Following a talk that British/Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare gave during his 1998 Alien Obsessives show at the Tabernacle Gallery in London, he was asked by a heavily dreadlocked man: “Where is Africa in your work?” Shonibare’s response was bold, indeed shockingly so: “I don’t give a toss about Africa!” He immediately qualified this by insisting that his work was not necessarily “about” Africa, that it could not be seen in Africa as it was in Europe and America. His work is generally concerned (among other things) with the deconstruction of stereotypes and essentialized identities, most especially those of black and African people in the so-called West that persist within the threefold legacy of racism, slavery, and colonialism.
One recurring element in Shonibare's investigation of these themes is his use of African-print fabrics, perhaps the classic example of an industrial product developed in Europe for which an African demand had to be generated. African-print fabrics emerged in the nineteenth-century Dutch attempt to undercut Indonesian batik production through the mechanization of the traditional wax-resist production process. The Indonesians rejected the Dutch fabrics because of the unacceptable quality of their veining and spotting, but these very imperfections found favor on the colonial African Gold Coast. Produced in Europe but not conspicuously European, these fabrics manifested an exotic and modern aesthetic which took popular hold in Africa. As the Gold Coast became the most profitable market for these textiles, local sensibilities began to creep in, most obviously in the visualization of proverbs well known as a feature of the aesthetic of Twi-speaking peoples. The earliest dated cloth is the still-popular “Hands and Fingers” pattern, which was in production by 1895. “Staff of Kingship” is another still-popular pattern, its design based upon a wrought-iron sword captured from the Asante and acquired by the British Museum in 1896, the year that Asante leader Prempe I was sent into exile. By incorporating a captured sword, a well-publicized image in its day, the designers of the Haaremi Cotton Company in The Netherlands had made a cloth that would remind Gold Coast people of the wars fought over access to Asante gold, resulting in the British defeat of the Asante nation and the resulting profits to be had in Britain. Perhaps the very wearing of this cloth gave Gold Coast people an opportunity to register their opposition to the colonial pretense to authority. The history of such textiles identifies a West African capacity for the subversion of European intention, and this realization has made these clothes so apt a continuing medium for Shonibare’s work.

These fabrics can act, for Shonibare, as signs of the harsh realities of colonialism and trade. Colonial rule had made possible the continuity of access to the cheap labor and raw materials that were once the context and justification for transatlantic slavery, and it also worked to encourage a demand within the local markets of West Africa for artifacts industrially produced in Europe. All this contributed to the foundations of European imperial prosperity. Whether directly, as domestic servants, manual laborers, and traders usually of slave descent, or indirectly within the colonial territories, black and African peoples were there, hidden from sight by the circumstances of their place. Shonibare makes this invisibility explicit by recasting conventional European images and themes with African-print textiles, as in his sculptural rendition of Jean-Honoré Fragonard’s 1766 painting The Swing. In Hound, Shonibare addresses the well-known aristocratic pursuit of the fox hunt. One of the hunters is dressed in “Staff of Kingship,” and the Dutch wax African-print cloth is mostly deep pink in color, a reference to Hunting Pink, the red cloth traditionally worn by English huntsmen. The headless figures in Hound and The Swing are distinctly swarthy (a term based upon the Anglo-Saxon for “black”), suggesting, further, the hidden facts of miscegenation in the colonial context, more covert than overt and more widespread than we recognize. Hound was shown in 2000 along with Shonibare’s 100 Years, in which there is one panel for each year of the twentieth century. Of these, fifty are painted over to obliterate the underlying cloth pattern. Instead, they show bacterial, fungal, and insect infestations, the hidden dangers always lurking behind a taken-for-granted order. In 2004’s Scramble for Africa, Shonibare revisits the Berlin Conference of 1884–85, in which representatives of fourteen European nations met to divide the resource-rich land mass of Africa between them.

African-print fabric, as used in Shonibare’s work, can be seen as a direct point of historical reference, but also as a more general symbol of the social ambiguities engendered by global markets and cultural transmission. As Shonibare noted in 1992, his use of these industrially manufactured textiles “refers to the experience of the urban African artist. They contain motifs on them from alphabets to footballs and are reproduced over and over again. I want to incorporate this symptom of commodification into my work...there is a deliberate denial of the authentic.”

Shonibare’s interest in using African-print fabric remains primarily with their generic formal attributes as a hybrid and subversive outcome of a fortuitous late-nineteenth-century engagement between Indonesia, West Africa, and a Europe intent upon colonial rule. As his work has come to address an ever-widening set of stereotypes, the fabric remains an
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effective medium because of its generic and ambiguous status. Shonibare gently insists that we recognize, question, critically distance ourselves from, take apart, and even for-sake the taken-for-granted status of the ethnic paradigm with which we interpret material, a paradigm that pervades the literature of African art with a mere delusion of certainty. The continued presence of African-print fabric in Shonibare’s work stands as a marker of both cultural exchange and resistance, a symbol that he alternately defaces and celebrates.

John Piston is Emeritus Professor of African Art in the University of London School of Oriental and African Studies. This essay is adapted from an article originally published in African Arts.