

DANIELLE BRUGGEMAN
ArtEZ University of the Arts

Vlisco: Made in Holland, adorned in West Africa, (re)appropriated as Dutch design

ABSTRACT

While the idea of 'Africa' is sometimes a source of inspiration for brands and designers aimed at the western market, the colourful wax prints by the Dutch company Vlisco were historically made for West and Central African consumers. These fabrics, designed and produced in the Netherlands, have become interconnected with African culture and identity. Established in 1846, the company Vlisco focused on the Dutch East Indies and later West and Central Africa as its export markets. Yet today, Vlisco is playing an increasing role in western fashion, art and design. Moreover, Vlisco has recently collaborated with renowned Dutch designers such as Viktor&Rolf, actively (re)appropriating the wax printed fashion fabrics as Dutch. In this article I explore the multiple layers of cultural (re)appropriation, and the deep-rooted 'cultural hybridity', underlying Vlisco's wax printed fashion fabrics. The most recent form of cultural (re)appropriation is the way in which Vlisco presents itself within the context of Dutch design. In this article I focus on the hybrid cultural dynamics underlying the performance of Africanity – and recent Dutchness – through the use of Vlisco's fabrics in the context of today's globalized fashion system.

KEYWORDS

Vlisco
Dutch wax
African fashion
cultural hybridity
cultural
(re)appropriation
Dutch fashion
Dutch design

1. See <http://www.viktor-rolf.com/haute-couture/>.

INTRODUCTION

Dutch fashion designers Viktor&Rolf brought textiles company Vlisco's abundant colours and floral patterns to life as sculpted flowers in their haute couture collection 'Van Gogh Girls' (Spring/Summer 2015). As the title suggests, the Viktor&Rolf collection was also inspired by 'the raw energy of Vincent van Gogh's exuberant depiction of the rural countryside'.¹ In this fashion collection Viktor&Rolf thus presented the Vlisco wax printed fabrics in the context of Dutch (fashion) design and Dutch cultural heritage. This Dutch context is surprising since the Vlisco fabrics, although designed and produced in the Netherlands since 1846, were historically made for West and Central African consumers. Moreover, even before Vlisco's focus on West and Central Africa as its main export market, in the nineteenth century the company appropriated the batik technique from Indonesia for the production of their wax prints, which were then exported to the former Dutch colony, the Dutch East Indies. This demonstrates the multiple layers of appropriation inherent to the Vlisco brand and the textiles.

In the twentieth century, the Vlisco fabrics have increasingly become interconnected with African culture and identity (see Sylvanus 2007; Cronberg 2012; Delhay and Woets 2015). Today, Vlisco is marketed as 'Real Dutch wax' and as 'The True Original' wax print in African fashion. This discursive construction of Vlisco's 'true originality' is problematic considering that the wax prints were originally imitations of the Javanese batik technique, appropriated from Indonesia (Cronberg 2012; Delhay and Woets 2015). In addition, Vlisco was one of many European wax print manufacturers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries aimed at the West African market, which also renders



Figure 1: Viktor&Rolf, 'Van Gogh Girls' (Spring/Summer 2015). Photograph by Team Peter Stigter.

this branded originality ambiguous.² While the idea of these wax prints being ‘authentically African’ should be critically approached, it is also important to acknowledge that the Africanness of these fabrics is produced in the context of local consumption practices (Sylvanus 2007, 2013a). In contemporary West and Central African fashion the Vlisco brand stands for luxury, exclusivity, status and high quality: ‘It is for the Ghanaian, Nigerian, Beninoise or Congolese woman what Hermes or Louis Vuitton is for the European’ (Cronberg 2012: 313). Recently, Vlisco’s fabrics have entered western fashion, art and design (e.g. Cronberg 2012; Corstanje 2012; Delhay and Woets 2015). As the example of Viktor&Rolf’s ‘Van Gogh Girls’ collection illustrates, Vlisco’s fashion fabrics are also specifically presented as part of Dutch fashion and Dutch design.

In this article I will discuss multiple layers of cultural (re)appropriation and focus on the most recent form of (re)appropriation, namely the new performative and discursive construction of Dutchness through the use of the Vlisco wax prints in design for western audiences.³ ‘Cultural appropriation’ is a complex and much contested term, but fundamentally entails ‘the taking – from a culture that is not one’s own – of intellectual property, cultural expressions or artifacts, history and ways of knowledge’ (Ziff and Rao 1997: 1). An important addition to this process of taking is that cultural appropriation also involves ‘taking as *one’s own*’ or ‘making use of’ what has originated in another cultural context, integrating it into one’s own culture (Young and Brunk 2012: 2–3, emphasis added). This understanding was actively produced by problematic colonial power relations. ‘Cultural reappropriation’ can then be conceived as the process of reclaiming or ‘taking back’ these cultural objects. These terms help to understand the multiple processes of cultural (re)appropriation inherent to Vlisco’s wax prints, such as appropriating the Javanese batik technique; the integration of ‘Dutch wax’ into West African culture; and the most recent form of reclaiming these fabrics as Dutch. At the same time, the term cultural appropriation might suggest a simplified binary exchange between two different cultures, which does not always do justice to the complexities of the underlying cultural dynamics. Therefore, I also explore the multiple layers of cultural appropriation and reappropriation through the term ‘cultural hybridity’ by Homi Bhabha (1990, 1994). Several scholars have debated the notion of ‘hybridity’, suggesting that this term does not acknowledge political sensitivities regarding cultural difference (see e.g. Young 1995; Mitchel 1997; Werbner and Modood 1997). Although we must remain sensitive to cultural difference, the term cultural hybridization does enable understanding the increased transgression of cultural boundaries and helps to recognize the production of new hybrid cultural identities (Pieterse 1995; Barker 2012: 265). In this article I will use the term ‘cultural hybridity’ to demonstrate the complex and deep-rooted hybrid cultural dynamics and the heterogeneous cross-cultural fertilization that underlie Vlisco’s wax prints. First, I reflect on the historical paradoxical relationship between manufacturing Vlisco fabrics in the Netherlands, its export markets, and the perception of these wax prints as African. Second, I focus on Vlisco’s use by Dutch designers for western audiences, critically reflecting on its recent (re)appropriation as Dutch.

RESEARCH METHODS

In this article I draw upon my extensive research in the Vlisco archives, in-depth interviews with Vlisco employees, and a fieldwork trip in Togo and Ghana (August 2015). I conducted fourteen in-depth interviews with (former) Vlisco employees in the Netherlands about the company’s history,

2. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Vlisco (at the time, Van Vlissingen & Co) was just one of many European wax print companies aimed at the West African market. Other European wax print companies at the time include Ankersmit, Haarlemsche Katoen Maatschappij, Leidsche Katoen Maatschappij (in the Netherlands); Logan Muckelt & Co, F.W. Ashton and Co, F.W. Grafton and Co (in the United Kingdom); and Fröhlich, Brunnschweiler & Cie, Gebr. Blumer & Cie and AG Baumwolldruckerei Hohlenstein (in Switzerland).
3. This article presents the results of the research project ‘Vlisco: Made in Holland, Adorned in West Africa’ (February–November 2015) at Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands. This nine month project was funded by the Creative Industry / KIEM programme of The Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO). The project was initiated in collaboration with Professor Anneke Smelik (project leader, Radboud University), José Teunissen (ArtEZ), Roger Gerards (former Creative Director Vlisco), and Joop Martens (Foundation Pieter Fentener van Vlissingen).

4. Not only Vlisco, but also other Dutch printing companies such as Prévinçaire, De Heyder, and the Kralingsche Katoen Maatschappij produced textiles for the Dutch East Indies.
5. During the period of the British occupation of Java from 1811 to 1816, they saw commercial opportunities to imitate Javanese cloth in Europe, to export it from Europe and to sell it for a cheaper price in Java (Verbong 1988: 185; Heringa 1989: 137–38). Among other European manufacturers, the Dutch (at first unsuccessfully) aimed to reconquer the Javanese textile market by imitating the Javanese cloth (Verbong 1989: 51).
6. The mechanically produced cloth was unacceptable to Indonesian consumers as a result of the ‘cracking effect’, an unintended technical fault which caused indigo veins and white spots called ‘bubbling’, which was created by cracks in the resin during the production process (Sylvanus 2013a: 32; Clarke 1997: 114; LaGamma 2008: 20).
7. The potential for distinction was a result of the ‘cracking effect’, which was rejected in Indonesia, but did appeal to West African taste because each yard was considered to be unique (Kroese 1976; Clarke 1997: 114; Sylvanus 2007, 2013a).

the emotional and cultural value of the product, and about their design, brand and communication strategies. In addition, I conducted sixteen in-depth interviews with consumers, shop owners, and traders during my fieldwork in Ghana and Togo about the meaning of these wax prints for the West African consumers. Through a detailed visual analysis of fashion collections and design objects made of the Vlisco fabrics presented in a western and specifically Dutch context, and a discourse analysis of the reception of these design expressions, I critically reflect on the recent performance of Dutchness through the use of the Vlisco textiles.

MADE IN HOLLAND, ADORNED IN WEST AFRICA

The context of colonialism and textile trade in which Vlisco (among other European textile manufacturers) started to develop and export wax prints in the nineteenth century is crucial to understand the complex processes of cultural appropriation inherent to Vlisco’s wax prints. As Christine Delhaye and Rhoda Woets point out, ‘[t]he multi-layered history of wax cloth is embedded in a long and ongoing history of global trade and cultural (re)appropriation’ (2015: 94).

When the company P.F. van Vlissingen and Co. (Vlisco) was founded in the small city of Helmond in the Netherlands by Pieter Fentener van Vlissingen in 1846 (Rodenburg and Bijlsma 1948: 19), the Fentener van Vlissingen family had already established trade relations with the Dutch East Indies.⁴ Samples of Javanese batik cottons were sent to the Netherlands in order to be reproduced with the aim to export these imitation batik prints to the former Dutch colony (1948: 15–23).⁵ European textile companies such as Vlisco developed a mechanical reproduction process to replicate the Javanese wax printing technique, planning to sell it for a lower price in the Dutch East Indies (Sylvanus 2013a: 32). The export of imitation batiks to Indonesia already started to decline after 1867 due to an increasingly competitive local market and because the mechanically reproduced batik cottons did not suit Indonesian taste (Sylvanus 2013a: 32; Clarke 1997: 114; LaGamma 2008: 20).⁶ The declining sales forced European traders to search for a new export market, which Vlisco found in West Africa, specifically the British colony Gold Coast (today, Ghana) (Verbong 1988: 200–01, 219–20; Picton 1995: 26). Indian cotton textiles had been brought to the Gold Coast for centuries and by the eighteenth century, woven and printed cotton from India was the most highly valued commodity by West Africans due to ‘its bright, nonfading colors and its affordability’ (LaGamma 2008: 20). The early interest in high-quality printed cotton textiles in West Africa possibly prepared the market for the successful import of European wax prints in later centuries (Elands 2017). The success of the wax prints is said to be a result of their appeal to local taste, ‘not only because of the advantages associated with the lightness of their cotton and the new and unprecedented choice for color possibilities offered, but most importantly because of their unique potential for distinction’ (Sylvanus 2013a: 32).⁷ In order to better understand West African visual culture, aesthetic tastes, and symbolic systems, European manufacturers such as Vlisco employed local market women as consultants (Gott 2010: 16). These Dutch wax printed fabrics gradually became part of African culture (Picton 1995: 29; Ankersmit 2010: 4; Gott 2010: 16).

The Africanness of Vlisco’s wax prints was produced by local consumption practices and systems of meaning (Sylvanus 2007: 212). During my

fieldwork, market women, shop owners and consumers in Lomé (Togo) and Accra (Ghana) expressed that Dutch wax is valued because it is closely related to their family histories and personal memories, worn at special occasions, and passed on from generation to generation. A defining factor in the appropriation of the Dutch wax prints as African is the tradition of assigning local names, meanings and symbolic values to the specific designs of the wax printed fabrics. Local consumers and traders thus actively appropriate these fabrics into their local traditions, daily practices and rituals, creating their own local visual language (see Sylvanus 2007; Delhay and Woets 2015). Vlisco marketers actively contribute to this process of adaptation and appropriation by inviting contemporary consumers to send in their stories connected to specific designs (Delhay and Woets 2015: 85). As a brand, Vlisco thus constructs and commodifies the idea of the 'authentically African' (Sylvanus 2007: 201). Vlisco's branding activities and the multiple layers of cultural (re)appropriation that have formulated its core identity and practice, point to a paradox of what Anneke Smelik has called the 'performance of authenticity' (2011). As Smelik argues, particularly in the field of fashion 'authenticity is nowadays constructed and performed, and it has therefore become an illusion that can no longer be true or genuine' (2011: 77). In addition to the illusions of authenticity created in the field of fashion, the notions of originality and authenticity are especially controversial in relation to Africanity and are much contested in African art history and postcolonial studies. Sidney Kasfir played an important role in the critical discussion of authenticity by highlighting the importance of dissecting the political, economic and cultural power relations inherent to the study of authenticity (Kasfir 1992; Steiner 1992). As Kasfir asserted, it is imperative to critically re-examine who has authority in giving meaning to and defining African art, and who determines its cultural authenticity (1992: 41). This debate must be taken into account when investigating the meaning and authenticity of Vlisco's wax prints in a West and Central African context. The colonial context of Dutch wax prints' origins and textile trade in West and Central Africa contests the concepts of originality and authenticity of 'Real Dutch wax' as African. The role of Vlisco's 'Real Dutch wax' in local consumption practices can thus better be understood as an 'invented "African" tradition' (Sylvanus 2013a: 34). Moreover, as Victoria Rovine points out, many African styles emerged out of cross-cultural contacts before they gained 'official' status as traditions (2010: 91–92).

The complexities underlying the 'Dutchness' and 'Africanity' of Vlisco's wax prints, are best interpreted in terms of Homi Bhabha's 'cultural hybridity' (1990, 1994).⁸ Bhabha proposed to understand a nation as a 'space that is *internally* marked by cultural difference and the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities, and tense cultural locations' (1990: 299, original emphasis). Although the term 'cultural hybridity' remains problematic because it might imply the interaction between two homogenous cultures, Bhabha fruitfully understands 'hybridization is the mixing of that which is already a hybrid' (Barker 2012: 265). From this perspective, narrative constructions of nations, as well as narrative constructions of entire continents like Africa, are necessarily characterized by the internal hybridity of international and intercontinental cultural constituents. The notion of cultural hybridity offers deeper insight into the complex processes of cross-cultural fertilization inherent to the integration of Dutch wax into West and Central African culture.

Even though cultural hybridity lies at the core of the Vlisco wax prints, most designs are embedded in local systems of signs and meanings, which

8. In my Ph.D. dissertation 'More than meets the eye: Dutch fashion, identity and new materialism' (2014) I used a synthesis of postcolonial studies and performance theory to conceptualize the hybrid cultural dynamics underlying contemporary performances of national identity, and specifically performances of 'Dutchness' through contemporary Dutch fashion. In this article I will draw upon this approach by using the theoretical notion of 'cultural hybridity' as theorized by Homi Bhabha (1990, 1994) in relation to performances of Africanity through Vlisco's wax prints.

9. As expressed by a Vlisco employee, this strategy of becoming a fashion brand was initially primarily a response to the increased competition from Chinese manufacturers, who started selling exact copies of the Vlisco designs in Africa (personal communication, 7 December 2016).
10. Vlisco, for instance, launched a Tailor Academy and facilitation platform in West Africa to help young fashion designers by educating them with the aim to stimulate the local fashion system.

produces the fabrics' Africanness, as argued above. When wearing wax prints consumers are thus *performing* African identity as well as embodying the wax prints' (partly commodified) originality and authenticity. When using the theoretical notion of 'performance' here, I draw upon Judith Butler's (1990, 1993) work on performative identity dynamics. Her understanding pertains to subjective identity and embodied performances, but this notion of performing identity can also be extended to a national and broader cultural level. Relating this to Stuart Hall's (2002) notion of national identity as a culturally shared and constructed *idea* of what the nation stands for, helps to understand how specific objects, symbols and representations of fashion play a discursive role in defining and performatively constituting – an inherently fluid and hybrid – national, or in this case even continental, cultural identity. As argued elsewhere, '[a]t the heart of national identity we find cultural hybridity' (Smelik et al. 2017: 100). The performance of African – or perhaps rather Ghanaian, Togolese, etc. – identity through Dutch wax is simultaneously constituted and commodified by the Vlisco brand and subjectively experienced and expressed through the embodied performances of the consumers. While African identity is performatively constituted through (wearing) Vlisco's Dutch wax with its distinctive visual language, hybrid cultural dynamics are always simultaneously present.

Cultural hybridity is a result of historical processes of cross-cultural fertilization. Yet cultural hybridity is still relevant in relation to the contemporary globalized context of fashion and design. In the field of contemporary African fashion, which has entered the globalized world of fashion (Rabine 2002), we can find many African fashion designers who 'celebrate and transform their own cultural heritage in runway fashions emphasizing the use of local textiles and African themes' (Gott and Loughran 2010: 1), including Vlisco's wax prints. Due to the rise of African fashion, changing demands of the younger generations, and increased competition, there was an urgency for Vlisco to reconsider its brand strategy (see e.g. Arts 2012; Sylvanus 2013b; Delhaye and Woets 2015). Instead of remaining a textile manufacturer, in 2007 Vlisco became a (luxury) fashion brand and started to work in accordance with established principles of the fashion system (Arts 2012: 117–18; Delhaye and Woets 2015: 81).⁹ As Vlisco initiated collaborations with African fashion designers, the presence of Dutch wax within the growing fashion industry in cities such as Accra and Lomé became even more visible.¹⁰ While Vlisco has become part of the West and Central African fashion system, the brand and its textiles have recently entered the fields of western fashion, art and design, and specifically Dutch design.

(RE)APPROPRIATED AS DUTCH DESIGN

In the course of the last decade, Vlisco aspired to become a worldwide fashion, design and lifestyle brand and started collaborating with brands like Eastpak and Adidas. The role that Vlisco aims to play in the global world of fashion can be understood as a 'de-localizing' strategy (Delhaye and Woets 2015: 81), somewhat loosening the exclusive ties with the African continent by reframing itself as a global brand. In recent years, western fashion brands and designers such as Dries van Noten, Burberry, and Agnes B have presented Vlisco fabrics on the catwalk in Europe, alluding to 'the "otherness" that African-print textiles have come to signify' for the western eye (Cronberg 2012: 313). These recent activities of European designers using Vlisco's wax

prints – which still symbolically signify Africanity – must be approached from an orientalist perspective, which is ‘indispensable when trying to understand fashion’s fascination for “cultural otherness”’ (Smelik et al. 2017: 98). The western fascination for ‘exotic’ (in this case African) textiles cannot be separated from the cultural dynamics in the times of colonial textile trade as it echoes the western interest in appropriating oriental cultural objects.

The most recent form of cultural (re)appropriation is the way in which Vlisco started to present itself within the context of western fashion, art and design (Delhay and Woets 2015: 81), and specifically in the context of Dutch design. From February to August 2016, the Vlisco fabrics were exhibited as part of the *Cooper Hewitt Design Triennial* in New York City. This exhibition also showed work of renowned Dutch designers Iris van Herpen, Studio Job and Scholten & Baijings. In the accompanying publication, Vlisco’s former creative director Roger Gerards – who played an important role in developing Vlisco’s brand and design strategy focused on western fashion, art and design – stated that:

Vlisco still has this long relation between the consumer in West Africa and the production and design department in Holland. But for the last eight years, we have been making a big shift to fashion and design globally. We are slowly working to get more and more relevancy outside West Africa.

(Gerards, in Lipps 2016: 58)

Although aiming for a de-localized global market, Vlisco’s new focus also involved actively collaborating with renowned Dutch designers, which contributed to the discursive production of the Vlisco brand and product *as* Dutch.

The new strategy was, for example, expressed in 2012 when Dutch fashion designers such as Frans Molenaar, Bas Kosters and Addy van den Krommenacker created exclusive accessories made of Vlisco’s wax prints for Orange Babies, an NGO that aims to help mothers and babies with HIV in Africa. In the same year, the Museum for Modern Art in Arnhem opened an exhibition about (and in collaboration with) Vlisco called *Six Yards Guaranteed Dutch Design* (2012). The title of this exhibition refers to the length of fabric traditionally sold and worn by consumers in West and Central Africa. In addition, the title also refers to the text ‘Guaranteed Dutch wax’ (or *Veritable Wax Hollandais* in the French-speaking countries) printed on the selvedge of the Vlisco cloth. Consumers in West Africa traditionally like to show the selvedge of the cloth to prove that it is genuine Dutch wax, which is connected to social status (interview 27 August 2015, Accra, Ghana). While these six yards of Dutch wax are closely connected to West African traditions and values, the exhibition title simultaneously explicitly (re)appropriates the Vlisco fabrics as a form of Dutch design.

The exhibition presented Vlisco’s folded cloths as well as fabrics styled into clothing in the work of fashion designers such as Dries van Noten, Lucy Orta and Marga Weimans. The artwork of Yinka Shonibare, known for his critical use of the Vlisco fabrics, was also included (De Baan 2012). As Shonibare has expressed, he used the Vlisco fabrics ‘as a metaphor for challenging various notions of authenticity both in art and identity’ (Shonibare, in LaGamma 2009: 98). By ironically playing with Vlisco’s ‘African’ fabrics, Shonibare continuously raises questions such as ‘What is African? What is European?’



Figure 2: The exhibition Six Yards Guaranteed Dutch Design (2012), Museum Arnhem. Photograph by Willem Franken.



Figure 3: The exhibition Six Yards Guaranteed Dutch Design (2012), Museum Arnhem. Photograph by Willem Franken.

Who creates and consumes these identities?’ (Hynes 2001: 61). Including Shonibare’s critical artworks in this exhibition can be understood as a way of acknowledging the complexities of the company’s (post)colonial history and the multiple layers of cultural (re)appropriation underlying its presence in the international field of fashion and design. At the same time, this museum exhibition shows how Vlisco today explicitly relates its brand and designs to the discourse of Dutch design.



Figure 4: The exhibition *Unfolded*, Dutch Design Week (2013). Photograph by Kasia Gatkowska.



Figure 5: The exhibition *Unfolded*, Dutch Design Week (2013). Photograph by Kasia Gatkowska.

Vlisco's presence in the field of Dutch design is also emphasized by the company's participation in the Dutch Design Week, the largest design event of Northern Europe, in the city of Eindhoven. As part of the Dutch Design Week in 2013, Vlisco presented its rich history in the exhibition *Unfolded*, simultaneously unfolding their future vision for Vlisco as a global lifestyle, design and fashion brand (Eindhovens Dagblad, 27 September 2013). For this exhibition Vlisco collaborated with renowned Dutch designers such as Studio Job, who designed the *L'Afrique* fabric – a fabric made by Vlisco used to

cover the 'Congo Chair' (1952) by Theo Ruth for Dutch design label Artifort. Interestingly, this demonstrates the incorporation of symbolic signifiers of Africanity into a Dutch design context.

In an interview with the fashion magazine *Dezeen* about this exhibition, Roger Gerards explicitly related Vlisco to (a tradition of) Dutch design: 'People know Dutch design from the past, like Rietveld, very clean, very sober and very reflective. We [Vlisco] are very outspoken, decorative – and we're Dutch design. It's totally made in a Dutch environment' (Gerards, in Fairs 2013). In this statement Gerards contrasts Vlisco to a so-called 'typical' minimalist Dutch style, which is often understood as a 'Dutch modernistic and conceptual design tradition in graphic design, architecture and interior design' (Teunissen 2011: 159). Yet at the same time, Gerards claims Vlisco as Dutch design due to the Dutch environment in which it is made. As such, this statement demonstrates the way in which Vlisco is actively engaging in the discursive production of the Vlisco textiles *as* Dutch for a western audience. Since the 1990s, product, industrial and interior design has been at the core of 'Dutch Design'. One could argue that 'Dutch Design' has become a brand in itself to promote Dutch designers internationally, capitalizing on the narratively constructed national tradition of design with a modernist style. Thus, 'Dutch Design' is a myth of a 'typical Dutch design mentality' (Feitsma 2014: 83), which could also be viewed as a performative expression and discursive construction of Dutchness.

Even more recent examples illustrate the ways in which the Vlisco brand and product are increasingly integrated into Dutch design. As part of her graduation project at the Design Academy in Eindhoven in 2015, Dutch designer Simone Post did extensive research into Vlisco's waste material. For her 'Post-Vlisco' project, she used leftovers and misprints for a series of interior products, such as carpets and seat covers.



Figure 6: Simone Post, 'Post-Vlisco' (2015).

Her project was also aimed at developing new sustainable application possibilities and addressing a new market.¹¹ In 2016 her project was nominated for a Dutch Design Award, which is annually one of the highlights during the Dutch Design Week in Eindhoven. While Vlisco developed from being a textile manufacturer to a brand focused on fashion aiming for a global market, the company has now entered the multidisciplinary field of Dutch design.

An exhibition at the heart of the Dutch Design Week of 2016 included a pop-up restaurant which Dutch designer Maarten Baas had fully decorated with Vlisco fabrics functioning as, for instance, tablecloths and flags. Moreover, this exhibition presented a digitally created Vlisco wax print design made by Teun van den Wittenboer, which was brought to life as a two-minute animation video by digital media designer Lody Aeckerlin.

This animation shows the entire design and manufacturing process of Vlisco textiles: drawing and digitally creating bright coloured and geometric patterned designs; applying the hot wax on long lengths of white cloth; the first layer of indigo dye; removing and washing off the wax with some brown spots of wax remaining; the second layer of printing; washing and folding the textiles; and finally, adding the Vlisco logo and packaging the folded textiles in jute bales ready to be sent to cities like Kinshasa, Lagos and Abidjan. Interestingly, this animation video focused on the entire process from the first design sketches to the printed textiles packaged in bales ready to be sent to West and Central African countries. It did not include what happens in the context of local consumption practices in West and Central Africa nor on the ways in which these fabrics are styled into fashionable clothing. Paradoxically, this animation presents the Vlisco fabrics meant for West and Central African consumers, while the brand and products are simultaneously presented in the context of Dutch Design and popularized by new digital technologies. A Vlisco employee pointed out that this animation is also part of Vlisco's new communication strategy meant for African consumers in 2017, which is a strategy aimed at highlighting the production process and unique qualities of the product (personal communication, 7 December 2016).

Although Vlisco collaborated with many international (fashion) designers in Europe and in Africa, these examples demonstrate the ways in which Vlisco has recently been positioned in the context of Dutch design. Vlisco's collaboration with Viktor&Rolf for their 'Van Gogh Girls' (2015) collection also illustrates how Vlisco is nowadays explicitly related to Dutch cultural heritage and thus actively (re)appropriated *as* Dutch.

As a journalist of the online fashion magazine *Dazed* stated in her review of this Viktor&Rolf's collection: 'Whether in Accra, Ghana or Dalston, London, these fabrics have become our own projected symbols of "Africanness". Viktor&Rolf underlined the Dutch connection once again with their collaboration with Vlisco' (Lau 2015).

Considering how objects of fashion and design can discursively constitute and thus perform national identity, I argue that Vlisco is engaged in performances of Dutchness – on top of its performances of Africanity – by (re)appropriating the wax prints as Dutch. When presenting these fabrics as Dutch design, Vlisco is thus incorporating an important symbol of Africanity into the context of (narratively constructed) Dutchness. This process of incorporating Africanity was also expressed in the collection 'Afropolitain' (Spring/Summer 2017) by Dutch fashion designer Liselore Frowijn. For this high fashion collection, which was presented at the Amsterdam Fashion Week in July 2016, Frowijn collaborated with Vlisco.

11. Simone Post, 'Post-Vlisco', <http://www.simonepost.nl/index.php/material/post---vlisco-material-research/>.



Figure 7: Vlisco animation (2016), design by Teun van den Wittenboer, animation by Lody Aeckerlin.



Figure 8: Vlisco animation (2016), design by Teun van den Wittenboer, animation by Lody Aeckerlin.



Figure 9: Vlisco animation (2016), design by Teun van den Wittenboer, animation by Lody Aeckerlin.



Figure 10: Viktor&Rolf, 'Van Gogh Girls' (Spring/Summer 2015). Photograph by Team Peter Stigter.



Figure 11: Liselore Frowijn, 'Afropolitain' (Spring/Summer 2017). Photograph by Team Peter Stigter.



Figure 12: Liselore Frowijn, 'Afropolitain' (Spring/Summer 2017). Photograph by Team Peter Stigter.

She expressed that she wanted to tell a story about the identity and the power of the African woman and was particularly inspired by women from the Igbo-tribe in Nigeria (Frowijn, in Buls 2016). She studied the dress practices of these Igbo women, and used the Vlisco fabrics that were originally made for the Igbo tribe to suit their preferences. As a Vlisco employee explained, a combination of indigo, and a specific kind of yellow and red (developed by colourists at Vlisco) was always used in designs that were especially created for the Igbo tribe. In addition, the fabric called 'fingernails' was typically designed for these Igbo women (interview 12 February 2015, Helmond, the Netherlands). It is specifically these fabrics that Frowijn used for her collection in a more contemporary and sporty way, (re)appropriating these symbols of the Nigerian Igbo tribe and incorporating them into contemporary Dutch fashion. One of the designs of this collection is characterized by geometric patterns in white, red, yellow and blue and could be understood as a contemporary visual re-interpretation of a Dutch modernist style à la Mondrian. This design could thus be viewed as a way of inscribing these Vlisco fabrics into a Dutch design tradition. Yet Frowijn also used, for instance, embroidered fabrics from India and hand-painted silk and woven jacquards made in Italy and in the Textile Museum in Tilburg, the Netherlands (Frowijn, in Buls 2016). A fascination for 'cultural otherness' and the eclectic incorporation of elements from other cultures and faraway countries into Dutch fashion cannot be separated from an orientalist perspective.

In this sense, designers who use the Vlisco fabrics – as well as the Vlisco company itself – can be viewed as part of a tradition of western fashion that has 'flirted with Orientalism' (Clark 2009: 177). As a collaborative research on Dutch fashion in a globalized world has shown,

[t]he global dynamics of fashion produce 'glocal' Dutch fashion brands, contributing to a visual and discursive reproduction of 'Dutchness' that includes 'otherness'. The inextricable interconnectedness of global

12. Due to Vlisco's recent reorganization and new CEO since September 2015, it was unclear for some time whether the company would continue the brand strategy to focus on western fashion, art and design. A former Vlisco employee pointed out that the company has recently, in 2016, started to focus mainly on its core business in Africa again, as it was necessary to change the strategy due to disappointing financial results (personal communication, 5 December 2016). Vlisco's new creative director, Zara Atelj, wants to focus on what she views as the core of the brand, namely design, in order to maintain Vlisco's reputation as a renowned wax print design company (personal communication, 7 December 2016).

13. Vlisco, '170 years of celebrating you': <http://v-inspired.vlisco.com/nl/170-years-celebrating/>.

and local undermines any idea of a homogeneous unity of a national identity.

(Smelik et al. 2017: 100)

Acknowledging the hybrid cultural dynamics and the 'otherness' inherent to Dutch fashion helps to understand that Vlisco has recently started to discursively *perform* Dutchness, capitalizing on national identity and on the established discourse of Dutch Design by (re)appropriating these wax prints. Yet, since fashion, dress and clothing are fundamentally characterized by intercultural exchange, it is rather artificial to promote a brand *as* Dutch, especially in the complex case of Vlisco that historically has entailed multiple layers of cultural appropriation and cross-fertilization. Considering Dutch colonial history, it is essential to be careful with actively (re)appropriating and assimilating elements from other cultures, particularly when explicitly presenting it as a form of Dutchness or even Dutch pride. Vlisco's recent local and national focus seems to be at odds with the global cultural hybridity that fundamentally underlies its wax prints.

CONCLUSION

Vlisco's wax prints are an exemplary case study of the cultural hybridity that lies at the heart of processes of appropriation and reappropriation in the globalized context of fashion. These multiple layers of appropriation include the European and Dutch imitation of Javanese batik cottons, the integration of Dutch wax prints into African culture by adapting them to local taste and aesthetics, and recently, the (re)appropriation of these wax prints in the context of western fashion and specifically Dutch design. It is essential to acknowledge the complex hybrid cultural dynamics at the core of the Vlisco company and its textiles, which undermines its commodification of 'Dutchness' and of 'Africanity'. Although Africanity and authenticity are performatively constituted, it is imperative to do justice to the Africanity that is produced in the context of local consumption. The emotional and cultural value of Dutch wax in West and Central Africa – and the ways in which Vlisco's visual language is culturally embedded in local systems of meaning – are potentially at risk of being superseded by Vlisco's recent performances of Dutchness. Interestingly, in September 2016 the company celebrated its 170th anniversary by paying tribute to powerful African women. Considering Vlisco's recent strategy to focus on western fashion, design and art, it is remarkable that this new campaign highlights the generations of African women who wore Vlisco.¹² As stated on the Vlisco website, it is these women 'who made us part of their heritage, and therefore they have become a part of ours too'.¹³ While originally made in Holland by imitating the Javanese batik technique, adorned in West and Central Africa, and (re)appropriated as Dutch design, Vlisco – as a brand, and as a product – is quintessentially and culturally hybrid.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank the guest editors of the special issue 'Fashion and Appropriation' of *Fashion, Style and Popular Culture*, Denise Nicole Green and Susan B. Kaiser, for the opportunity to contribute to this journal. In addition, I would like to express my gratitude and appreciation to (former) Vlisco employees Roger Gerards, Tamara Schoon, Joop Martens, Frans van Rood and

Ruud Sanders for collaborating in this research project; sharing their knowledge and vision; allowing me to do extensive research in the Vlisco archives; and enabling my fieldwork in Ghana and Togo in August 2015.

Furthermore, I am grateful to Professor Anneke Smelik (Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands) for her inspiration, valuable discussions and useful comments that helped improve this article. I would also like to thank Helen Elands for sharing her extensive knowledge of the history of Dutch wax.

The Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) provided the financial support for the research project 'Vlisco: Made in Holland, Adorned in Africa' at Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands.

REFERENCES

- Ankersmit, W. (2010), 'The wax print, its origin, and its introduction on the Gold Coast', MA thesis, Leiden: University of Leiden.
- Anon. (2013), 'Vlisco introduceert nieuwe koers tijdens Dutch Design Week', *Eindhovens Dagblad*, 27 September, <http://www.ed.nl/regio/eindhoven/vlisco-introduceert-nieuwe-koers-tijdens-dutch-design-week-1.4025484>. Accessed 23 January 2017.
- Arts, J. (2012), *Vlisco*, Arnhem: ArtEZ Press.
- Baan, E. De (2012), 'Afrikaanse jurken uit Helmond', *Trouw*, 12 February, <http://www.trouw.nl/tr/nl/5009/Archief/article/detail/3202071/2012/02/25/Afrikaanse-jurken-uit-Helmond.dhtml>. Accessed 23 January 2017.
- Barker, C. (2012), *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*, Los Angeles and London: Sage.
- Bhabha, H. (1990), 'Narrating the nation', in H. Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration*, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 1–8.
- (1994), *The Location of Culture*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Boer, D. (2016), 'Simone Post makes carpets from leftover Vlisco fabrics', *Fashion Week*, 20 October, <https://fashionweek.nl/en/node/432>. Accessed 7 November 2016.
- Bruggeman, D. (2014), 'More than meets the eye: Dutch fashion, identity and new materialism', Ph.D. dissertation, Nijmegen: Radboud University.
- Buls, A. (2016), 'Lislore Frowijn: "Elke Vlisco-stof vertelt een verhaal"', *Fashion United*, 10 July, <https://fashionunited.nl/nieuws/mode/lislore-frowijn-elke-vlisco-stof-vertelt-een-verhaal/2016071126660>. Accessed 7 November 2016.
- Butler, J. (1990), *Gender Trouble*, London and New York: Routledge.
- (1993), *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Clark, H. (2009), 'Fashioning "China Style" in the twenty-first century', in E. Paulicelli and H. Clark (eds), *The Fabric of Cultures: Fashion, Identity and Globalization*, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 177–93.
- Clarke, D. (1997), *The Art of African Textiles*, San Diego: Thunder Bay Press.
- Corstanje, C. (2012), 'Styling beyond the Nation: Positioning up and coming Ghanaian fashion designers in a contemporary world of fashion', MA Thesis, Amsterdam: VU University.
- Cronberg, A. (2012), 'The story of Vlisco and real Dutch wax: From Helmond to Accra to Paris and back again', in R. Gerards and S. M. Sho (eds), *Vlisco Fabrics*, Arnhem: ArtEZ Press, pp. 310–14.
- Delhay, C. and Woets, R. (2015), 'The commodification of ethnicity: Vlisco fabrics and wax cloth fashion in Ghana', *International Journal of Fashion Studies*, 2: 1, pp. 77–97.

- Elands, H. (2017), 'Dutch wax classics: The designs introduced by Ebenezer Brown Fleming 1890–1912 and their legacy', in S. Gott with K. Loughran, B. Quick, and L. Rabine (eds), *African Fashion Print Now! A Story of Taste, Globalization and Style*, Los Angeles: Fowler Museum at UCLA, in press.
- Fairs, M. (2013), 'Fashion fabric brand Vlisco to work with "a list of designers"', *Dezeen Magazine*, 23 October, <http://www.dezeen.com/2013/10/23/vlisco-fashion-exhibition-at-dutch-design-week/>. Accessed 31 August 2016.
- Feitsma, M. (2014), 'Dutch fashion? An exploration of myths and meanings', Ph.D. dissertation, Nijmegen: Radboud University.
- Gott, S. (2010), 'The Ghanaian *Kaba*: Fashion that Sustains Culture', in S. Gott and K. Loughran (eds), *Contemporary African Fashion*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, pp. 11–28.
- Gott, S. and Loughran, K. (eds) (2010), *Contemporary African Fashion*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Hall, S. (2002), 'Whose heritage? Un-settling "The Heritage," re-imagining the post-nation', in R. Araeen, S. Cubitt and Z. Sardar (eds), *The Third Text Reader on Art, Culture and Theory*, London and New York: Continuum, pp. 72–84.
- Heringa, R. (1989), 'Javaanse katoentjes', in B. Brommer (ed.), *Katoendruk in Nederland*, Tilburg and Helmond: Nederlands Textielmuseum / Gemeentemuseum Helmond, pp. 131–56.
- Hynes, N. (2001), 'Re-dressing History', *African Arts*, 34: 3, pp. 60–93.
- Kasfir, S. (1992), 'African art and authenticity: A text with a shadow', *African Arts*, 25: 2, pp. 40–53, 96–97.
- Kroese, W. T. (1976), *The Origin of the Wax Block Prints on the Coast of West Africa*, Hengelo: Uitgeverij Smit van 1876.
- LaGamma, A. (2008), 'The poetics of cloth', in A. LaGamma and C. Giuntini (eds), *The Essential Art of African Textiles: Design without End*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, pp. 8–24.
- (2009), 'Exhibition preview: The essential art of African textiles: Design without end', *African Arts*, 42: 1, pp. 88–99.
- Lau, S. (2015), 'Viktor & Rolf Haute Couture SS15', *Dazed*, 29 January, <http://www.dazeddigital.com/fashion/article/23436/1/viktor-rolf-haute-couture-ss15>. Accessed 31 August 2016.
- Lipps, A. (2016), 'Vlisco', in A. Lipps and E. Lupton (eds), *Beauty – Cooper Hewitt Design Triennial*, New York: Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, pp. 58–61.
- Mitchell, K. (1997), 'Different diasporas and the hype of hybridity', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 15: 5, pp. 533–553.
- Picton, J. (1995), 'Technology, tradition and Lurex: The art of textiles in Africa', in C. Brown and L. Myers (eds), *The Art of African Textiles: Technology, Tradition and Lurex*, London: Lund Humphries Publishers, pp. 9–32.
- Pieterse, J. (1995), 'Globalization as hybridization', in M. Featherstone, S. Lash and R. Robertson (eds), *Global Modernities*, London: Sage, pp. 45–68.
- Rabine, L. (2002), *The Global Circulation of African Fashion*, Oxford and New York: Berg.
- Rodenburg, G. H. and Bijlsma, G. W. (1948), *Van Vlissingen & Co's Gedenkboek: 1846–1946. Honderd Jaren Van Vlissingen & Co. Over de kunst van het drukken*, Haarlem: Joh. Enschedé en Zonen.
- Rovine, V. (2010), 'African fashion: Design, identity, and history', in S. Gott and K. Loughran (eds), *Contemporary African Fashion*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, pp. 89–104.

- Smelik, A. (2011), 'The performance of authenticity', *Address. Journal for Fashion Writing and Criticism*, 1: 1, pp. 76–82.
- Smelik, A., Bruggeman, D. and Feitsma, M. (2017), 'Vivid colours: From the local to the global and back again: Oilily, Mac&Maggie and `CoraKemperman', in A. Smelik (ed.), *Delft Blue to Denim Blue: Contemporary Dutch Fashion*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris, pp. 84–101.
- Steiner, S. (1992), 'Fake masks and faux modernity: The crisis of misrepresentation', *African Arts*, 25: 3, pp. 18–20.
- Sylvanus, N. (2007), 'The fabric of Africanity: Tracing the global threads of authenticity', *Anthropological Theory*, 7: 2, pp. 201–16.
- (2013a), 'Fashionability in colonial and postcolonial togo', in K. Tranberg Hansen and D. Soyini Madison (eds), *African Dress: Fashion, Agency, Performance*, London and New York: Bloomsbury, pp. 30–44.
- (2013b), 'Chinese devils, the global market, and the declining power of Togo's nana benzes', *African Studies Review*, 56: 1, pp. 65–80.
- Teunissen, J. (2011), 'Deconstructing Belgian and Dutch fashion dreams: From global trends to local crafts', *Fashion Theory*, 15: 2, pp. 157–76.
- Verbong, G. P. J. (1988), *Technische innovaties in de katoendrukkerij en -ververij in Nederland 1835–1920*, Amsterdam: NEHA.
- (1989), 'Katoendrukken in Nederland vanaf 1880', in B. Brommer (ed.), *Katoendruk in Nederland*, Tilburg and Helmond: Nederlands Textielmuseum / Gemeentemuseum Helmond, pp. 47–68.
- Werbner, P. and Modood, T. (eds) (1997), *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multi-Cultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism*, London: Zed.
- Young, J. and Brunk, C. (eds) (2012), *The Ethics of Cultural Appropriation*, Malden and Oxford: Blackwell.
- Young, R. (1995), *Colonial Desire. Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, New York: Routledge.
- Ziff, B. and Rao, P. (eds) (1997), *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

SUGGESTED CITATION

- Bruggeman, D. (2017), 'Vlisco: Made in Holland, adorned in West Africa, (re)appropriated as Dutch design', *Fashion, Style & Popular Culture*, 4: 2, pp. 197–214, doi: [10.1386/fspc.4.2.197_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/fspc.4.2.197_1)

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

In January 2017, Danielle Bruggeman has been appointed as Professor of Fashion and as interim Head of the MA Fashion Design at ArtEZ University of the Arts in Arnhem, the Netherlands. Her research interests include the fluid, performative and embodied dimensions of identity; the rise of African fashion and its underlying cultural hybridity; and circular thinking and designing. In 2014 she successfully defended her Ph.D. dissertation *More Than Meets the Eye: Dutch Fashion, Identity and New Materialism* at Radboud University Nijmegen. More recently, she participated in the research project 'Made in Holland, Adorned in West-Africa' focused on the history, heritage and cultural value of the Dutch company Vlisco. This project was funded by the Creative Industry / KIEM programme of The Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO). She has been a visiting scholar at Parsons, the New School for Design (NYC), and at London College of Fashion. She has published on topics like the performative power of fashion, the fluidity of identity, (Dutch)

fashion photography, and the relationship between concept and materiality in the field of fashion.

Contact: ArtEZ University of the Arts, Modelectoraat / Danielle Bruggeman, P.O. box 49, 6800 AA Arnhem, The Netherlands.

E-mail: d.bruggeman@artez.nl

Danielle Bruggeman has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.
