

### Object Spotlight

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#### **Versatility**

El Anatsui (b. 1944, Ghana, lives and works in Nigeria, 1975 – present)

2006

Metal

X2007.7.1

*Intersections: World Arts, Local Lives (Art and Transformation)*

#### **Background Information**

El Anatsui is a Ghanaian artist who has lived much of his life in Nigeria. He often works with discarded everyday objects (such as bottle tops, food tins, and cassava graters), creating large metal sculptural tapestries that recall kente cloths, a Ghanaian textile. As such, his work considers Africa's history and traditions while also drawing on contemporary Western art.

Kente cloths are a type of fabric made of interwoven strips of cotton or silk, native to the Akan peoples of Ghana. Kente comes from the word *kenten*, which means “basket” in the Asante dialect of Akan, referring to the woven pattern on the cloth. Initially worn by royalty as a royal or sacred cloth, kente is now more widespread.<sup>1</sup> Today it is typically worn for special occasions, by men as a sort of toga and by women as an upper and lower wrapper.<sup>2</sup> Certain kente patterns

<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kente\\_cloth](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kente_cloth)

<sup>2</sup> <https://africa.si.edu/exhibits/gawu/artworks.html>

have been invented, traditionally symbolizing different concepts. For example, the Obaakofoo Mmu Man pattern symbolizes democratic rule while the Sika Fre Mogya pattern represents the responsibility to share monetary success with family.<sup>3</sup>



*Example of kente*

*Versatility* draws on all of these themes, reusing bottlecaps to create a large sculptural form whose patterning recalls a kente. Per the artist, the title of the work, *Versatility*, suggests “the notion of adaptability and the twists and turns of human existence.”<sup>4</sup> In addition to speaking to ideas of consumption, reuse, and transformation, the bottlecaps in the piece also refer to the history of colonialism in West Africa. Bottles of liquor were the preferred currency of European slave and ivory traders in West Africa. Further, rum was a by-product of the Caribbean sugar plantations, which extensively used African slave labor. *Versatility* gently evokes these histories, with the interwoven patterning of the cloth recalling the intermingling of Africa and Europe’s histories.

El Anatsui has created several textile-like wall sculptures. Given their large scale and unique materials, the sculptures take on subtly different forms in each museum they are installed in, as they are draped and situated in different ways.<sup>5</sup> Measuring 12.3 feet by 16.3 feet, *Versatility* pairs visual impact with historical meaning. Per El Anatsui, “Art grows out of each particular situation and I believe that artists are better off working with whatever their environment throws up”—a nod both to his use of materials and their historical context.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> [https://web.archive.org/web/20100107014113/http://www.marshall.edu/akanart/kentecloth\\_samples.html](https://web.archive.org/web/20100107014113/http://www.marshall.edu/akanart/kentecloth_samples.html)

<sup>4</sup> <https://africa.si.edu/exhibits/gawu/artworks.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.fowler.ucla.edu/exhibitions/el-anatsui-gawu/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.fowler.ucla.edu/exhibitions/el-anatsui-gawu/>

## *Possible Teaching Strategies*

### All Grades

- *Fabric or Not?* **For K-5:** Have students observe the piece, and then ask them what makes something a fabric? You can prompt with questions like, does fabric have to be woven, does it have to have a pattern, does it have to be soft, does it have to be able to wrap around something (like a blanket), does it have to be sewn? Then, bring the students' attention to the piece. Would the students consider this piece to be fabric? Bring a piece of kente cloth from the Education Office (in the clear bins next to the clipboards), and let them know that the piece was modeled after kente cloth. You can pass around the cloth, so people can see it and touch it. After some discussion, you can take a vote as to who believes the piece is fabric or not. **For 6-12:** Dig deeper into the discussion. Do you see this more as fabric, sculpture, or both? Instead of a simple vote as to whether or not the piece is fabric, you could create three groups (for, against, and judge), and have them make the case for their side, with the judging team ultimately making a call as to who was the most convincing. After the voting exercise, ask students to reflect on how the piece made them rethink categorization. Does categorization make sense? Do things always belong in just one category?

### Kindergarten – 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade

- *Close Looking:* Ask students to look closely at the piece for 30 seconds. What do they notice? Does this look soft or hard? Is it big or small? What color is it? Does this seem like something to be used, or just to be looked at? After some of its attributes have been discussed, ask students if they have any guesses as to what the piece is. Explain that this is a sculpture. If they do not know what “sculpture” means, you can explain that some art is decorative, meant to be looked at instead of used. This includes paintings and photographs, and is different from some of the art we saw today, like the vessels and masks. A sculpture is decorative like a painting, but it is three-dimensional, which means it isn't flat. If the group has seen *Panteon*, you can ask them if we have seen any sculptures on the tour so far, and offer *Panteon* as an example. Would students want this sculpture in their house? Why or why not?
- *First Impressions:* Have the students observe the piece for 30 seconds. Then, ask the students to pick one word that describes the piece. Go around in a circle, and have everyone share their word. After everyone has gone, you can talk about any popular words that came out, or students can speak more to why they chose their word.

### Grades 3 – 5

- *Materials and Construction:* Ask students to carefully observe the piece for 30 seconds. What materials do they see? Does it look like it is made out of one big piece of something, or a bunch of tiny pieces? Then, let the students know that we are going to brainstorm how this piece could have been made. Have students pair up with a classmate, and answer. Explain to the students that this is a sculpture made out of bottle caps carefully sewn together. How long do you think it would take to make a piece like this? Has anyone ever sewed cloth or quilted before? Was it difficult or time-consuming?

- *Finding Intersections:* Have students observe the piece, and give a brief description of the piece (such as what it is, where it's from, and who created it). Then, ask them for any differences between this work of art and the other pieces they have seen so far. Students may talk about the different materials, the size, the fact that this doesn't have an explicit use like many of the other pieces, and the fact that we know the artist unlike many of the other pieces (excepting the *Initiation Crown*). Then, ask students for any similarities between this work of art and the other pieces they have seen so far. Students may mention that it is from Africa, that it is a sculpture like *Panteon*, that it uses patterning like some of the other pieces, that it repurposes materials (like the gourd bowls), and that it uses symbols. After the discussion, you can explain how we just found intersections between this piece and others in the gallery, and tie the conversation back to your introduction of the gallery.

#### Grades 6 – 8

- *Exploring Versatility:* Have the students closely observe the piece, and then have students share their first impressions. Share a brief description of the piece, including where it is from, its materials, and its connection to the kente cloth. Then, ask them if anyone would like to share a definition or understanding of the word “versatility.” After some discussion of what “versatility” means, share that this piece is called *Versatility*. Why might this piece be called versatility? Are there any other names that you think would fit this piece? You can lead this as a group discussion, or as a pair-and-share. Ideas to address could include the versatile nature of the materials (both as repurposed bottle caps and as materials evocative of textile), the historical context of liquor and colonialism in Africa, or El Anatsui's thoughts on the piece as representing “the notion of adaptability and the twists and turns of human existence.”
- *Close Looking through Drawing:* Have students observe the piece, and then pass out clipboards with pencils and paper. Give the students three minutes to draw the piece -- they can focus on parts of it or the sculpture as a whole. After, ask students to share thoughts about the experience of drawing the piece. Was it easy or hard to draw? For those who drew the sculpture as a whole, how did you try to show the movement and draping of the tapestry? Why did some people choose to focus on the details of the piece? Were there any new details you noticed once you started drawing, that you didn't notice when we were looking at the piece?

#### Grades 9 – 12

- *Patterns and Symbols:* Have students observe the piece, and invite them to share first impressions. Does the piece remind them of anything? Explain that the piece is meant to recall kente cloth, a textile from Ghana. Does anyone see details of the piece that remind you of textiles? You can talk about draping and patterns, segueing into a discussion about the patterning of kente cloths. Specific kente patterns have been invented, traditionally symbolizing different concepts. For example, the Obaakofoo Mmu Man pattern symbolizes democratic rule while the Sika Fre Mogyia pattern represents the responsibility to share monetary success with family. Why do you think those values would be encoded onto textiles? Do our own clothes reflect values or symbols? You can lead a group discussion or have students pair and share.

- *Curatorial Decisions:* Have students observe the piece. Direct students' attention to the bottlecaps. Describe how they refer to the history of colonialism in West Africa, as bottles of liquor were the preferred currency of European slave and ivory traders in West Africa. Further, rum was a by-product of the Caribbean sugar plantations, which extensively used African slave labor. Have the students look at the piece as whole again, and describe how the piece was meant to recall the kente cloth, a Ghanaian textile. After giving this background, have students partner up to brainstorm and come up with one reason why this piece would be placed in a room called "Art and Transformation." Themes you could touch on include the transformation of the bottlecaps into a cloth/sculpture, and the intermingling of Africa and Europe's histories.

Sources:

<https://www.fowler.ucla.edu/exhibitions/el-anatsui-gawu/>

<https://africa.si.edu/exhibits/gawu/artworks.html>

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