Cosmopolitanism and Women's Fashion in Ghana

History, Artistry and Nationalist Inspirations

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1 Introduction

The many modes of (African) fashion

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The many modes of (African) fashion

I attended my first African fashion event in 2009: *Ghana Fashion Weekend*. Held at the Accra International Conference Centre, the event was organized by the late Sima Ibrahim, former model and CEO of Exopa Modeling Agency. I still remember my feelings of excitement and self-consciousness on the inaugural day of the event as my cousin and I were escorted, each by our own model, down a sloping red carpet, only to be greeted by a space overfilled with chairs and completely devoid of people. I later learned the importance of not arriving early for an event in Accra, particularly a fashion show.

At the time, the significance of the event escaped me. I was dazzled by the constant parade of bold, intricate and imaginative fashions, yet I could not foresee the expansions and revisions that were set to take place (Figure 1.1).

As time passed and my research became more robust, I realized this inadvertently final presentation of *Ghana Fashion Weekend* marked an important moment in Accra's fashion history. The event included a diverse array of designers from across the continent, many of whom were highly successful and celebrated designers of the time, such as Kofi Ansah (Ghana), St. Ossei (Ghana) and Alphadi (Niger).[1] These individuals represented a particular generation that aided in the revitalization of African fashion during the late 1980s and early 1990s, while simultaneously contributing to the stimulation of a nascent, global interest in African sartorial expressions. The event's emphasis on accomplished, celebrated designers had an additional, unintended effect. It created a distinction between an older, more established generation of designers and their younger, largely excluded counterparts, a generation of emerging designers who in the following years began to reinvent the form and presentation of African fashion, particularly in Ghana. As a doctoral student, the event served as a powerful turning point in the trajectory of my research: it demonstrated that Accra had an active and diverse fashion culture that had largely escaped extensive documentation, galvanizing me to commit my fledgling academic career to the exploration of Ghanaian fashion.

This book serves as the culmination of my research, conducted during six trips to Accra from 2009 to 2017, including a seven-month period of intensive research in 2012. The focus has shifted considerably since my dissertation; I no longer feel the need to document the entirety of Accra's

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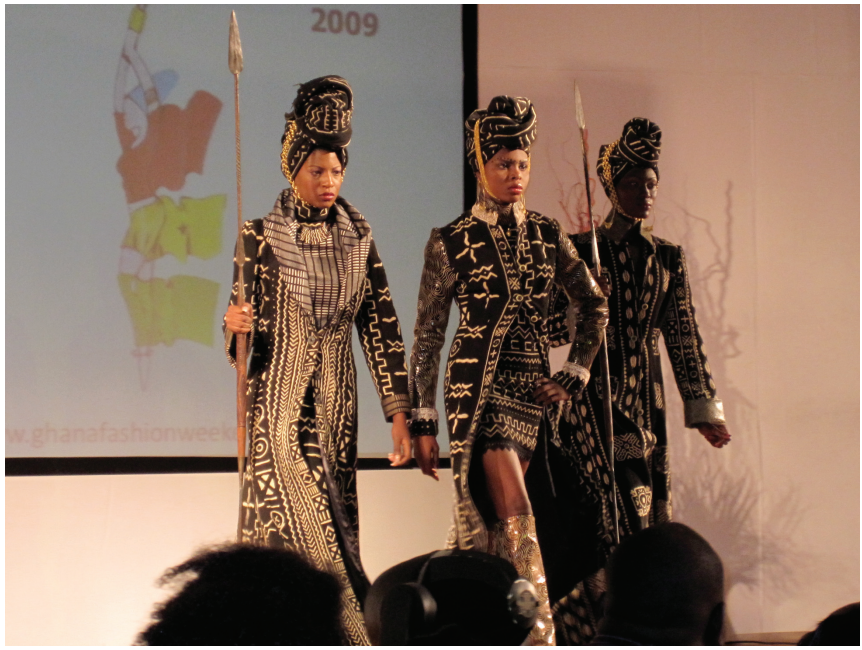

Figure 1.1 Kofi Ansah's Bogolan ensembles, presented at the 2009 *Ghana Fashion Weekend* in Accra (Image: Christopher Richards).

fashion designers and the city's sartorial fluctuations. Instead, I have embraced imperfection, choosing to highlight the most culturally and artistically significant female designers from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. My decision was influenced by several confluences: the existing publications on African and Ghanaian fashion that focus primarily on male designers and the continued, international promotion of young, emerging African designers who are almost exclusively male.

This emphasis on male designers is not a new phenomenon; the lack of gender diversity in global fashion has been actively discussed and debated by journalists and scholars. First recognized by fashion scholar Valerie Steele in 1991, she admitted: "It's true: Men do dominate women's fashion" and that "almost all the big names are male."[2] Ten years later, sociologist Diana Crane acknowledged that "women designers have been in the past and continue today to be outnumbered by male designers in the field of fashion design for women."[3] She further argued that men have benefited from "organizational constraints and highly competitive market conditions," affording them the ability to dominate the realm of women's fashions.[4] Although women's contributions to fashion are more celebrated than ever before, exemplified by recent exhibitions and publications on Elsa Schiaparelli (2018), Guo Pei (2018) and Rei Kawakubo

(2017), many women remain on the periphery of the fashion industry and its history.

This gender imbalance is equally applicable to Ghana, where men's contributions to the country's fashion culture are better documented and more globally acknowledged than those of their female counterparts. This is not to suggest that fashion designers like Kofi Ansah, St. Ossei, Ben Nonterah and Mawuli Okudzeto are not significant; indeed, they have contributed immensely to Accra's vibrant fashion culture and have often functioned as international fashion "ambassadors," showcasing the originality of Ghanaian fashion to a largely global audience. However, the contributions of women designers, particularly in a historical context, are often understated. This book attempts to amend this imbalance by focusing exclusively on Ghanaian women and elucidating their roles as originators and purveyors of fashion, particularly in a historical context. By focusing on women, I am not attempting to reaffirm existing stereotypes, such as women being more suited or sensitive to creating attire for women, nor am I suggesting that female identity has a particular influence on the selected women's designs; I am simply acknowledging and celebrating women's contributions because they are significant and they have, up until now, been largely undocumented.

Space does not permit the inclusion of every woman who has contributed to the development of Ghana's fashion culture. There are generations of both anonymous and known women who have made important contributions to Accra's sartorial landscape, individuals like Joyce Ababio, designer and founder of the Joyce Ababio College of Creative Design, Nora Bannerman, Brigitte Merki, Titi Ademola (KIKI Clothing), Brigitte Naa-Ode Kragbé (Nahode Okai), Ajepomaa Oklah (Ajepomaa Design Gallery), Adoley Addo (JIL Boutique), Aya Morrison, Sumaya Muhammad (PISTIS) and Nelly Aboagye (Duaba Serwa). The designers in this publication were chosen based on the following, non-gendered criteria: their documented and sustained success both locally and globally, the existence of a sufficient array of garments for closer examination, and a commitment to producing original and innovative designs that engage with established Ghanaian dress practices, while simultaneously affirming a decidedly cosmopolitan identity.

Although firmly rooted in art history, with careful analyses of particular designs as forms of artistic expression, this publication draws upon the fields of dress and fashion history, anthropology, African studies and women's studies, indirectly illustrating the cross-disciplinary nature of investigations into fashion and dress practices. My research equally expands and complicates these fields, attesting to the potency of fashion and its relevance in understanding both historical and contemporary African cultures and histories.

"Fashion matters" in Ghana

As posited by Victoria Rovine in the introduction of *African Fashion, Global Style*: "fashion matters."[5] Such a statement may seem self-evident, and yet

the importance of fashion, particularly on the African continent, cannot be overstated. This is particularly true in Ghana, where even the most seemingly superficial sartorial decisions are often embedded with layers of social, cultural and historical significance. These vestiary gestures, as diverse as the individuals who compose them, illustrate the inherent complexity and primacy of African fashion, a form of expression that often defies existing social divisions of class, age, gender and ethnicity. I will share two examples that attest to both the explicit and embedded significance of fashion in the context of Ghana's capital.

To gain a better sense of Accra's dynamic everyday fashions, I often watch the informal procession of Ghanaians (and some foreigners) strolling in the Kokomlemle neighborhood from Emily Asiedu's second-story verandah, giving new meaning to the concept of "pedestrian" fashion.[6] For a brief moment in July 2017, I was unexpectedly joined by two of Asiedu's nephews. Their intent differed from my own; whereas I was surveying for fashions, they were searching for and greeting neighborhood friends. As we stood, elbows resting on the railing, a young, well-dressed man walked into view. He was wearing examples of global fashion: trousers and a short-sleeve shirt, and his overall appearance was well-groomed and stylish. Recognizing him, Auntie's nephews shouted greetings and initiated a brief, but lively exchange. As I listened, the phrase volleyed back and forth was "abɔ dam," which in Twi describes someone who is mentally unstable, insane or "mad." I was surprised to hear them laughingly repeat this phrase, as it is often employed as an insult. Puzzled, I asked one of Auntie's nephews why they kept repeating "abɔ dam." He explained that the dapper young man was a mechanic at the nearby repair shop; the nephews were asking about the absence of his uniform, which would typically be worn, dirty and unsightly. The young man explained that he only wore his uniform once he arrived at the mechanics' shop, where he would change from his more stylish ensemble and "become mad."

I was stunned, not by the association of disheveled dress with madness, as this is readily acknowledged by Ghanaians, but by the young man's commitment to presenting himself in a stylish manner for such a seemingly mundane and momentary routine.[7] In spite of the short distance to his place of employment, this young man ensured that he presented himself in clean, pressed and fashionable clothing in order to maintain his sartorially constructed social identity. The exchange suggests the additional ability of assuming or "putting on" an identity, even temporarily, through the changing of attire. Although the young man's assertion of "becoming mad" by donning his uniform was slightly sardonic, it implies that he could become someone else, or at least, act in different, potentially socially unacceptable ways, by simply altering his dress. By not wearing his uniform in a highly public setting, he was subverting his identity as a manual worker and asserting his desired identity as a professional, globally aware individual. In this fleeting moment, fashion mattered. It mattered how the young man presented himself to the public; his dress signified his desired social status and served as a means to challenge established preconceptions regarding his profession.

On July 1, 2016, I witnessed a second sartorial parade, albeit one more grandiose than the informal street stylings of Kokomlemle. I attended the funeral of Ruth Botsio, a celebrated fashion icon, trendsetter and the wife of independence-era politician and diplomat Kojo Botsio.[8] I became aware of the funeral a week prior to the event when I spotted an eye-catching wax print fabric at a seamstress' shop. The fabric was black, with a kente-inspired design in bright pink. The pairing of pink and black was highly unusual; intense pink is not common in wax print and a predominantly black fabric rarely features accent colors outside of white, red or maroon. I began asking about this anomaly and was eventually informed that it was a special commission for Ruth Botsio's impending funeral. The following week, I joined several other onlookers outside the gates of the Christ the King Church to watch as waves of attendees entered the courtyard, all bedecked in their own interpretations of Botsio's striking black and pink funeral cloth (Figure 1.2).

Again, I found myself stunned, not only at the variety and inventiveness of the garments on display, but at the malleability of Ghana's "traditional" sartorial practices. Existing scholarship and experience taught me that, for funerals, Ghana's dress code was strict and limited: clothing could be black, black and red, or black and white; anything outside of these color schemes would be considered inappropriate. In this instance, established dress forms were challenged, resulting

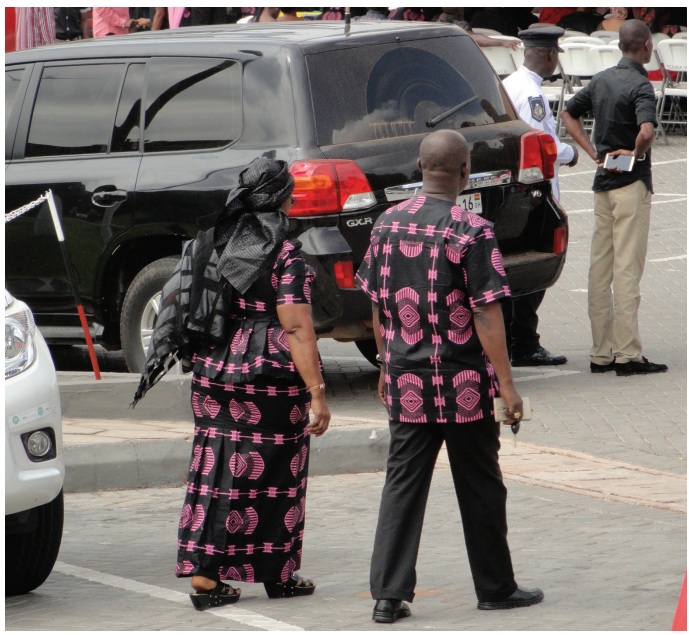

Figure 1.2 Attendees at Ruth Botsio's funeral on July 1, 2016 (Image: Christopher Richards).

in an innovation that defied existing precedents with the potential to diversify Ghana's acceptable funeral attire (I have since seen at least one funeral print that incorporated magenta into the overall color scheme of black and red). Moreover, Botsio's black and pink funeral print functioned as a symbol of her identity and legacy. Botsio's favorite color was purportedly pink, hence the revised color scheme of the cloth, and the phrase "Beloved Mother" on the fabric's selvedge, became a literal (and wearable) acknowledgment of one of her many social roles. The potency of the fabric extended to the individuals who wore it; those able to procure, tailor and wear the material immediately expressed their participation in the funeral (an invitation was not required), signifying a personal connection to the deceased. Like the aforementioned mechanic, individuals could potentially "put on" an identity simply by donning the unusual funeral cloth, suggesting an affiliation with Botsio as an individual, her family and their elite social circle.

Once again, in this equally fleeting moment, fashion mattered. It mattered that Botsio's personality and reputation as a fashion innovator was expressed through a printed fabric, and subsequently through a myriad ensembles, suggesting the inherent power of Botsio as a fashionable figure and her posthumous ability to disrupt and reimagine established dress practices, even if only for the span of her funeral. For the attendees, by donning the fabric they were able to visually assert a connection to Botsio, signaling their own elite social and political status, whether real or aspirational.

These two examples serve as exemplars of countless moments that demonstrate how "fashion matters." Whether these occurrences are composed of a singular vestiary gesture, as indicated by the mechanic, or encompass a complex choreography of sartorial performance, as illustrated by Botsio's funeral attendees, they remain clear indicators of the potency and primary of fashion within the larger context of Accra. Furthermore, these examples suggest that fashion is not an exclusively elite preoccupation; in Ghana, fashion matters to a diverse range of individuals, regardless of their socioeconomic status. While the importance of fashion remains undeniable, defining what constitutes fashion is repeatedly debated, with definitions often excluding African countries and their respective cultures.

Defining fashion

Fashion is frequently, and inaccurately, characterized as a primarily Western phenomenon linked to the rise of capitalism in Europe and America. Publications by Allman (2004), Gott and Loughran (2010), Hansen and Madison (2013), Rabine (2002), Roces and Edwards (2007) and Rovine (2001, 2010, 2015) have challenged this misconception, arguing for a more inclusive and equitable understanding of fashion by gradually removing the implicitly racist and colonialist strands that are interwoven into this exclusively Eurocentric definition. In an effort to further rewrite these established misconceptions, I define fashion as a "form of dress frequently associated with elite status in a given culture, which

embodies change through the innovation of existing and historically significant materials and styles of dress."[9] Change is a key element in understanding fashion; sartorial shifts can be dramatic and instantaneous, or subtle and gradual. Regardless of the frequency and intensity of the changes, fashion is constantly being revised and reimagined in a process that emphasizes cyclical production over an assumed, linear progression. Fashion is also inherently cross-cultural; "fashion designers continually look beyond the confines of their own localities for creative inspiration," hoping to construct "original and avant-garde garments that blend global styles, materials and dress practices with familiar and established elements of their respective dress systems."[10]

An expansive conception of fashion does not preclude further categorization; the focus of this book is primarily designer fashions, garments that fulfill the general qualifications of fashion, but can be further distinguished as garments by known and celebrated individuals recognized for a particular, consistent aesthetic. With designer fashions, the brand name often eclipses the identity and contributions of their creator, suggesting the inherent value of designer fashions lies in the social and cultural cachet of the brand's constructed image. The most telling Ghanaian example is of fashion designer Juliana Kweifio-Okai, whose own identity was subsumed by that of her label as she became popularly known and referred to as Chez Julie. In a global context, designer fashions often refer to garments made exclusively for runway shows, industrially produced as part of seasonal collections to be sold in boutiques or online, and custom-ordered by clientele. What further distinguishes designer fashions from other subcategories is that the brand name or identifiable aesthetic is more important than the artistry or quality of the item. Frequently, designer fashions *are* more detailed and well-made than other forms of mass-produced fashion, but in other instances, particularly in terms of the current global fashion culture, a brand and its presumed heritage is more important than the craftsmanship and quality of a particular article of designer fashion.

It is necessary to acknowledge that, in spite of its elitist tendencies, fashion often extends beyond the limited and insular sphere of elite consumption, permeating the lives of everyday individuals. This is particularly true in Ghana, where fashion is considered, discussed, created, imitated and enacted by a diverse range of individuals. The predominance of tailors and seamstresses found throughout the country encourages an environment of sartorial creativity and innovation; individuals can select from a dizzying array of imported and local materials and adapt existing silhouettes to create garments that reflect local and global fashion trends, while simultaneously displaying the creator's (or the commissioner's) individual perspective. The reflections of former First Lady Nana Konadu Agyeman Rawlings attest to the permeation of fashion:

> people were fashionable in the cities, but in the rural areas, they were fashionable in their own way. Sometimes they would put on just a cloth, but the style would be different or there would be piping, so they were fashionable.[11]

Rawlings' observation is clear, yet profound. She acknowledges the diversity of Ghanaian fashion and that localized forms of dress are equally susceptible to experimentation and innovation, qualifying them as fashion and legitimizing their role in the global fashion network.

The culture of seamstresses and tailors, found throughout the African continent, is important to acknowledge, as it allows for a more democratic engagement with designer fashions and a given country's fashion culture, albeit through the act of mimicry. The predominance of seamstresses and tailors allows for facsimiles of designer fashions to be easily produced, meaning that designers and their creations can have direct and immediate impacts on the everyday dress practices of Accra's citizens. As discussed in Chapter 6, Ayensu's use of fabric-covered buttons for her brand's accessories and garments resulted in the widespread imitation of these adornments, one that has even reached overseas markets.

The beginnings of scholarship on African fashion – dress and adornment

Fashion is ultimately a subcategory of dress, concisely defined by Joanne Eicher as "visual as well as other sensory modifications (taste, smell, sound and feel) and supplements (garments, jewelry and accessories) to the body."[12] A focus on the cultural significance of dress, and more specifically, the woven textiles and elaborate ornaments worn to enhance the body, formed the underpinnings for early anthropological and art-historical explorations of the dressed and adorned African body. Eicher was one of the first scholars to compile an exhaustive bibliography on African dress and textiles, predated only by her coedited volume *Dress, Adornment and the Social Order,* which explored the multidisciplinary and cross-cultural importance of dress in relation to social organization and the presentation of self. Roy Sieber's *African Textiles and Decorative Arts*, published in conjunction with an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, was one of the first publications to exclusively explore the diversity and complexity of African dress and adornment. One of Sieber's conjectures remains remarkably relevant: "the art of personal adornment is *pan*-African and may, indeed, reveal the breadth and range of aesthetic life of traditional Africa with greater accuracy than the limited formulations that currently serve in the West…as African art."[13] The publications of Eicher and Sieber, coupled with Picton and Mack's *African Textiles* (1979), marked an important shift: the inclusion and examination of African forms of dress, textiles and personal adornment in the study of African art and culture.

As research in the field of African dress and adornment expanded, publications focusing on specific countries, cultures, and forms of textiles became more prominent. These include works by Borgatti (1983), Eicher (1976), Gilfoy (1987, 1988), Lamb (1975, 1981, 1984), Polakoff (1980), Spencer (1983) and Wass (1975), many of which were published in conjunction with exhibitions. The May 1982 issue of *African Arts*, replete with nine essays addressing various

forms and expressions of African dress, marked a pivotal moment specifically for the academic exploration of African art history: the acceptance of dress as a legitimate and important aspect of African artistic expression. The issue included essays from Eicher, Fred Smith, Lisa Aronson, Christopher Roy, Patrick McNaughton and Daniel Biebuyck, addressing subjects ranging from Frafra dress to several forms of West African weaving. Following the 1980s, the study of African textiles continued to expand, with scholars beginning to use textiles and forms of dress as a lens to explore specific cultural practices, political shifts, identity and gender politics, even religious affiliation. Most recently, scholars like LaGamma and Giuntini (2008) have begun to situate textiles in relation to the practices of contemporary African artists, elucidating how specific textile forms and techniques are referenced and reinterpreted by artists such as El Anatsui, Atta Kwami, Yinka Shonibare and Sokari Douglas Camp.

Scholarship on African fashion

Although the examination of textiles and personal adornment has gained considerable traction as a crucial aspect of African culture and history since the late 1960s, the notion of fashion remained largely outside the parameters of scholarly inquiries regarding African dress and adornment. Allusions to fashion are evident in Doran Ross' *Wrapped in Pride* (1998), but it wasn't until the late 1990s that African fashion – garments and designs that reflected particular viewpoints, iconographies and histories associated with specifically African countries and cultures – emerged as its own field of study. *Revue Noire*'s pivotal special issue on African fashion (1997) was one of the first publications to acknowledge the diversity and importance of African fashion. It highlighted an array of designers from across the continent, with a particular emphasis on Malian Chris Seydou who, at the time, was lauded posthumously as one of the first and most celebrated African designers to blend indigenous African textiles with global fashion trends. Following *Revue Noire*, several books were authored, including works by Geoffroy-Schneiter (2006), Mendy-Ongoundou (2002) and Van der Plas (1998). Like *Revue Noire*, these publications took a broad approach to African fashion, highlighting designers who were currently active and internationally recognized. These publications were largely popular in their approach, which belied the complex significance of African fashion as artistic expression.

Leslie Rabine's *The Global Circulation of African Dress* (2002) was one of the earliest academic explorations of African fashion, asserting its prominence and importance to the overarching global fashion system, particularly its ability to reflect the needs, desires and identities of African and African-American consumers. Following Rabine's publication, Jean Allman's edited volume *Fashioning Africa: Power and Politics of Dress* (2004) provided a multidisciplinary examination of fashion and dress practices across the African continent. Allman's contribution to the publication is particularly significant; it examined Ghana's government-sanctioned, post-independence promotion of "properly" dressed female bodies

as indicators of modernity and progress, acknowledging the linkages between dress and politics and the primacy of women in the conceptualization of a modern and independent African nation. Additional publications focusing specifically on African fashion have been authored by Gott and Loughran (2010), Hansen and Madison (2013) and Jennings (2011). Victoria Rovine's most recent publication *African Fashion Global Style: Histories, Innovations, and Ideas You Can Wear* (2014) serves as the unofficial primer to the subject of African fashion, arguing for its importance and legitimacy as a form of artistic expression and exploring its myriad manifestations throughout history and across the continent; the publication further addresses how European designers have crafted imagined conceptions of Africa through particular, historically significant, collections.

The exploration of African fashion has recently permeated museums, resulting in exhibitions that add to existing scholarship in unexpected and innovative ways. Beginning with my own exhibition, *Kabas and Couture: Contemporary Ghanaian Fashion* (2015), which was the first American exhibition to explore the fashions of a specific African nation, museums across the United States and Europe have begun to acknowledge the significance of contemporary African fashion, including The Museum at FIT's *Black Fashion Designers* (2017); Brighton Museum's *Fashion Cities Africa*; *African-Print Fashion Now!* (2017) at the Fowler Museum; and the Museum of Modern Art's *Items: Is Fashion Modern?* (2017).

While publications, exhibitions and the overall popularity of African fashion have increased dramatically in recent years, there are limited studies on fashion designers from a specific country, and even fewer that trace the trajectory of contemporary African fashion to its historical roots. The intent of this book is to expand and complicate the scholarly inquiry of African fashion, illustrating the need for similar research focused on specific regions and capitals, unfurling the complexities of African fashion and unequivocally demonstrating that Africans, across the continent, have been developing, promoting and navigating their own complex fashion systems for decades, if not centuries. As part of this book's conclusion, the conceptualization of African fashion will be interrogated and challenged, ultimately arguing for a more expansive and nuanced understanding of what constitutes "African" fashion.

Fashion as art

As fashion becomes increasingly accessible to a global audience and more actively incorporated into art-museum exhibitions, a particular question continues to be discussed, debated and evaded: is fashion art? In some writings, such as Saillard and Zazzo's *Paris Haute Couture*, specific forms of fashion are unabashedly categorized as art; in others, like Hank Hines' essays for *Dalí & Schiaparelli*, affinities between art and fashion are acknowledged, yet the two creative spheres remain distinct. This section will provide a brief overview of the burgeoning practice of exhibiting fashion in a museum setting, followed by an assessment of how fashion can be considered art through three specific

guises: the craftsmanship of haute couture, the sheer artistry and creativity of a given design, and the historical and cultural significance of a fashion innovation. This section relies primarily on examples of European and American fashion, as these are more widely known and recognized by fashion scholars and academics alike. The proposed categories for understanding fashion as art will subsequently be applied to the Ghanaian designers and their garments discussed in this book.

Although their prototypes were established in the early 1900s, fashion exhibitions are experiencing unprecedented popularity across North America and Europe in the twenty-first century, capturing new and varied audiences with the opportunity to regard, with a mixture of awe and aspiration, all manner of fashionable garments.[14] The Metropolitan Museum of Art's 2011 exhibition *Alexander McQueen: Savage Beauty* served as a watershed moment in the history of exhibiting fashion: it became the Costume Institute's most visited exhibition and held one of the highest attendance records for exhibitions organized by the Met (a record that has since been surpassed by the exhibition *China: Through the Looking Glass*). Following this blockbuster exhibition, museums across the globe began organizing exhibitions focusing specifically on fashion, a trend first acknowledged in the writings of Fiona Anderson (2000), Lou Taylor (2004) and Valerie Steele (2008). Fashion exhibitions have been mounted by institutions without significant collections of fashion, such as the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) and the Dalí Museum in St. Petersburg, Florida; other institutions, like The Museum at FIT, the Victoria & Albert Museum, the Palais Galliera, the Musée des Arts Décoratifs and the aforementioned Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, have continually organized fashion exhibitions, setting the standard for the methodology and theoretical frameworks for exhibiting fashion.

A short survey from the last several years illustrates the sustained popularity of fashion exhibitions; an examination of the Met's Costume Institute alone demonstrates that, since 2014, they have frequently organized two annual fashion exhibitions, including *Charles James: Beyond Fashion* (2014), *Death Becomes Her: A Century of Mourning Attire* (2014–2015), *China: Through the Looking Glass* (2015), *Jacqueline de Ribes: The Art of Style* (2015–2016), *Manus x Machina: Fashion in An Age of Technology* (2016), *Masterworks: Unpacking Fashion* (2016–2017) and *Rei Kawakubo/Comme des Garçons* (2017). Between 2011 and 2015, *The Fashion World of Jean Paul Gaultier: From the Sidewalk to the Catwalk* traveled to ten international institutions, including the Brooklyn Museum in Brooklyn, New York, the Dallas Museum of Art in Dallas, Texas, and the Grand Palais in Paris, France. The Denver Art Museum has mounted several fashion exhibitions, including *Dior: From Paris to the World* (2018), *Shock Wave: Japanese Fashion Design* (2016–2017) and *Yves Saint Laurent: The Retrospective* (2012). The Los Angeles County Museum of Art organized *Reigning Men: Fashion in Menswear* (2016) and the Philadelphia Museum of Art developed retrospectives highlighting two historically significant designers: *Shocking!: The Art and Fashion of Elsa Schiaparelli* (2003–2004) and *Patrick Kelly: Runway of Love* (2014).

African fashion has become a growing subfield of fashion exhibitions, with one of the earliest organized by The Hague in 2002, *Fashion and Ghana*. A selection of the more recent African fashion exhibitions includes *Kabas and Couture: Contemporary Ghanaian Fashion* (2015), *Black Fashion Designers* (2016), *Vlisco: African Fashion on a Global Stage* (2016–2017), *Fashion Cities Africa* (2016–2017), *African-Print Fashion Now!* (2017), *Making Africa: A Continent of Contemporary Design* (2017–2018) and *Items: Is Fashion Modern?* (2017–2018).

In spite of the increasing proliferation of fashion exhibitions within the confines of art museums, which inherently promotes fashion as a viable art form, the question of whether fashion is art, and to what end, remains a considerable conundrum. Fashion curator Andrew Bolton suggests that the debate of fashion as art can be traced to the mid-eighteenth century, when the importance of hand-sewn and embellished fashion was galvanized by the extravagant practices of the French royal court. Bolton refers to Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert's 1751 *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, in which Diderot and d'Alembert argued that specific *métiers*, including trades aligned with the production of dressmaking, should be regarded as equal to the arts and sciences.[15] Their perspective was revolutionary, as it asserted that handcrafted embellishments were not simply forms of manual labor, but expressions of artistry and creativity.[16] The six métiers related to dressmaking originally codified by Diderot and d'Alembert are still utilized in contemporary haute couture: embroidery, featherwork, artificial flowers, pleating, lacework and leatherwork.

As early as 1967, the Metropolitan Museum of Art affirmed that fashion is an art form, or that it can be considered, discussed and appreciated in a manner similar to fine art. In an essay introducing the exhibition *The Art of Fashion*, the Costume Institute's Executive Director argued that fashion "has components found in works of art: it has form, color, and texture; it is symbolic, it serves an important function in ritual and superstition, and it also communicates."[17] Weissman further acknowledged that: "the art of fashion is so intrinsically woven into the fabric of the story of man that one can hardly be separated from the other."[18]

Art inseparable from fashion: haute couture

Since Weissman's recognition of fashion as a form of artistic expression, there have been several explications as to how forms of fashion are indeed indicative of the appellation of "Art." The most common assessment relates to a specific, highly specialized subset of historical and contemporary fashion culture: haute couture. Fashion scholar Olivier Saillard succinctly asserts: "haute couture is an art form – inseparable from fashion."[19] French designer Christian Dior eloquently explicated the notion of haute couture as art:

> haute couture dresses have the unique and unexpected quality of a work of art. They are among the last things to be made by hand, by the human

> hand whose value is irreplaceable, for it gives everything it makes what no machine can bring: poetry and life.[20]

The crux of haute couture is, as indicated by the words of Dior and the earlier writings of Diderot and d'Alembert, its high level of craftsmanship. Each haute couture garment is made entirely by hand, under the exacting supervision of a cadre of the most skilled artisans who ensure a standard that is extravagant in its precision. As Saillard explains, "hidden beneath the austere lines of a sculpted jacket or under hems and invisible seams, haute couture quietly reigns."[21] Saillard's description implies a second hallmark of haute couture: custom measurements. Each haute couture garment is made for a particular person; as invoked by Martin and Koda: "the couture garment is a fulfillment of mutually agreeing ideas that are contingent upon and wrought on the human body."[22] Martin and Koda suggest that, without a sartorial consensus between the couturier and the patron, haute couture would not exist. Thus, haute couture is distinguishable from other forms of fashion due to the sheer artistry of its creation, as expressed through its hand-sewn and embellished surfaces and its customization to individual owners. This approach suggests that all haute couture, whether reflecting the Orientalist fantasies of Paul Poiret or the theatrical opulence of John Galliano, is ultimately a form of art.

"… Like a Modern Canvas": fashion as art – the designs of Schiaparelli and Pei

In 1932, the *New Yorker* writer Janet Flanner stated "a frock from Schiaparelli ranks like a modern canvas." This description encapsulates a second means for understanding fashion as art: that specific garments, whether haute couture, ready-to-wear designer fashions, or garments created by recognized or unknown individuals, have creative elements that distinguish them as works of art.[23] Additionally, designers who take inspiration from particular artists or artistic movements (like Alexander McQueen, Christian Dior and Yves Saint Laurent) or who treat their designs as sculptural extensions of the body (Azzedine Alaïa, Iris Van Herpen and Hussein Chalayan) create garments that are often considered art.[24] As suggested by the introductory quotation, Schiaparelli is the most fruitful example of a historical designer whose work attests to this categorization, as many of her garments were influenced by her connections with surrealist artists. Her first artistic collaboration dates to 1931, when she commissioned artist Jean Dunand to paint trompe l'oeil pleats on an evening gown; in the following years, Schiaparelli became adept at blurring the lines of art and attire. Schiaparelli's iconic 1937 evening coat, adorned with detailed metallic embroidery and silk flower embellishments, was the result of a drawing gifted to her by Surrealist artist and writer Jean Cocteau. The garment features the iconic Surrealist motif of a vase that simultaneously appears as two side-profile faces (Figure 1.3). This optical illusion comprised of overlapping images reflects the paranoiac-critical method, a philosophical theory proposed

by Salvador Dalí. Thus, this garment becomes more than a feat of haute couture craftsmanship; it is the fusion of Schiaparelli's aesthetic with that of her Surrealist peers, becoming an artwork in its own right.

A contemporary example of fashion as art are the designs of Chinese couturier Guo Pei. Much like her predecessor Schiaparelli, the majority of her garments are considered haute couture, with the added appellation of being works of art. *Vogue* contributing editor Lynn Yaeger described Pei's designs as impactful and transcendent: "the very existence of such a work of art can lift us out of our ordinary lives – and if only for a moment, deliver us into the realm of the sublime."[25] The *New Yorker* fashion writer Judith Thurman echoed Yaeger's indirect acknowledgment of Pei as an artist, describing a specific Pei gown as reflecting the "idiosyncratic 'hand' of a great artisan."[26] Not only are her

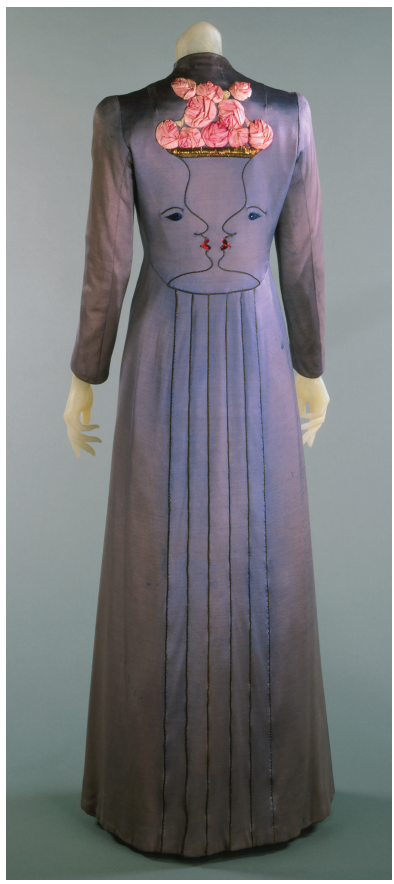

Figure 1.3 Elsa Schiaparelli's 1937 evening coat with Surrealist motif (Image: Philadelphia Museum of Art: gift of Mme Elsa Schiaparelli, 1969, 1969-232-7).

garments painstakingly made by hand, with several lauded for taking two years and fifty thousand hours to create, but her garments, particularly when paired with her towering platform shoes, become almost unwearable. When asked about this potential lack of functionality, Pei responded with: "I don't care; the creation is enough."[27] This narrative suggests that Pei intends her designs to function as creative, visual expressions of her imagination, inseparable from her cultural heritage and her own personal history.

The artistry of her designs is best captured in a suite of garments from her 2015 *Garden of the Soul* collection. Consisting primarily of dresses in shades of ivory and cream, Pei's designs were embellished with such a density of embroidery that the surfaces of skirts and bodices become sculptural, with blades of grass, flower petals and leafy tendrils lifting and spilling off the surface of the garment (Figure 1.4). The notion of sculpture is further invoked by each garment's silhouette; whether a skirt comprised of layers of rectangular-shaped silk "petals," or a bodice with voluminous, structured sleeves shaped like Chinese lanterns, Pei's exaggerated and fantastical silhouettes reject wearability

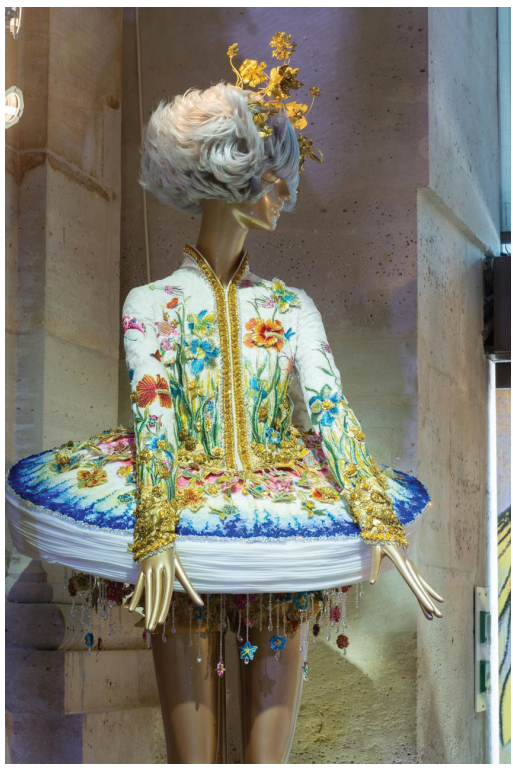

Figure 1.4 An ensemble from Guo Pei's 2015 *Garden of the Soul* collection (Image: Guo Pei).

to become works of art, sculpted in silk and lurex. Several of these garments also included hand-painted motifs, adding an additional layer of artistry to Pei's designs.

Most importantly, both Schiaparelli and Pei have referred to their design process as a form of artistic expression. In her memoir, Schiaparelli stated: "dress designing, incidentally, is to me not a profession but an art."[28] Pei expressed a similar sentiment, stating: "designing clothes, particularly couture, is a form of art."[29] Acknowledging their perspectives is significant, as it indicates both women *intended* to create garments that could be considered artistic. Schiaparelli and Pei approached the design process differently from other designers; they championed unusual motifs, elaborate and extensive embellishments, and the ability of fashion to express fantasies, ranging from Schiaparelli's depiction of surreal, optical illusions, to Pei's evocation of Chinese imperial dress. Both women, and their designs, demonstrate that specific garments function akin to an artist's canvas, thereby implying a second means for considering fashion as an art form.

Art to wear: fashion and the "wearable art" movement

It is necessary to briefly acknowledge an additional facet of fashion as art, one formally codified as "wearable art" or "art to wear" by the publication *Art to Wear* (1986). Although distanced from haute couture and designer fashions, much of the hallmarks of wearable art are highly reminiscent of haute couture, including "attention … paid to detail and to painstaking craftsmanship," "high-quality handwork" and "innovation."[30] More recent explorations of this classification emphasize the importance of wearable art in honoring women's contributions to textile arts, the ability for said garments to be simultaneously functional and non-functional, and the importance of a personal relationship between the maker and the wearer.[31]

Instead of segregating these highly imaginative garments due to their idiosyncratic qualities and their reliance on "craft" technologies (weaving, knitting, crochet and leatherwork), these garments should be treated as a viable and integral part of fashion as artistic expression, thereby nuancing the established understanding of what constitutes fashion as art. The thread that ties these garments, exemplified by the exuberant, loomed capes of Susanna Lewis and the sculptural, fabric vests of Joan Steiner, to the designs of Schiaparelli and Pei, is the unapologetic celebration of personal expression.[32] As explained by Julie Schafler Dale: art to wear is "distinguished by an intensity of personal content. They are about the artist who created them, unabashedly autobiographical, signaling an eruption of personal information from private spaces … these works are the physical embodiment of interior worlds and intangible ideas."[33] The notion of a singular and deeply personal viewpoint is particularly valid when assessing the works of Schiaparelli and Pei, as both designers actively impart their own individualistic and highly imaginative approach to fashion with each design they produce. The notion that fashion as art is both deeply personal and

a reflection of a designer's interior monologues adds an additional, but necessary, layer to understanding fashion as a form of artistic expression.

"New" looks and distressed duds: the artistry of the "New Look" and punk fashion

The previous two categorizations of fashion as art place emphasis on the materiality of the garment: it is either the garment's detailed craftsmanship or its creative and expressive appearance that suggests the appellation of art. A third category does not exclusively emphasize a garment's appearance or silhouette; rather it considers the garment's social, cultural and historical impact. Typically, this assessment is best conducted in hindsight, allowing another means for scholars to understand and appreciate fashion as art. This particular approach is more democratic than emphasizing the extravagance of a given garment, in both its creation and presentation; it implies that a self-fashioned, punk ensemble can be as important as Coco Chanel's iconic "little black dress."

To understand fashion as an art form based on its social and cultural impact, it's best to examine an iconic and influential design from the House of Christian Dior. One of the most important garments of the twentieth century was Christian Dior's 1947 "Bar" suit, the most well-known example of his "New Look." Although the garment is a masterpiece of couture craftsmanship, famed for its carefully hand-stitched darting and pleating, its true significance remains its impact on European and American society. Dior's "New Look" was in direct opposition to the prevailing streamlined and utilitarian fashions of the 1940s; Dior's "New Look" garments reveled in exaggerated femininity, with silhouettes emphasizing rounded, natural shoulders, a narrow waist and full, curving hips. Dior's designs were a study in extravagance; introduced to a world still recovering from World War II and a legacy of shortages and rationing, Dior lengthened skirts to mid-calf and incorporated elaborate pleating, which could require between 30 to 80 yards of fabric to produce.

Although Dior's sartorial innovations were drastic, their true impact went beyond mere structural and material revisions. As documented by fashion curator Alexandra Palmer, the "New Look" was not immediately embraced by women; in fact, it was rejected by many who saw Dior's lengthening of skirts as an expensive and unnecessary alteration to their existing wardrobes.[34] Dior's return to longer skirts was interpreted as a signifier of women losing newly gained independence, while the narrower waist was critiqued as potentially detrimental to women's health and wellbeing.[35]

In spite of the documented resistance to Dior's "New Look," it quickly became *de rigueur* for fashionable women, ushering in an even more significant revolution: a revision of the "ideal" female silhouette. Neither manufacturers nor department stores had the appropriate forms to recreate and display Dior's sartorial innovations, resulting in what Palmer describes as "a lacuna in the dressmaking and display sectors that reverberated through the fashion industry."[36] Mannequin manufacturers quickly began producing forms that

mirrored Dior's more restrictive measurements, resulting in a dramatic shift in not only the display of garments, but the expectations placed on women. Just as mannequins were molded to fit Dior's more restrictive garments, so were women's bodies, resulting in a powerful and potentially problematic reimagining of the female form.

Dior's "New Look" is as legendary as it is conspicuous; it literally changed the shape of fashion and serves as a potent example of how specific garments or silhouettes can alter social and cultural histories. However, a garment does not have to fit within the strict limitations of haute couture to be socially and culturally transformative. One such example, which reverberated throughout American and European society as powerfully as the "New Look," is the punk fashion movement. Inextricably linked to music, curator Andrew Bolton distilled punk in both London and New York City as "a frustration and dissatisfaction with the state of hegemonic mainstream culture, especially mainstream rock and roll."[37] British musician John Lydon echoed Bolton's distillation, characterizing London's punk scene as resulting from a sense of economic failure: "it felt like the whole country was going to collapse. There was no real movement … most of us felt hopeless – no future, no jobs, nothing."[38] From this frustration grew a distinctive aesthetic and approach to dressing, one that emphasized customization and individuality, expressed through the deconstruction, embellishment and reassembly of individual garments or ensembles. Bolton makes a clear distinction between the "street level punks" who initiated this type of aesthetic through experimentation and the recycling of discarded or outdated clothing, and the constructed, intentional designs of Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood, with their resulting creations classified as "commodity punk."[39]

Whether "street" or "commodity" punk, the movement and its raiments challenged the status quo, serving as expressions of protest and propaganda; as Jon Savage states, punk "liberated a generation to create its own culture."[40] Whereas Dior's "New Look" was the result of a singular vision, disseminated throughout the Western world (and beyond), punk achieved the reverse: it was a sartorial movement created and enacted by youth that permeated designer and haute couture fashions. The safety pin, an icon of punk dressing that decorated and literally held together garments, was transformed by designer Gianni Versace into a high-fashion, logo-emblazoned embellishment. The aesthetic of bricolage, cobbling together a look from disparate elements, even items of trash, has been subsequently referenced by designers John Galliano and Maison Martin Margiela. A movement that grew out of dissension and disruption, reflecting the frustrations of a generation, has subsequently been co-opted by mainstream fashion designers and brands, becoming a continually referenced aesthetic in contemporary fashion.

The punk youthquake may be the antithesis of Dior's "New Look" in material, form and aesthetic, yet these disparate fashions share a powerful commonality: the ability to drastically change established modes of dressing and subsequently revise the social and cultural fabric of the time. Dior's "New Look" reveled in luxury and economic affluence, celebrating material abundance and

a feminine reinterpretation of the female form. A lack of wealth and resources contributed to the creation of the punk aesthetic, which employed deconstructed and recycled clothing as a means of challenging the status quo. Although seemingly contradictory, Dior's "New Look" and the punk movement demonstrate how social and cultural transformation is another means for considering specific fashions as forms of art.

From Guo Pei's luxuriously embellished, fantastical ensembles to the pared down and deconstructed forms of punk attire, these disparate and often incompatible forms of fashion can, and should, be read as forms of art. This is not to suggest that every design to grace the runways of Paris or the streets of New York is a form of artistic expression. There are discrete categories for viewing fashion as art: the complex and carefully executed extravagance of haute couture, garments that meaningfully reflect and embody the artistic approach of their creators, and singular or series of garments that irrevocably revise not only the dress practices of a particular time, but that continue to serve as inspiration for future designers, continually reworked and reimagined through the cyclical nature of fashion. By examining the qualities and influences of fashions in determining their artistry, the categories of both art and fashion are expanded and diversified, allowing for fashions outside of the restrictive Western fashion system to be included and examined.

"Picking" from the past: African fashion and the notion of tradition

When discussing various forms of African artistic expression, particularly forms of African dress, the conversation inevitably includes the concept of tradition. Historian Mark Phillips provides an apt distillation of the term's academic implications, stating that "much of the sociological and anthropological discussion of tradition has been carried on as though tradition primarily concerned the unselfconscious continuance of social institutions and practices, often in non literate societies."[41] Anthropologist Christopher Steiner notes that, through the scholarship of anthropologists like Margaret Mead and A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, tradition became "synonymous with the term 'culture' itself," particularly when applied to non-Western peoples.[42] These established understandings of tradition have created an additional implication: that tradition exists in opposition to modernity and innovation, creating a concept of tradition that is mired in a stagnant past, one that cannot be reconciled through adaptation or invention.[43] This hardened terminology, and its subsequent dichotomy, has spawned a multitude of scholarly revisions and rejections of tradition, and yet the ideology persists throughout academic inquiry and investigation, particularly in relation to the African continent.

What is largely absent from scholarly debates on tradition is the viewpoint of contemporary Africans; Steiner does mention, albeit through the lens of white sociologist Norbert Elias, that Africans have purportedly viewed Western studies on "vanishing traditions" with contempt.[44] What remains unacknowledged

is that the concept of tradition has permeated African cultures, resulting in a term that is understood and employed by a diversity of Africans. How can the inherently biased and problematic legacy of tradition be reconciled with its contemporary use, particularly when employed by the individuals it originally essentialized? The answer lies in the theoretical postulations of historian and anthropologist James Clifford.

Clifford considers tradition an "elastic term," implying that when considering tradition, flexibility and malleability are key.[45] An element deemed traditional can still be susceptible to alterations and innovations, it simply suggests the phenomenon is meaningfully tied to a collective past, ultimately reflected through individual identities. Clifford acknowledges that "native societies have always been both backward and forward looking. Loyalty to a traditional past is, in practice, a way ahead, a distinct path in the present."[46] The importance of the past, and its role in creating the present and future, resonates with a Ghanaian approach to indigenous knowledge, expressed through the well-known proverb: "San kɔ fa," or "Go back and pick." It reiterates Clifford's assertion that many global cultures value a direct linkage with the past, one that is employed to simultaneously innovate and preserve specific forms and expressions. Instead of completely rejecting tradition, it is more fruitful to employ Clifford's explanation: "tradition is not a wholesale return to past ways, but a practical selection and critical reweaving of roots."[47] The notion of reweaving is particularly rich for the study of Ghanaian dress and fashion, as textiles are the result of a literal and metaphorical weaving together of past forms and materials with newly acquired substances and aesthetics, resulting in dress forms that reflect a particular moment, while celebrating an inherited history.

There is an additional facet to tradition that is implicated in the discussions of Steiner and Clifford, but never fully elaborated: the inherent timelessness of tradition. Although firmly rooted in the past, tradition is not fixed at a given point on an assumed, linear timeline. The historical practice deemed traditional, such as dressing in wax print fabric, may remain constant, yet the means for expressing said tradition are easily adapted and made relevant to individuals and groups throughout time. The historical origins of a tradition are equally indefinite; even if a specific date can be attributed to the introduction of a given tradition, it is often treated as though it has been practiced in perpetuity. Thus, in spite of constantly drawing upon the past, the lack of temporality in tradition ensures its ability to be easily passed on and made meaningful, through alteration and adaptation, by subsequent generations.

As the subsequent chapters will illustrate, contemporary Ghanaians actively employ a similar notion of tradition to discuss their designs, one that is permeable and encapsulates the past, present and future of Ghanaian culture and heritage. To honor these intellectual positions, while being fully aware of the concept's scholarly baggage and shortcomings, I have chosen to embrace the *Ghanaian* usage of tradition, albeit stripped of its nagging quotations. When employed by Ghanaians, tradition encapsulates a meaningful, historical practice that is fixed in its cultural relevance and assumed legacy, but adaptable in

its form of expression. In truth, it is the flexibility of tradition that ensures its continuity.

Cosmopolitanism: a space and its inhabitants

To fully understand the significance of Accra's historical and contemporary fashion culture, it must be situated within the framework of cosmopolitanism, a concept that is continually embraced, rejected and subsequently revised. To understand the relevance of cosmopolitanism, one must first acknowledge its diversity of expression; its inherent malleability. Carol Breckenridge, Sheldon Pollock, Homi Bhabha and Dipesh Chakrabarty argue in the introduction to their edited volume *Cosmopolitanism* that there exist multiple cosmopolitanisms, or at least that conceptions of cosmopolitanism can be expressed in culturally specific, localized terms, resulting in subtle variations on a shared concept.[48] Breckenridge et al. further emphasize the importance of change and transition to cosmopolitanism, implying that in moments of uncertainty or shifts in social order, cosmopolitanism becomes a means for unifying individuals, for emphasizing commonalities in spite of perceived differences. As cultures constantly experience shifts, cosmopolitanism thus becomes an important framework for understanding how individuals and groups see themselves in relation to others, as existing in the past, present and future.

Building on the recognized mutability and variations of cosmopolitanism(s), Thomas Turino emphasizes the importance of interconnectedness and localization to understanding cosmopolitanism in *Nationalists, Cosmopolitans and Popular Music in Zimbabwe*. According to Turino: "particular cosmopolitan lifeways, ideas and technologies … are situated in many sites which are not necessarily in geographical proximity; rather, they are connected by different forms of media, contact, and interchanges."[49] It is this conception of exchange between physically disparate locations that becomes the crux of cosmopolitanism.

The most significant contribution to the theorization of cosmopolitanism comes from Kwame Appiah, who in his publication *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (2006), frequently imparts childhood memories as vivid and descriptive indicators of cosmopolitanism in his childhood city of Kumasi, Ghana. Appiah humanizes philosophically removed conceptions of cosmopolitanism, arguing that these exchanges occur through the literal mobility of individuals and their sharing of physical, intellectual and cultural spaces. As Appiah asserts, cosmopolitanism cannot exist without engagement and interaction, adding an additional layer of complexity to the established understanding of this theoretical framework. In an attempt to distill the work of these scholars and philosophers, I consider cosmopolitanism to be a constellation of beliefs, actions and physical spaces, unifying in their forms, but localized in their expressions, that are constantly reacting to social and cultural shifts. These constellations exist only through active exchange and engagement; in spite of being physically disparate, they are interconnected. Cosmopolitanism is ultimately about

commonalities, and how certain ideas and forms are valued and enacted in specific locales across physical space and throughout history.

Fashion is a powerful vehicle for encapsulating and enacting cosmopolitanism; fashion is inherently global, for everyone dresses the body in some manner or another, and sartorial interventions are constantly experiencing revision, as both reactions to the past and projections into the future. Fashion is simultaneously localized; individuals draw upon their own histories and experiences to create expressions that reflect particular viewpoints, whether they be individual, social or cultural, that simultaneously resonate with a presumed global network. Of utmost importance, fashion is easily exchanged; fashion is intended to be transported and traded across perceived boundaries and geographical borders, suggesting that it is a prime indicator and means for enacting cosmopolitanism. This enactment, however, most successfully occurs when fashion is placed on a body, thus allowing for the full exchange and interaction that Appiah believes is central to a conception of cosmopolitanism.

The following chapters will attest to the validity of a quote from Ghanaian fashion designer Joyce Ababio: "Ghanaians have always been fashionable."[50] Each chapter is obliquely dedicated to supporting this assertion, which Ababio expressed with a casual confidence. Chapter 2 establishes the presence and significance of fashion in Accra, beginning in the early 1950s. The mid-twentieth century in Ghana was an era of expansion, diversification and sartorial experimentation; local and global forms of fashion were equally celebrated and promoted, indicating the unique ability of Accra's women to navigate the complexities of a multifaceted fashion system and attesting to their inherent cosmopolitanism, in both outlook and action. The subsequent hybridization of these disparate, yet overlapping, forms of dress ultimately led to the creation of specifically Ghanaian designer fashions. Chapter 3 focuses on two women who served as precursors to Accra's recognized fashion designers. Although the sartorial legacies of seamstress Laura Quartey and scientist Letitia Obeng are vastly different, they exemplify the continued contributions of countless, largely undocumented, women who actively contributed to the historical fashion culture of Accra. By acknowledging their impact, the contemporary understanding of African fashion is further complicated and historicized, providing a more complex understanding of the origins of Ghanaian, and more broadly African, designer fashions.

Chapter 4 explores the career and creations of Ghana's first formally trained designer, Juliana "Chez Julie" Kweifio-Okai, the "model" for subsequent Ghanaian fashion designers. Kweifio-Okai's contributions are significant, not only in their artistry and originality, but in their historical and cultural significance. Kweifio-Okai's most innovative creations will be highlighted, illustrating how her garments, particularly following Ghana's independence, challenged established conceptions of tradition and dress, particularly in relation to gender. The originality and boldness of Kweifio-Okai's designs allowed for future women to create even more avant-garde fashions, exemplified by Beatrice "Bee" Arthur, the focus of Chapter 5. Known for her unconventional approach

to design, Arthur pushed the boundaries of Ghanaian fashion, creating garments that are almost unwearable, yet laden with symbolism, challenging the divide between art and fashion. Arthur's designs are further imbued with her own complex identity, illustrating how fashion can reflect and encapsulate layers of personal meanings and histories. Her most recent collections, themed around the controversial subjects of sexual harassment and failing infrastructures, are examined to illustrate how fashion can also function as a means for social protest, empowering the creator and activating the body of the wearer in a complex conversation on resistance and the status quo.

Aisha Ayensu is the final designer to be included and is the subject of Chapter 6. Ayensu is the most successful and prolific of a generation of young designers who revitalized Accra's twenty-first-century fashion culture. Ayensu has developed a globally recognized fashion brand with a distinctive aesthetic, one that blends wax print and local forms of dress with global materials and styles, invoking many of the concepts originally expressed by Kweifio-Okai. Ayensu continues to emphasize a level of artistry in the creation and promotion of her designer fashions, distinguishing her brand as a purveyor of garments that challenge established dress codes, while maintaining a level of sophistication, elegance and Ghanaian heritage. Woven throughout these chapters is the framework of cosmopolitanism, as expressed through the artistry and originality of the designers and their garments. The final chapter looks to the future of Ghanaian, and more broadly African, fashion, examining how Ghanaian designers continually reconsider how to best capture their culture and heritage through fashion, and calling into question what actually constitutes distinctly "African" fashion.

Interspersed between the chapters are "vignettes," brief, personal reflections of events and interactions that I have experienced during my research process. They are meant to be enjoyable, illustrative and evocative, a means for sharing the complexities of research and the diversity of Accra's fashion culture. They serve as a means for acknowledging my own position and voice within this publication, for my experiences have certainly shaped how I understand, explicate and theorize Ghanaian fashion.

These vignettes, alongside the formalized chapters that document and examine the various ways in which women, both recognized and undocumented, shaped Accra's fashion culture, will illustrate the potency and centrality of fashion to Ghanaian culture, history and artistic expression, and that some of the most fashionable and cosmopolitan global citizens existed *outside* of the established metropoles.

The location: Accra, Ghana

Who says we shall not survive among these turbines? – Ama Ata Aidoo.[51]

My research is firmly rooted in Accra, the capital of Ghana. In casual conversations with Ghanaians, I jokingly refer to myself as an "Accra Boy," the designation given to Ghanaian men who grow up within the confines of the

city. The appellation of "Accra Boy" is a point of pride for many, as it implies an extensive knowledge of the city: understanding how to navigate the meandering streets that connect the city's ambiguous, haphazard neighborhoods; where to find the best "chop" houses; how to skillfully cajole a cheaper cab fare. These abilities reflect an overarching ease and confidence in existing within the city, an outward-facing, performed identity that blends seamlessly into the vibrant, everyday culture of Accra. The city thus becomes an integral part of an "Accra Boy's" identity. They purposely distinguish themselves from the countless Ghanaians who migrate to the capital in search of employment, economic stability and an escape from rural lifestyles; in contrast to these idealistic migrants, "Accra Boys" are born into city life.

Although I could never be a real "Accra Boy," the city became a crucial part of my identity. I repeatedly chose to remain bound to Accra, not out of a fear of rural life, nor from a lack of interest in Ghana's myriad art forms and cultural practices, but because I wanted to be part of the city and to feel a sense of belonging; that I was part of the dynamic, multicultural fabric that is Accra, and in doing so, I would better understand the city's vibrancy and complexity. It was during the ongoing process that I realized Ghanaian fashion and Accra are inextricably and perpetually intertwined, so much so that a discussion of Ghanaian fashion is ultimately about Accra's fashion culture. This is not to imply that cities like Kumasi and Tamale don't have their own fashion cultures; they certainly do, but the global conception of Ghanaian fashion is, in reality, what is produced, consumed, exchanged and performed in Accra.

When I began writing my book manuscript, my first words slowly coalesced to form the following reflection. It is my attempt to creatively and philosophically encapsulate what Accra means to me. It also functions as a grounding for the entire book; to understand Ghanaian fashion, one must understand the city, for it is the city, in all its successes and failures, that serves as the fertile ground for its flourishing fashion culture.

In 2012, my colleague and I embarked on an ambitious endeavor: to restore the dusty, barren front garden of Auntie Emily Asiedu's residence to its former verdant glory.[52] It was not an easy task. As I crisscrossed the city from one elite enclave to the next, gathering information on Accra's fashion designers, I also collected a sampling of plants: delicate, sherbet-colored orchids and slender birds-of-paradise from East Legon, speckled bromeliads from a seller alongside Ring Road and a shockingly red hibiscus from a location that I have since forgotten. While I amassed this impressive collection of flora, my colleague, an Agro-forester, planned the bed to ensure a balance of height and color, while allowing room for future growth. As a final touch, and to add an element of humor, I procured a smiling, oversized cement penguin whom I proudly positioned in the center of the fledgling flora. My friend and I had a mutual goal in mind: to create an enduring, physical expression of our love and gratitude for Auntie Emily, a plot of fecund and flowering beauty for her enjoyment, her own private Eden.

Every day I left the house, I would water the flowers. I had hoped that planting the garden during the start of rainy season would ensure its survival, but the rains refused to fall. I continued to nurse the juvenile plantings for several weeks, hoping that they would persist with my continued care. As my date of departure drew near, I attempted to enlist the help of Auntie's nephews, cajoling and even bribing them to water the garden, but I couldn't convince them of the dormant potential of this spotty, straggly space. On the day I departed, I resigned myself to accept the eventual demise of the garden. All our time, planning and hard work would slowly wither away, returning the plot to its former state of desolation, its eventual dusty barrenness ironically disrupted only by a smiling cement penguin, an alien, yet ever buoyant, interloper.

I returned two years later to find the garden teeming with life. Plants spilled over the raised bed in all directions and the penguin, now partially obscured, peered from behind flowering bushes; he was transformed from interloper to explorer, a monochromatic parody of Dr. Livingstone surrounded by his own jungle. I surveyed the garden: the orchids, unsurprisingly, had failed to germinate, yet the birds-of-paradise and bromeliads were thriving, thrusting their stalks and blooms toward the sky. I was amazed and delighted that Auntie Emily's Eden had not only survived, but flourished. I marked the garden's success with the addition of a second cement bird, a large and vividly pink flamingo.

Another two years passed. I no longer thought about the failure of the garden; I assumed that it would continue to survive in its own unexpected and haphazard way. By the time I returned again in 2016, the garden had reached a state of fluctuating constancy. The hibiscus and birds-of-paradise continued to thrive and jockey for their own space among their flowering neighbors. Weeds had begun to creep into the bed, but their delicate, periwinkle blue blossoms were more endearing than invasive. One plant made an ingenious decision; it had grown from a crack in the side of the bed, circumventing its own confinement and spilling onto the ground, its pure white flowers aggressively reaching toward the compound's front gate, a dramatic gesture of defiance. The birds had not fared as well as their more natural brethren. The flamingo had faded to a shade of dusky pink and the penguin's beak and wings had been broken by a careless handyman, reducing the penguin's enigmatic smile to its underlying metal wire and bits of unpainted cement.

One day during my 2016 trip, as I made the trek from Auntie Emily's Kokomlemle house to a designer's boutique in Osu, my mind continually returned to the sheer resilience of the garden. As I contemplated its survivalist tendencies and sheer vibrancy, I began seeing parallels between the garden and the city of Accra: diverse and exuberant spaces constantly in flux, both experiencing continual development and decline, expansion and destruction. Every time I return to Accra, new luxury hotels have sprung up seemingly from nowhere, sleek and imposing odes to modernist architecture that testify to the continued presence and importance of local wealth and foreign influence. Like the birds-of-paradise, these massive structures seem to widen their reach at any cost, casting their long, fortified shadows across Accra's existing urban landscape.

In other areas of the capital, buildings that originally dwarfed their neighbors are slowly being reduced to shadows of their original forms, their sturdy and seamless façades giving way to cracks and disintegrating edges. In Auntie Emily's neighborhood of Kokomlemle, I have watched this gradual decline over the years. The homes, with their broad verandahs and unexpected architectural flourishes (including Greek Ionic columns), served as markers of post-independence wealth and success; they now slowly crumble under the weight of family disputes and years of disrepair. Like the cement birds, these once bold and eclectic homes struggle to maintain their position in the face of new expansion, development and the growing competition for physical space.

And yet, like Auntie Emily's garden, the appearance of decline is deceptive.

The Museum of Science and Technology officially opened in 1965, originally intended as a dramatic and elaborate example of mid-century architectural design. I am unaware how long it functioned in its original capacity; in my memory, it was always a shell of its former self, a grandiose relic hinting at the optimistic modernism of Nkrumah's presidency. I distinctly remember my clandestine tour of the vacant space in 2012; a few articles of clothing were drying on a line outside of the museum, the inside was cavernous and awash with natural light. Near the entrance were rows of carved wooden sculptures, a temporary and informal storage area for itinerant street vendors. It was clear the space had been usurped by squatters, with blankets and the occasional mattress strewn haphazardly on the floor.

In spite of its general degradation, I was captivated by the building's two-story, octagonal, central atrium. I began to reimagine the space in my mind, populating it with silhouettes of elegant Ghanaians gathering around the multiple balconies to watch the presentation of an avant-garde fashion show. Even though the space was already being adapted and repurposed by its informal tenants, like the garden, there was a greater, yet dormant potential. I departed the space with similar sentiments as when I originally left Auntie's garden: hopeful, but resigned to the reality of decline.

In the summer of 2016, the museum was transformed by the faculty and students at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) into a vibrant and interactive space for their annual thesis exhibition. The building, which had appeared neglected and forgotten only a few years previously, was suddenly catapulted onto an international stage, becoming the setting for what will likely be remembered as a turning point of twenty-first-century Ghanaian art. The scattered remnants of squatters were replaced by art installations, paintings and elaborate sculptures constructed from a range of media, including used underwear. For me, the most significant statement was relegated to the building's impressive atrium: a singular, bristling column of snail shells rose to the ceiling, growing from an amorphous base that covered the main floor like an encroaching stain or oil spill.

The exhibition was a monumental display of creativity, artistry and vitality. As the building was revitalized, Accra's art scene was also reactivated, flourishing

in its own unexpected, yet productive ways. Even the exhibition's title, *Accra in the Cornfields*, inspired by Ama Ata Aidoo's poem *Cornfields in Accra*, evoked notions of productivity, resilience and a bountiful harvest in the face of disbelief and inhospitable landscapes.

How can so much survive, and in many cases thrive, from what appears to be a vulnerable and tenuous state? And yet, the city does thrive, in spite of its assumed veneer of fragility and instability. Like Auntie Emily's garden, there are aspects of the city that are destined to fail, while others experience unrestrained success. Still other elements remain in a state of dormancy, quietly waiting to be renewed by the fertile imaginations of Accra's citizens. And like the plant that resisted confinement, there are aspects of the city that are completely renegade: breaking free from expectations and physical limitations to create their own pathway to success and survival. Accra is in a constant cycle of blossoming and withering, flourishing and decay, yet its growth and expansion continue in spite of tangible and measurable hindrances. The result, much like Auntie's garden, is vibrant, exuberant and unpredictable. It is an African capital. It is a global metropolis. It is Accra.

Notes

1 St. Ossei's runway collection was exhibited posthumously and included garments from his final collection, which outside of the event, remain largely undocumented.
2 Valerie Steele, *Women of Fashion: Twentieth-Century Designers* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), 9.
3 Diana Crane, "Fashion Design and Social Change: Women Designers and Stylistic Innovation," *Journal of American Culture*, 22/1 (1999): 61.
4 Ibid., 67.
5 Victoria Rovine, *African Fashion Global Style: Histories, Innovations and Ideas You Can Wear* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 3.
6 In a contemporary context, the phrase "pedestrian" is often applied to fashion that is mundane, unimaginative or mainstream.
7 The linkage of being undressed or partly dressed to mental illness or madness is found in other West African cultures, such as the Yoruba of Nigeria, who believe a lack of clothing is "bizarre" and "indicates an incurable mental illness or an irreversible course." Rowland Abiodun, *Cloth Only Wears to Shreds: Yoruba Textiles and Photographs from the Beier Collection* (Amherst: Amherst College, 2004), 45.
8 Ruth Botsio is informally credited with introducing the popular mid-20th century hairstyle "the Pompador" to the women of Accra.
9 Christopher Richards, "The Models for Africa: Accra's Independence-Era Fashion Culture," *African Arts*, 49/3 (2016): 9.
10 Ibid.
11 Interview, Accra, 2012.
12 Joanne B. Eicher, *Dress and Ethnicity: Change Across Space and Time* (Oxford: Berg, 1995), 1.
13 Roy Sieber, *African Textiles and Decorative Arts* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1972), 10.

14 For further information on the history of fashion exhibitions, see Valerie Steele's "Museum Quality: The Rise of the Fashion Exhibition," *Fashion Theory*, 12/1 (2008): 7–30.
15 Andrew Bolton, *Manus x Machina: Fashion in an Age of Technology* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2016), 13.
16 Ibid.
17 Polaire Weissman, "The Art of Fashion," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, 26/3 (1967): 151.
18 Ibid.
19 Olivier Saillard and Anne Zazzo, *Paris Haute Couture* (Paris: Flammarion, 2012), 12.
20 Raphaëlle Roux and Florence Müller, "Christian Dior: Designer of Dreams," *Connaissance Des Arts Special Issue* (2017): 18.
21 Olivier Saillard and Anne Zazzo, *Paris Haute Couture* (Paris: Flammarion, 2012), 12.
22 Richard Martin and Harold Koda, *Haute Couture* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1995), 48.
23 Dilys E. Blum, "Shocking! The Art and Fashion of Elsa Schiaparelli," www.philamuseum.org/exhibitions/2004/64.html.
24 For a more detailed discussion on the overlap of Art and Fashion, see Mitchell Oakley Smith, Alison Kubler and Daphne Guinness, *Art/Fashion in the 21st Century* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2013).
25 Paula Wallace and Lynn Yaeger, *Guo Pei: Couture Beyond* (New York: Rizzoli Electa, 2018): 6.
26 Judith Thurman, Guo Pei, "The Empire's New Clothes," 2016, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/03/21/guo-pei-chinas-homegrown-high-fashion-designer.
27 Wallace and Yaeger, *Guo Pei: Couture Beyond*, 6.
28 Elsa Schiaparelli, *Shocking Life* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1954): 75.
29 Farouk Chekoufi, "In Conversation with: Guo Pei," 2018, www.buro247.me/fashion/insiders/in-conversation-with-guo-pei.html
30 Jean L. Druesedow, "Foreword," in *Art to Wear*, ed. Julie Schafler Dale (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986), 8–9.
31 Melissa Leventon, *Artwear: Fashion and Anti-Fashion* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2005), 8.
32 Julie Schafler Dale, *Art to Wear* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986), 12.
33 Ibid.
34 Alexandra Palmer, *Christian Dior: History & Modernity 1947–1957* (Toronto: Hirmer Publishers, 2018), 22.
35 Ibid., 23.
36 Ibid., 16.
37 Andrew Bolton, Richard Hell and Jon Savage, *Punk: Chaos to Couture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 12.
38 Ibid., 21.
39 Ibid., 13.
40 Ibid., 35.
41 Mark Salber Phillips, "What is Tradition When it is Not 'Invented'? A Historiographical Introduction," in *Questions of Tradition*, eds. Mark Salber Phillips and Gordon Schochet (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 18.
42 Christopher B. Steiner, "The Tradition of African Art: Reflections on the Social Life of a Subject," in *Questions of Tradition*, eds. Mark Salber Phillips and Gordon Schochet (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 92.

43 Ibid., 95, 96.
44 Ibid., 95.
45 James Clifford, "Traditional Futures," in *Questions of Tradition*, eds. Mark Salber Phillips and Gordon Schochet (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 162.
46 Ibid., 156.
47 Ibid., 157.
48 Carol Breckenridge, Sheldon Pollock, Homi K. Bhabha and Dipesh Chakrabarty, eds., *Cosmopolitanism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).
49 Thomas Turino, *Nationalists, Cosmopolitans, and Popular Music in Zimbabwe*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 8.
50 Interview with Joyce Ababio, Accra, Ghana, January 31, 2012.
51 Aidoo, Ama Ata, "Cornfields in Accra," in *New Poetry Works*, ed. Robin Malan (Clermont, South Africa: David Philip, 2007), 14.
52 Emily Asiedu, lovingly referred to as "Auntie Emily," is a Ghanaian woman who runs an informal guest house for researchers and scholars in the Kokomlemle neighborhood of Accra. When traveling to Ghana, I have always stayed with her and she has become part of my Ghanaian family.