

Audio Guide Transcript

Aso Oke:
Prestige Cloth from Nigeria

September 29, 2023–March 10, 2024
Carolyn C. and William A. McDonnell Gallery 100

SAINT LOUIS ART MUSEUM

STOP 1

McDonnell Gallery 100

Introduction

Speaker

Nichole Bridges

**Morton D. May Curator of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas,
and Curator of African Art**

Saint Louis Art Museum

Hello, my name is Nichole Bridges. I am the Museum's Morton D. May Curator of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, and curator of African art. I am delighted to welcome you to *Aso Oke: Prestige Cloth from Nigeria*.

This exhibition features *aso oke* cloth dating from the 19th through 20th centuries. *Aso oke* are textiles created by Yoruba weavers in southwestern Nigeria that are fashioned into clothing for celebratory and ceremonial occasions.

At the center of this gallery, three agbadas—men's robes—introduce the fundamental types of *aso oke*. These are *sanyan*, tan raw silk and cotton; *alaari*, vibrant purple silk; and *etu*, deep indigo blue cotton. *Sanyan*, *alaari*, and *etu* form the foundation upon which weavers have implemented boundless innovations by incorporating new materials and design techniques as seen through the examples of *aso oke* presented here.

This exhibition includes one painting by Nengi Omuku, a studio-based artist working today in Lagos, Nigeria. Omuku has been inspired by *aso oke*, sourcing the cloth in Nigerian marketplaces and creating paintings on *aso oke* that asserts presence for both her painted compositions and the cloth itself.

This audio guide features Nengi Omuku, who speaks about her painting *Mar Loj*, on view here, and the voices of several members of the Yoruba community in St. Louis, who share their experiences resonating with examples of *aso oke* on view here.

We encourage you to experience this guide in any order you like. You can locate each

featured work by following the floorplan on this webpage or by identifying the audio icon on gallery labels.

Whether you are listening from home or the exhibition gallery, I hope you enjoy this audio guide to *Aso Oke: Prestige Cloth from Nigeria*.

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McDonnell Gallery 100

Aso Oke Pronunciation

Nichole Bridges

**Morton D. May Curator of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas,
and Curator of African Art
Saint Louis Art Museum**

Benjamin Olayinka Akande

Board Member

Saint Louis Art Museum

Bukky Gbadegesin

**Professor of Art History and African American Studies
Saint Louis University**

Marcel Esubi

Architectural Construction Administrator

NewGround International

Mrs. Felicia Adetoun Gbadegesin

[Nichole Bridges]

Listen to different voices from Saint Louis' Yoruba speaking community pronouncing
aso oke:

[Ben Akande]

aso oke

[Bukky Gbadegesin]

aso oke

[Marcel Esubi]

aso oke

[Mrs. Felicia Adetoun Gbadegesin]

aso oke

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Man's Robe (agbada)

Speaker

Benjamin Olayinka Akande

Board Member

Saint Louis Art Museum

Hello, I'm Benjamin Olayinka Akande, born in Abeokuta, Ogun State, Nigeria; raised in Ogbomosho and Ibadan and Lagos. And I am a long-standing board member of the Saint Louis Art Museum.

What is important in the Yoruba tradition are respect, honor, and formality. When you see people that are wearing the agbada, and it is made from *aso oke*—that is the holy grail of all agbadas, the ones that are made from *aso oke*. We say this was the original three-piece. So, you've got the three-piece suit—the original three-piece is the agbada.

I grew up being taught and being exposed to the regality and the importance and the tradition of agbada. And when they wear it, it seems to give them more power, more, more confidence, as they walk around in their agbada. And initially, you wear the agbada with your hands spread out, so that you can fully feel the effect. And then as you, as you get even more comfortable, you then bring the agbada—fold it up on the left, fold it up on the right. And when you do that, it actually shows the second piece, which is the internal, sort of like second piece of the outfit itself. And essentially, for us, it speaks to the tradition, the heritage, of being a Yoruba man.

I remember my first experience with *aso oke* agbada was wearing it to a naming ceremony. Naming ceremonies are as important as the birth of the child itself. My dad took me to that occasion, and I got a chance to wear my first *aso oke* agbada to that event. And I was a little boy; I was like 10 years old. The other occasion is, it's also worn at weddings. But then before the weddings, the engagement is also a critical juncture where the *aso oke* is worn. Also, I remember three years ago when I went to bury my dad, I had a special *aso oke* sewn for me. And we chose my father's favorite color, which was purple. And three weeks ago I was in Nigeria for the funeral of my in-law. When they brought his remains into the house for him to lie in state overnight into the morning, he was dressed in his favorite *aso oke* agbada, similar to the brown one here.

I end with that because agbada is there to celebrate your birth; *aso oke* agbada is there to celebrate your passing. It is a cyclical experience that starts from birth until the very end.

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McDonnell Gallery 100
Mar Loj

Speaker

Nengi Omuku
Artist
Lagos, Nigeria

Hello, I'm Nengi Omuku, an artist based in Lagos, Nigeria.

When I was in art school, I always made work with canvas or paper or wood. I was very particular about the surface I worked on. And there was this approach towards painting which encouraged experimentation and paying attention to the surface of the painting as a primary reason why your painting exists in the first place. And I sort of took that to heart.

And when I moved back to Nigeria, there was something that seemed illogical about the fact that we have a huge tradition with textiles, but I was still importing the canvas I was painting on from England. So, I started investigating different materials from different states in Nigeria. And a friend introduced me to *sanyan*, and immediately it was like a spiritual experience where I saw this textile, and I immediately understood that I didn't want to make paintings about people wearing this textile, but I wanted to collaborate with it as the surface for the painting. With the way in which I was sourcing the fabric, at the same time, I was also mourning the fact that, technically speaking, it's no longer . . . well, it was said to have no longer been in production in this kind of way. *Sanyan* is not something you see people wearing as often as you would have seen in the past. So, it became a quest for me to try to see if I could find weavers or spinners of the *sanyan* thread.

So, I had this incredible experience in Mar Lobj, where I learned to spin cotton. And when I finished that residency and came back to Nigeria, I realized that I should continue my quest for cotton spinners, that there must still be a couple of families that still do this, that have still maintained this tradition. And our quest led us to Ilorin, where we eventually met people that still spin cotton from the plants and still weave cotton into *sanyan* in the traditional way it was made. And so, *Mar Loj* actually was painted on the first new *sanyan* that my studio commissioned for painting.

So, I'll talk a little bit about the painting. And so, in the middle, seated in the green, is sort of like a self-portrait of me surrounded by these women. And they're teaching me how to spin the cotton. So, for each of them, I think in one of their hands, they're holding the spool of the completed thread. I think that's probably where you can see the pinnacle of this triangulation. And you can see a woman holding the spool of the completed thread, and in her other hand, encouraging it to become a thread. And at the bottom, you see some of the women holding what seems like another spool, but what it is, it's like a stick with a ball at the bottom that they feed the raw cotton into and spin like a top on the floor. So, that was the thought process, sort of, that went through my head as I was thinking about collaborating with this textile.

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Woman's Ensemble

Speakers

Bukky Gbadegesin

**Professor of Art History and African American Studies
Saint Louis University**

Mrs. Felicia Adetoun Gbadegesin

[Bukky]

Hello, my name is Bukky Gbadegesin, and I'm a professor of art history and African American studies at Saint Louis University.

My professional research is on photography, and to this day, one of my favorite photographs is of my mother decked out in her *aso oke*. The outfit was sewn in a 1960s Mod style, her *iro* (or wrapper) was a stylish knee-length, and the *gele* (or head wrap) was huge! The photograph was in black and white, so it was hard to get the full effect of her ensemble. Years later, when I finally saw the set in person, it was so gorgeous—three large-pieced cloths in a deep, dark red, crisscrossed with carryover threads and double lines of shiny gold Lurex. The best part was the smell—because the fabric is so fragile, it's never been dry-cleaned. Instead, after each wear, all the pieces are hung on a clothesline outside, where they soak in the morning dew and the hot afternoon sun. And then by nightfall, they are shaken out and folded for the next event. The smell immediately takes me back to Nigeria. Here's my mother, Mama Felicia Gbadegesin talking about the outfit:

[Mrs. Felicia Adetoun Gbadegesin]

I ordered this cloth from a weaver in the town of Okeho, in Oyo State, Nigeria, in 1974. It was a time of great oil wealth in Nigeria and this *alaari* style of *aso oke* truly reflected that moment. The rich, red-wine shade is a standout color that is associated with high quality, luxury, and is worn on very important occasions."

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McDonnell Gallery 100
Techniques of *Aso Oke*

Speaker

Shaka Myrick
2021–2023 Romare Bearden Graduate Fellow
Saint Louis Art Museum

I'm Shaka Myrick, the 2021–2023 Romare Bearden Graduate Fellow at the Saint Louis Art Museum.

There are two techniques distinctive to *aso oke*: carryover (*njawu*) and openwork (*eleya*). These designs are created by skillfully manipulating the weft and warp threads on the loom. I'd like to highlight two principal terms of weaving. *Warp* refers to the stationary, longitudinal threads set onto the loom (up and down), while *weft* refers to the threads woven over and under the warp threads.

For carryover designs, the weaver adds a thicker weft thread behind the cluster of warps, pulling it through and securing it with a few passes of weft weaving. The extra-thick wefts create zigzag shapes on top of the light blue lines in the dark blue wrapper.

Repeating this technique produces a row of eyelets, the small gaps within the solid tan strips that alternate between white and tan strips with the geometric motifs. If the weaver decides to trim the floating wefts instead of using them for carryover, a row of perforations reveals the *eleya* (openwork) design.

This exhibition features variations of *njawu* [carryover], like the pink crisscross carryover designs in the *Woman's Wrapper* nearby and the *sanyan Wrapper* with threads floating parallel over silver Lurex details.

Can you find other examples of the two distinguishing techniques or combinations of several?