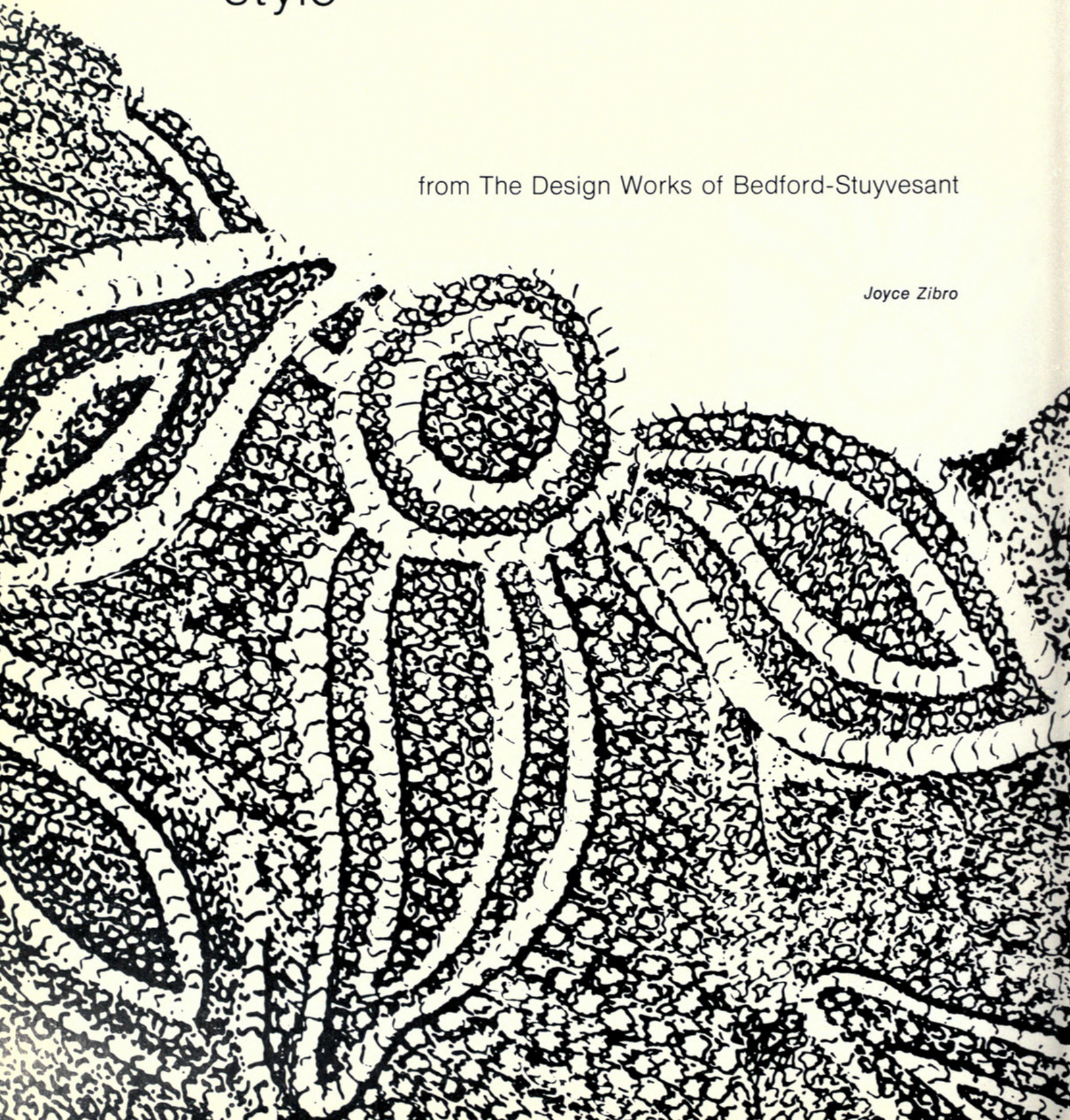


Afro- american style

from The Design Works of Bedford-Stuyvesant

Joyce Zibro



"This is our story," reads a small, red card which comes with products from The Design Works of Bedford-Stuyvesant. "In the fall of 1969, we opened a workshop in Bedford-Stuyvesant, dedicated to creative design and quality craftsmanship. After a year of research, training and experimentation, our artists produced a first collection melding the classics of African art with a distinctly contemporary esthetic. Our craftsmen hand printed the designs on cotton linen, and silk."

Now, after a lot of research and experimentation, and with the factory's Print Department producing 500 yards of fabric a day, the first collection from Design Works goes on exhibit at Field Museum. Opening April 7 in Hall 9 under the title The Afro-American Style from The Design Works of Bedford-Stuyvesant, the exhibit will include many examples of handsome silk-screened textiles, some made up into apparel, table linens and decorative items. Exhibited along with these beautiful craft products will be the original art pieces which inspired their designs—Benin bronzes from Field Museum's famous collection of Benin art.

Field Museum possesses the largest and one of the most comprehensive collections of Benin art in the United States. Mr. Leslie Tillett, world-famous textile consultant to Design Works, wrote after seeing the Museum's Benin collection, "A wide research program has been going on for many months to unearth the best of African art. Some of this we have been lucky enough to see in Africa, but we've found the most inspiring group in the Benin collection in your museum."

The ancient African kingdom of Benin, in what is now western Nigeria, is recognized as having produced art of high technical mastery and esthetic excellence over a long period—

certainly over the last five centuries, perhaps even longer. Although some excellent carvings in ivory and wood have come down to us from Benin, it is the bronzes which continue to attract most attention from anthropologists, art historians, and artists. The bronzes, produced through the lost wax (*cire perdue*) process, were the work of court artists. Included among the fine old pieces which have come down to us from these artists are great bronze portrait heads of the Obas (Benin Kings) and bronze relief panels which once decorated the rooms and galleries of the palace. The panels show the Oba and courtiers, noble warriors, European merchants, hunting and battle scenes, and the animals which played a major role in Benin life such as panthers, serpents, and mudfish. Life-size bronze cocks with carefully engraved feathers were also produced by Benin artists.

The lost wax method of casting, very simply, consists of modeling a wax image over a clay core, covering the model with clay, and applying heat. At one and the same time, the clay is thus made hard and strong, and the wax is melted away, leaving a negative clay impression of the original wax sculpture, which is then filled with metal. Finally, the mold is broken, leaving the positive cast in metal. The term "lost," or *perdue*, refers to the original sculpture in wax which is, indeed, lost as the heat melts it away.

The lost wax method of casting has probably existed in Benin since at least the 1300s and probably even earlier. It may have been introduced from the East or from north of the Sahara, or both. Benin tradition states that the process was introduced to Benin by Iguehga, an artist dispatched from nearby Ife about the year 1280. In any case, by the time the first Europeans arrived in this part of West Africa in 1485, Benin bronze casting was well developed. Iguehga, by the way, is still venerated by Benin artists today.

The high point in Benin art was reached in the 1600s and lasted through the first

quarter of the 1700s. Most scholars agree that the art was in a period of decline when Benin City was sacked and burned by a British punitive expedition in 1897.

Field Museum early in its history recognized the value of Benin art and acquired many specimens during the period 1889 to 1907. Dr. George A. Dorsey, then chief curator of anthropology at Field Museum, upon his return to the United States from a trip to England in 1898, wrote a memorandum to the director of the Museum: "While in Liverpool in the Free Public Museum, I saw for the first time a number of the bronze objects and carved elephant tusks from Benin, West Africa; later on in my visit to other European museums, I saw a large number of additional specimens especially in Berlin where they have the largest collection in existence. These bronze casts and carved elephant tusks are probably the most remarkable specimens which have ever been brought out of Africa. Their presence at Benin was probably unknown until about three years ago when the first of these wonderful specimens . . . was brought to the attention of anthropologists of Europe."

The collection was greatly enlarged by the generous gift in 1963 from Mrs. A. W. F. Fuller of her late husband's major private collection of Benin work. Captain Fuller had been a life-long collector of outstanding art specimens from Africa and the South Seas.

The Afro-American Style exhibit, in addition to presenting the original Benin art work and the products from the Design Works of Bedford-Stuyvesant which were inspired by it, will tell the history of this new enterprise. Field Museum is pleased to be playing a part, albeit a small one. The story goes something like this.

"Bedford-Stuyvesant is the Harlem of Brooklyn," says one resident of the area. Often referred to as the second

largest ghetto in the United States, after Chicago's Southside, Bedford-Stuyvesant comprises 653 blocks stretching in a nine square mile area of central Brooklyn. Into these blocks are crammed half a million people, 90 per cent of whom are black. Bedford-Stuyvesant has all the problems of any big city ghetto—inadequate housing, poor health facilities, widespread unemployment. Some statistics: high school dropouts—80 per cent of all teenagers; families headed by women—36 per cent; families with annual income under \$3,000—27 per cent; unemployment—7 per cent; underemployment—28 per cent; infant mortality rate—one of highest in country; homicide rate—reported as one of highest in country; rats—no one has ever counted. (These figures are based on the 1960 census. It is likely that the 1970 census will show no appreciable change.)

Early in the century Bedford-Stuyvesant was a white, upper-middle-class community. Residents lived in sturdy brownstones, built between 1880 and 1930, along tranquil tree-lined streets. The first wave of black migration reached Brooklyn during the Depression of the 1930s, and the second wave rolled in during World War II. War industry jobs were plentiful then in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, just a few minutes away from the heart of Bedford-Stuyvesant.

Many of the aged buildings are now decayed, plaster now falls from walls, and roaches and rats run everywhere. Bedford-Stuyvesant has no municipal hospital, and the area boasts only one high school within its boundaries.

Then in February 1966, the late Senator Robert F. Kennedy took a walking tour of Bedford-Stuyvesant. Senator Kennedy's tour got a lot of publicity, but to the residents of the area he was just one more in a long procession of politicians who walked through their misery into newspaper headlines. One



Lynette Charles Johnson, a resident of Bedford-Stuyvesant, models a hostess gown from Design Works in Field Museum's photography studio. Mrs. Johnson worked part-time as a lecturer in zoology in Field Museum's Department of Education last winter while completing her M.A.T. at the University of Chicago. Familiar with Benin art even before coming to the Museum, Mrs. Johnson taught biology while with the Peace Corps for two years in Owo, Nigeria—just 75 miles northeast of Benin City.

community leader put it to Kennedy like this: "Senator, we have been studied, examined, sympathized with, and planned for. What we need now is action."

Kennedy acted. Within eleven months, he returned to Bedford-Stuyvesant with a program aimed at nothing less than the total physical, social, and economic rehabilitation of the community. By May of 1967 Kennedy's program, backed by Senator Jacob K. Javits and Mayor John V. Lindsay, was in operation.

Two nonprofit corporations were formed: Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, whose twenty-six board members are local residents, and Bedford-Stuyvesant Development and Services Corporation, whose twelve-man board is drawn from the nation's business establishment. Franklin A. Thomas, a lifelong resident of Bedford-Stuyvesant and a former deputy police commissioner and former assistant U.S. attorney from the southern district of New York, was hired as president and executive director of Restoration Corporation. Eli S. Jacobs, an investment banker, took leave of absence from White, Weld and Company to direct Development and Services until a permanent replacement could be found. Early in 1968, John Doar, former assistant attorney general of the civil rights division of the Department of Justice, took over the job.

Restoration Corporation with its staff of 150 local residents develops and directs projects. Development and Services Corporation has such business giants on the board as IBM chairman Thomas Watson, William Paley, chairman of CBS, C. Douglas Dillon, former Secretary of the Treasury, and Benno C. Schmidt, managing partner of J. B. Whitney & Co., along with Ethel Kennedy, who took her husband's place on the board. They raise funds, generate ideas, bring in new businesses, and provide technical expertise in administration.

These two corporations working hand in hand have produced some impressive results in Bedford-Stuyvesant. More than fifty one- to four-family brownstone houses have been rehabilitated and resold to community people at cost. An additional 1,828 houses have undergone exterior renovation. Over 1,600 new jobs have been created and some 3,000 people placed in new or existing jobs. This is



in addition to the work done at four Neighborhood Centers through programs dealing with health care, youth development, sanitation, and cultural affairs and education.

Where does The Design Works of Bedford-Stuyvesant come in? It was bound to happen—a local firm that recognized the importance of Africa as a source of inspiration for the designs and manufacture of textiles. Restoration Corporation produced the idea of a textile business to develop talents of local residents while at the same time helping an ethnic minority give expression to its own cultural background. In conjunction with Development and Services Corporation, they raised some \$120,000 of the venture capital. The First National Capital Corporation together with Wall Street investors Peter Loeb and Robert Tobin contributed amounts adding up to \$60,000. Another \$60,000 was lent by the Chemical Bank.

Mr. Mark Bethel, president of Design Works, considers the fourteen persons presently employed by the company as the "nucleus, or fiber, for future expansion." With the exception of four employees in the Print Department, all have professional experience in their respective areas.

Briefly, this is how the operation works. Using African art as inspiration (in the case of this first collection, Field Museum's Benin bronzes), patterns are designed and coordinated. The design is then sent out to be photographed and made into a silkscreen, which consists of material stretched on a heavy wooden frame on which the design has been stenciled and the areas which are to remain white painted with some substance, such as gum or shellac, which will make the material impervious to the ink used. When the screen is returned to Design Works for reproduction, it is placed in contact with the fabric to be printed and a puddle of ink is scraped from one end





Too valuable to be included in the traveling exhibit of *The Afro-American Style*, Field Museum's original Benin bronzes have been reproduced in fiber glass casts. Here, John Harris, preparator in the Museum's Department of Geology, removes the fiber glass cast of a bronze cock from the mold. The original Benin bronze cock is at left.

to the other by means of a rubber squeegee. The design is reproduced on the cloth as the color is forced through the pores of the screen in areas not blocked out by the gum or shellac. One design can require as many as four or five screens, one for each color in the pattern. It is a hand process and gives a precise, clear pattern.

Various weights of cotton are used for the majority of the textiles, from sailcloth for drapery and upholstery material to butterfly net for sheer curtains. In addition, three weights of silk are used, primarily for boutique items such as ties, scarves, and some apparel. The colorist for Design Works mixes all of the more than forty colors to print on the fabric. Printing is done

on three thirty-yard-long tables. The large screens require two-man teams. Daily output is about 500 yards.

If the response of major department stores across the nation can be used as a gauge, Design Works is well on its way to success. It markets its products in its own boutique shops—one located on the premises at 11 New York Avenue and another on the upper East Side of Manhattan—as well as in key stores across the country, including W. J. Sloane in Washington and New York, Bloomingdale's in New York, Marshall Field in Chicago, Woodward and Lothrop in Washington, D.C., and I. Magnin in California.

"Our goal," says Bethel, "is to seek out and develop the black talents of the community. It is projected that eventually Design Works will employ 250 persons."

Two hundred fifty jobs in a sea of one-half million people may not sound like much, but when you multiply Design Works by the fifty other local businesses started through Restoration Corporation and consider that all employees are local residents pouring their money back into the community, the picture takes on another complexion. The people of Bedford-Stuyvesant, with a helping hand from big business, have that proverbial bootstrap in hand and they're pulling hard.

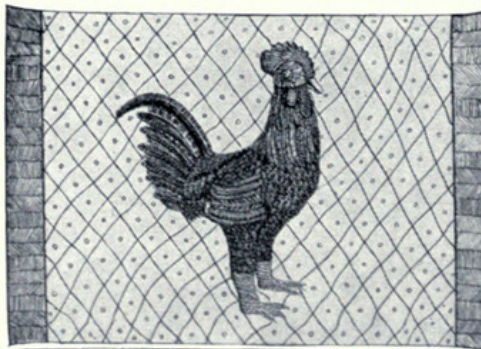
Joseph Coles, a former laundry truck driver and now production foreman in Design Works print shop, sums it up like this: "Businesses like The Design Works of Bedford-Stuyvesant aid everyone. I feel it builds community

closeness, an interest in the community and bettering it. Like most depressed areas, work is hard to obtain here. Bedford-Stuyvesant is not industrial, and many people have to go out of the borough to Manhattan to get work. Once we and other businesses like us get established, it will be more convenient for residents of the area to get work. A mother who wants to work, for example, must travel to Manhattan and can't be home with her children at lunch. If she could find work in the borough, a fifteen-minute ride home would enable her to prepare lunch for her children." Coles views his job in Design Works as "hard work but work you can see the end results of. It's something you've had a hand in," he says, "and you know that you did it with your utmost ability."

The *Afro-American Style* from The Design Works of Bedford-Stuyvesant will remain at Field Museum through September 21. Field Museum's chief exhibit designer Ben Kozak designed the exhibit so it can easily be disassembled to travel and, if funding can be obtained, it will travel around the state of Illinois in the fall. In the meantime, ten smaller traveling exhibits have also been prepared. These will be displayed in community centers in Chicago's inner city through spring and summer.

A museum is not often recognized as a resource that can stimulate combined artistic and economic development. This function, among our many, applies directly to some of our contemporary problems.

Joyce Zibro is editor of the Field Museum Bulletin and Public Relations Manager.





Zibro, Joyce. 1971. "Afro-American Style from the Design Works of Bedford-Stuyvesant." *Bulletin* 42(4), 2–6.

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