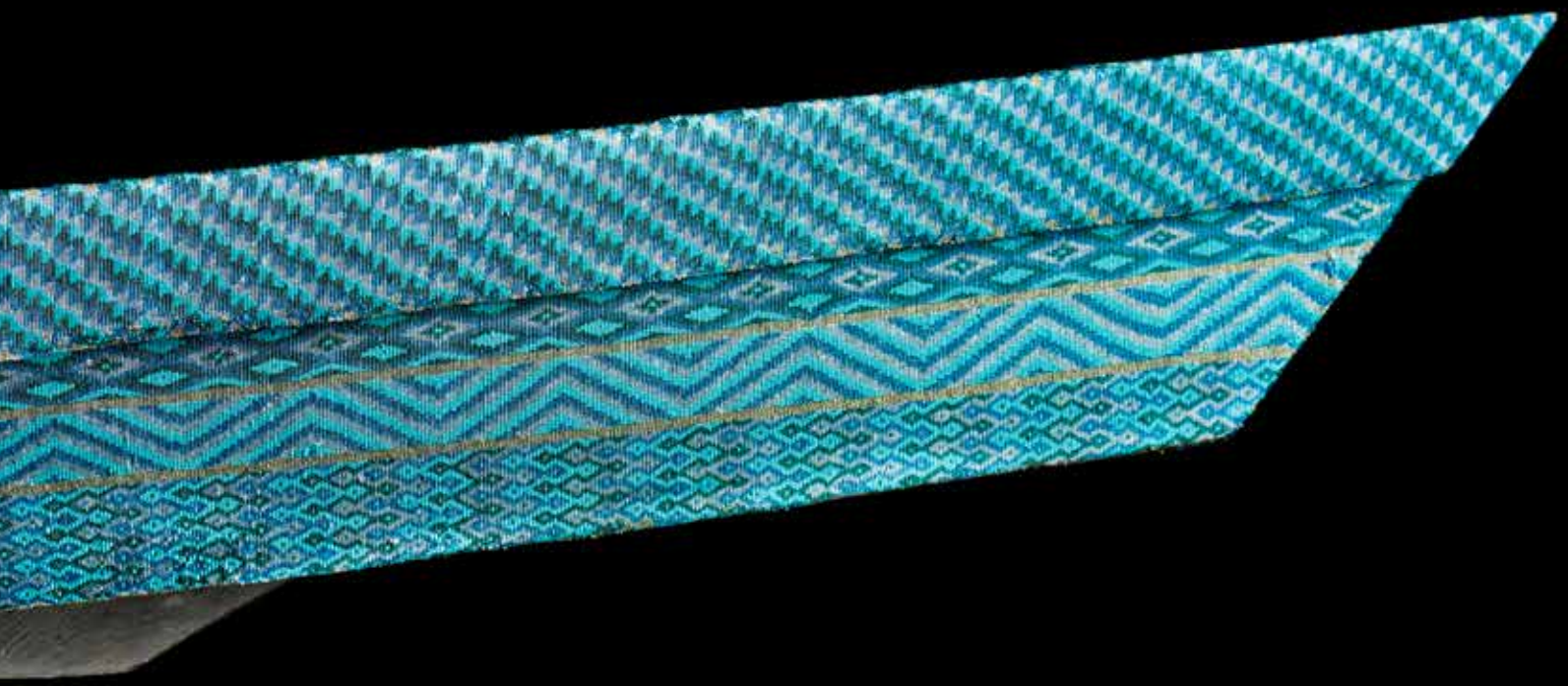
CULTURAL THREADS

TRANSNATIONAL TEXTILES TODAY



edited by

JESSICA HEMMINGS

BLOOMSBURY

Cultural Threads
Transnational Textiles Today

Edited by Jessica Hemmings

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edited by
JESSICA HEMMINGS

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OPPOSITE Jorge Lizarazo and Hechizoo Studio, *Inga*, 2013. Wood canoe, glass beads. 28 × 50 × 401 cm (11 × 20 × 158 in.). Courtesy of Cristina Grajales Gallery and Andres Valbuena.

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Chapter two

Dutch wax-resist textiles: Roger Gerards, creative director of Vlisco, in conversation with Jessica Hemmings

The transnational identity of wax-resist textiles emerges from the numerous cultures that have in the past, and continue today, to identify with wax-resist cloth. Present-day Indonesia has a history of refined wax-resist cloth production known as batik. During Dutch colonization of the region, batik production was taken up in the Netherlands, as well as other textile manufacturing centres such as Manchester, England, intended for trade with the islands. (Kent 2008: 12) But the market proved unsuccessful. Aesthetic concerns are often cited as the reason for this failure, with the presence of 'veins' of dye on the cloth occurring during mechanical production deemed inferior by a market familiar with the subtleties of hand production. (Picton 2001) But taxation imposed, ironically, by the Dutch government, to protect the value of cloth produced in the islands is also cited as a reason why importing cloth to the region was a marketing failure. (Hobbs 2008 and Vergès 2014) Instead, the textiles found a welcome reception in West Africa, becoming symbols of national pride associated with independence gained by a number of nations in the late 1950s and 1960s.

The Dutch company Vlisco has been designing and manufacturing wax-resist cloth since the late nineteenth century for the African market. (Arts 2012) Based in Helmond near Eindhoven, Vlisco today produces wax-resist textiles that are sold globally. In this chapter Roger Gerards, creative director of Vlisco, discusses the company's brand identity, speculates on the reasons for Vlisco's longevity and proposes that fashion, by default, always seeks out the unfamiliar.

Jessica Hemmings

OPPOSITE Vlisco, Theo Maas, fan design, 1985. Wax-resist on cotton. © Vlisco Netherlands B.V.

LEFT Vlisco, Theo Maas, fan design, 1985. Wax-resist on cotton. © Vlisco Netherlands B.V.

OPPOSITE Vlisco campaign *Funky Grooves*, 2012. Wax-resist on cotton. Photograph by Wendelien Daan. © Vlisco Netherlands B.V.

JESSICA HEMMINGS: There are many explanations put forward to explain why Dutch – and English – wax-resist cloth produced for what is present-day Indonesia was not a successful business during Dutch colonization of the islands. What is Vlisco's understanding of this 'failed' trade route?

ROGER GERARDS The story I know is that there was a law in Indonesia that it was forbidden to import batik from outside. The import rates on imitation batik were so high – imposed by the Dutch government – that it was no longer profitable for the Dutch and the English to export to Indonesia. There was also a kind of print technique of batik that we [the Dutch] were not allowed to do. The original batik is not printed by wood but with handmade copper plates. We were not allowed to do that anymore. So there were a lot of complications in making the batik product for Indonesia. In Indonesia they also discovered a new stamping technique (*Tjap*) for certain simple designs to replace the hand-drawn technique (*Tjanting*), so they could produce their own product easier, cheaper. But the most important thing, which made it difficult, was that we were not allowed to export to Indonesia.

JH Mechanized production of batik can introduce 'veining' where small cracks in the wax allow dye to seep onto the cloth. I understand that Vlisco is now developing production techniques to enhance this veining because it allows each cloth to be unique and affords protection against digitally printed copies. I had originally understood that the veining was a problem for some markets and another reason why imported cloth was unpopular in what is now Indonesia?

RG Yes. In the design image the vein is caused by an uncontrolled break in the wax [that] became part of the image. This is a very specific, unique aspect of the product. Besides the drawing meant and designed by the designer, we allow the manufacturing technique to 'draw' as well: there are design-related image effects in the bubbling, and also in the veining aspect of the image. So when you look to the old cloths made by the wax technique, the vein (which is in the image by accident) became a stylized ornament to refer to the wax process and it happened a lot. Since 2000 we have a lot of copies on the market made by rotation printing. They don't have the natural uncontrolled vein and other effects anymore in the image and consumers like that better than the original wax.

JH So the design development is also a market response?

RG Yes. On the other hand, we also have products which use work that is called 'spec' to refer to 'special breaking' in which you have very long veins through the whole image that ignore the planned design. We have wax 'spec' products now, which I am going to use in every season to show the technique. But the arts and crafts technique in the image has become less important for our key consumers now. On the other hand, outside our key markets the arts and crafts – the vein – becomes much more important because people love the speciality of the technique.

JH Is there an aesthetic split among Vlisco consumers that is driven by differing cultural tastes?

RG Yes, and from a design aspect. I discovered in West Africa a blue t-shirt with a white vein printed on it as an African image. It was originally a mistake, which had been stylized, then became a design ornament, and now stands for Africa. So you have these layers of ornament, some derived from uncontrollable techniques.

JH In your West and Central African markets where Vlisco is so popular at the moment, do you think your customer has an interest in the complex history of the product?

RG [Vlisco's history] has meaning when you talk to consumers, but also professionally. The mothers and grandmothers are around the table immediately and the [company's] history is apparent through the generations.

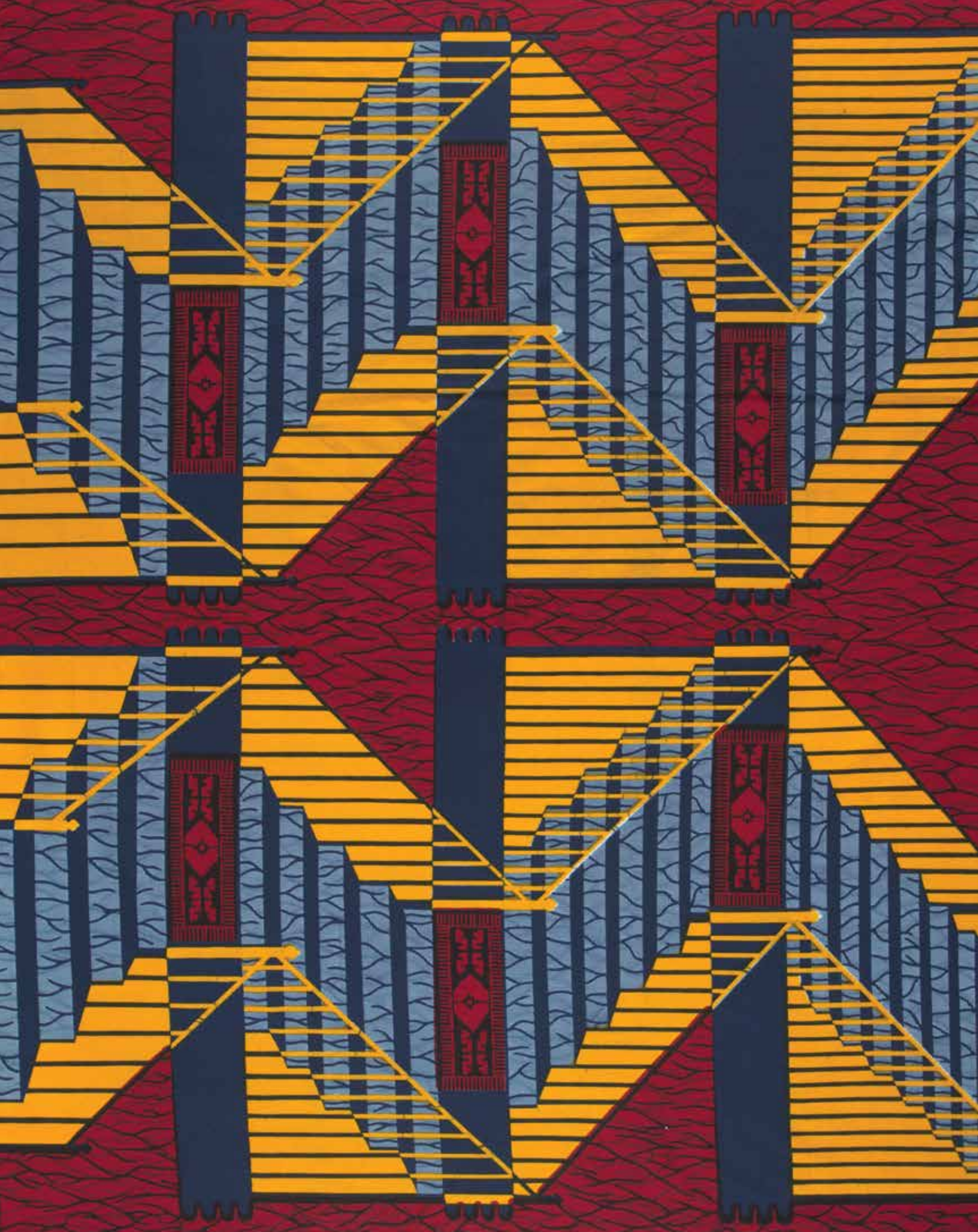
JH When did Vlisco's market in Africa begin?

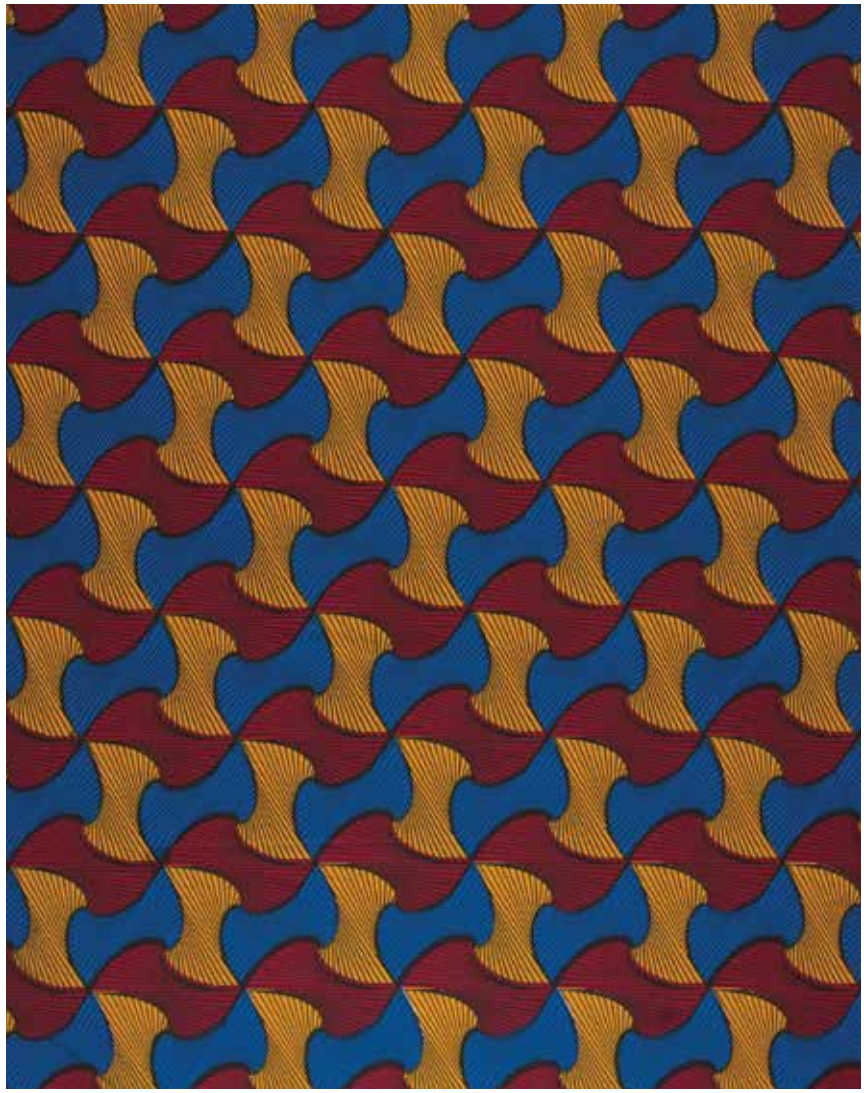
RG It started in the 1920s, but it really became big in the 1960s and 1970s. Almost fifty years ago. But I have seen dresses [made with Vlisco fabric] from 1900 and 1910. The first shipment we have documented is dated 1876. That is the real first order for Vlisco. Before that time there had been trade with the Ashanti in Ghana, where imitation batik was traded for water and supplies when the boats stopped halfway before they completed their journey to Indonesia. Before 1876 and the opening of the Suez canal they had to sail around Africa to get to Indonesia. In the nineties (last century – so that is not that long ago) the Nana Benz in Togo played an important role in the market growth. By then the trade became important in Togo, Benin and Nigeria. And Nigeria is huge.

JH How important to Vlisco is it be thought of as 'authentic'? Admittedly, our material world is hardly ever authentic if we define authenticity as a single history or source of reference.

RG The printed [Vlisco] selvedge is not that old. It is not from the beginning [of the company], that is the first thing. The selvedge also has a legal reason. In a lot of countries you were obliged to show that you were 'made in Holland'; it has to do with import duties. But talking of authenticity in general, I always challenge that: give me one authentic company. What you see in the history of Vlisco, and not only Vlisco but also other brands that worked with wax [resist textiles] for West Africa, is a follow-up of reasoning and circumstances and facts which made the product as it is. And the image of the product now is totally different than the image of the product in the beginning, because then it was a copy of the Indonesian product for West Africa. But by making the batik technique industrial you get a kind of roughness in the technique, which made the ornament more rough and bigger, which was appreciated for storytelling or other aspects.

Vlisco, Dries van de Ven, *Hibiscus – Hiisque – Fiorba,* 1952. Wax-resist on cotton. © Vlisco Netherlands B.V. In the background the stylized breaking of the wax – the vein – is visible and part of the design.





THIS PAGE Vlisco, Johan Sleegers, *Santana – Cherie, ne me tourne pas le dos,* 1984. Wax-resist on cotton. © Vlisco Netherlands B.V.

OPPOSITE Vlisco, Ankersmit design, *Big Step – Staircase – Death Men's Ladder,* 1927. Wax-resist on cotton. © Vlisco Netherlands B.V.

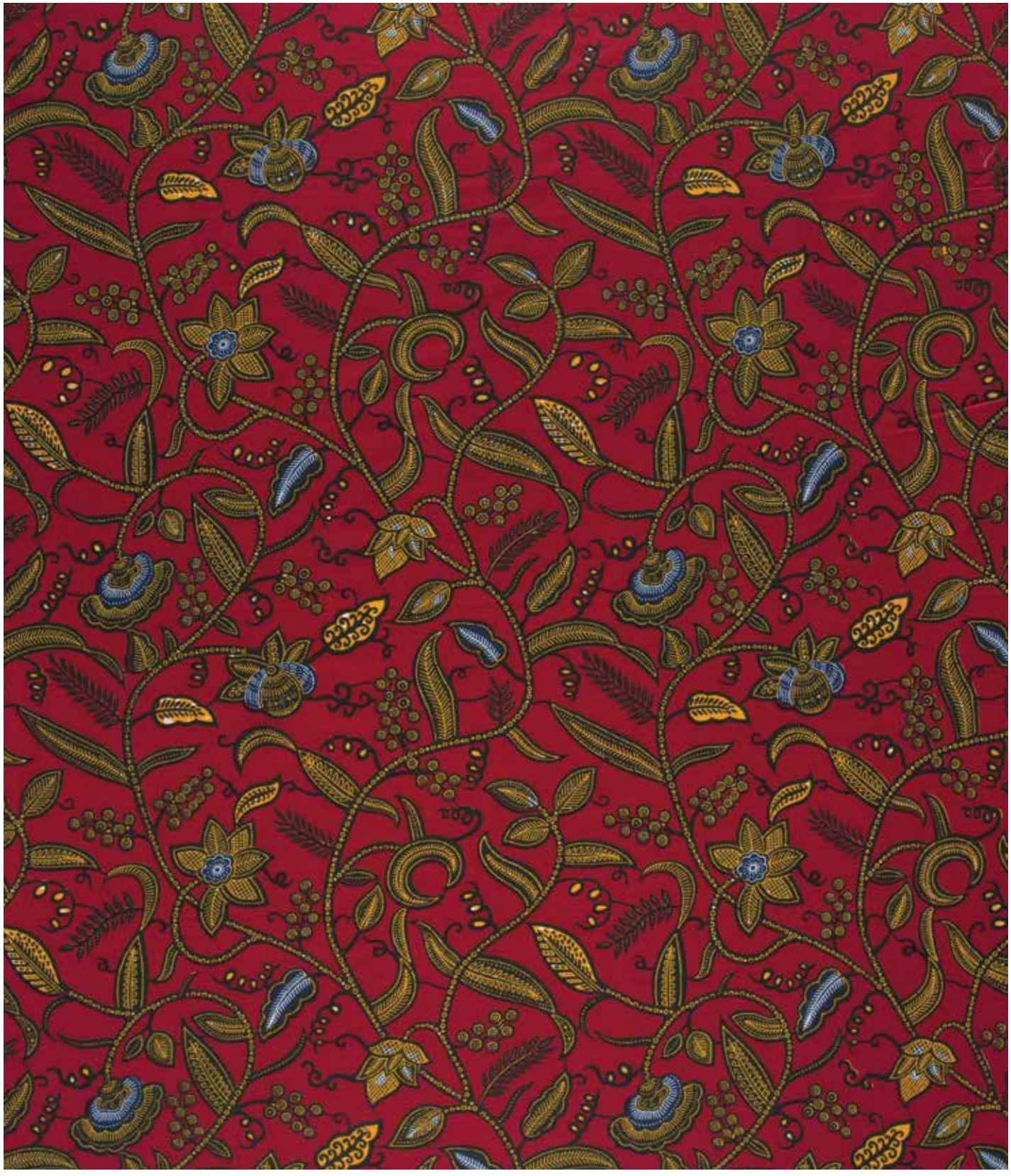
However, the style changes were appreciated. So it is the dialogue which made the image as it is now. Then I don't know anymore if you can say it is authentic.

We keep it authentic because we have our own designers working on it, and we have our own technique that nobody else has. So we have aspects of authenticity, because the designs we bring now are from the brains and craft of the designers, and made in an industrial technique, which is also authentic as such. But at the very end, I often hear, 'but you copied Indonesian batiks'. Yes, it is true. But the image now is different than the Indonesian batik. There are new authenticities. That is also what I like. The batik has had time to react to environmental aspects, to legal aspects, to appreciation aspects, to consumer and trader aspects, which all give influence to how the product is now. And in all the interpretations, or reactions, or dialogue the brand also took some authenticity to answer it. We are the ones who are copied now, with the same products but made using different techniques.

There are other brands that are also Vlisco group owned: Uniwax and GTP. So we have a factory in Côte d'Ivoire making Uniwax and we have a factory in Ghana making GTP.

JH This is where some of the production equipment from Helmond [the Netherlands] moved?

Vlisco, Willie Kartner, *Small Star – Petits Etoiles – Kilikilistar – Stars,* 1952. Wax-resist on cotton. © Vlisco Netherlands B.V.



Vlisco, Frans Jacobs, *Leaf Trail – Feuille-feuille – Zamba- Zamba – Agre Pankassa – Ahoudi Pankassa* ('empty barrels make the most noise', Ghana) – *Makaiva*, 1933. Wax-resist on cotton. © Vlisco Netherlands B.V.

RG Yes, in the early 1970s there were opportunities to start manufacturing in West Africa, and in the beginning the existing designs of Vlisco were reproduced under other names. Uniwax was produced in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire and GTP – Ghana Textiles Printing – in Accra, Ghana. But that did not work, so now there are also design departments in Abidjan and Accra who design for the Uniwax and GTP brands. I work closely with the [entire] Vlisco group[1] as the creative director. But the Vlisco products made in Helmond have the best quality and the best quality perception with the consumer still. One aspect is because it is not made in West Africa. In Africa there is a perception that it is better if made 'abroad' than there. The aspect of exoticism is always important in fashion and design – it is the same as when we perceive products from other cultures as more inspiring.

JH And are the various West and Central African markets particular – quite different – for Vlisco?

RG Yes every country, or market, or tribe or cultural group.

JH So talking about a country is not a very useful way to talk about organizing design, production, marketing … ?

RG No. We offer new designs, but also existing designs every year. We order more existing designs than we take on new designs. And the order on existing designs really relates to the symbolism some designs have in specific areas. It can be different areas within one country. The most famous is the Igbo wax product, which only has a palette of five colours and is always ordered because of the design. There is a red, a green, a blue and a yellow on indigo. They are ordered for the Igbo market in Nigeria. And that is only one part of Nigeria.

JH And these orders are stable? Is this because the cloth has ceremonial use that generates a steady demand?

RG Yes, it is very traditional and it is very static. On the other side, we are a fashion brand in the sense that people are longing to see what we are doing the next season. So we have that aspect, but also what we do is release some classic designs and the new seasonal concepts. So we link the new with the history and the heritage: past, present and future as a concept.

JH You have one of the most productive relationships with a company archive that I have seen, helped by your designers' studios being located on site next to production and next to the company archive.

RG Yes, now I will take this more to the foreground. It has always been that designers use the archive to get inspiration, or designers look to old designs for reinterpretation, that happens also. So we have some designs that we can follow through, that are reinterpreted. I discovered in our archive a period in which our known old designs are used on a smaller scale. The ornaments have shrunk in size so that there is more density of ornaments in the repeated design. Then I heard from colleagues in West Africa that there was a trend that all the designs should be smaller to allow for other use in fashion. So we have all these interpretations. But now more and more we work in concepts, which started six years ago. I went to [trade fairs such as] Première Vision, but I stopped that because now we just look to ourselves and make our own concepts. And of course on colourways and on ways of communicating we catch up on things that are going on because we are in the middle of the world. But for the designers' inspiration I am making the heritage and the archive much more important.

OPPOSITE Vlisco, Marjo Penninx, 2008. Wax-resist on cotton. *Touch of Sculpture* collection, August 2009. © Vlisco Netherlands B.V.

JH The current colourways are suited for bright sunlight and dark skin. I can't get out of my head the image of your designers' studio and the grey winter sky of the Netherlands. Production and the archive are on your doorstep, but your market – the sounds, the smells, the heat – how do you make sure that the design team comprehend that?

RG Vlisco designers go once every year or two to the market and when they have been they are flabbergasted for half a year or a year. You really feel the strong bond with the users. You see, you feel. I have seven new designers. The design department is nearly fifty people now, but there are seventeen designers. We have design support, technical people for translating designs for the factory. I try to answer this question for the new designers who have not been to the market yet. It takes you a year to learn to develop just technically. We only have two hundred colours to add to the indigo so that already also gives a lot of influence to the design image. Even when you don't know Africa, if you want to make dark colourways, it is still bright because we have a bright, fully saturated palette. There are a lot of technical restrictions. On the other hand, I have designers that love to design ornament. They are more and more difficult to find.

JH Textile design education isn't preparing the type of designer Vlisco needs?

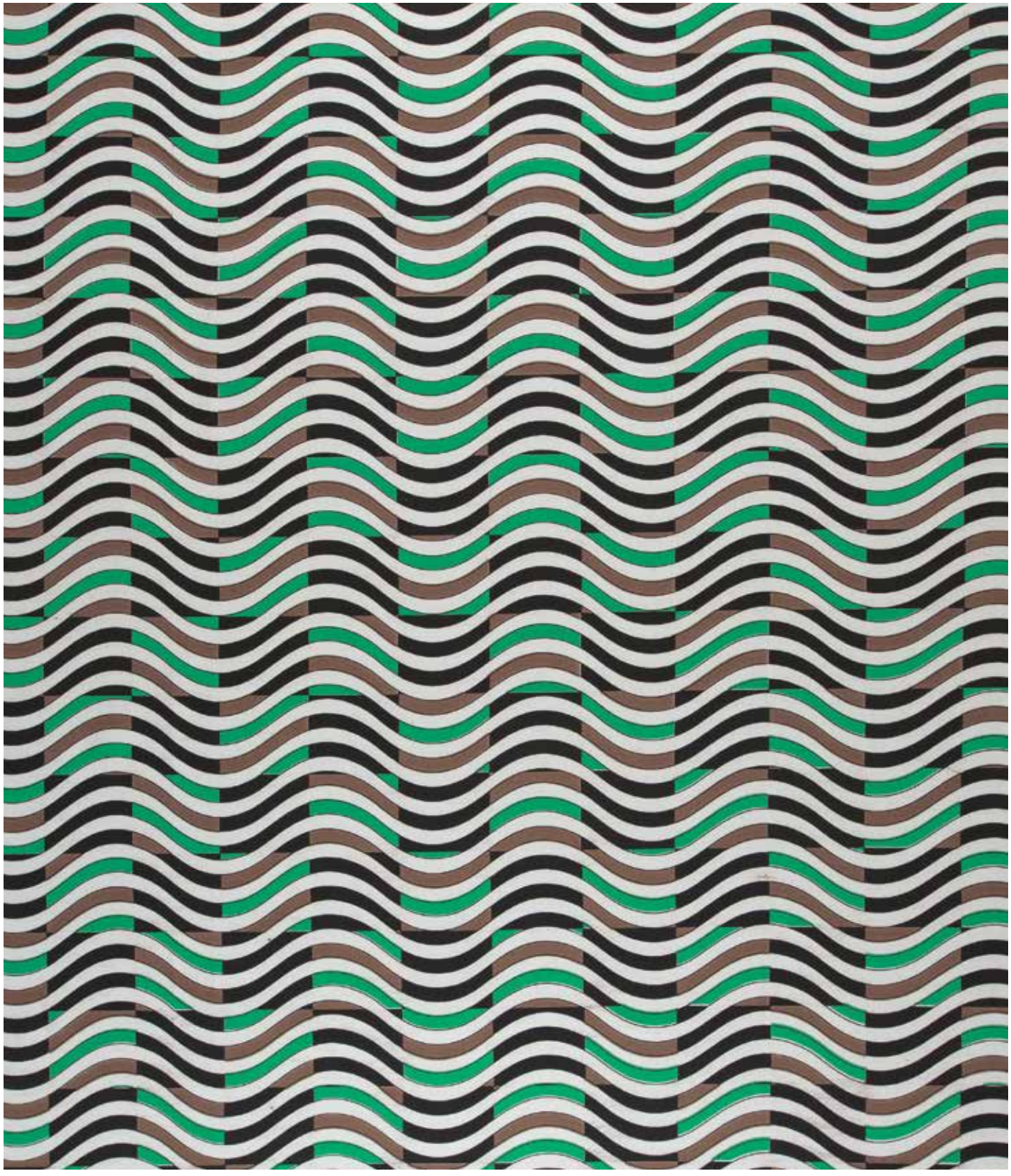
RG I think it is a significant difference between England and Holland, but in Holland everything is conceptual. When people like to design illustration or ornament they do it with Photoshop and not by hand. I see a lot of work where I see more the Photoshop function than the handwriting of the designer. These designers that we choose are almost already Vlisco designers who discover Vlisco. They already have this urge to design strong ornaments, detailed and illustrative. So it is also choosing the good designers – in fact I discover that they are Vlisco already.

JH Is it a benefit to train in another discipline outside textile design? Is there a concentration of designers of different nationalities working with Vlisco?

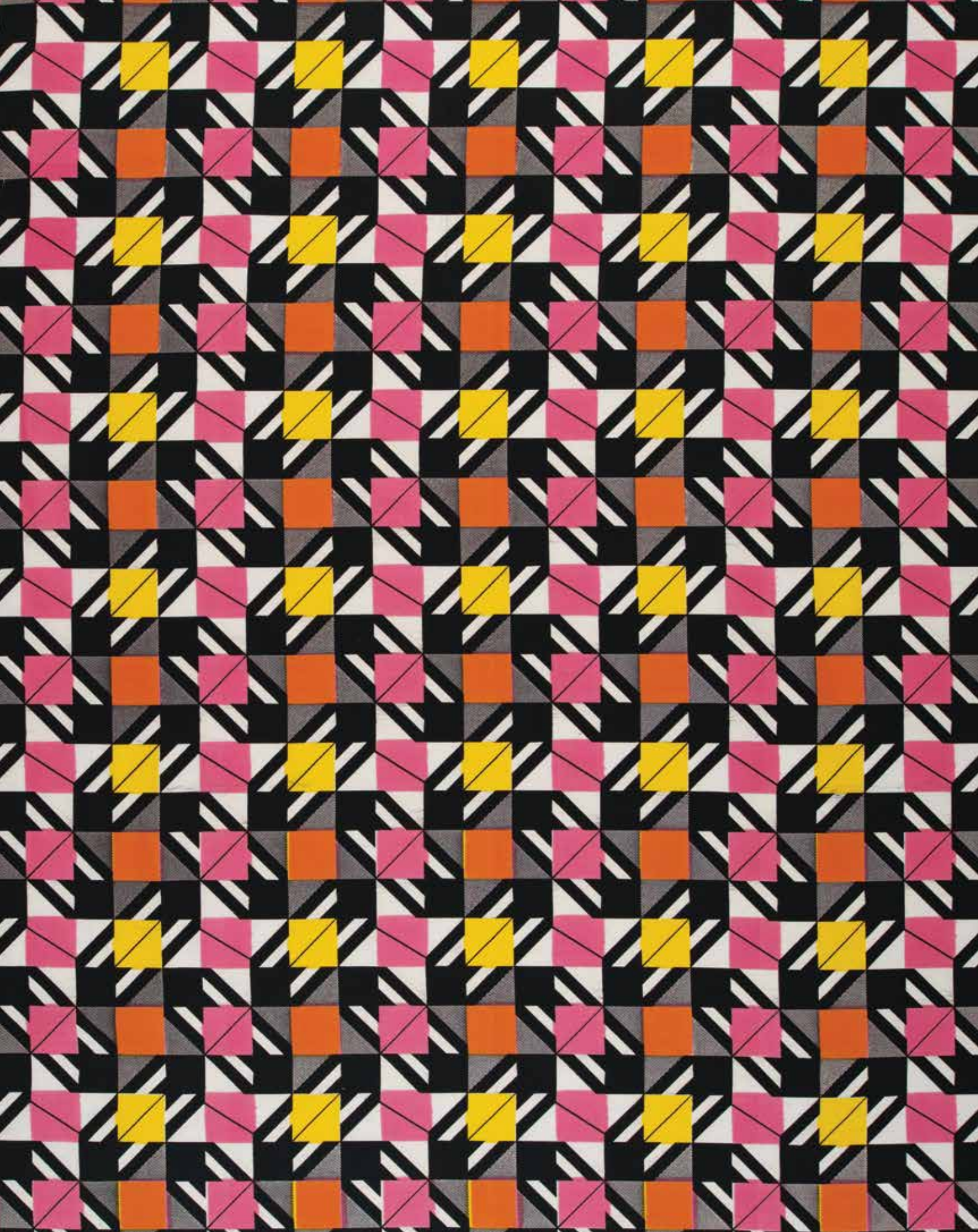
RG Now more and more we become known since we have a brand strategy. So now we have designers from Mexico, England, everywhere. I just had a request for a designer from Peru to do a work placement. And applications from Nigeria, Denmark and Poland. So it becomes international. What also happened is that a graphic designer who had his own career discovered that he has a lot of affinity with our way of working, our techniques and designs, and wants to work with us. And he does now. More and more we find the people that fit Vlisco and in that way we guide our DNA. I also have my own theory that fashion (in the perspective of a consumer) is when you see something that is different from what you know. My theory is that when designers have a totally different environment of reference compared to the environment of the consumer, that fact in itself is already a strong fashion condition. Because when designers have a different cultural heritage from the users, then there is already a fact of inspiration by definition. There is already one very important restriction on newness that you always feel new because you are different. So the fact that you are Dutch, with a European culture, making a product for a West African or African culture makes it aspirational in the design image. Similarly, it works the other way. And this immediately touches our unique story: our image is perceived everywhere as African, and by that inspires non-Africans as well.

JH Do you think – ironically – it works better if the designers don't know the market?

RG In some perspectives (brand and design positioning) it is better. The point is when you make it for yourself it is not fashion in a sense. And then the concept becomes important because you need to have a difference in the product. We have a kind of circumstantial law that it already is fashion. That is why even big fashion houses take other times or other cultures as inspiration for concepts. When I first started at Vlisco I was also wondering, how can it work? But it does work. One of these circumstances is some guarantee that there is some fashion in what you do. Mixed with exceptional technique, mixed with heritage, mixed with exceptional inspiration. You have a lot of laws that keep the brand the brand.



Vlisco, Marjan de Groot, 2010. Wax-resist on cotton. *Dazzling Graphics* collection, May 2011. © Vlisco Netherlands B.V.



JH Is the new work that is now developing with the woven fabrics (rather than prints) for a global market? Is it located in the way that the print heritage is located, or is this a crossover moment?

RG It is a crossover moment. Before I worked for Vlisco, I thought Vlisco was as exceptional as Liberty is, or a [William] Morris design. It is so typical in its image. I found it strange that it was only for Africa; I never understood [this]. I can understand from the colours and the size, but it is a taste product and you can like it or not. There are a lot of non-Africans who like it as well. That is now what we are creating. We want to be relevant for everyone and the only critical factor for that is looking to your design DNA to communicate. But it is a crossover for all consumers of our products. A big change that is typical of Africa now is that we are not only making the pagne[2], I call it pagne because pagne means that there are thousands of tailors, a lot of designers that make fashion for you. We [also] need to make finished products for consumers who are used to buying finished products, who never make a dress for themselves – with or without the help of a designer or tailor – from bought fabric.

JH But the two types of production run in parallel? The two cultures of dressing [ready-made and cloth bought for bespoke tailoring] are so different. Does the Central and West African textile market have no hunger for the ready-made garment?

RG Yes. When you look to Ghanaian or West African music clips on YouTube, all the music bands wear five, six types of clothing: casual, pagne, African artisanal, chic, ready-to-wear, ceremonial, cocktail dress, fashion. Only in West Africa can I see consumers' huge range of different clothing styles or types. As a man I can wear a suit with an artisanal hat, I can wear smoking [a tuxedo suit], a booboo made of wax [resist cloth] or lace. I can wear jeans with a polo – you can do that. You can mix all these different types of clothing as one person. In Europe we don't have that.

JH Our clothing traditions are much more rigid?

RG Yes. We don't have an artisanal, or cultural or African clothing set within our wardrobe that we can use. In West Africa everyone has. I see the people in our company working in offices in West Africa in all types of clothing. It can be very African to very Western. The range is massive. The exclusivity of the pagne dress made for you as a woman is also exceptional because you make dresses for every new moment you want to dress up. When you can afford it, you want to wear it once. People [have] a haute couture habit of making a dress for a moment, which is something special that we don't have any more. In fact, the best use of fashion as a language exists in West Africa. We could learn from that.

JH Does a Vlisco dress then become a family heirloom?

RG Of course you have rich people who can buy many and will do it this way. But I also talked with tailors in Lagos who explained you don't need to finish the dress that well because it is only for one day: the image of the moment. I love it, it is really styling because then it can collapse! But you also have dresses where the seams are not cut so that as you grow…

JH More like a sarong or whole-cloth garments?

RG In the past I have heard – nothing is statistically proven – but I have heard that the problem with Vlisco is that you don't cut into it because it is too expensive. So there were a lot of other folding techniques to use it. The young women I speak to don't wear pagne, but they say that 'my mother wore it' and they [the garments] are all kept. That is my next task, to get all the dresses.

OPPOSITE Vlisco, Marjo Penninx, 2010. Wax-resist on cotton. *Dazzling Graphics* collection, May 2011. © Vlisco Netherlands B.V.

JH Vlisco has a good archive, with the exception of the damage caused by fire in 1883. But it sounds as though your customer base also has a rich archive.

RG And traders also – in that sense it is very complicated. Even today, we still have some textile designs that are only going by one channel to West Africa. So the trader has his own exclusive products; all trade will go via him to maximize profit. That was the system for everything in the past. In the beginning nobody from here [Helmond] went to Africa. Traders from Paris or other countries came to Helmond and said I want to have one pagne for Africa and then they gave it to other ones and other ones and other ones and that is how it came to West Africa. In this relationship, these designs became really attached to certain people who knew this is my exclusive design. So in Togo you had traders in the market who had all pagnes, which were only traded via them. More and more we allow them to come to us to show this old design and we re-engrave [the printing plates] and make it again. There is a very emotional relationship – also a business relationship – with the traders. Some [textile design] names are named after traders. People knew, even if you lived in Togo, this [design] is traded in Lagos. On everything there is emotion attached to it.

JH And the trade monopoly would stay in a family?

RG Yes, in Togo this is the case. I know a lot of mother-daughter relationships. The 'Nana Benz'[3] originally started in Togo in Lomé (the capital city) and there it was said that only a few families were able to trade in the pagne. So it was only women who were allowed to trade in textiles. I am sure there were also certain products that only women were allowed to trade. I think it was around fifty families. Madam Krepe made a union of female traders in the 1990s and the trade is going from the mother to the daughters. The Krepe family still have a shop, Manatex. There is an older woman working there and I discovered that she had four sons and she had to wait for a granddaughter to pass on the trade. In the markets in Lomé I often meet young women who studied abroad, in London or Paris, and come back to take over the trade of their mothers. In this African environment, women educated in London, Canada, Paris, are coming back to do the trading because it is really big business and very relevant. The 'Nana Benz' is named after the first lady of the Krepu family because she bought the first car; the first car in Lomé was a Mercedes Benz, and Nana means 'woman'. That is why all these women in Lomé are called 'Nana Benz'. The young daughters in business are called Nannettes nowadays. And Lomé is only one part of the big market we have. People think that 'Nana Benz' is everywhere, but it is originally Togo.

JH Why did Vlisco survive? There were so many other Dutch textile companies producing wax-resist cloth.

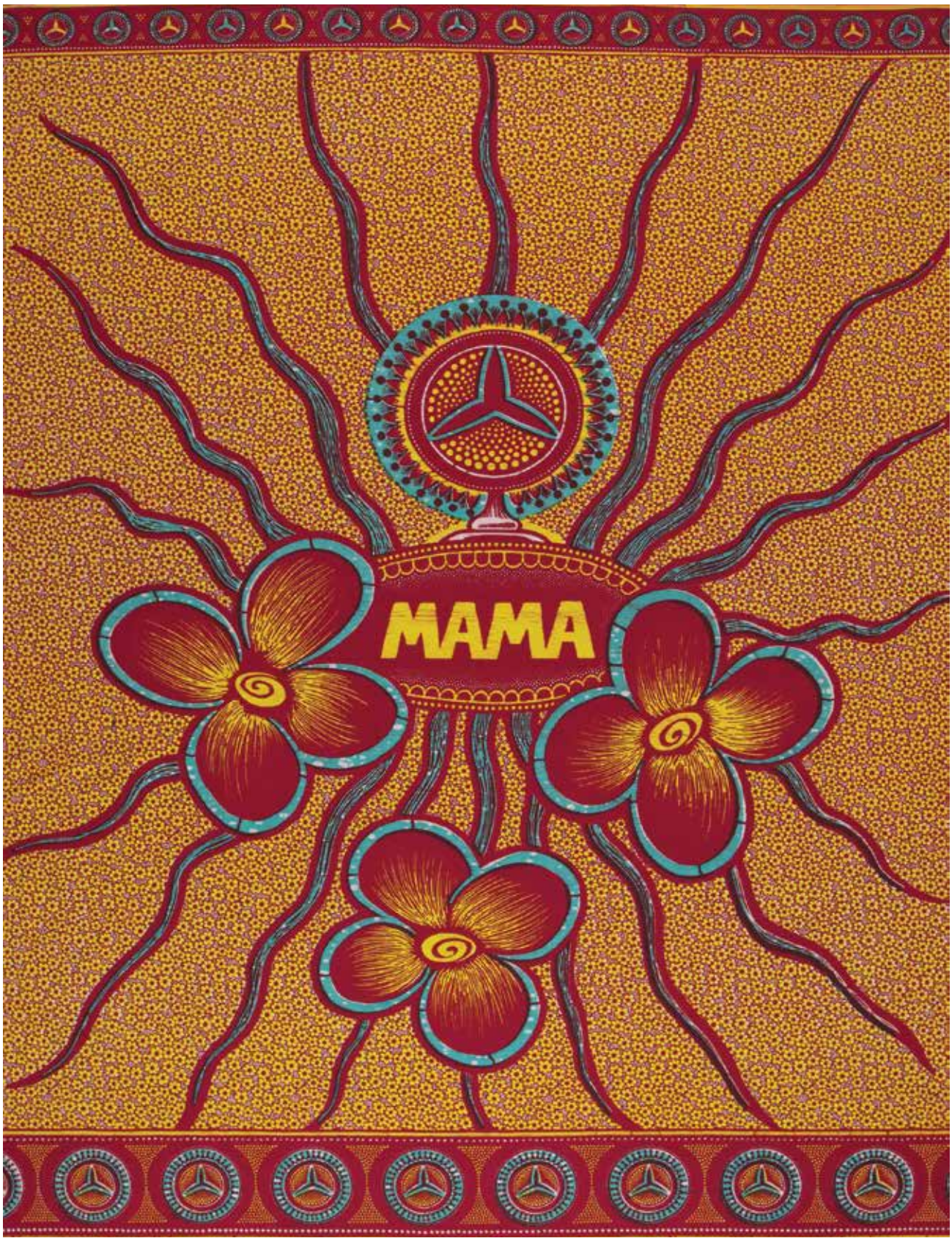
RG I don't know, but I think it could be the culture of the company. I think other companies took more risks than Vlisco. Besides Vlisco there were companies in Haarlem (HKM), in Leiden (LKM), in Rotterdam (KKM) and Deventer (Ankersmit).

I know that Vlisco was not the first to improve on colours; I know that Vlisco was not the first to improve on how to print the wax. Some of our very old designs are not Vlisco-owned but from other archives: the Ankersmit Company, which was based in Deventer, and the HKM in Haarlem. They really discovered the new techniques. But it is very important to mention that Vlisco only became a focused West African textile business in the 80s of the last century. Until the 1880s, Vlisco also made fabrics for Europe, and from the beginning of the 1950s the African textiles became more important than the Euro textiles. In the 1980s Vlisco stopped producing for European markets.

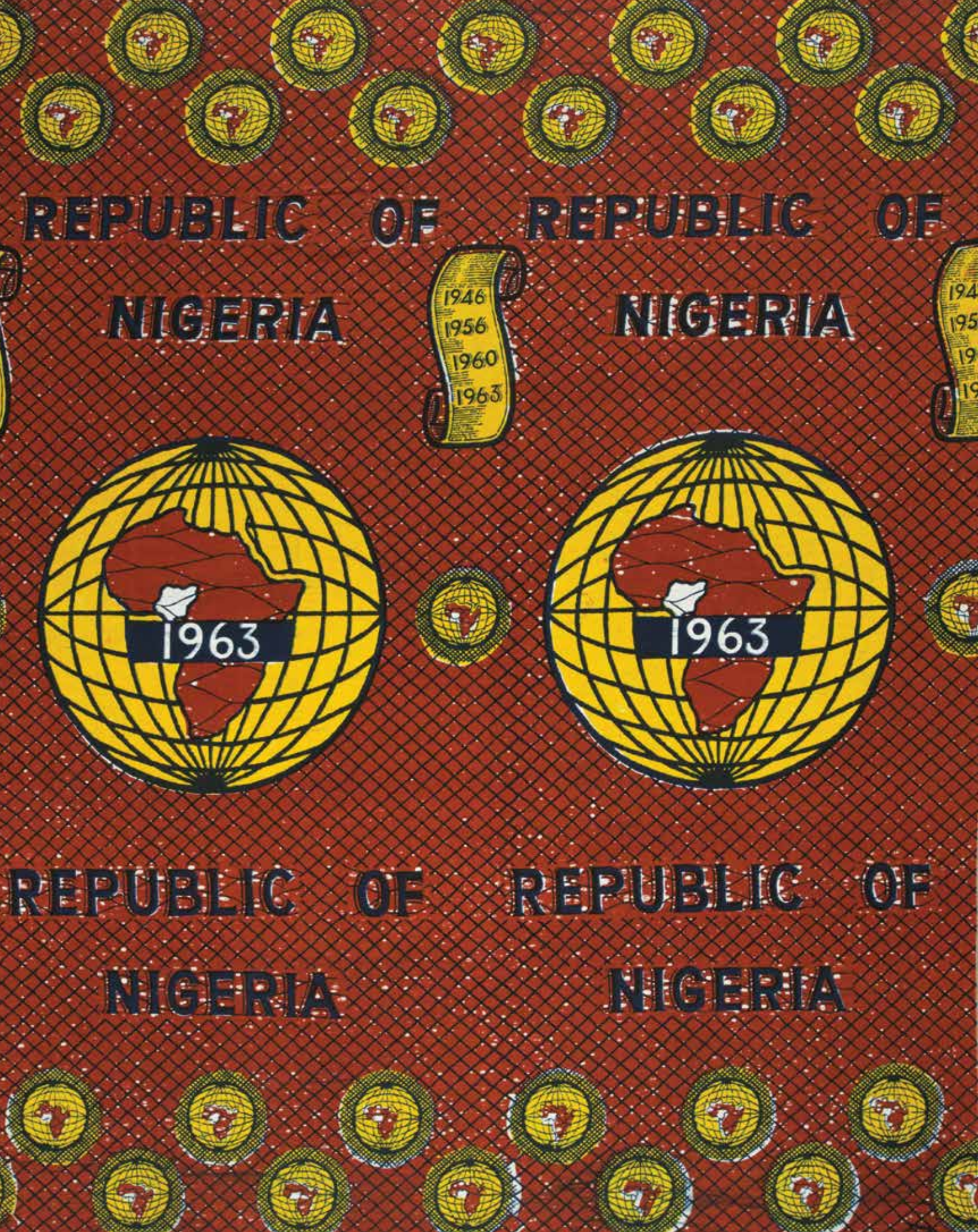
JH With entirely different production techniques?

RG Yes – rotation printing. And there were different names to the company.

JH So Vlisco is one strand of the company that has survived.



Vlisco, Cor van den Boogaard, 2009. Wax-resist on cotton. *Sparkling Grace* collection, May 2010. © Vlisco Netherlands B.V.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RG Yes, and the other strands were very important to survival. I have never thought about this before, but maybe the other companies [that did not survive] only had one strand and that was, at the time, much more difficult. In the 1960s and 1970s a lot of West African countries became independent. We have textiles in which the independencies are celebrated. And I know from Congo, by law, or by government, the president has said to the people that they have to wear wax [resist textiles] to express their African identity, to tell this story to the Belgians [the colonizers]. By government you needed to wear wax and suddenly the wax of Vlisco became very important. So this circumstance gave a big boost to the volume of Vlisco.

JH Which is interesting today because the Indonesian government dress uses batik, so their version of the batik tradition is also alive as well.

RG I really want to see the [Indonesian] batiks more because I saw a collection some time ago. A lot of small drawings we are still using but I want to make that Indonesian connection again. I see a lot of old wax – I call them the Indonesian wax – with a lot of Indonesian ornament in it. When I started [working at Vlisco] some years ago, the [company] image then was the image made by the last twenty years; and people always think when they see us that we made this product in the 1960s. I am now changing the design more and more because it changes every year. Our story is so layered and surprising for people that when they meet it they think this was it for 160 years. And that is a big mistake. But that is always in fashion and textiles: what you see today is a result of the past and the start of new design tomorrow.

JH Can your newest developments in woven jacquard fabrics inspired by the wax-resist printing process be understood as yet another type of adaptation?

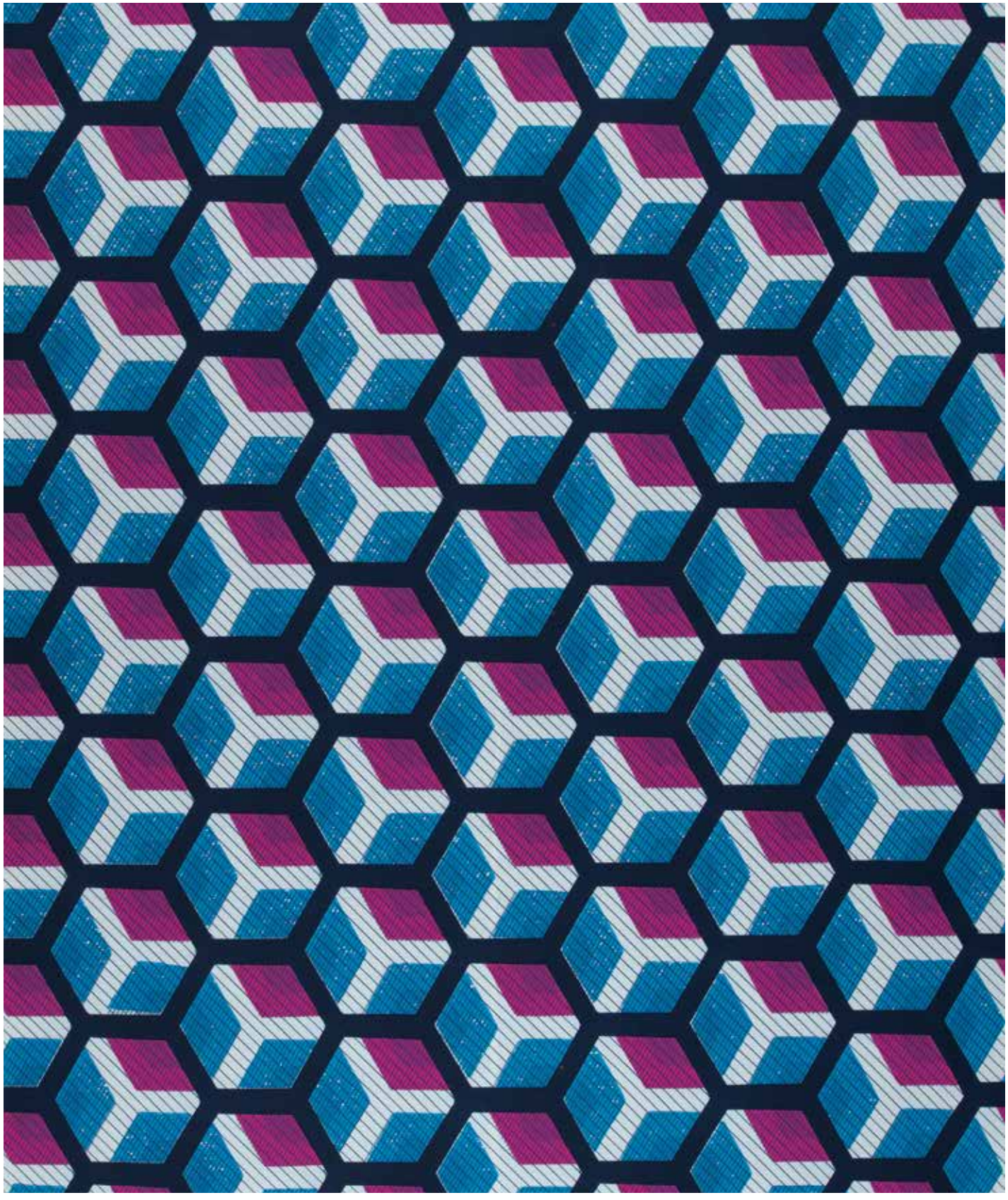
RG This is a big step. When you see the other products, made by rotation printing until the 1980s, you can't say it is Vlisco. It is a totally different image than the wax image. I even met an interior designer some months ago who worked for Vlisco in the [19]80s, but she worked for the Euro fabric style at the opposite [side] of the street and she was never involved in the wax design. I heard from her that there was really a split between the designers working for the European markets and the wax prints. What is happening now is that we are making new textiles. Now maybe I make it a kind of static design DNA and translate it to new textile qualities or arts and crafts techniques in which we ask questions, also inspired by our own wax technique. Because we print on both sides of the fabric, our product has two good sides – which is exceptional for printed fabrics.

We ask our printed and leather and even logo designers, 'what is the other side'? We ask different questions because of our own technique. And that reflection on what you are as a designer is something of the recent years because we made a DNA book and we made DNA laws. More and more people are working for us and we need to have laws otherwise it goes in all directions. That was not necessary in the past.

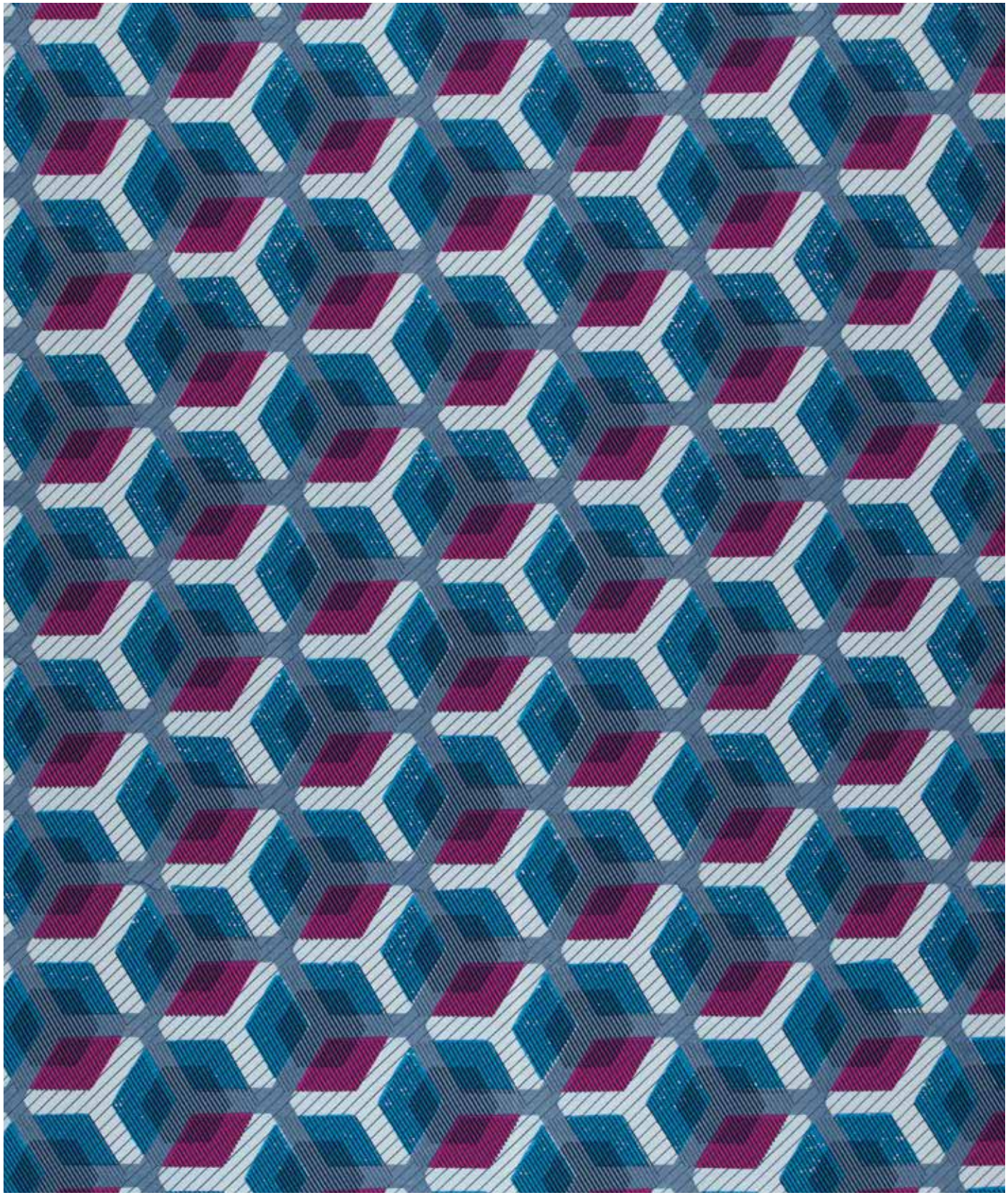
JH Because the production and the design teams were much smaller previously?

RG [Vlisco] designers in the past were not called designers, but called 'drawers'. And they had no design department. They were working in the drawing room in the factory and after they drew, it went to the walls department and they engraved it by hand on the walls. And then the colour was added on a commercial level because the traders were allowed to say what colours would you like to have. Everything was focussed on production and trade. And since the 1970s/1980s when the wax became more important in West Africa the drawers – and we still have designers who have now worked here for forty-one, forty-two years – they became more stubborn and said we are designers and we do our own funny things.

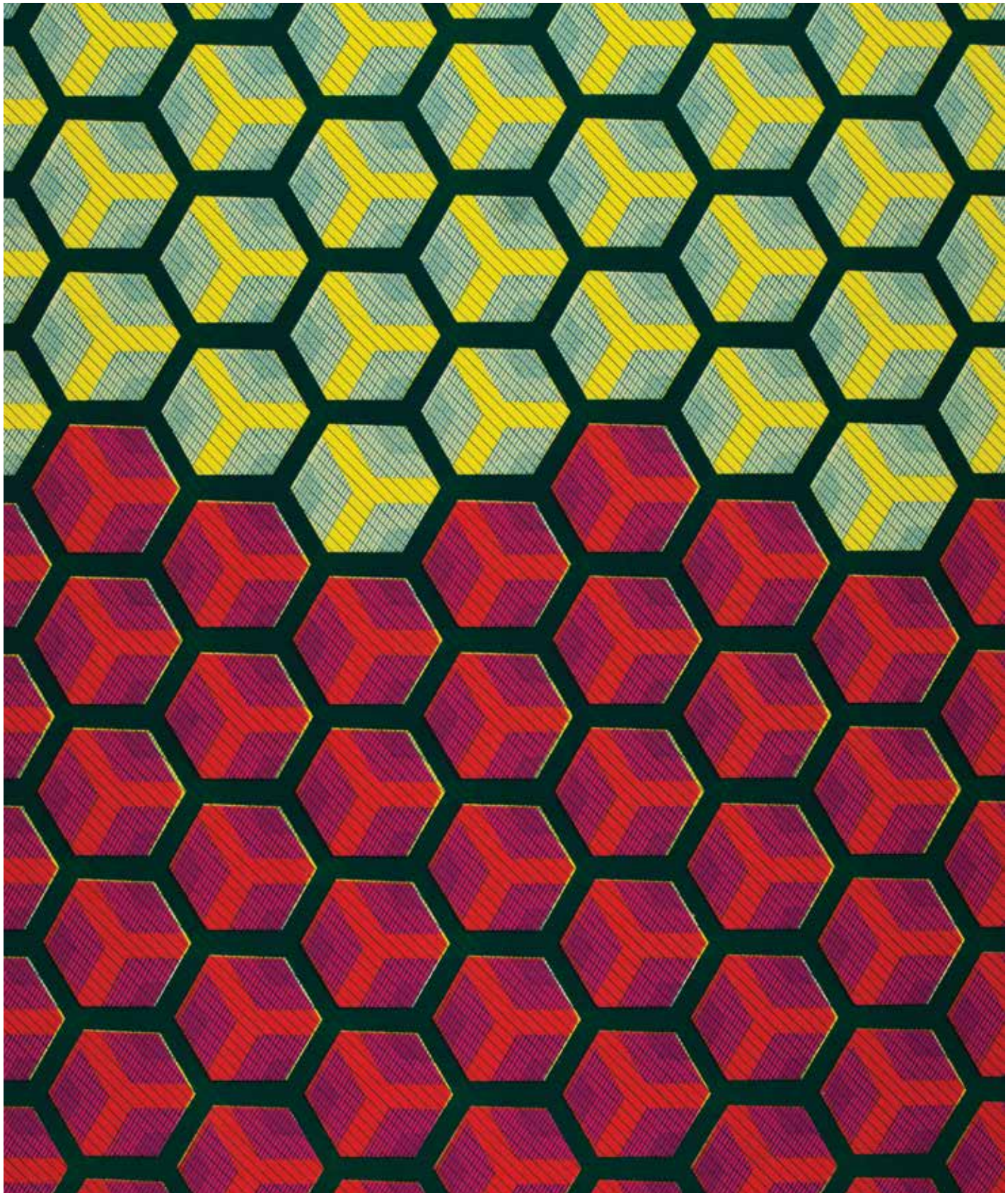
OPPOSITE Vlisco, Dries van den Ven, untitled (Republic of Nigeria), 1962. Wax-resist on cotton. © Vlisco Netherlands B.V.



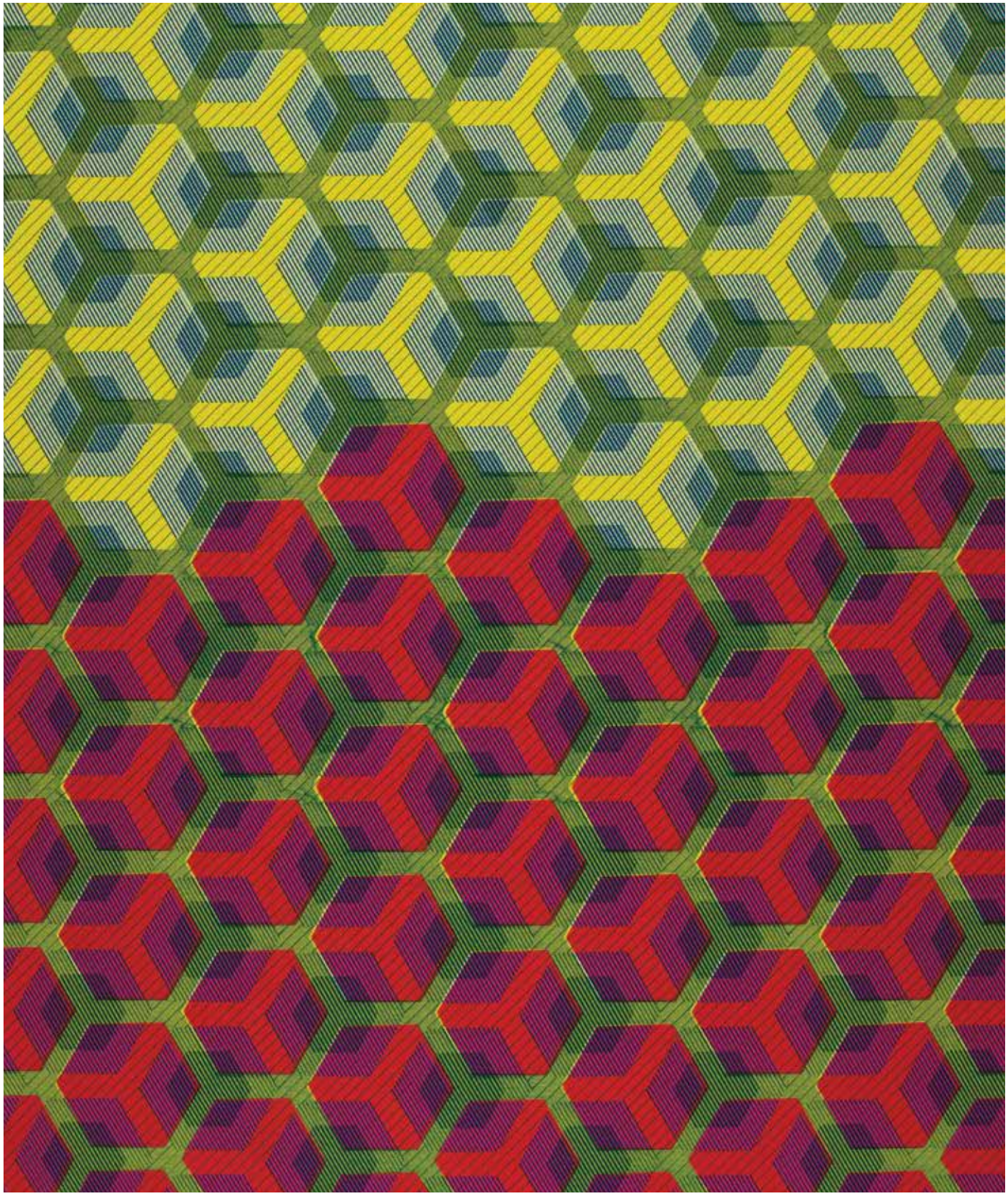
Vlisco, Marjon de Groot, 2011. Wax-resist on cotton (front). *Delicate Shades* collection, November 2011. © Vlisco Netherlands B.V.



Vlisco, Marjon de Groot, 2011. Wax-resist on cotton (back). *Delicate Shades* collection, November 2011. © Vlisco Netherlands B.V.



Vlisco, Marjon de Groot, 2011. Wax-resist on cotton (front). *Delicate Shades* collection, November 2011. © Vlisco Netherlands B.V.



Vlisco, Marjon de Groot, 2011. Wax-resist on cotton (back). *Delicate Shades* collection, November 2011. © Vlisco Netherlands B.V.

For instance in 1998 Vlisco started to work digitally also. In 1998 you see a lot of digital designs with wax effects. So the drawers became much more autonomous designers, and the [new] requests from the markets [traders] slowed down. Vlisco said 'we are going to draw this' because in the past it was much more on request, and then it became design driven. In that sense we honour all designers, because they really made it a design house.

JH To have such a core design team is unusual. Many design houses would bring in freelancers.

RG To be honest, we have some freelancers in other departments. But if you do not understand the key to Vlisco this is a big risk. My philosophy is that we never work on wax design with freelancers because you can't. You need to know the technique. For other products we do use freelancers but still the laws and the questions we ask and the design image and the colour we use and the perfect imperfections of image in it – in your veins you need to understand it. I want to work more with students again because it is always good to challenge yourself with new insights. But people who have a degree or experience in other fields of textile design find Vlisco quite difficult. The other thing and this is what I said earlier is sometimes I discover people who are Vlisco designers but they don't know yet. But they have something: largeness or strangeness or humour or surrealism in them and I discover they are Vlisco even when they don't know themselves. And that is what is happening more and more. In some ways for a long, long time the company has always been a factory making products and traders asking for something. There was almost no sales or marketing. For the last six years I see we are telling stories but you need to be clear who you are. We could copy all the designs to other qualities but in two years it would be over.

JH Cannibalized?

RG Yes, so I am making the translation much more clever. That is design. There are a lot of open questions still. People buy textiles and beautiful design products because you love it. And even when you think it is an important brand, when you hate the Louis Vuitton bag on a taste level, you don't buy it. Your taste level could be organized because your friends have it, or the brand has changed, but still when you don't like the product you never buy it. I am now developing design that is so beautiful and individually made that when you love it you want to buy it and then you discover the whole world of Vlisco behind it, because we will tell our story in books and on the website and that is what I want.

JH Do you think your clients in West and Central Africa have a better appreciation of the textile? I shouldn't speak for the Dutch, but a lot of English people walking down the street don't know or care that what they bought is going to fall apart tomorrow. They have not even noticed that the seam is not straight. They are really not that bothered. Is there a different value system in West Africa about the material world?

RG In the past, textiles were sixty per cent of your individual expression because you don't have a swimming pool, you don't have a home interior. It is stupid to say, but because you don't have an interior, the textile is very important for your personal expression. I think it is still an important part of the culture in West Africa – showing off. That is one thing. The other thing is that when you don't have a lot of money and you pay a lot of money, you want quality. The quality awareness is quite huge. This said, the fact that we can buy updated fashion design very cheap at several popular retail chains has destroyed quality perception. But be aware, this again can be the start to [how we] differentiate on quality – it makes you exceptional.

I think Africa is much more international than the rest of the world. Proactive and not proactive; not proactive because families have been torn apart because they had to flee to other countries and continents. Proactive because of money and studying. But there is a huge international audience, much more than we have in Europe. Africa is changing and its global awareness is huge.

NOTES

1. In addition to the two wax-resist related brands Uniwax and GTP, the Vlisco Group also has an Accra-based brand Woodin, which makes rotation printed fabrics and fashion. Gerards describes the brand as 'totally African in perspective, designed and made in Africa'. In contrast with the wax-resist textiles that are the focus of the interview conversation, Woodin designers draw inspiration from and market the fabric at international textile trade fairs such as Première Vision and Indigo. Gerards explains, 'The product is perceived as "African" as well, but the design process is global, using universal laws of designing and producing. The product of Woodin is a so-called "fancy" product. In the textile world of West Africa, "fancy" stands for all products that are not artisanal and/or wax, but made by screen rotation printing.'
2. *Pagne* refers to the tradition of buying cloth that is then made into a garment, rather than buying a ready-made garment.
3. Roger Gerards explains, 'About the M and the N; the official Togolese name is Nana Benz. Nana is how mothers are referred to in French (the official language in Togo). Benz of course refers to the Mercedes Benz. Also, the daughters of the Nana Benz nowadays are called the Nannettes. The Mama is the designer, Cor van den Boogaard's, freedom [poetic license] of the Nana word. In Dutch (here the Vlisco triangle is coming in) mama means mother.' (Gerards 2014)

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