

Art in the Basement:

Mandingo Gara from Sierra Leone

Scott Mitchell
Graduate Student Intern, Folk Arts



I often associated art with formal institutions, like our own Museum of Art and Archaeology, which makes the collections accessible to the public through exhibition, interpretation and research. For me, appreciating art, especially visual art, is often a solitary experience. I enjoy being able to enter a museum, separate myself from the world, and focus on one work. I stand in front of a painting and meditate on what it means to me, why I think it is beautiful, and what I gain from looking at the painting. Once I leave the museum, I reflect on the experience but usually do not share it with another. The experience is often a very me-centered activity and loses some of its meaning when shared with others.

In the spring of 2006, however, while a graduate intern at the Missouri Folk Arts Program, I was able to observe firsthand an artist as he created art in what may seem the most unlikely of settings—a basement in urban St. Louis. That day I traveled with folklorist Deborah Bailey to visit with Mahmoud Conteh, a master of Mandingo tie dye, and his apprentice Salieu Kamara, one of eight apprenticeship teams in the 2006 Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program. Debbie and I visited them to observe and document the progress of their apprenticeship.

Both Mahmoud and Salieu were born in northern Sierra Leone, Africa, and were members of the Mandingo tribe. The Mandingo are known throughout West Africa for creating intricate, beautifully tie-dyed and batiked cotton fabrics, an art form known as *gara*. Traditionally, *gara* is

very important in Mandingo cultural and ceremonial life; selling *gara* also serves as a source of economic support. While a teenager, Mahmoud learned from his Aunt Mary and spent fifteen years working by her side. She was well known in their region and sold her dyed fabric in marketplaces all over West Africa. As a child, Salieu also learned basic tie dye from family members, but unlike Mahmoud, Salieu was not fond of the tradition. As a young adult, however, he seriously pursued the art, learning from skilled artisans.

Unfortunately, the people of Sierra Leone have suffered through years of civil war and many fled the country fearing for their lives. Both Mahmoud and Salieu ended up in refugee camps in Ghana, where they met. Although they lived in different refugee camps, they continued their friendship once they both immigrated to the United States.

Debbie Bailey and I met Mahmoud and Salieu at Mahmoud's home in St. Louis, and we went down to his basement where they tie and dye the cloth. At first, the basement did not seem like the ideal place to experience art, even the making of art. It was unfinished, bare and dark, and since there was no place to sit, we stood the entire time, making the experience physically uncomfortable. This basement, unlike a museum, did not seem like a place for me to separate myself from the world and contemplate art. As I watched and listened to Mahmoud and Salieu, however, I soon forgot the stark surroundings and was lost in the process of watching a simple white piece of cloth transformed into a vibrant, culturally significant piece of art. As they worked together, Mahmoud and Salieu described the process of creating *gara*.

This is not summer camp tie dye. It is a sophisticated resist dyeing process that incorporates complex patterns and techniques like sewing, knotting, binding, folding and applying combinations of color using special dyes. Before we arrived, Mahmoud and Salieu had completed the first step, hand sewing a pattern onto white cotton cloth using strong nylon thread called *gari* and a large needle. This step takes hours to complete, sometimes more than a week, depending on the complexity of the pattern. Patterns often have specific names, and certain patterns are gendered specific. One zigzag sewing pattern uses tying techniques that produce a mirror image design called *suru suru*. After tying, the piece is ready for dyeing. First, the powdered dye is mixed with boiling water and very specific amounts of caustic soda are added to the mix. Then, sections of the white cloth are submerged into several different colored dyes.



Finally the entire fabric is submerged into the dye. The excess liquid is squeezed out of the fabric, all the stitches are carefully cut, the cloth is rinsed in cold water, and starch is ironed into the fabric.

After completing the dyeing process, Mahmoud and Salieu proudly held up their work for us to see. They hung this piece and others outside to dry. Mahmoud explained that after the cloth is dry, he cuts and sews the material into shirts and other apparel, showing us some of his finished shirts. The experience in Mahmoud's basement was so amazing, in part,

because I was able to observe much of the entire process of tie dyeing, better understanding the time, talent and complexity involved in making *gara*. That deeper understanding of the process is often lacking in my more solitary experiences with art.

What affected me most, however, were the stories Mahmoud told about his life. During the dyeing process, when waiting was required, Mahmoud worked on cutting and pulling the threads out of an already dyed cloth while he told us stories. Coincidentally, Debbie and I visited them on Sierra Leone's Independence Day (the day British colonialism ended and Sierra Leone officially became an independent nation in 1961). Upstairs, Mahmoud's family and friends were cooking in preparation for the evening celebration among Sierra Leone refugees who have resettled in St. Louis. The holiday and upcoming celebration may be one reason Mahmoud seemed particularly reflective that day. He spoke quickly, quietly, but passionately about the horrors of the Sierra Leone civil war, his first wife murdered in front of him by soldiers, and his children taken from him. Mahmoud himself was almost beaten to death and was lying unconscious when he was discovered and rescued by foreign aid workers. When he awoke he had no idea what had happened to his children. He finally had to flee for his life, ending up in a refugee camp in Ghana. And, on this day, his independence day, he still had no idea if his children were dead or alive. He wants to go home to look for his children, but the continuing political unrest in Sierra Leone makes it almost impossible for him to return—which causes him great despair.

Eventually he spoke about the extreme hardships of living in a refugee camp, and these stories connected most directly to *gara*. Mahmoud spent "seven long years" in the refugee camp. There was never enough food in the camps, so at that point, the art that he loved became essential to his extended family's survival. He created and sold tie dye clothing to refugee workers and at several venues outside the camp to earn a little money.

Today, living and working in the United States, Mahmoud's economic situation is not as dire. However, he continues to create and sell *gara* and sees it as essential for his cultural survival. He has told Debbie Bailey on several occasions that *gara* is part of him. Even during my short visit, *gara* started to mean more to me than just a pretty piece of cloth after I heard Mahmoud's stories. He has been forced to leave Sierra Leone and many of his cultural roots, but *gara* is one thing he can still do that connects him to his heritage, his home and his family.

Mahmoud taught me that viewing art does not always have to be a solitary self-centered process and that something is gained by witnessing artists create their art and hearing their stories about its meaning, context and traditions. My appreciation of *gara* cannot be separated from my experience with Mahmoud and Salieu. Now, when I see samples of their art, I not only see the beautiful colors and patterns, I also revisit the stories.

Postscript: Mahmoud's story articulates the unimaginable horrors of that war, which left physical and emotional scars unlikely to ever totally heal. Simultaneously, he speaks to hope, creativity, beauty and the triumph of the human spirit in the face of tremendous suffering and cultural dislocation. Mahmoud never gave up hope of finding his children. Recently, he received joyous news—his children are alive and living with relatives in a refugee camp in neighboring Guinea. Though not possible now, someday he hopes to reunite with his children, as he says, "with the help of almighty God."

Folk Arts Exhibitions

June 29–Aug. 16

Work is Art and Art is Work: The Art of Hand-crafted Instruments
A traveling exhibit sponsored by the NEA American Masterpieces Initiative and the Missouri Arts Council
Excelsior Springs Museum and Archives
Excelsior Springs, Missouri

<http://www.exsmo.com/museum>

Sept. 1–Oct. 5

Work is Art and Art is Work: The Art of Hand-crafted Instruments
A traveling exhibit sponsored by the NEA American Masterpieces Initiative and the Missouri Arts Council
Mineral Area Community College
Park Hills, Missouri

<http://www.mineralarea.edu>

Oct. 21–Nov. 30

Work is Art and Art is Work: The Art of Hand-crafted Instruments
A traveling exhibit sponsored by the NEA American Masterpieces Initiative and the Missouri Arts Council
Republic Fine Arts Council & Springfield-Greene County Library
Springfield, Missouri

<http://republic.mocaa.net/vp/anwmt/republic-fine-arts-council.html>

<http://thelibrary.springfield.missouri.org>

Dec. 15, 2007–Jan. 19, 2008

Work is Art and Art is Work: The Art of Hand-crafted Instruments
A traveling exhibit sponsored by the NEA American Masterpieces Initiative and the Missouri Arts Council
Kansas City Public Library
Kansas City, Missouri

<http://www.kclibrary.org/>

