

ABOMEY APPLIQUE



Abomey Applique are animated woven cloths from present day Benin. The fifth king of Dahomey, King Agadja (1708 - 1740) is said to have introduced the Abomey applique art to the kingdom. It is believed that when he was on campaign in Weme, he witnessed a voodoo dancer whose skirt formed colorful circles. Inspired by this, he captured two expert applique workers from the Auranku region and took them back to Abomey. In the king's service, they were tasked to make rainbow colored cloths for his court. The first applique cloths used raffia material as background material, as cotton was extremely uncommon and valuable. The applique designs depicting birds, fish, wild animals, human beings, plants, sailing ships, the king's insignia and the like recalled significant events during the reign of the kings of Dohomey. The men who made the applique cloth belonged to a guild that passed on the design knowledge through their lineage. After the kingdom was colonized by the French, the colonists looked to diminish the memory of the monarchy from the people's collective memory. Thus, they had the Abomey artists incorporate new subjects into the craft, they turned to daily life for inspiration and added scenes from activities such as hunting and agriculture.