

Good as Gold: Fashioning Senegalese Women, North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, North Carolina [review]

By: Sidney Pettice and [Elizabeth Perrill](#)

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Abstract:

Focusing on gold jewelry and dress from the nineteenth to twenty-first centuries, *Good as Gold: Fashioning Senegalese Women* offers an engaged experience of West African styles and trends. The exhibition foregrounded Wolof terms and ways of understanding the presentation of self, such as *sañse* and Signare (described below), in Senegalese life, past and present. Organized by Kevin D. Dumouchelle of the National Museum of African Art and curated by Amanda Maples at the North Carolina Museum of Art (NCMA), *Good as Gold* features over one hundred works including jewelry, ensembles, photography, and historic artifacts.

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Article:

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What follows is a dialogic review, which began in-person at the NCMA and was then continued online during the COVID-19 pandemic. This conversation represents a discussion between a professor and student, a white woman and a black woman, a veteran of the field about to earn full-professorship and a new art historian with fresh eyes. We delighted in trying on jewelry at the NCMA's interactive exhibition and learning from one another. In turn, we hope readers enjoy the way that this review style opens new perspectives on *Good as Gold*.

Sidney Pettice: The exhibition takes the popular saying “Look good, to feel good” to a whole new level. As you enter the *Good as Gold* exhibition, you are greeted by a striking late-twentieth-century heart-shaped gold pendant framed in a flat wall case. Positioned alongside the exhibition title, this single pendant introduces the importance of gold itself in Senegal. Subsequent juxtapositions convey how dress and jewelry work together to create a feeling of elegance. I was intrigued by the idea of dressing to create grace and good feeling, as defined by the Wolof term *sañse*, which was an anchoring exhibition concept. It’s not a concept that is easily conveyed in English.

Elizabeth Perrill: Yes, the Wolof terms make this exhibition unique from the perspective of an African art historian. The gold, 1970s-style font used for the introductory text conveys that same sense of dressing to feel good. It’s as if the show itself has metaphorically dressed up to give us the *sañse* sensation we needed; it’s very glitzy. I think we’ve all missed going out and being a part of public life during quarantine.

SP: The twentieth-century amulet and amulet case were exemplary pieces that presented the significance of objects for individuals; a tone I felt throughout the exhibition. The exhibition featured a wide range of quite small, intimate items of jewelry interspersed with mannequins and photographs that show us images of the women who wore these pieces. The amulet itself is minimal in style, a necklace containing very few ornamental details, attached to a subtly patterned amulet case. The amulet case, an item owned by men and women, was most likely used to hold powerful verses of the Qur’an, as a means of protection and good health.

EP: This personalized presentation of Qur’anic amulet cases was so welcome. It brought out of the abstract an object I have long studied as a religious item and reminded me it was also jewelry owned by an individual and used for self-presentation.

I was struck [by] how *sañse* was presented alongside the title *Signare*. The concept of *Signare*, a woman who is both fashionable and an active part of governmental and economic affairs, came to life (Figure 1). The contemporary interpretations of *Signare* ensembles were presented on unobtrusive mannequins. Mannequins are a loaded choice for exhibitions featuring black bodies. Too often the mannequins attempt to mimic a brown skin tone that flattens out the realities of West African beauty. These mannequins were a gorgeous matte black that blended into the overall black and gold design of the exhibition. This neutrality allowed viewers to enjoy the clothing and jewelry and avoided mirroring the mannequin design in the quagmire of Colorism; an issue in so many Black communities both in the United States and abroad.

FIGURE 1 IS OMITTED FROM THIS FORMATTED DOCUMENT

Figure 1. Fabrice Monteiro, *Signare #1*, 2011, inkjet print on baryta paper, 47 1/4 × 31 1/2 in., Courtesy Magnin-A, © Fabrice Monteiro/ADAGP, Paris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York 2021

A personal favorite contextualization of a *Signare* ensemble was the one seated on a Louis Ghost, the now-classic Philippe Starck interpretation of a Louis XIV chair. They are both so elegant that one could easily see a *Signare* combining her ornate robe, headwrap, and gold

jewelry with this transparent polycarbonate nod to the francophone design world in her own home. It was a subtle choice not to use just any chair, but a chair that signaled a francophone and global design culture.

SP: One of these ensembles was created by world-renowned Senegalese fashion designer Oumou Sy. The ensemble was breathtaking, incorporating a vibrant red fabric with intricate gold detail. Sy created an extremely elegant look. His work encourages the viewer to take in and enjoy every detail, from the Signare's headdress to her jewelry and handbag accessory. Though *Good as Gold* focused heavily on tradition, it also made apparent that Senegalese fashion traditions are vibrant in the twenty-first century.

Golden jewelry and dressing to "feel good" is very much alive. Your comment about Starck, for instance, brings to mind how Senegalese fashion designers also take inspiration from traditional styles, patterns, and motifs, as well as contemporary Senegalese habits of *sañse* dress.

The connections between history, contemporary practice, and fashion were clear in the *Pinton Ensemble* created by Khadija Ba Diallo. This ensemble features a traditional style of clothing called a boubou, a flowing garment. The pattern of Ba Diallo's boubou presents a contemporary style with a checkerboard that echoes the pattern made popular by the shoe company Vans. The piece also features a popular Senegalese street food called pinton; the pinton cans on the fabric print are reminiscent of Andy Warhol's Souper Dresses, paper garments decorated with the repeating pattern of Campbell's soup cans.

EP: I hadn't thought of that parallel! Ba Diallo does a great job of connecting tradition with contemporary styles.

The NCMA installation techniques emphasized the concepts of *sañse* and transparency. Golden platforms accentuate ensembles and transparent mounts and cases bring jewelry into the space of the viewer. We were both excited by the display area that allowed viewers to try on pieces of contemporary Senegalese gold jewelry!

SP: Jewelry is such a tactile medium that we touch and try on outside of the museum setting to decide if it goes with our outfits; if it's too heavy or uncomfortable; or if it helps one "feel good."

Transparency was also emphasized in *Good as Gold* through honesty. Maples and the museum staff were transparent about how the pandemic effected the exhibition. Certain objects could not be loaned. Instead of eliminating them altogether, the installation included purple-tinted reproductions of the missing pieces, accompanied by QR codes.

EP: I confess, I didn't scan any of the QR codes, but I know that for you they helped to bring these missing pieces to life. It might be a generational divide.

From a pedagogical perspective, I appreciated how the video of the NCMA Exhibition Designer, Molly Trask-Price, explained how couriers from the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art would typically be present for installation, but that couriers could not travel amidst the pandemic and, thus, several Smithsonian objects couldn't travel to North Carolina.

SP: The NCMA had a lot of great resources. A rear projection interactive video showing a local Raleigh TV anchor wearing and explaining Senegalese jewelry was an amazing, almost physical experience (Figure 2). I love that they chose Lena Tillet, a local news anchor and woman of color, to model and narrate this didactic section. As a whole, the exhibition was very accessible, offering QR codes and visual, tactile, and audio resources.

FIGURE 2 IS OMITTED FROM THIS FORMATTED DOCUMENT

Figure 2. Installation Gallery View, *Good as Gold: Fashioning Senegalese Women*, North Carolina Museum of Art. Photograph by Christopher Ciccone, courtesy NCMA.

One critique is that, although the exhibition provides nuanced information about jewelry and fashion, there was not an extensive timeline of the history of gold trade in Senegal. The exhibition included a chronology mentioning thirteenth- to fifteenth-century trade, and it put on view eighteenth-century weighing devices from Ghana, but then the bulk of the exhibition focused on the nineteenth to twenty-first centuries. It would have benefitted from a timeline of localized gold trade and European contact in Africa that more coherently contextualized this commodity.

EP: This was a moment when I appreciated your perspective. It was as if I had a blind spot related to the history of gold trade. I didn't take note of the chronological jump. African art curators sometimes overlook the history of slavery or economic imperialism when a show isn't focused on these histories, and I've been noticing my students want to grapple with the impacts of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and its impacts more directly. It's a disservice when the more ancient pre-colonial context is covered and then the exhibition jumps to the late-eighteenth or early nineteenth century. This chronological leap erases the more painful content of colonial economics and the slave trade.

SP and EP: *Good as Gold* is one of the first exhibitions in the world to ever bring together the artistic genres of Senegalese fashion, fine art photography, and the concepts of women's presence in public space, all with an emphasis on the exquisite details featured in the crafting of gold jewelry. It's as if the curator is a fashion enthusiast, anthropologist, African art historian, and contemporary art historian all in one. Although many exhibitions have featured West African gold jewelry in an African art context, emphasizing the empowerment and social importance of Black women through dress and jewelry is groundbreaking. The Senegalese fashion presented exemplifies empowerment and pride through physical representations of the self and, most importantly, dressing to evoke "good feeling," or *sañse*; moreover, the intimacy of jewelry and the dynamic art of displaying selfhood on the body was brought to life through the combination of casework, full figures, photography, and interactive exhibition displays.

Notes on contributors

Sidney Pettice is an Undergraduate Art History Senior at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, sjpettic@uncg.edu. Elizabeth Perrill is an Associate Professor of African Art History at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.