute Couture Maison, the expertise of anthropologist Anne Grosfilley, and the dynamism of the Uniwax company in the Ivory Coast combine to create an exceptional ready-to-wear collection, based on 42 designs created and printed in Abidjan. For 130 years, wax print was produced in Europe for African markets. Reversing the course of history, it’s now Africa that is becoming a major producer of wax print for the luxury market in Europe.

Textile hangings

The anthropologist Anne Grosfilley and the historian Claude Boli question representations of wax by proposing a dialogue on various themes, in the spirit of XXL imagiers. The visual effectiveness of their work is reminiscent of Pop Art, and is a unique take on fabrics intended for clothing use.

⁴⁸ Elegance

To complete a beautiful outfit, there’s nothing like a watch and a pretty pair of shoes. Not everyone can do this, and many women have to make do with flip-flops, which they call ‘in the meantime’, in the hope of one day wearing pretty pumps. The handbag is the emblematic accessory of feminine elegance, and when she dons ‘Michelle Obama’s handbag’, every woman feels beautiful and powerful.

At the dawn of the 21st century, wax print is a fabric for clothing, accessories and interior decoration. It is also becoming a visible symbol of the link between the African continent and its Diasporas. Wearing tailor-made wax underlines the uniqueness of one’s personality, while expressing membership of a collective union. What’s more, wax is also a form of exceptional craftsmanship that is highly valued in the luxury sector and transcends borders.

The **tailor’s workshop** is evoked by the famous Singer sewing machine ²⁹, scissors, charcoal irons ³⁰ and a tape measure, pieces of wax prints left by customers ³¹ and garments that have just been sewn ³², posters compiling the year’s trends ³³ and the order book of the fashion designer Pathé’O ³⁴, Vlisco and Uniwax magazines ³⁵ serving as inspiration catalogues, and other essential objects such as the fan ³⁶, the transistor ³⁷ and the broom for cleaning the workshop of all the fabric scraps ³⁸.

In Togo, the word *assassan* ³⁹ is used to describe a wrapper made up of strips of high-quality wax prints joined edge to edge. Wearing such a fabric becomes an ostentatious way of showing off one’s entire collection of original Vlisco Dutch fabric. This practice differs from the *baïfal* style from Senegal ⁴⁰, where tailors recycle scraps of irregular shapes by assembling them to make shirts at very low cost.

⁴¹ The outfits worn by the participants at a wedding in Abidjan (Ivory Coast) illustrate the notion of uniform. Group membership is expressed by the wearing of the same fabric, but each person’s personality is revealed by the unique style of their outfit, sewn to measure.

⁴² Tailors often display their creations to attract customers. In the 1990^s, they displayed their work on painted screens, influenced by the Bollywood films shown in open-air cinemas.

⁴⁹ Coquetterie

The Dutch factory Vlisco only assigns a serial number to its designs, and lets African shopkeepers give them a name. This is how the background designs on this hanging became ‘Family’ and the women like to point out that the whole hen occupies a central position, whereas only the rooster’s head appears on the periphery. The British company ABC preferred to associate a name with each creation. To target the French-speaking markets, some names have tried their hand at French, such as ‘Coquetterie’ for a rooster motif. *So British!*

⁵⁰ Africa in fashion

In black Africa, made-to-measure tailoring is still the main way to dress. After buying a wax at the market, people take it to a tailor who takes the measurements and creates an outfit in just a few days, according to the customer’s instructions. The result is never guaranteed, and the phrase. “Je reviendrai” is the expression of a satisfied customer.

⁵¹ ⁵² Vlisco — 2021 Campaign

Extract from the “Euphoria” campaign directed by Bart Hess and choreographed by Emma Evelein. A veritable visual manifesto conceived as a colourful musical spot where wax-printed fabrics are enhanced by dynamic, sensory choreography. → emmaevelein.com/portfolio-items/vlisco/

⁵³ ⁵⁴ Vlisco — 2025 Campaign

The “Blossoming Beauty” campaign has been entrusted to the Togolese collective Togo YEYE (‘New Togo’), founded in 2019 in Lomé by Malaiika Nabillah and Delali Ayivi. The collective celebrates Togolese culture, youth and female strength. A vibrant tribute to Nana Benz, the emblematic and inspiring figures in the history of wax fabric in Togo. VLISCO invites you to discover Lomé (its beaches, flowers and streets) through powerful visuals created by a 100% Togolese team.

⁵⁵ ⁵⁶ Instagram photo booth

Perrine Caloin, *À vol d’oiseau* and Marguerite Outhenin Chalandre, *SIM - Société industrielle mulhousienne*