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Nadia Adanle, promoter of Colour Indigo workshop, a project transforming waste fabric into decorative objects, poses for a portrait in Ouidah yesterday.



Marcel Adjanohoun, head of several hotels in Ouidah, holds items made at Colour Indigo workshop.

BENIN PROJECT TURNS WASTE FABRIC INTO RECYCLED 'GOLD'

Every morning, Amake Yessoufou makes the rounds of the sewing workshops of Ouidah, a small coastal town in the south of Benin, and collects scraps of fabric used by tailors to make clothes. In the past, waste fabric clogged up the gutters of Ouidah, but Yessoufou is part of one effort to change that culture and make the most of recycling materials.

When Yessoufou ends her tour, the 28-year-old, who is deaf and mute, joins the

"Colour Indigo" workshop, a project transforming waste fabric into decorative objects. Employing around 30 people, including 10 living with a disability, the project has found a loyal following and even ships some objects overseas.

"I had never imagined that scraps of fabric could be useful. At first, I was amazed and astonished but afterwards, I understood that textile waste is worth gold if it is recycled," says Lucrece Sossou, a local seamstress.

In the workshop, Anne-Marie Afoutoutou leaves her wheelchair at the foot of a pile of scraps of fabric. On a small wooden chair, she braids pieces of laundry sorted by colour.

Over the course of the day, the piles of fabric disappear and all manner of objects take shape, from placemats and rugs to earrings, sold at between seven and 40 euros a piece. One "Colour Indigo" client is Marcel Adjanohoun, head of several hotels in Ouidah — a tourist destination

40 kilometres (25 miles) along the coast from Cotonou, the economic capital.

"These are objects that speak to me a lot, so I use them to decorate my hotel," explained the entrepreneur.

Braiding the pieces of fabric to make objects has significantly changed the lives of the workers, most of whom use crutches or wheelchairs. Contrary to what some argue, working with people living with a disability does not affect the productivity of the company in any way, says Nadia

Adanle, the business manager.

Thanks to her work, Afoutoutou can "finally provide for her needs", whereas before, she says, she could "not put anything aside".

"The way society looks at me has changed a lot since I leave the house every morning to go to work," she says, her eyes riveted on the thin braids. "Today, I feel valued." — AFP



To Tjoelker-Kleve, ambassador of the Netherlands in Benin, who is a customer at Colour Indigo workshop. — AFP photos



Items made at the Colour Indigo workshop, a project transforming waste fabric into decorative objects.



In a changing city, a glitzy Hong Kong gallery grapples with censorship

Between glass and soaring concrete walls, Hong Kongers queued for the opening of the much-anticipated multimillion-dollar art museum M+, a project bedeviled by delays, spiraling costs, and now the spectre of censorship. The Kowloon gallery - built directly above a major train tunnel that for weeks ferried thousands to the 2019 pro-democracy protests - was supposed to open four years ago, and is the first in Asia dedicated to 20th- and 21st-century visual culture.

While the Swiss-designed venue aims to rival Western leaders in contemporary art curation, critics say it must also grapple with a shrinking space for freedom of expression and growing self-censorship. And ahead of the opening on Friday attention has focused on the decision to not display a photo series by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei in the museum. "Politics shouldn't override art," said Yip, who gave only her surname, while waiting to enter the museum on a bright autumnal morning. "The current situation is very disappointing," interrupted her husband, also in his sixties.

In the series in question, Ai is showing his middle finger to institutions around the world, including the White House, Germany's Reichstag - and Beijing's Tiananmen Square. Earlier in the week, officials confirmed the artwork would not be shown, stating "artistic expression is not above the law". That political tension was not immediately on display as the museum's first visitors - many touting designer handbags better suited to Shanghai fashion week - roamed the atrium. Other visitors, most of whom declined to be fully identified, gave a different perspective to AFP.

'Art should be free'

"Some people said in the news recently that law is above art, but I think art should be free and creative," said Dennis, 35, who only gave his first name. He said instead of attracting artists as initially envisaged, the gallery was scaring them away. First conceived 14 years ago and budgeted at \$760 million - a figure officials have said is likely to be higher when the data is released - the 65,000-square-metre gallery has opened in a hugely different political climate.

The National Security law, passed in June last year following the 2019 pro-democracy protests, targets anything deemed "secession, subversion, terrorism or collusion with foreign forces" and has quickly criminalized a host of political views. And critics say it has also stifled a once-thriving artistic community, clamping down on freedoms and expressions previously celebrated in the city. In March, Hong Kong's leader Carrie Lam said authorities will be "on full alert" to ensure exhibitions do not undermine national security while simultaneously promising artistic freedom of expression, in response to a question about M+'s upcoming shows.

But critic Leung Po-shan asked how the art museum would function under such restrictions: "Is it possible to omit June 4 in stories about China's contemporary arts?" "All the cultural and art institutions, not only M+, are facing the same problem of the unlocatable 'red line'," she said. "M+ is big and it will become a wind vane, but we are not sure how well it can defend itself." Despite concerns, others were delighted. Visitors leaving "Hong Kong: Here and Beyond" - among the exhibits showcasing some 1,500 works from the museum's 8,000 piece archive - expressed their surprise at some of the work shown. "When we walked around the galleries there are some politically sensitive items related to China and we are happy to see that they are displayed," said Ashley Wong, 35. One man, who declined to give his name, said the situation was not black and white. —AFP

'Like queens': Divisive legacy of Senegal's women traders

Aminata Sall, who rents out brilliantly coloured dresses in the Senegalese city of Saint-Louis, systematically quizzes her clients about their motivations for the prized cultural heirlooms. Kept in a storeroom near her office, the gowns represent a now-vanished group of mixed-race merchant women known as the Signares. "If it's just for show, I won't rent them to you," Sall says, recounting how she once rejected a bid by a university professor hoping to hire some Signare-style dresses.

The Signares were a colonial-era class of female traders of gold, ivory and slaves who once strutted their wealth in West African trading hubs in magnificent spangled dresses and conical hats.

At their height, they were powerful commercial brokers in Saint-Louis and further south on the island of Goree, developing their own unique Euro-African hybrid culture. They have since faded away, but their glamour lives on in folk memory. Today, women wearing Signare dresses are in demand at business or political events in Saint-Louis, once the capital of the former French colony of Senegal. The Signares' ties to the slave trade are either unknown or pass largely without comment.

Sall, a museum curator and member of a history association that has about 100 replica Signare dresses, warned that flippant use of the robes represents a "loss of meaning". "I think people forget or pretend to forget," she said. "People have to understand that they played a big role-like the colonisers."

Female bourgeoisie

The history of the Signares is entwined with the history of Saint-Louis itself. French traders founded the city in the mid-17th century, on an island on the mouth of the Senegal river, and it quickly became an important hub. The Signares first emerged during the early years of the settlement, when European traders would take native wives. Marrying locals was frowned upon, and condemned by the Catholic Church. But the common practice afforded African women and their mixed-race descendants opportunities for social advancement.

Through inheritances and shrewd business acumen, these women ended up building considerable fortunes in their

own right, including by trading in slaves.

Accounts from travellers during the heyday of the Signares - from the 18th to mid-19th centuries - describe a thriving female bourgeoisie in Saint-Louis.

At set times during the day, the businesswomen would promenade through the city wearing their vivid dresses to flaunt their wealth. Aissata Kane Lo, a researcher at Saint-Louis' Gaston Berger university, described the Signare phenomenon as a novel way of life "that had nothing to do with Senegalese tradi-

matching headdress and shawls.

Diallo, 77, said the popularity of Fanal is such that she is now regularly asked to "send us some Signares" by people throwing parties, or organising business events. Demand for the dresses has been a boon for tailors in Saint-Louis who can replicate the style.

Awa Marie Sy, who models for one such dressmaker, said she felt proud to wear the outfits. "These dresses were worn by our grandmothers, who were like queens," she said.



Models working with fashion designer, Ndeye Diop Guisse, talk as they wear their traditional Signares outfits in Saint Louis.

tion". But from the middle of the 19th century onwards, with the abolition of the slave trade and French restrictions on local commerce, the Signares disappeared.

'Like queens'

Some are nostalgic for the old times, Aissata Kane Lo said.

Marie-Madeleine Valfroy Diallo, a journalist and actor, is one such person. In 1999, she revived the "Fanal" festival, a custom that once saw the Signares march to Midnight Mass by lantern light.

Today, women dressed as Signares for the festival shimmer in the procession alongside other festival-goers in traditional Senegalese garb. Their dresses are of another era - puffy below the waste, adorned with ruffles and lace,

'You can't erase history'

Ariane Reaux, who owns a hotel with rooms named after famous Signares, and has hosted conferences on the women, said there was a broad fascination for the singular culture of Saint-Louis centuries past. "There's a lot that people don't quite understand," she admitted, but noted that the Signares are part of Senegal's heritage.

"It's all part of a history between France and Senegal. Nothing like this has ever happened anywhere else". Aminata Sall, the museum curator, insisted the complex reality of the Signares should not be glossed over. "You can't erase it, it's history," she said. —AFP



M+ museum director Suhanya Raffel (L) and chairman of the Board of the West Kowloon Cultural District Authority, Henry Tang (R), attend a press conference during a media tour of the new M+ Museum in Hong Kong on November 11, 2021. —AFP



Models pose for a portrait in front of a disused port crane. — AFP photos