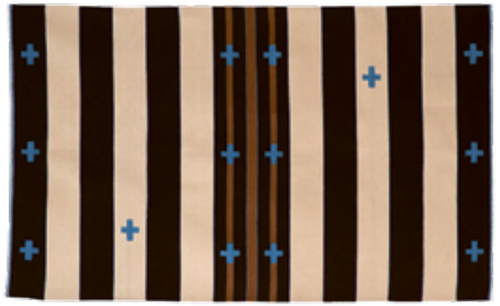
05

06

07

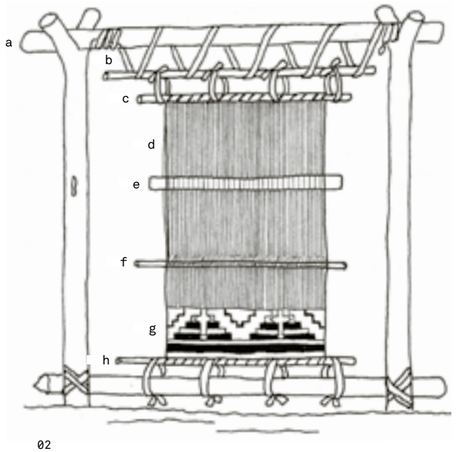
08



09

10

01



02

03

04

11

12

13

14

NAVAJO WEAVING

Weaving plays a prominent role in Navajo culture. Renowned for its geometric patterns and natural colours, their woollen blankets were used as cloaks, saddle blankets, night covers or ‘doors’. The exact origins are uncertain, but Navajo weaving probably dates back to the 17th century when women learned the technique from neighbouring Pueblo tribes. Churro sheep introduced by the Spanish provided the wool. A few examples of 18th century Navajo weaving survive; most show plain stripes, some feature terrace and diamond motives, characteristic of later Navajo weaving.

The Navajo used blankets as barter long before European settlers and traders entered the south-west. Its commerce accelerated with the trading post system in the late 19th and early 20th century. This period saw the introduction of new design elements, dyes and yarns, such as Germantown yarns and vibrant aniline dyes, often encouraged by traders to cater to a non-native clientele.

01. Navajo weaver in hogan, 1933.
02. Vertical loom, Pueblo/Navajo type.
(a) vertical supports; (b) rope tension adjustment; (c) upper warp beam; (d) warp threads; (e) batten or weaving sword; (f) harness stick with string heddles; (g) rug in progress; (h) lower warp beam or cloth beam
03. Weaving tools.
04. Navajo-Churro sheep (Dibé dits’ozí), with its renowned dual coat consisting of long fleece outercoat and soft downy undercoat, Navajo-Churro sheep are strong and adaptable to harsh desert environment.
05. Chief Blanket (First Phase), c. 1855–1860.
Hand-spun wool, natural white, natural dye black, indigo blue, bayeta (ravelled) yarn, tapestry weave, horizontally woven, 157.5 × 186.7 cm.
Woven before 1860, First Phase Chief Blankets were characterized by their simple, bold stripes in natural colours, using natural dyes and repurposed yarns. These blankets were traded widely among Indigenous American tribes and Euro-American settlers.
06. Woman’s Chief Blanket, c. 1890s.
Hand-spun wool, natural white, natural dye black, aniline-dye red, tapestry weave, horizontally woven, 139.7 cm × 172.72 cm.
Typically, Woman’s Chief-style blankets combine striped panels with rows of stylized medallions with centred diamond motives. The hourglass motive, woven in grey yarn, symbolizes Spider Woman.
07. Transitional Blanket, c. 1897–1912.
Hand-spun and commercial wool, undyed white, natural black and synthetic red dye, tapestry weave, interlocked and diagonal joins, 231.5 × 156.5 cm.
08. Eyedazzler Germantown Blanket, c. 1890–1910.
Wool, aniline-dyed commercial yarns, tapestry weave, dovetailed and diagonal joins, 144 × 95.5 cm.
While interned at Bosque Redondo, Navajo were issued new aniline-dyed yarns which they combined with wool from their last few sheep. Close to Mexico, Navajo adopted and adapted the elaborate serrated diamond style from the Saltillo sarape textile, turning it into eye-dazzling geometric designs.
09. Turquoise Crosses Rug, Pendleton Home Collection.
Hand-spun, hand-dyed wool, hand-woven in a flatweave.
Available in various sizes.
Based on traditional Navajo Chief Blankets, this rug is woven by Zapotec artisans in Oaxaca, New Mexico.
10. Woven in the Stones, Melissa Cody, 2018.
Wool warp, weft, selvedge cords, aniline dyes, handwoven in a flatweave, 93.3 × 64.1 cm.
A fourth generation Navajo weaver, Melissa Cody (b. 1981) is renowned for her vibrant colours and geometric patterns. Revitalizing historic Navajo ‘Germantown’ weaving, Cody creates modern art pieces that honour and innovate her heritage. In Woven in the Stones she uses the traditional Navajo hourglass motive, symbolizing Spider Woman.

BOSQUE REDONDO AND AFTER

While Navajo weaving thrived throughout the 19th century, the Navajo people entered a dark period. Set on expanding their territory in the south-west after the Mexican-American war (1846–1848), the United States government stepped up its campaign against Indigenous tribes. What followed was a systematic destruction of their crops and livestock, including the Navajo-Churro sheep. In 1864, the Navajo were forced from their land and incarcerated at Bosque Redondo. After four years, they signed a treaty that allowed them to return home. To replace their Churro, each family was given one sheep of a different breed, providing lesser quality wool.

11. Studio portrait of Chief Manuelito, c. 1887–1891.
With text written on rear: ‘Manuelito, the once fierce chief of the Navajo.’
Chief Manuelito or Hastiin Ch’il Haajiní (c. 1818–1893) was one of the principal headmen of the Navajo before, during and after the Bosque Redondo period.
12. Photograph of a Navajo family in front of a timber and earthen hogan near Bluff City, Utah, c. 1880–1910.
A rug, cloth belt and horse tack hang from the house.
13. Ruins of military Fort Sumner, New Mexico, which oversaw the internment of the Navajo people in the adjacent Bosque Redondo reservation.
14. Spider Woman Crosses Basket, 1994.
In the Navajo Creation Story, Spider Woman, or Na’ashjéii Asdzáá (Diné name), emerged from nothingness and created the world. She wove together threads of light to form everything we see today, including mountains, rivers and even the sun itself. She taught the first humans spinning and weaving, and passed on patterns and techniques that have been used by generations of Navajo women weavers. She is symbolized by the so-called Spider Woman Cross which can be found in weavings and other Navajo craft objects.

seeking refuge from war and poverty. Many made that precarious journey by boat, and some didn't survive. I don't want to make work that's too literal or too illustrative, but if you look closely, you'll see that some of the human figures are upside down, as if falling from the ship.

CHRISTEL — The public artwork *Tulip Palepai*, along with the jacquard-woven *Tampan* featured in this chapter, are early examples of your work inspired by Lampung textiles. In 2016, you also began the *Tampan Tulip* series, collages made from dried tulip petals, based on motifs from historic tampan and palepai. Looking back on this decade-long process, would you say the tampan and palepai have accompanied you on your journey too? What transitions or transformations occurred along the way?

JENNIFER — Although the tradition has died, many tampan and palepai are preserved in museum collections in Indonesia and Europe, which gave me the opportunity to study them in more detail — their materials, symbolism and visual language. And I discovered that these textiles are not one-dimensional; they are richly layered and symbolically complex.

At first, I was drawn to the central motifs, the ship and the tree of life, which aligned with themes important to me then. But over time, other elements emerged: *garuda* birds, the snake- and dragon-like forms, and sea creatures that surround the ship. Initially, I wasn't sure how they related to the central motif. Gradually, I realized they all form part of a broader cosmology, an understanding of the world and of the connections between all living things across time and space.

The more recent *Tampan Tulip* collages feature mountains, mythological creatures and animal motifs. One reason I replaced the ship and human figures on deck with elements from the natural world is that I want to create works where nature, rather than humanity, takes centre stage. This non-human imagery resonates more deeply with an ecological consciousness, something I'm engaging with in my practice today.

CHRISTEL — Could you say a bit more about that?

JENNIFER — Ancestor worship is an important aspect of the pictorial narrative of the tampan and palepai, and of traditional Indonesian culture more broadly. But this sense of ancestry goes beyond familial ties; it relates to kinship with all species, human and non-human, and how these connections evolved over Earth's time. To me, the scenes depicted on tampan and palepai bear witness to this worldview.

The coexistence of diverse species — animals, humans, seaweed, abstract plant forms — on one visual plane expresses a deep awareness of the kinship among all living beings. Humanity is not central or superior; instead, tampan and palepai show us that everything is interconnected and mutually dependent: humans and non-humans, the material and spiritual worlds, past, present and future. These textiles, along with ceremonial rituals and other objects, embody a profound understanding of our origins, of what sustains us, and how to live within ecological time.

I believe that the women who created these cloths held a deep cosmological wisdom, of the world around us and humanity's place in it. Like shamans, they sought to share this knowledge visually. Sometimes that knowledge appears in the use of symmetry, mirroring sea and sky, reflecting the balance of the cosmos and the parallels between earthly and spiritual realms.

And when you live on an island like Sumatra and see animals arriving from the north to escape winter and returning again in April, your understanding of migration is cyclical. Movement becomes part of life's rhythm and the cosmos itself. The sea is not just a space to cross, but a living realm, teeming with creatures and meaning.

Tampan World Mountain, Ancestral Creatures, Jennifer Tee, 2022.

Detail, Tampan World Mountain, Ancestral Creatures, 2022.

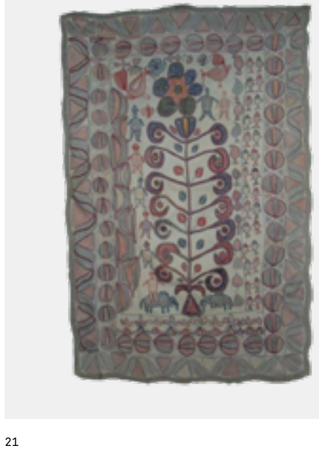
CHRISTEL — What I hear you saying is that the tampan and palepai are not simply ethnographic artefacts locked into their own time-space continuum. Instead, they continue to convey essential wisdom about life and our world today, the most timely 'lesson' being that all things, human and non-human, are interconnected. Perhaps they still function as spiritual guides, accompanying humanity during its next rite of passage, as we transition from a human-centred to a nature-centred way of being in the world?

JENNIFER — In our so-called modern world, we tend to focus only on the short period that humans have existed on Earth, while ecological time, the time of the universe, is far broader and more encompassing. Earth's development spans 4.5 billion years. We must address the current ecological crisis and rethink how we want to live on this planet. I believe we'd benefit from weaving ourselves back into

18

19

20



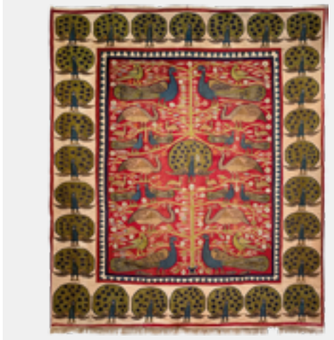
21

22

23

24

25

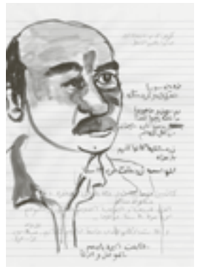


26

RITUAL TEXTILE
Across many cultures, textiles hold deep meaning in sacred rituals and ceremonies, including spiritual blessings and offerings, at the heart of which is contact between gods, ancestors and worshippers. Textiles carry or cover sacred objects, wrap or drape deities, decorate religious spaces or as prayer mats. Depending on the context, ceremonial textiles range from richly adorned silks or velvets to simple cloths that reflect austerity and humility.

18. Tibetan Prayer Flags, Himalayas, Sikkim, India.
Usually made from rectangular cloth in five basic colours, Tibetan prayer flags are commonly strung along trails and peaks high in the Himalayas. They bless the surroundings and carry prayers to the wind. Their origin is believed to lie in the shamanistic practices of the indigenous Bon people of eastern Tibet.
19. Tibetan Lung Ta, Himalayas, 19th century.
Block print, c. 45 × 30 cm.
The Tibetan mythical creature 'lung ta', or 'wind horse', symbolizes the human soul in the shamanistic traditions of East and Central Asia. In Tibetan Buddhism it also represents well-being and good fortune.
20. Lamak nganten, 'wedding' lamak, Galungan festival, Ubud, Bali, Indonesia.
Woven from palm leaves, Lamak are narrow, elongated mats used to decorated altars, shrines and daily objects, especially during the Balinese-Hindu Galungan festival. Variations in colour and motif reflect the ritual's purpose.
21. Kantha, Bangladesh.
Made from leftover fabrics, 'kanthas', meaning 'simple stitching', are humble patchwork quilts made by Bengali women. They are often attributed with transformative properties, and kantha embroidery is seen as a meditative ritual.
22. Jizō Statue at Sainen-ji Temple, Kyoto, Japan.
In Japan, Buddhist rituals help mourn miscarried, stillborn or aborted children. A red cloth scarf or knitted cap is placed on a Jizō statue, a guardian spirit believed to protect their souls and guide them to paradise. Red is thought to ward off evil.
23. Lao Baci Ceremony.
Baci ceremonies in Laos invoke well-being and protection using white cotton cords tied around the wrists to symbolize connection, spiritual strength and the reunification of a person's protective spirits (khwan).
24. Decorated bulls in Oachira kali festival, Kerala, South India.
Bulls are adorned with colourful textiles to symbolize strength and honour their role in local warrior traditions.
25. Rambu Solo funeral procession, Tana Toraja region, South Sulawsi.
Tasked with guiding the soul to the afterlife, women pull metres of red cloth from the deceased's house to the burial site during a Rambu Solo ceremony. Red symbolizes life force and protection.
26. Dhurrie, North India, late 19th-early 20th century.
Cotton, interlocking tapestry weave, 203 × 234 cm.

that had been passed down generations, like flowerpots, peacocks and ships. I started to research the meaning and the history of these motifs, not only in Greek culture, but also in ancient Byzantine, and Persian and Islamic culture. I noticed that the technique and style of this embroidery closely resembled the needlework I'd seen in Lebanon, made by Palestinian women in camps. And it made me think about how embroidery must have travelled between these regions for many centuries.



I Strongly Believe in our Right to Be Frivolous, 2012–ongoing. Hand-written conversations and drawings on yellow legal pad and A4 paper, mixed media, 28.6 × 21 cm.

But what I found most interesting was how the symbolism of these motifs still echoes the same hopes and fears I heard in the stories of the men and women I spoke to, who were forced to flee their homes. That's when I decided that I wanted to make a contemporary bridal tent using these old motifs to tell those contemporary stories, and to dedicate it to the memory of all those who were sadly lost recently.

CHRISTEL — Can you explain how those ancient motifs relate to these contemporary stories?

MOUNIRA — Well, in traditional Greek embroidery, the peacock symbolizes fertility and eternity. Women would embroider it onto the gable over the entrance of their bed-tent, with these big, curved tails and an eight-pointed star in the middle, which is used in many cultures as a symbol of unity, harmony and stability. The peacock is a very old symbol and can mean different things in different cultures. You find it on the pharaoh statues in ancient Egypt. In Greece the peacock is associated with Hera, the wife of Zeus, and the patroness of women, marriage and childbirth. But on my *Sperveri* I connect the peacock with the story of Khalit, a Yazidi man from northern Iraq, who witnessed the massacres by ISIS. You can read his story inside the bed-tent. In the Yazidi religion, which is one of the oldest in the world, the Peacock Angel is a divine being, the chief of all incarnations of God, and a symbol of immortality. So this peacock is dedicated to him, together with the sun motif that is repeated along the borders.

CHRISTEL — You have embroidered some fascinating creatures and epic scenes on the panels of the tent. In the middle panel on the left I see a man on a horse, and on the right this mythical animal, and in the gable at the top there is this flamboyant red lady, dancing, with a peacock by her side, in what looks like a schematic representation of a house. Is there a story attached to these motifs?

MOUNIRA — The woman in red is connected to the story of the bride that you can read inside the tent. The man on the horse is based on examples of Greek embroidery I saw at the Benaki Museum. You can find them on cushions or bedlinen embroidered for a girl's dowry, and they represent the groom's best man as part of the wedding procession. Just like the people dancing with the lute in the middle. The horse with wings is a very old Byzantine motif. In the Islamic tradition we have the Buraq, the winged horse-like creature that carried Muhammed to the heavens and back. But for me, the man on the horse is connected to the story of the Iraqi woman inside the tent.

Another important motif is the cypress tree, which again is an ancient symbol in many cultures in the eastern Mediterranean. In the Palestinian cross-stitch tradition, every region — Ramallah, Jaffa, Gaza — has its own variations. More recently, the tree has become a symbol of Palestinian resilience. But in Greek and Roman culture, the cypress tree is also associated with mourning. You often see it in cemeteries or on paintings depicting someone mourning the loss of a loved one.

Detail of Sperveri, embroidered 8-pointed star.

Detail of Sperveri, embroidered ship motif flanked by harpies.

I thought it was important to show how these symbols are connected in various cultures, even if their meaning might be slightly different. But also, how these symbols and motifs are still relevant today, expressing the same hopes and dreams. Take the sailing boat, for instance. It was an important element of island culture, but it also expressed the concerns a woman might have had back then, about losing her husband or son when they went out to sea to fish, hoping they would return safely. In *Sperveri* the Greek sailboat travelling across the Aegean Sea takes on a new meaning with the

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

GREEK EMBROIDERY MOTIFS
Embroidery is more than decoration; it is a centuries-old language that conveys people's hopes and beliefs, as well as the social and geopolitical histories of a region. Traditional Greek embroidery adorned dowry textiles and festive clothing, featuring motifs inspired by nature, island life and indigenous myths and customs. Repeated stitch by stitch for generations, these motifs are imbued with symbolic meanings rooted in antiquity.

14. Fragment with mythical birds, trees, animals and medallions, region unknown, 19th century. Coloured silk floss on unbleached cotton, stem, herringbone, satin, French knot stitch, 29 × 16 cm.
15. Bed valance with diagonal leaves and 'glástra' motif, Rhodes, 18th century. Blue-green and red silk thread on beige linen, Rhodes stitch, 62 × 246 cm.

GLÁSTRA
The stylized vase overflowing with flowers and leaves is a common motif in many artistic traditions. On this bed valance, the vase motif is executed in a typical Rhodes stitch, a loose cross-stitch technique using thick untwisted silk, creating a compact relief surface.

16. Fragment skirt border with flower vase and two-tailed mermaid, Crete, 17th–18th century. Coloured silk and cotton thread on linen, chain, herringbone, satin and stem stich.

GORGONA
Cretan motifs closely resemble European embroidery, particularly from Venice. The 'gorgona', a two-tailed mermaid, appears in ancient Greek mythology and medieval art, symbolizing both protector and seductress. They often appear in compositions with plants, human figures, animals, birds and imaginary creatures such as double-headed eagles and winged snakes.

17. Cushion cover with ship motif, Skyros, Sporades, 17th century. Coloured silks on fine linen, corn, brick, chain, back and cross stitch, 43 × 46 cm.

SHIP
Ships are a common motif among seafaring cultures. This festively decorated three-masted schooner is crowded with miniature figures, fish, birds and mythological creatures and is typical for the embroidery style of Skyros.

18. Part of a bridal sheet with hoopoe, Skyros, Sporades, 18th century. Coloured silks on fine linen, darning and double-running stitch, 91 × 41 cm.

BIRDS
The hoopoe is a popular motif in neo-Hellenic art. It was the sacred symbol of Zeus and Apollo, the sun god. In Ancient Greece, the peacock symbolized immortality, and later vanity and self-assurance.

19. Bridal cushion cover, with cypress trees, flowering stems, birds, human figures, Epirus, 17th century. Coloured silks, metallic-wrapped thread on linen, chain stitch, herringbone stitch, running stitch, stem stitch, 40 × 109 cm.

TREE OF LIFE
Stylized trees were popular motifs. The Greeks worshipped trees and regarded them as sacred. Stylized trees are often found on bridal sheets, symbolizing fertility and longevity.

20. Pillow cover with horseman wielding two swords, Skyros, 18th century. Coloured silks on linen, darning and double running stitch, 37 × 49 cm. Wedding scenes, including processions, dancing guests or a bride or relative on horseback are a common feature of Greek embroidery.

THE THREADS THAT BIND US

Vrouwen van VOS
patricia kaersenhout

Detail Jessica d'Abreu & Polly Levens, African wax fabric border and fringes.

Detail Naomi Pieter and Twi Tjoa, bead work.

Detail Camilla Parker & Mevr. Weels, African Wax fabric with quality mark and design number in selvedge.

UNRAVELLING VROUWEN VAN VOS
In Conversation with patricia kaersenhout

Vrouwen van VOS is the third series of textile banners in which visual artist patricia kaersenhout brings important Black women poets, academics and activists out of oblivion. The banners honour six women who played a vital role in the struggle for social justice for Surinamese women in the Netherlands. Born in the Netherlands to Surinamese parents, kaersenhout investigates their background in relation to their upbringing within the culture of Western Europe. Working across a wide range of media, including textiles, they explore the movements of the African diaspora and its relation to feminism, sexuality, racism and the history of slavery.

CHRISTEL VESTERS — What draws you to textiles?

PATRICIA KAERSENHOUT — For each project, I choose a medium or material that is connected with the content of the work, not necessarily because of its aesthetic or stylistic quality. I often work with cotton because the fabric relates directly to the history of colonial exploitation and the transatlantic slave trade. In many textile-based works, I use so-called African wax textiles, which I bought on my travels through West Africa.

CHRISTEL — I noticed that you didn't cut off the selvedge labels printed along the edge of the fabrics. Markings such as 'Guaranteed Real Wax', 'Authentic African wax', or 'True Original Wax Hollandais' are tell-tale signs of a history scarred by colonial expansion and appropriation. To what an extent does the history of African wax fabrics play a part in these works?

PATRICIA — Vlisco fabrics are part of Dutch colonial history. I remember reading about it and suddenly realizing why I'd been collecting them all those years. In my culture we believe in embodied history, meaning that history is not only communicated in written or oral form, but that it becomes part of our bodies, and can therefore be transmitted between bodies, between spirits. Somehow these fabrics spoke to me about this history of appropriation and extortion. So yes, the history of the Real Dutch Wax fabrics, and the capitalist operation of manufacturers like Vlisco, influenced my choice to use African textiles in my work.

CHRISTEL — Do you use them to critique the cultural appropriation that took place under colonial regimes? As reminders? I mean, African wax fabrics are incredibly popular amongst young people in West Africa and North America, even in Surinam.

PATRICIA — Appropriation is not necessarily a negative thing. After all, culture exists because of mutual influencing and exchange. Take the use of chintz textiles in the traditional clothing from the small Dutch town of Hindeloopen. Today these wax-coated fabrics are described as vernacular culture, whereas they were originally made in India, imported to the Netherlands, and adapted to reflect local tastes. The same kind of cultural exchange occurred with African wax fabrics. Dutch designers modified them in response to the local tastes in West-Africa in terms of colours, symbols and motifs. Vlisco later started to collaborate with local designers.

Four pages with samples of warp patterns collected and described by R.S. Rattray in his book Religion and Art in Ashanti, 1927.

The Asantehene King Perempeh II of Asante and His Excellency the Governor, Sir Arnold Hodson at the reinstatement of the Asante dynasty in Kumase. Photographer unknown, 30 January 1935.

Known for its vibrantly colourful and intricate designs, kente cloths are strip-woven textiles rooted in the traditions of the Akan-Ashanti and Ewe peoples of West Africa. Once reserved for Ashanti royalty, they now symbolize 'Africanness' and are widely worn by the African diaspora. However, their politicization and commodification as a symbol of a universal Afrocentric identity have not been without critique.

The magnificence of kente cloth lies in its construction and appearance. Composed of narrow woven strips sewn side by side, its grid-like patterns obscure any visual logic or organisation. Kente strips, which can measure up to ten metres, are created by stacking one pattern block onto the next. The most basic pattern sequences consist of a single-colour warp (for instance, undyed cotton with indigo threads) and a neutral weft. By manipulating the rhythm of the weft, weavers produce different pattern blocks.

With limited means — two wooden sticks and one coloured thread — and simple interventions such as altering the warp's composition, weavers can generate an endless variety of strip designs. Adding a second colour to the warp multiplies the

KENTE CLOTH
Mastering the Variables, Unravelling the Mystery

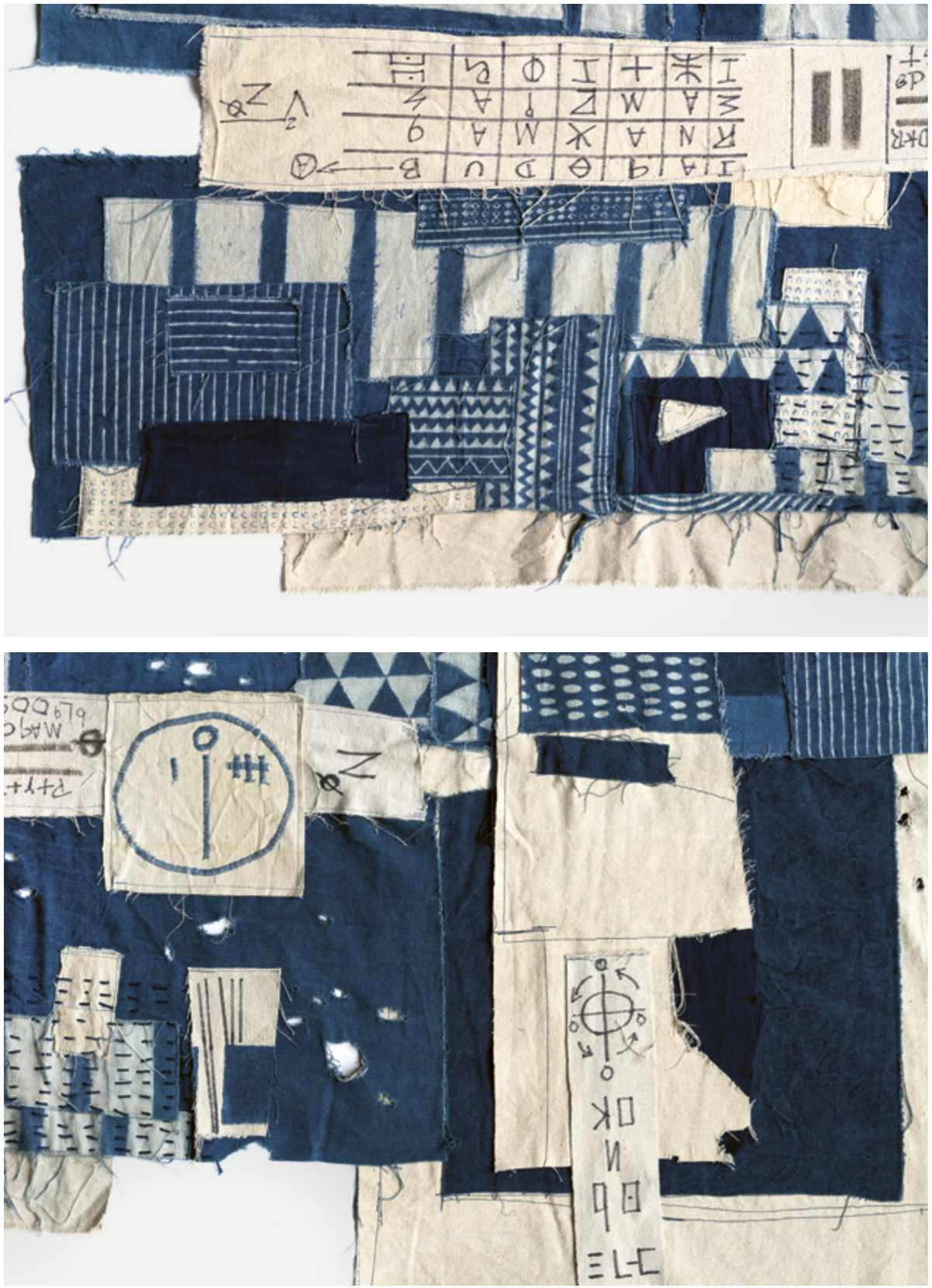
Christel Vesters

possibilities exponentially.[1] Once woven, the strips are cut and sewn together, adding another layer of visual complexity. In some cloths, identically patterned strips are placed in a half-drop repeat; in others, different patterns are combined into rhythmic, dynamic compositions.

Traditionally, weaving in Ashanti culture was the domain of men. There were no written instructions; the skills and patterns — along with the stories they conveyed — were passed down from father to son. Women were excluded from the weaving process. In early times, kente was reserved for kings, who wore the colourful fabrics during ceremonies — moving in fast, powerful dances or slow, majestic processions. In both cases, kente cloth was made for movement, creating visual vertigo that dazzled the audience.

The visual complexity and symbolic meaning of kente fabric also captivated the attention of Western anthropologists, including Robert Sutherland Rattray, who was one of the first Westerners to study and document Ashanti art and culture.[2,3] From 1906 to 1930, Rattray was stationed in the British Crown colony of the Gold Coast — present-day Ghana — where he headed the newly established Anthropological Department of Ashanti. During his time there, Rattray compiled

1. Basic kente strips are plain-woven, though more experienced craftsmen may employ advanced techniques. An Asante man's cloth requires 28 strips sewn together, measuring approximately three metres in length and two in width. A typical female cloth consists of up of 24 strips. Commonly used colours are maroon, gold-yellow, green, red, black and blue.
2. Robert Sutherland Rattray, better known as Captain R.S. Rattray (1881-1938), was born in India to Scottish parents. He studied Law and Anthropology at Oxford University and served with the British forces in South Africa before being stationed in the Gold Coast. Rattray learned local languages and formed close relationships with Ashanti chiefs and community members, whom he acknowledged extensively in the prefaces of his books on Ashanti culture, including *Ashanti Proverbs: The Primitive Ethics Of A Savage People* (1916); *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (1927) and *Ashanti Law and Constitution* (1929).
3. Rattray, *Religion and Art*, pp. 234-235. Rattray describes kente weaving in the chapter entitled 'Technology', alongside woodcarving, stamped cloth, pottery and metal casting. Other chapters include 'Religion' and 'Rites de Passage'. The structure of Rattray's book echoes that of Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (1751-1772), which aimed to systematically disseminate knowledge across disciplines. Like Diderot and d'Alembert, Rattray distinguishes between art and craft, and separates them from their cultural and ritual contexts.



The Rise of the Prophet as part of Messengers of the Sun, Antonio Jose Guzman & Iva Jankovic, 2022.

Patchwork with Ajrakh block-printed, indigo-dyed-cotton, black marker, wood, hand and machine sewing, machine embroidery, sashiko stitching, various sizes.

The Rise of the Prophet is a patchwork of pieces of blue-and-white fabric sewn together to form a large variegated landscape. There are longer and shorter strips, medium-sized squares, small triangular fragments, and patches with no distinct shape. Just as the shape and size of each piece varies, so do their designs. Some feature simple patterns of dots or stripes spaced at regular intervals. Others show a seamless repeat of alternating triangles, or a maze pattern of interlocking angular and wavy lines. In between are patches of monochrome blue, and strips of unbleached cotton featuring cryptic signs.

The pieces of fabric are seamed together in a makeshift fashion, without any apparent layout or design and with all stitching in full view. Some fragments overlap or are stitched on top of one another, others float freely, only seamed to the canvas at one end. Some are stitched by hand, whereas others have multiple lines of machine stitching running across—again seemingly without any apparent plan or overall design. This sense of randomness in the composition is enhanced by the frayed edges and the many loose threads that stick out from the sides or hang down the surface, as none of the patches are hemmed. Some patches have holes in them or show other signs of wear and tear. However, *The Rise of the Prophet* does not only evoke a sense of chaos and chance: the irregularity of the composition is offset by the even rhythm of the block-printed patterns, in which the repeated motifs connect seamlessly into a single design.

While each unique patch invites detailed examination, a few jump out immediately: the white sections and strips bearing symbols reminiscent of hieroglyphs or alchemical formulas written with what appears to be black marker; the *sashiko* embroidery on the far right and the embroidered circle in light blue. Some of the fabrics are used in more than one place, others only appear once. Yet it is the unmistakable indigo blue that holds all fragments together and makes the patchwork a unified whole.

The Rise of the Prophet is part of Antonio Jose Guzman and Iva Jankovic's ongoing research project titled *Electric Dub Station* (2018–ongoing). Like other indigo resist-dye textile objects that are created within its scope, *The Rise of the Prophet* has been presented in various settings and installations, sometimes displayed horizontally, sometimes vertically, sometimes draped over a wooden pole, part-concealed behind other objects, thus mirroring the patchwork ideology of reuse and sampling.

Europe and the Americas. How do these histories of extractive colonialism resonate in your works?

ANTONIO & IVA — These histories of exploitation are part of our works because they are an intrinsic part of the material history of indigo. As artists, we believe that you cannot work with indigo without engaging with these histories. We believe that the contemporary indigo fabrics we work with bear witness to these histories of forced displacement, oppression and exploitation. But our work doesn't stop there. We are more interested in the legacy of these histories today. *The Rise of the Prophet* and *Electric Dub Station* emerge from the diasporic and transcultural spheres that emerge as a direct result of forced migration across the Atlantic. They are a product of what Paul Gilroy calls the Black Atlantic. According to Gilroy, there is no such thing as a typical Black African, Black Caribbean, Black American or Black European culture, there is only a hybrid transatlantic Black culture.

IVA — Another aspect of indigo blue we are interested in is its spiritual and cultural significance across the world, its use in rituals and ceremonies. The longer we work with indigo fabrics, the more we discover. People tell us stories about what indigo means in their culture. For instance, when we did a project in Amsterdam South-East, someone told us about *blauwsel*, which is one of the things produced on the indigo plantations in Surinam. Women add blauwsel to their laundry to make it white, but in Afro-Surinamese communities they also use it in rituals to protect newborn babies against evil, by adding it to the bathing water.

Cover of Paul Gilroy's seminal book The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness, 1993.

ANTONIO — These customs are very old and can be traced back to the symbolic meaning of indigo blue in various African cultures. The Yoruba people, for instance, use indigo in ceremonies and rites of passage and believe it has medicinal powers. This just shows how everything is connected.

CHRISTEL — I want to circle back to what Iva mentioned earlier, about indigo not having one unique point of origin, and that indigo knowledge and indigo textile traditions have their roots in various cultures across the globe. To me, the multi-rootedness of indigo offers a thought form to think about diasporic culture. I mean, in its natural form, indigo defies the Western, essentialist idea that all things can be retraced to their singular point of origin, which has led to such Western values as originality and authenticity.

ANTONIO — It's about the connecting threads. Everything is connected, and people look for these connections. It's not just about the transatlantic or transoceanic connections between cultures, but for us, living in Europe, coming from Panama and from the Balkans, we are always searching for things that connect us to our motherland *and* to the place we are living now. Sometimes it's a pattern in a textile, a sound or rhythm, a way of talking, or some specific food. You look for this mix of your own culture and the one that surrounds you; that's what creolization and the Black Atlantic look like to me. But for Iva, coming from the Balkans, the concept of the Black Atlantic can be something different.

Messengers of the Sun, performance at Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, November 2022.

Part of the project Messengers of the Sun, the performance took the form of an Afrofuturistic ceremonial procession, infused with music and dance, referencing a fictional story in which the lost children of the prophet Sun Ra, who live in the Sirius-B galaxy, are 'messengers of the sun'.

IVA — The Balkans are defined by a mix of cultures. It's where East and West meet, and clash. We have three religions: Catholic, Orthodox Christianity and Islam; we are between Africa, Asia and Europe. We are in Europe's backyard, but we don't belong to Europe. When I was growing up, Yugoslavia was part of the Non-Aligned Movement, which included many former colonies in Africa and East-Asia that had fought against imperialism, neo-colonialism and racism. For me, the mix of those cultures is where I feel I belong.

ANTONIO — What we're looking for, and what we want to create with our works and our performances, is a liminal space where various countercultures come together and connect. In Amsterdam, the Kwaku Festival or the Roots festival can be considered liminal spaces. People from various minority groups gather to be part of a bigger community. In a way it's like a fabric where threads from different backgrounds intertwine. When we exhibit our works or stage our performances, we want to insert the energy of these kinds of environments into the Western, white-cube museum. And we see, from Instagram posts for instance, how people who identify with Black Atlantic culture engage with the

08

09

10

11

12

13

14

INDIGO WORLD
All shades of blue emerge from natural indigo dye, forming the foundation of diverse textile traditions rooted in cultures worldwide.

08. Boro Noragi, Japan, mid-1900s.
Farmer's jacket, several layers of indigo-dyed cotton, shashiko stitching, 90 × 125 cm.

BORO
From the Japanese 'boroboro', meaning something tattered or repaired. Boro technique combines patches and shashiko stitching. Farmers and fishermen favoured indigo dye for its insect- and reptile-repelling scent. Now sought-after collectibles, these garments inspire young designers interested in recycling and sustainability.

09. Men's tunic, Yoruba, Nigeria, c. 1950–1960.
Cotton, embroidery.
In Yoruba culture, indigo symbolizes wealth, stability and wisdom. It is a hallmark of Adire (tied and died) cloth, traditionally made by women. Indigo-dyed garments are worn at weddings, naming ceremonies and funerals. The dye also has medicinal uses and is painted on houses to ward off sickness.

10. Trade card Levi Strauss & Company, San Francisco, USA.
Levi Strauss & Co. patented indigo-dyed denim in the 1870s, revolutionizing workwear worn by plantation labourers and California goldminers. By the 1890s, the company started using synthetic indigo dye. In the 20th century, blue jeans became a symbol of freedom and equality.

11. Three women and a girl in Hindeloopen folkore dress, Nicolaas Huppes (after an original by Hendrik Lap), 1949.
Gouache on paper, 18 × 30.8 cm.
The four figures wear folklore dress appropriate to various stages of mourning, with descriptions below the image. The woman on the right wears a traditional 'wentke' coat.

12. Wentke, Hindeloopen folklore dress, the Netherlands, c. 1750–1850.
Cotton, linen, 32 × 140 cm.
The Hindeloopen wentke is a traditional coat from the Frisian town of Hindeloopen, renowned for its richly patterned chintz fabrics. These fabrics are historically linked to resist-dyed and block-printed cotton textiles imported from India, similar to the indigo dye that replaced the blue hues once derived from natural woad. The colour blue holds deep significance in Frisian culture and mourning customs, with darker shades symbolizing the earliest stage of mourning.

13. Zhifu, China, 1950s.
Blue cotton, blue plastic button, metal.
Recognizing the symbolic power of uniforms, Mao Zedong introduced the Zhifu (Mao jacket) in 1949 to project nationalist and communist ideology. The blue jacket became the everyday uniform of most Chinese people, connecting to China's artisanal heritage while signifying unity and rejection of Western influence.

14. Cut, Slash & Pull ensemble, Vivienne Westwood, S/S collection, 1990, England.
The collection channels punk culture through its deconstructed and rebellious aesthetic, featuring torn fabrics and raw edges. It challenged traditional fashion norms, cementing Westwood's reputation as a pioneer of anti-establishment fashion.

Sperveri (سبيرفري), Mounira Al Solh, 2017.

Polyester, cotton and silk threads, acrylic paint, curcuma and pencil on linen and cotton, various embroidery techniques, including cross-stitch and freestyle filling, 400 × 220 × 110 cm.

Mounira Al Solh's *Sperveri* presents a tent-shaped structure elaborately embroidered with motifs and designs. It is modelled on hand-embroidered bed tents, or *spervéri*, from the Greek island of Rhodes, which were used to cover the marital bed. *Sperveri* measures around 4 metres in height and 10 metres in diameter at the base. The structure is suspended from the ceiling and sits on a plinth, 100 centimetres high and 200 by 100 centimetres in plan—the size of a small bed. The tent is made of a pale yellow linen sewn together with an opening at the front, with multiple embroidered panels on the front and sides, and like the historical bed tents, the back, normally placed against the wall, is left empty.

Similar to the Rhodes bed tent, the embroidery on this contemporary spervéri is executed in reds and greens, with some added yellow, brown and black. There are mermaids, peacocks, people in traditional dress, a ship, a lute, rows of dancing warriors, horses with wings, octagonal stars, flowers, trees and feet. Rich in imagery and laden with symbolic meaning, the heavily embroidered surfaces conjure up an otherworldly realm inhabited by folkloric creatures and tales, triggering our curiosity and inviting close examination.

The embroidery reveals a variety of styles and techniques, including cross-stitch and freestyle filling, with polyester, silk and cotton threads. Pieces of decorated silk and cotton ribbon—the kind that can be found on markets and in haberdashery shops—frame the various panels.

The most lavishly embroidered areas border the opening. Here, two slender cypress trees flank a schematic representation of a flower, with two birds facing each other on top. They are embroidered in a fine cross-stich of dark reds and greens with additional lighter reds and yellow for the birds. The tree-flower-bird motif is repeated vertically on the door panels, which converge at the top in a pediment featuring a dancing female figure flanked by two peacocks. Trees also appear on two horizontal panels, one on each side the opening, surrounded by flowers, branches and birds.

If the embroidered exterior creates a sense of wonder and beauty, the atmosphere inside is sober, even sacrosanct. A bulb hanging from the top casts just enough light to read the roughly ten hand-embroidered texts carefully arranged on the plinth. The 'letters' are in both Arabic and English and signed with initials or a first name, place and date: 'Khaled, Kassel, 22-10-2016', or 'Samira, Tripoli, 2-12-2014'. What connects the stories told in these documents is the sense of unimaginable anguish and loss. One letter reads: 'They took my son, my husband and my brothers and they slew them in Mosul, after forcing them to play a duel on horses with swords. I wish the horses had wings to save them.' On the front of the plinth, just below the edge, is a dedication embroidered in Greek: 'Αλλά η μνήμη τους παραμένει' ('But the memory of them remains.')

01

02

2 "Luggie" (measuring lands for cultivation.)

7 Loading a vat with plant.

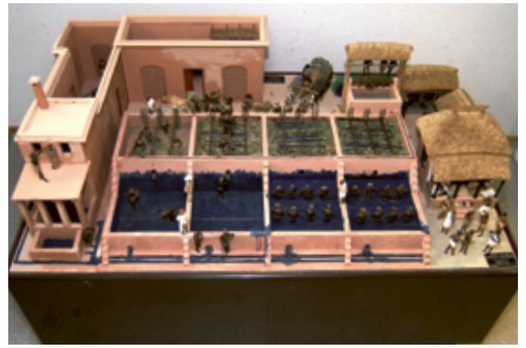
8 Indigo factory (beating the Vats.)

15 Pressing the fecula.

17 Cutting Indigo into Cakes.

03

06



04

05

07

01. Woodcut from Pierre Promet, Histoire generale des drogues, traitant des plantes, des animaux, et des mineraux..., Paris: J.-B. Loyson & A. Pillon: E. Ducastin (1694).
02. Indigo branch with open and closed ball, Cornelis Markée, brush drawing, 'described by Mr. Joh. Weijman in his third volume, folio 152, No. 605', c. 1763.

INDIGOFERA

There are a variety of blue-dye plants, the best known of which is the Indigofera family. Thriving in tropical climates, species of the Indigofera are native to parts of Africa, India, South-East Asia and Central and South America.
In the Americas the local species is called Indigofera suffruticosa, also known as 'anil', and in India the most common species is Indigofera arrectia, also known as 'natal' indigo.
Long before European botanists gave the plants their Latin names, ancient indigenous cultures, thousands of miles apart from one another, had developed recipes for extracting the pigment and fixing the colours in the fibres of a textile. Indigo-dyed fabrics have been found in Peru, Guatemala, the Indus Valley, West Africa and India. The oldest patch containing indigo-dyed yarn was recovered at Huaca Prieta in Peru and is estimated to be 6000–6200 years old.

03. The Planting & Manufacture of Indigo in India: 29 Photographic Views, Allahabad, India, by Oscar Mallitte, 1877. Album with albumen silver print.
(2) 'Luggie'(measuring lands for cultivation).
(7) Loading vat with plants.
(8) Indigo factory (beating the Vats).
(15) Pressing the fecula.
(17) Cutting indigo into cakes.

INDIGO PROFIT

It wasn't until the beginning of the 16th century, when Portuguese merchants imported the first consignment of indigo to Europe, that indigo-blue became a symbol of status and power, replacing the much paler blue dye from woad plants and making indigo dye a much sought-after and very profitable commodity. To convince potential investors back home of the profitability of the plantations, local governors and colonial companies such as the Dutch East India Company (VOC) and the East India Company (EIC) documented their findings in botanical studies, including drawings of the various species they cultivated, and sent samples of their produce back home.

04. Indigo Factory Model, 1886.
Wood, clay, 200 × 150 cm.
The model depicts the production of indigo dye in India and was commissioned from Indian artist Rakhal Chunder Pál by the British authorities in India for the Colonial and Indian Exhibition held in South Kensington in 1886. The model later went on display at the Museum of Economic Botany at Kew Gardens. It consists of wooden buildings and 100 clay figurines, including four oxen pulling a cart that delivers raw indigo plants, one European manager wearing a pith helmet standing on top of the vats, and 95 Indian workers occupied in various stages of the process by which indigo was converted from fresh green plants into blocks of dye. The miniature scale of the diorama turns the harsh working conditions and violent reality on indigo plantations into a doll-house-like curiosity. By entering the Museum, the model became part of a 19th century global network of knowledge production that catered not only to the scientific botanist and general public, but also to the merchant, the manufacturer, the physician, and artisans of every description.
05. Indian blue indigo dye in block and powder.
06. Portrait of the Comte de Vaudreuil, François-Hubert Drouais, 1758.
Oil on canvas, 225.4 × 161.3 cm.
Joseph-Hyacinthe-François de Paule de Rigaud, Comte de Vaudreuil (1740–1817), the son of the governor of Saint-Domingue, present-day Haiti, points at a map of the then French colony. The family owned many sugar cane and indigo plantations in Saint-Dominique, and the count earned substantial revenue from enslaved labour on his plantations without lifting a finger. Instead of a uniform, Vaudreuil wears a blue velvet coat, blue being the colour of aristocracy. In 1791, a rebellion by the enslaved population broke out on Saint-Domingue. Known as the Haitian Revolution, it led to the abolishment of slavery in the French colonies, and the independence of western Hispaniola as Haiti in 1803. The successful revolt was a defining moment in the history of the Atlantic World and its effects were felt throughout the Americas.
07. Generale kaart der kolonie Suriname: hoofdzakelijk voorstellende de tegenwoordige bebouwing dier kolonie: Oostelijk gedeelte der kolonie Suriname. Landmeter: Mabé, 1835, 48 × 53.5 cm.
This map forms the eastern half of a bigger map of Surinam that was originally part of the book De landbouw in Suriname (Agriculture in Surinam) by M.D. Teenstra, an agricultural expert posted to Surinam in 1828. The publication devotes particular attention to the decline of the plantations. The map shows the area of the 'old colony'. Although it still indicates the largest extension to the cultivated area, it is hard not to notice the many abandoned plots. Plantations in Surinam were capital-intensive agricultural companies that grew produce for the world market. Profit mattered more than anything. They were usually financed by Dutch trading firms that oversaw the sale of the produce in the Netherlands and elsewhere. Most plantations specialized in one particular product to maximize returns. The legend lists the crops grown on the various plantations, with blue representing indigo. Owing to intensive cultivation and the polluting production process, much of that land could not be used for growing other crops for a long time.