



"FEEL THE FABRIC...EMBRACE THE CULTURE"

Displaying Your Favorite Textiles

by Lisa Shepard Stewart

While some of us consider decorating with African fabrics only during Kwanzaa or Black History Month, remember that these unique pieces make beautiful home accents year-round! Creating culturally relevant surroundings provides a wonderful sense of tranquility, a retreat from the hectic pace of the outside world.

Fabrics of all types, and West African textiles especially, are my passion, including mudcloth, korhogo, adire, adinkra and others. Ghana's textile arts in particular are unique to its culture, and the woven kente cloth is one of my favorite creative decorating tools. Vibrantly colored strips are woven on a narrow loom in widths of four to six inches, then sewn together to form larger cloths. Kente is traditionally regarded as the cloth of royalty, worn as a simply wrapped toga-style garment. Each pattern and color combination conveys a particular meaning, or tells a specific story.

Authentic mudcloth also continues to grow in popularity for home decor. The distinctive patterns and colors of this handwoven cloth have inspired many machine-made look-alikes, produced in West Africa and in other parts of the world, but there's nothing like the "real thing" to add warmth and character to your living space. Here are a few basic suggestions for displaying your mudcloth, woven kente and other African fabrics. All of these ideas allow you to keep the cloth intact so you can always use it for another project later:

- *Ladder display – As shown in the pages of African Accents, I keep an assortment of my favorite African textiles folded and tucked into the rungs of a wooden ladder that I "rescued" from a garage. The ladder's slightly weathered appearance is the perfect complement for the various pieces of mudcloth, kente, korhogo and kuba fabrics I've collected. Every once in a while I change and rearrange the pieces. The mix of colors and textures livens up the room, and makes an excellent conversation piece.*
- *Headboard drape for the bed (SEE PHOTO) -- Fold over about 4" across the top edge of the fabric and hem. Or, sew tabs of a contrast fabric to the upper edge of the fabric. Insert a decorative curtain rod that measures the width of your bed (or for an earthier look, try a dried tree branch). Mount the rod to the wall, at the same height a headboard would be positioned.*
- *Single kente strips -- Wrap one around a solid color throw pillow and secure it at the back with small hand stitches. Tie a kente strip around a large vase or flower pot, arranging the ends in a bow. In a formal dining room setting, drape one kente strip across the back of each chair (like a sash) for a regal look.*
- *I've also utilized kente strips as mat borders in large picture frames.*
- *Wrap plain or not-so-new throw pillows with vibrant fabrics as if wrapping a gift. Secure the ends at the back with one or two safety pins. As an approximate guide, allow ½ yard of fabric for a 14" pillow.*
- *Handstitch kuba raffia to pillow fronts for a quick face-lift, or simply use them as table toppers on a coffee table, nightstand or other table.*
- *Do-it-yourself decorators will find lots of other ideas in the project books African Accents: Fabrics and Crafts to Decorate Your Home and Global Expressions: Decorating with Fabrics from Around the World.*



Room accessories in potato stamped fabrics from Zimbabwe. Photo: Courtesy NOVICA.com

Lisa Shepard Stewart is an author, designer and instructor based in New Jersey. In her how-to project books, Lisa encourages others to express themselves creatively through culturally relevant techniques and materials. She promotes her work through workshops, trunk shows and special events both in the US and internationally. Visit www.CulturedExpressions.com; call 1-866-MUDCLOTH; or write PO Box 356, Rahway, NJ 07065