

African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter

Volume 1
Issue 1 April 1994

Article 2

4-1-1994

Archaeological Evidence of an African-American Aesthetic

Laurie A. Wilkie

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan>

Recommended Citation

Wilkie, Laurie A. (1994) "Archaeological Evidence of an African-American Aesthetic," *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan/vol1/iss1/2>

This Articles, Essays, and Reports is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.

Archaeological Evidence of an African-American Aesthetic

Submitted by Laurie A. Wilkie

Archaeological excavations took place at Oakley Plantation in West Feliciana Parish, Louisiana during 1991 and 1992. Four African-American assemblages dating from the period of slavery through the 1940s were recovered (Wilkie and Farnsworth 1992, 1993). One of the most striking trends in the African-American assemblages is the predominance of personal adornment related artifacts at the house sites. Artifacts included in this group are buttons, beads, jewelry, and hair combs. In the slavery-period assemblage, personal adornment related artifacts comprise 10.0% (9 MNI) of the assemblage. In the late nineteenth-century assemblage, 27.9% (126 MNI) were related to personal adornment. The 1920s assemblage had 21.3% (67 MNI) of the artifacts related to personal adornment, while the 1940s assemblage has 23.6% (56 MNI) in this category.

Large numbers of personal adornment artifacts, most commonly buttons, have been found at other African-American sites in the Caribbean and American South (Adams and Smith 1985, Cheek and Friedlander 1990, Handler and Lange 1978, Wheaton and Reed 1990). Such high proportions of personal adornment artifacts are not typical of European-American sites (e.g. Wilkie and Farnsworth 1992; Wilkie 1988). Personal adornment comprises only a small portion of the planter assemblages at Oakley, with 6.1% (3 MNI) of the antebellum and 2.8% (2 MNI) of the postbellum artifacts being related to this category.

Some archaeologists have proposed that high numbers of buttons may reflect a pattern diagnostic of African-American occupation. This idea was first proposed by Eric Klingelhofer, as summarized and then supported by Cheek and Friedlander (1990) and disputed by Wheaton and Reed (1990). However, I would like to suggest that buttons are only a part of a larger cultural expression.

Zora Neale Hurston (1981) in her essay "Characteristics of Negro Expression" discusses the African-American love of intricate designs, bright colors and ornamentation for ornamentation's sake. Likewise, African-American authors such as Ernest J. Gaines (e.g. 1971) and Richard Wright (1937) have described how fine dress was particularly important on Sunday, when the African-American community gathered for church.

Personal adornment serves as an expression of a personal aesthetic. Adornment of the body can be achieved through jewelry, clothing, hair plaiting, body piercing, painting, tattooing, tooth filing, or scarification. All of these bodily alterations are common throughout Africa (Rubin 1988), but were seen as threatening by European-American planters, and usually discouraged under slavery. Denied this form of personal expression, African-Americans seem to have turned to personal ornamentation through material items. Beads are common at slave sites, and represent a mode of ornamentation familiar to African slaves. Buttons, which can be strung much like beads, or used to decorate cloth in the same way as beads, represent a common and inexpensive means of ornamentation.

The extent of personal decoration was limited not only by the views of the planters, but also by the availability, and later, cost of ornamental items. African textiles are well known for their

artistry and intricacy (e.g. Ben-Amos and Rubin 1983; Cole 1985; Cole and Aniakor 1984; Thompson 1983). In contrast, clothes affordable to tenants and domestic servants included muslins, calicoes, gingham, and denims (Oakley Collection, Turnball-Bowman Papers). While affordable, these clothes were less than aesthetically stirring. Ledger entries from Oakley demonstrate that African-American tenants bought "lace", "trim", "beads", and "buttons" to ornament their clothing (Oakley Collection). It is clear from the diversity and quality of many of the buttons recovered from the African-American features at Oakley that buttons provided a relatively inexpensive means of elaborating simple clothing.

While buttons were the most common personal adornment artifact at Oakley; beads, buckles, lockets, cuff-links, broaches, rings, a lady's watch fob and a glass bracelet were also recovered from the African-American features. The 1920s assemblage included one celluloid, one tortoise shell, one hard rubber and one plastic hair comb, representing attention to the "dressing" of hair as well.

Archaeologists have already considered buttons as potential indicators of African-American occupations. I would suggest that we recognize the cultural behaviors behind the pattern so that we may come to a better understanding of African-American world view and daily life. The importance of ornamentation seen archaeologically in African-American households may represent a direct continuity of African personal aesthetic traditions.

References

Manuscript Collections

Oakley Plantation Papers, Audubon State Commemorative Area, West Feliciana, Louisiana.

Turnball-Bowman Papers, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Louisiana State University.

Contemporary Publications and Published Documents

Adams, William Hampton and Steven D. Smith
1985 Historical Perspectives on Black Tenant Farmer Material Culture: The Henry C. Long General Store Ledger at Waverly Plantation, Mississippi. In *The Archaeology of Slavery and Plantation Life*, edited by Theresa A. Singleton, pp. 309-334. Academic Press, New York.

Ben-Amos, Paula and Arnold Rubin (editors)
1983 *The Art of Power, the Power of Art: Studies in Benin Iconography*. Museum of Cultural History UCLA Monograph Series 19.

Cheek, Charles D. and Amy Friedlander
1990 Pottery and Pig's Feet: Space, Ethnicity and Neighborhood in Washington, D. C., 1880-1940. *Historical Archaeology* 24(1):34-60.

Cole, Herbert (editor)

1985 *I am not Myself: the Art of African Masquerade. Museum of Cultural History UCLA Monograph Series 26.*

Cole, Herbert M. and Chile C. Aniakor

1984 *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos. Museum of Cultural History, University of California, Los Angeles.*

Gaines, Ernest J.

1971 *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman.* Bantam Books, New York.

Handler, Jerome S. and Frederick W. Lange

1978 *Plantation Slavery in Barbados: An Archaeological and Historical Investigation.* Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Hurston, Zora Neale

1982 *The Sanctified Church: the folklore writings of Zora Neale Hurston.* Turtle Island Foundation, Berkeley.

Rubin, Arnold (editor)

1988 *Marks of Civilization. Museum of Cultural History, University of California, Los Angeles.*

Thompson, Robert Ferris

1983 *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy.* Random House, New York.

Wheaton, Thomas R., Jr. and Mary Beth Reed

1990 *James City North Carolina: Archaeological and Historical Study of an African American Urban Village.* New South Associates Technical Report 6.

Wilkie, Laurie A.

1988 *A Policeman's Lot: Early 20th Century Family Life in Santa Monica.* Report on file, UCLA Information Center, University of California, Los Angeles.

Wilkie, Laurie A. and Paul Farnsworth

1992 *National Register Testing at Oakley Plantation (16WF34) West Feliciana Parish, Louisiana, 1991.* Report on file, Division of Archaeology, Baton Rouge. 1993 *National Register Testing at Oakley Plantation (16WF34) West Feliciana Parish, Louisiana, 1992.* Report on file, Division of Archaeology, Baton Rouge.

Wright, Richard

1937 *Black Boy.* Harper and Row, Publishers, New York.