

ANTHONY AMOAKO ATTAH, A CONDUIT FOR CULTURE TELLING STORIES WITH FRAGILE FABRICS



by Joe Samuelson III

Storytelling is among the oldest methods of conveying history. The allegories, throughout time, have taken on forms such as song, dance, visual arts, and the written word. In Afghanistan, major historical events are documented with small handmade carpets often called “War Rugs.” Since its birth, hip-hop has been the vehicle used to spread the suppressed stories of black communities.

Western culture prides itself on the use of the written word to document history, but Ghanaians choose fabrics adorned with bright colors and vivid patterns known as Kente cloth as a part of their historical preservation. According to Ghanaian artist Anthony Amoako Attah, “In Africa, it’s hard for you to find the history of Africa in books. We can look inside a fabric, however, and tell which year it was made, what happened, and why they made that fabric.”

Kente, Adinkra, and the Akan

When you first happen upon Attah’s work, the vibrant colors and flow of the material are likely enough to grab your attention. However, a deeper understanding of the shapes and colors therein will offer the opportunity to interpret the artist’s work as intended.

Raised in the gold mining town of Obuasi, Ghana, Anthony identifies as Akan, an ethnic group spanning Ghana and several West African nations. Though differently styled Kente cloths exist across Africa, the brightly colored cloths patterned with geometric shapes are that of the Akan. Both the colors and the patterns project deeper meanings. For example, yellows and golds represent prosperity or fertility, whereas green denotes growth.

The patterns are unique in that they are each created for individual events or even people, as in the case of the fabric created for the first prime minister of Ghana, Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, and his wife Fathia. “There’s a cloth we call Fathia Fata Nkrumah (Fathia Deserves Nkrumah). The first prime minister of Ghana married a woman from Egypt. They made that cloth during his regime, but then they overthrew him. That’s when it became a political fabric, so I made a piece in glass to match the real cloth. I was trying to reference what happened during that time.”

Anthony Amoako Attah, Mirror, Bullseye glass, powder screen printing, 40 cm x 50 cm, 2020. Set on a rotating base, this piece is a self-reflection of the artist as well as an opportunity for viewers to ask how they see themselves. Photo by Araceli Rodriguez Álvarez.

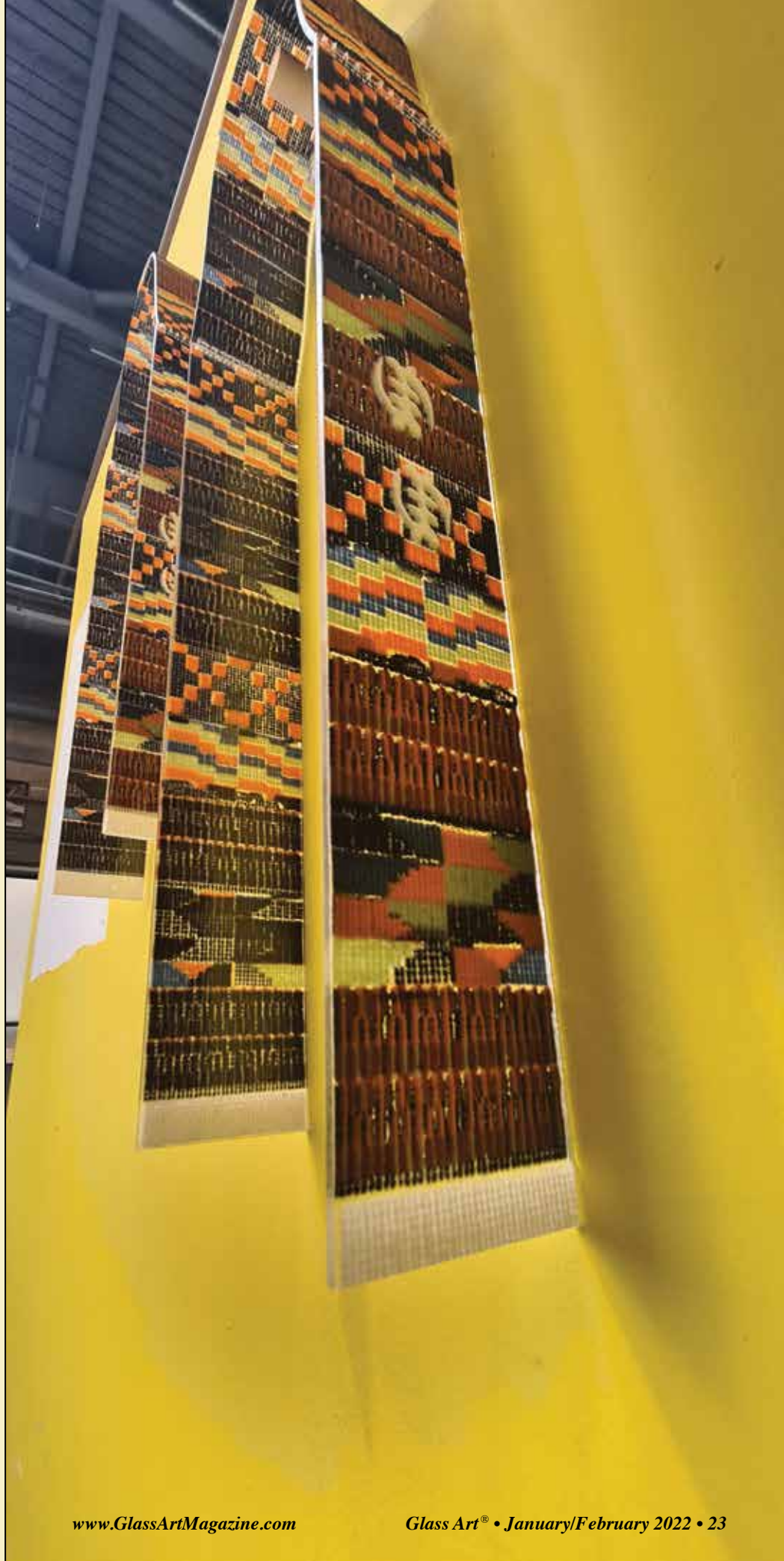
In addition to the representation offered by Kente colors and patterns, Akan Adinkra symbology offers a method of conveying sacred Akan philosophies. The Adinkra symbol of the fern, for example, represents endurance and resourcefulness. There are dozens of symbols that represent ideas like skillfulness, transformation, friendship, or the supremacy of God. Attah speaks to the use of the symbols in his work. "The symbols are trying to give more light to the fabric and add more value to it."

Enshrining Culture with Glass

When Anthony first arrived as a new master's student at the University of Sunderland in 2015, he had yet to work with the material. The bold move to choose a medium in which he had no experience kept him engaged virtually 24/7 his first year. "I had only one year, so I was always at the university. Always. I didn't have any social life. My concentration was just on how to learn the material, go back home, and teach."

Between hot glass methods and cold glass, two distinct themes emerged in Anthony's pursuit of his voice in glass. He found that the imagery and beliefs of his culture offered a form of expression unique to him. He also saw that the ever-changing nature of his own life would be the starting point for his work. "My work is mostly about life chances. It's about immigration. It's about integration. It's about the movement of life, and I'm using my Kente patterns and my Adinkra symbols to talk about it."

Anthony Amoako Attah, The Stole, Bullseye glass, powder screen printing, 80cm x 0.4 cm x 10cm, 2020. This piece represents the black community and the artist's own personal identity within the glass art world. Photo by Colin Davison.





Anthony Amoako Attah, *Transition II*, Bullseye glass, powder screen printing, 100 cm x 100 cm, 2020. The artist talks about his life from childhood to the stage where he finds himself now, referring to Kente designs, Adinkra symbols, and tartan fabric as stages of his life. Photo by Araceli Rodriguez Álvarez.

Attah's Ghanaian cultural identity grew even more important to him as a source of inspiration. Glass proved an ideal medium in which to preserve that identity, that story. "Glass has mostly been used as a container for storage. When you go to a museum, the most expensive pieces are all stored in glass to see through. With that concept in mind, I'm not going to put my piece in transparent glass. I'm storing the culture within the material itself."

Preserving Ghanaian culture in glass is a major aspect of how Attah plans to translate his western education into something with which his fellow Ghanaians can identify. In his preliminary PhD research, he read of a Chinese colleague who essentially copied and pasted the university's Western-focused education into her Chinese university back home. "When she taught her students, all the ideas and concepts were European concepts of art. I was thinking, how does she change that kind of attitude so it can adapt to a Chinese culture. I thought that the possibility of my going through the same process is high. I would be teaching a foreign culture instead of using my own culture. How would my people back home understand the material?"

Attah sought ideas for how he could incorporate his cultural identity into the material that he hoped to teach to his people one day. He found inspiration in African artists like Yinka Shonibare CBE, who brings African inspired garments to modern expressive forms, or El Anatsui, who takes iconic bottle caps native to his home in Nigeria and creates massive fabric-like installations. Attah also found inspiration within his chosen medium as he was drawn to Preston Singletary's use of Native American symbols etched into glass. "I started to do more research about how to use my own culture, blended with this material, so that when I go back home it will be very easy for my people to understand. When I looked at El and Yinka, and coming from the Akan, I told myself I could also weave my culture into glass. In my industrial arts foundation back home I did textiles, ceramics, and metals. I had a basic knowledge about weaving, so I decided to weave glass."



Anthony Amoako Attah, *Puberty/Adolescence*, Bullseye glass, powder screen printing, 80 cm x 50 cm, 2021. This work represents the adornment of girls with Kente designs during their initiation into adulthood within the rites of passage by Ashanti's of Ghana. Photo by the artist.

Fusing the Textures of Textiles

The initial idea was to be quite literal in the weaving of thin glass strands. Another experiment was the cutting, layering, and fusing of strips of glass to achieve the desired patterns. These methods, while practical in a logistical sense, were simply too expensive to play with in the hopes of finding his voice within the material. Anthony explains his vision: "I wanted a woven fabric. I wanted to feel that kind of roughness and texture, but I didn't know how I was going to do it."

Along with his academic supervisor Jeffrey Sarmiento, Anthony sought a different path in which he could create a crisp image that was also textured to the touch. Attah remembers the origins of what is now a style unique to him. "My supervisor Jeff is into screen printing with enamels on glass. I had done screen printing back home on T-shirts, but I didn't know how to do it in glass. With that, we were trying to find means to make glass look like the fabric.

"There was one student who was printing with powders. I told myself I was going to try. I went home, created my design, made my own screens, and did the first one. When it came out, ooooooh, it was so nice. When people saw the test piece, it was so nice. It was so nice." Repeating himself, on the other end of the Zoom screen, Attah was smiling like a schoolboy as he remembered opening the kiln that day.

Attah ran several tests of various methods and muses. "I went straight from my culture to the English culture. I was thinking this is a new culture I've put myself within, so I have to blend these two cultures together. I was looking for a fabric that represents the British people. I saw a fabric that is particular to the Scottish people—the tartan fabric—so I made a test piece of that. When it came out, oh man, my supervisor was happy."

With a bit of fine-tuning, Anthony settled on a technique of building his patterns on the computer, creating his screens, layering the powders, and fusing somewhere between a tack fuse and a medium fuse in order to maintain the physical textures he was searching for. "When I made those first pieces, they were smooth—still textured, but I wanted that woven nature. When I got the texture I wanted, I started on a larger scale"



Anthony Amoako Attah, *Myself, Bullseye glass, powder screen printing, 40 cm x 50 cm, 2021*. Part of *Rites of Passage*, this section represents the marriage stage of life. With Attah living in the north of England, the tartan fabric pattern is incorporated. Photo by Araceli Rodriguez Álvarez.

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Rite of Passage, a Life Cycle of Color

The Akan have a rich history of celebrating growth through the various stages of life. Attah explains these stages as seen through the eyes of Ghanaian culture. "You have birth, puberty, marriage, and death. When they're born, we believe it is coming from the ancestral world and they will go through this process again."

The artist has taken the cycle of life and applied aspects of his own experiences to one of his signature pieces entitled, *Rite of Passage*. Incorporating 20 panels in total, the piece is a meandering lifeline of experiences. The variation of Kente patterns and Adinkra symbols are the guides to the artist's life story.

- Birth. "When the child is born, we don't give them a name. After seven days, if the baby is alive, then we give them a name. On the eighth day we do the naming ceremony. When the baby survives, it's a kind of a victory. White and gold mean victory and happiness, so during that ceremony we wear white Kente. Therefore, I made a piece of white and gold to represent a newborn baby. The next color was green along with the patterns and symbols to show the growth of the child.

- Puberty. "From there you enter into puberty. This is when men and women are taught about adulthood. During this time, they are presented with gifts like Kente and other colorful things. I used the Kente and the other bright colors to represent that time.

- Marriage. "Marriage is beautiful and is celebrated with bright colors. Therefore, I represent that one with Kente as well. Also, because I am trying to put myself within it, I incorporated the tartan fabric. I am in the adult stage where I could get married, but I'm over here in England. I incorporated the tartan pattern to show this stage of my life. With that, I've gone with the dark colors of the traditional tartan.

- Death. "In Ghana, we believe that God has given you the age limit of 70. If you pass 70, it's a grace period. When someone dies in the grace period, we wear white and black. If you are younger, like in your 60s, we wear red and other colors, so I put them together in the piece.



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Anthony Amoako Attah, *Marriage, Bullseye glass, powder screen printing, 12.7 cm x 20 cm x 30 cm panels, 2021*. Part of *Rites of Passage*, this section represents the marriage stage of life. With Attah living in the north of England, the tartan fabric pattern is incorporated. Photo by the artist.

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A Parasol Built for Protection

When Anthony was finally able to return to his work after a Covid-forced hiatus, he found himself living near a less than desirable neighborhood. When he returned to a newly purchased car after having left it parked for a few days, Anthony found what was now a battered, rain-soaked shell of the former vehicle. "One day I woke up to see my car smashed. They smashed my car! Everything was gone. It was about racism. In that area, there are white people who are into drugs. They thought I was into that kind of thing. They feel like if you're a black person you're selling that kind of stuff. They thought I was competition."

Attah is a kind person. In speaking with him, the depth of both his compassion and vision are apparent as he relays his stories. With that type of mentality, it didn't take much for him to translate something terrible into something beautiful. "That was when I developed the umbrella. I call it 'The Protection.' I'm in a different culture, so with this piece I'm trying to embrace myself within my own culture. The umbrella represents a means of protection, and it reminds me about what happened."

Shaping a Future with Glass

Attah's vision is 20/20 and always has been, even in the face of the doubters. "Coming from Africa, you meet fellow African students. Most say they're doing engineering, science, or business programs. When I tell them I'm doing glass art and design, the question is, 'Huh?!' You see that kind of expression on their faces. It's strange to see someone coming from Ghana to do a program that's completely new to them, and then in art. They're thinking, 'What are you going to do? Are you going to get a job? Is there a market?'"

"My focus has always been to learn this material and to teach. I want to show my identity and also to expose my culture to a new medium. I want to represent the African identity within glass and say yes, we are also coming, and we want our presence to be felt within the material."

Joe Samuelson III has been a borosilicate lampworker intermittently for 20 years, both professionally and as a hobbyist. The focus of his work has largely been on functional glass in which he enjoys taking his own style and collaborating with artists who have unique aesthetics. In addition to his functional work, he produces a wide variety of glass both lampworked and fused. For more than a decade, Joe has been an avid collector of murrine focusing largely on glass butterflies.

Originally from Buffalo, New York, Joe has been an expat living across East Asia and the Middle East for 15 years, both teaching and managing English language programs. He is proud to be utilizing his BA in Journalism and experience as a writing instructor to venture deeper into the world of glass and glass art through his work with *Glass Art*® magazine. A variety of his glass art can be found on Instagram @number3glass.



Photo by Wokku Ari Sasaki

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