

# The Transformation of Commodity into Artistic Practice: El Anatsui and Metal Hangings

## Metanın Sanatsal Pratiğe Dönüşümü: El Anatsui ve Metal Asmalar

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### ABSTRACT

Focusing on the metal installations of Ghanaian-Nigerian artist El Anatsui, the present paper evaluates his contributions to local and cultural values as well as the sculpture and analyzes his artworks through a selected example. The paper analyzes El Anatsui's artworks created in and after 1998, which has an important place in the historical perspective of contemporary African art, and proposes a versatile perspective on the artist's metal hangings. The data analyzed within the scope of the subject is an output of the literature review presented with qualitative research methods. Going beyond conventional materials and forms of representation, the artist presents a new narrative. The metal material, which is processed in the artworks with the subjective interpretation of the artist as an unique medium, is handled with its history, quality and aesthetic value. The present study helps to make sense of Anatsui's art in the context of political instability, cultural values, recycling, sustainability, immigration and the problem of identity. This context is important, for throughout the research, the artist's approach that synthesizes the local and the global behind his practices and his transmission have been questioned. Using local resources, Anatsui's 'indigenous' identity cannot be disregarded in terms of the symbolism at the center of his artistic practice. The practices make a connection between West Africa's long-standing textile tradition and the industrial waste materials from cultural encounters as an outcome of colonialism. It is inferred that metal hangings are a reflection of the political, historical and sociocultural elements that lie at the origins of Africa, and that it is these elements that determine their artistic value. In the abstract metal sheets, a connection is made between the search for national unity in the postcolonial period and the traditional kente cloth. The artist is evaluated as an important figure in defining postcolonial identity discourse and cultural biography using existing local resources. It is aimed to present an alternative perspective on the practices, which constitutes the content of the research, and to contribute to the literature.

**Keywords:** El Anatsui, art, metal hanging, postcolonial art

### ÖZ

Ganalı-Nijeryalı sanatçı El Anatsui'nin metal enstalasyonlarına odaklanan makale heykel sanatının yanı sıra yerel ve kültürel değerlere sağladığı katkıları değerlendirerek seçili örnek üzerinden yapıtlarını analiz etmektedir. Makale, çağdaş Afrika sanatının tarihsel perspektifi içerisinde önemli bir yere sahip olan El Anatsui'nin 1998 yılı ve sonrası oluşturulan yapıtlarını incelemekte ve sanatçının metal asmaları üzerine çok yönlü bir bakış açısı önermektedir. Konu kapsamında analiz edilen veriler, nitel araştırma yöntemleri ile sunulan literatür taramasının bir çıktısıdır. Sanatçı, geleneksel materyal ve temsil biçimlerinin ötesine geçerek yeni bir anlatı sunmaktadır. Özgün bir araç olarak sanatçının subjektif yorumu ile yapıtlarda işlenen metal materyal, tarihi, niteliği ve estetik değeri ile ele alınmaktadır. Mevcut çalışma Anatsui'nin sanatının siyasi istikrarsızlık, kültürel değerler, geri dönüşüm, sürdürülebilirlik, göç ve kimlik problemi bağlamında anlamlandırılmasına yardımcı olmaktadır. Bu bağlam önemlidir, çünkü araştırma boyunca sanatçının, pratiklerinin ardındaki yerel ve küresel olanı sentezleyen yaklaşımı ile aktarımı sorgulanmaktadır. Yerel kaynakları kullanan Anatsui'nin taşıdığı 'yerli' kimliğinin sanatsal pratiklerinin merkezinde yer alan sembolizm üzerindeki etkisi göz ardı edilemez. Uygulamalarda Batı Afrika'nın uzun bir geçmişe dayanan tekstil geleneği ile kolonyalizmin bir çıktısı olan kültürel karşılaşmaların sunduğu endüstriyel atık materyaller arasında bir bağlantı kurulmaktadır. Metal asmaların, Afrika'nın köklerinde yatan siyasi, tarihsel ve sosyokültürel unsurların bir yansıması olduğu ve sanatsal değerini belirleyen bu unsurlar ile eş olduğu çıkarımı yapılmaktadır. Soyut metal levhalarda, postkolonyal dönemin ulusal birlik arayışı ile geleneksel kente kumaşı arasında bağlantı kurulmaktadır. Sanatçı, mevcut yerel kaynakları kullanarak postkolonyal kimlik söyleminin ve kültürel biyografinin tanımlanmasında önemli bir isim olarak değerlendirilir. Araştırmanın içeriğini oluşturan pratikler üzerine alternatif bir bakış açısı sunulması ve beraberinde literatüre katkı sağlanması amaçlanmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** El Anatsui, sanat, metal asma, postkolonyal sanat

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## Introduction

El Anatsui (1944) has an important place in the historical perspective of contemporary African art. The artist conveys his subject matter through various visual components such as color, shape, mass, movement and texture. In Nigeria, where he has lived since 1975, Anatsui explores local values and visualizes them in his artworks as an ethnographer in the postcolonial atmosphere, which defines the intellectual climate of the region. Studying history provides an explanation for the artistic context of the material used in Anatsui's artworks from a today's perspective. A connection between past and present, and moreover, bringing the history and legacy of Africa into the present, are the values that determine Anatsui's approach to the artwork as he has developed and deepened his artistic practices and the philosophy that underlies them over the years. The artist investigates the possibilities of the mundane object and, through his artworks, conveys to the audience the relationship between the material and the meaning it expresses. In his art, Anatsui creates a new and original aesthetic language by enriching the meaning of the material. Fascinated by the transformations undergone by the materials he uses, Anatsui transforms the commodity into an artistic practice with an interdisciplinary approach. The identity of the industrial product incorporated into the artwork is determined by the artist who brings the material into a new context and gives it an aesthetic quality. The meaning of the artwork is analyzed within the context in which it is positioned.

One question in particular framed this research: What kind of dialog is established between form and meaning with the metal material that makes up El Anatsui's artworks? The present paper attempts to answer that question. In this context, the theoretical framework of the paper is based on the relationship between form and meaning. In order to answer this research question, the recurring themes in Anatsui's artworks are evaluated from an artistic, historical and cultural perspective. The main aim of the research is to consider the impact of Ghanaian contemporary artist El Anatsui's use of non-traditional objects on the artworks. Another aim of the research is to examine the importance of artistic resources in African traditions in the artworks of Anatsui. The study is divided into two main sections. The structure of the paper is as follows. In section one, the quality and aesthetic value of the material, which has a historical background, is evaluated in Anatsui's artworks. In section two, the local values that are the source of these artworks are analyzed with the example given. Finally in section three, the conclusion section, the conclusions reached in line with the data obtained are evaluated.

### History, Nature and Aesthetic Value of the Metal Material

El Anatsui, a Ghanaian artist who lives and works in Nigeria, was born in 1944 during the British colonial period. Created in 1998 and afterwards, the foundations of the discourse in the metal artworks are based on the possibilities that the artist had in the current conditions of this period. The Western education Anatsui received during the colonial period determines his conception of art. With the training he received, Anatsui became proficient in sculptural techniques and developed a unique form. In his installations, the artist combines traditional African aesthetics with contemporary art practices, ultimately creating a hybrid form. With his metal installations, Anatsui has gained more exposure than ever before and has had a tremendous impact on art world. During the fifty year period of the second half of the twentieth century, the

various materials he used and the techniques he experimented with eventually paved the way for the creation of metal hangings. His artworks are located in a multidisciplinary field composed of painting, sculpture and weaving, but the material used takes on the appearance of a monumental sculpture in its final form. The practices created with thousands of used liquor bottle tops are a complex visual representation that pushes the limits of conventional sculpture. Anatsui keeps the collected metal materials in his studio until he finds the right way to express them. Then, by exploring the potential of bottle tops, he transforms the material into an art object and uses an innovative language in sculpture. The artist questions the traditional view of sculpture with these non-traditional materials and methods. The repurposing of the material through recycling supports the artist's practices with deep metaphorical meaning. Anatsui's art is a collection of waste objects whose value is preserved in its own meaning. For the artist, the primary reason for choosing the material is not to criticize consumption. The consumption practices symbolized by the metal sheets created by letting the material lead the artist in an experimental process stem from inherent in the medium itself (Binder, 2008, p. 27).

Anatsui creates multilayered artworks using discarded disposable aluminum bottle tops. The artist, who uses only recycled products in his artworks, benefits the national economy for this reason. The amount of bottle tops clearly shows the alcoholism problem of the region (Stanhouse, 2016, p. 4). The material used indicates the role of liquor in social life and hence to the recycling practices as an output of the consumer society. Whereas the repurposing of waste material is characterized as a recycling process, its use to create art practices is an act of upcycling; the process is recycling and the output is upcycling. With this act, the artist gives the material a new and unique identity. The reuse of bottle tops, the assessment of the possibilities they offer as commodities and their transfer to art practices in order to point to an issue is a narrative about the aforementioned identity. The material repurposed by changing its context communicates environmental concerns such as waste management, recycling and sustainability. The reuse of the idle leftover parts of a previously used commodity is also a commentary on consumption by the artist. While the material itself is a disposable commodity, in Anatsui's artworks it is transformed into an artistic form situated in a historical context; the material refers to the past. It should not be disregarded that the industrial legacy left behind by colonialism has an ecological dimension. Anatsui's artworks also suggest ecological issues.

Art does not always require non-discarded materials; one example of this is Anatsui's work with accessible waste materials. The objects around the artist are used as resources to convey the artist's subject matter. This preference reflects the artist's circumstances. Environment means everything around the subject. Using waste materials in his artworks, the artist conveys information about his environment to the viewer. Anatsui, who shapes his conception of art with the consumption wastes offered to him by the environment, works with unorthodox materials such as bottle tops and copper wires. One of the things that attracts Anatsui about bottle tops is they are materials that have been used and have had a lot of interaction with the human hand (Anatsui & James, 2008, p. 38). Anatsui discovered the bottle tops by chance in 1998 while searching for materials, and in her encounter with the bottle tops, he first associated them with the history of migration and consumption (Binder, 2010, p. 17; Vogel, 2012, p. 53). Then, he explores the potential of bottle tops, turning the waste material, which lacks aesthetic qualities, into a part of his art. Thus, he cre-

ates a new and original language in his installations by recycling waste metals. Moreover, he gives a different meaning to the recycled material. Aluminum bottle tops lack aesthetic qualities. By manipulating the material, the artist recycles industrial waste into a transcendental art form that makes the disciplines of painting and sculpture visible together. The used object brings along its history, however Anatsui transcends the limits of the material and considers it in a different context. Defining an industrial product with a functional characteristic as an artwork isolates the product from its meaning and positions it in a new context. This recontextualization refuses the original nature of the material he is processing for use in his artworks and gives it a new quality. The object, which has a function, utility and purpose, is not only experienced as a pure instrument but also “serves to communicate information” by being the vehicle of meaning (Barthes, 1994, p. 182). Its meaning goes beyond the function and purpose of the object.

Commodity production, intensified by industrial activities, leads to overconsumption and accumulated waste materials. Materials obtained through recycling support the theme of sustainability, as recycling and repurposing waste materials is a sustainable action. Sustainability as a social action bears ethical responsibilities. Anatsui is assigned to a prominent role in the concretization of environmental concerns. It would also be an incomplete assessment to say that Anatsui uses the waste liquor bottle tops only to refer to an environmental problem or to criticize consumption. Bottle tops are also a symbol for issues of consumer society, sustainability, recycling and waste management, as well as colonialism and its aftermath. With the aluminum bottle tops, the artist makes a historical reference to African history and the colonial period. Anatsui’s choice of aluminum tops for his installations is significant because of the historical reference of the material. In a historical context, aluminum liquor bottle tops symbolize the trade network and colonial practices between Europe and Africa. Indeed, trade allows for the acquisition of new materials. The historical association of the bottle tops used in Anatsui’s artworks is linked to liquor, which played a prominent role in the earliest contacts between Africa and Europe (Anatsui & James, 2008, p. 48). The aluminum bottle tops that bear witness to history are important because of the meaning that the material assigns to the artwork. In the shadow of postcolonialism, Anatsui directly criticizes colonialism with his choice of material. Analyzing Anatsui’s art by disregarding the impact of colonialism on contemporary African art would make the interpretation of metal materials difficult. “It is impossible to fully appreciate the stakes of artistic modernism in twentieth-century Nigeria without close attention to the political and cultural implications of Africa’s encounter with Europe during the imperial age” (Okeke-Agulu, 2015, p. 6).

The discovery of the continent’s natural resources by foreign interests is the main reason for the transformation of the region into a geography under the control of capitalist ideologies. Another reason is that the local people are seen by the West as a source of cheap labor. Moreover, in Africa, liquor production under the shadow of colonial policies also led to the slave trade. Postcolonialism stands for the process of decolonization in the post-World War II period. The postcolonial period refers not only to a specific time period but is also defined by the consequences of intervention in Africa. In the words of Nigerian author Wole Soyinka, “The African slavery experience has also recorded moments of resilience and triumph, and these are worthy of retention in memory and of commemoration” (2012, p. 58). In the past, the West and other colonial forces prevented Africa from preserving its art, leading to the suppression of collective memory (Savoy, 2022, p. 138). The

exploitation of memory by colonial powers has led to an identity issue. While the concept of postcolonialism refers to a historical period, postcolonial aesthetics basically refers to the preservation and shaping of Africa’s social, cultural and historical identity. As his artistic practice makes a decisive contribution to defining postcolonial aesthetics, Anatsui’s monumental installations can be considered in the context of this aesthetic. The artist presents the postcolonial aesthetic in the sociocultural, historical and artistic perspective.

“It is only when one proceeds from a position of clear knowledge and definition of oneself that one stands a bright chance of contributing meaningfully to whatever culture formation eventually emerges” (Anatsui, 1993, p. 49). The way in which the commodity transformed into an art object is accessed and interpreted is shaped by the artist’s interest in African history and culture. Anatsui embraces his own cultural heritage and transfers his local values into the artworks. Anatsui’s large-scale artworks made from recycled materials, go beyond conventional sculptural limitations and directly incorporate African cultural heritage into the sculptures. He conveys cultural values through his artworks. One makes a judgment at all times in relation to the values evoked by the impact of the aesthetic object on one’s senses: judgments arising from the emotions evoked by the object, or judgments surrounding its selection according to its function and purposes (Ashcroft, 2015, p. 413). Both forms of judgment are influential in Anatsui’s interaction with the metal material. First, the African artist’s perspective is shaped by the continent’s history, cultural resources and local values. The identity of the artist is decisive in understanding the issue being addressed. Secondly, the importance of analyzing the function and purpose of the material in terms of its meaning for the artist should be recognized. The qualities of the commodity such as color, size, form and texture are his main formal concerns. Moreover, being easily accessible, cheap and malleable are also important qualities for Anatsui, who began to use the recycled objects he found in his installations. Being local, easily accessible and cheap, metal bottle tops are a convenient material for use in the artist’s site-specific sculptures.

It is a practical feature, metal sculptures can be folded in a similar way to cloth and this feature provides ease of transportation. Anatsui uses the term “nomadic aesthetic” when discussing these sculptures (Binder, 2008, p. 29). Anatsui’s immigrant identity as a Ghanaian living in Nigeria is the main reason why immigration, one of the main problems of the contemporary world, is conveyed through his artworks. Lightweight metal hangings can be folded and stored in smaller spaces, without making transportation difficult, so they can be easily moved like a nomad. The fluidity and formal indeterminacy of the metallic form with visual dynamism reflects the nomadic aesthetic. The space of freedom created with this uncertainty allows the artist to experiment with different mediums and to try various compositions in the process. Anatsui seeks answers to the formal problems of sculpture. The lightness of the material allows the creation of large-scale installations.

Enormous and spectacular metal hangings give the audience a sense of sublimity. The metal pieces, which have a monumental appearance when thousands of them are used together in installations, are singularly unpretentious. From another perspective, it can be inferred that each part of the whole represents the individual and the whole itself represents community. The coexistence of particular units, which are the objects of the act of ‘collecting’ in art practices, indicates a common formation. In the process of procuring used waste materials and then bringing them together

to search for a unity in the current composition, the units, which are composed in a certain order, refer to the relationship between the individual and community. The copper parts of the structure can be read as cultural values keeping the individuals that make up the society together. Recycling the material, shaping it for its final mosaic appearance and exhibiting it is all a collaborative process. It is a reductive to disregard the intervention of the studio assistants in the practical process and the intervention of the installation team in the exhibition process. The coexistence of individuals for a common purpose also reiterates the relationship between the individual and community. What the collective movement in the artist's studio and the bottle tops have in common is that they are units that come together for a purpose. Anatsui's sculptures, whose surfaces feature bold curvilinear designs, bear the marks of collective endeavor.

It would be a mistake to overlook two points in Anatsui's art. Anatsui works with a host of young artists (Oguibe, 2024, p. 272). The first of these is the studio process. In a collaborative creation process, assistants contribute to the work with autonomous forms of expression. Metal hangings, which are the output of a collective work, extend the boundaries in art with its conceptual visual language, narrative of memory and identity. The second is the exhibition process. Copper wire is an important element that gives the installation movement by holding the aluminum pieces together. During the installation of large-scale wall sculptures, due to the weight of the artwork and the given cloth shape, the deformation of the copper wires connecting the aluminum parts is eliminated by replacing the damaged copper wire with a new one. This process also leads to the exhibition of the same artwork in various forms. In line with the artist's preference, the installation team decides where and how to attach the artworks consisting of multiple panels or detachable parts (Irvin, 2022, p. 44).

The artworks, which have dynamic folds as opposed to a fixed form, afford a rich experience to the audience. Anatsui does not believe that artworks are fixed things and likens this approach to dictatorship (Vogel, 2012, p. 104). It is eminently clear from Anatsui's statement that it is a political and critical discourse. The artist transcends individual experience to communicate his discourses through form. At the heart of El Anatsui's practices is a postcolonial identity discourse that can be evaluated in an economic, political and social context. His artworks addresses postcolonial issues such as ecological neglect, poverty, political conflicts and instability. Anatsui's art mirrors the history of the region. Anatsui's aesthetic should therefore be recognized as a catalyst for the depiction of African cultural identity in contemporary art. "Anatsui seeks an African artistic view with its own qualities" (Otenberg, 1997, p. 165). His practices are directly related to local artistic traditions and have the primitive and symbolic characteristics of traditional African art.

### Local Values that are the Source of Artworks

Building on the first section, the second builds on the Ghanaian-Nigerian artist El Anatsui's postcolonial stance, which embodies and problematizes the outcomes of the colonial system pursuing political and economic interests over the people of the region, by referring to precolonial Africa. By problematizing the effects left behind by colonialism, Anatsui brings art back to a political context. "Modern art, for Anatsui, can claim no legitimacy if it is not based on one's originary art traditions and culture" (Okeke, 1999, p. 156). This section focuses specifically on the elements of African history that Anatsui draws on, as well as the rich cultural resources and local values of the region.

### Image 1.

Unknown artist. Brass sculpture. 4.8 x 3 x 2.6 cm, L. Cruise, Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge



El Anatsui brings a unique approach to contemporary art by transforming discarded materials into artistic expression. Furthermore, Anatsui's definition of art also includes the cultural values of the artist. The wall sculptures with a metallic and shiny surface reflect traditional African aesthetics. Anatsui's wall hangings have a metallic cloth appearance. The fact that the installation takes on the appearance of cloth with the bending of the aluminum pieces subverts the idea that metal is hard and difficult to shape. The surfaces of the aluminum bottle tops are flattened and holes are drilled with the help of awl to stitch them together using copper wires. Aluminum pieces are combined into a composition. Numerous aluminum pieces, assembled using copper wire, form a visual unity. El Anatsui's large-scale installations crafted from aluminum bottle tops and copper wire have a complex yet holistic structure. On the other hand, he employs standardized units in metal hangings. The striped forms of the assembled metal pieces are reminiscent of the traditional narrow stripe woven cloths of Africa. With his innovative use of materials and techniques, the artist continues the tradition of weaving that has been handed over from generation to generation.

The rhythm in the artist's wall hangings is given by the color of the material in question as well as the arrangement of the aluminum bottle tops that make up his works. On the other hand, metal parts whose color changes due to light create irregularities in the visual rhythm. Thus, aluminum parts, which have an inherently shiny surface, prevent uniformity in the composition. The metallic reflections of the aluminum parts give movement to the work. Composing his installations in the context of the relationship between light and color, the artist manipulates the material by making formal changes and creates an autonomous aesthetic form. In order to change the stability of the installation and give the work a dynamic form, the aluminum pieces are connected with copper wires. Thus, each aluminum piece has the potential to gain movement, giving the work the appearance of cloth. The

final look refers to traditional “*kente*” cloth. Kente cloth has its roots in a long tradition of weaving, a rich cultural heritage of Africa. Anatsui’s hanging metal sheets are similar to kente cloth, which becomes dynamic as it folds with one’s movements. Adding folds to the artwork in order to make it suitable for a certain area is related to the role of the artist in preserving tradition and the African point of view.

The Ghanaian artist considers traditional African art and craft as a resource, and his works are directly related to the weaving traditions of Africa. Anatsui’s large-scale installations are influenced by the economic activities of his country, such as fishing and weaving, and are reminiscent of kente cloth, a cultural heritage product. Anatsui, whose family were weavers, is inspired by this tradition and appropriates the kente cloth and patterns. (Kwami, 2020, p. 375). Aluminum pieces stitched together with copper wire are technically similar to the art of weaving. Kente is a traditional type of woven cloth with vibrant colors and intricate patterns. On the other hand, the choice of non-traditional materials allows the artist to create a new and personal narrative space. The Kente cloth has symbolized royalty and its wealth since the eighteenth century, however, by the end of the nineteenth century it increasingly began to function in non-royal circumstances; in the postcolonial period it has been associated with the concepts of Ghanaian identity and nationhood (Perani & Wolff, 1999, p. 95; Ross, 1998, p. 54). Kente fabric was worn by a narrow select group of people. In this context, cloth draws social boundaries between members of society. The kente cloth, which initially had a high financial value, is now metaphorically rewoven with recycled objects. What was once considered precious is made from waste materials in Anatsui’s art, reflecting the dual nature of the material. The artist’s subjective approach contributes to the continuation of the kente tradition and the recognition of kente cloth. Anatsui creates a visual composition inspired by the various colors, patterns and symbols on kente cloth, a product of Ghana’s local weaving culture, and achieves a sculptural form with a cloth effect. The artist reevaluates the traditional kente cloth in the context of contemporary art and uses the bottle tops to create kente forms.

The cloth reflects the sociopolitical, historical and religious values of the society in which it was created. Kente cloth is not only used to cover the body, it is also a representation of symbolic language and features an array of symbolic forms. There is a conceptual relationship between the cloth and its abstract expression. The names written on the aluminum bottle tops used to create the metal hangings are the names of liquor brands associated with events, people, historical or current issues; moreover, traditional kente cloths are also named in this way (Spring, 2008, p. 34). Weaving the fabric, naming the symbols on it and giving it meaning is made possible through the series of past factors. The symbolism underlying the kente cloth with its vibrant colors and geometric patterns communicates cultural values. This is why there is no doubt that kente is more than just a cloth and has an inherent aesthetic in Anatsui’s practice. The symbols on the Kente cloth are geometric or figurative. These symbols provide the artist with a new basis as well as defining a new form for his artworks.

Symbolism has an important place in African art and one of its main characteristics is the relationship between form and meaning. *Adinkra* symbols are graphic motifs represented on cloth as part of African culture and have a rich variety of meanings. The artist’s past practices should also be understood and read in the context of his local values. Anatsui adds the *Adinkra* symbols to his wooden artworks prior to the metal hangings. The main simi-

larity between *Adinkra*, a communication form, and the embodiment of the totality of values internalized by Anatsui is the use of a symbolic language. The artist’s installations gain depth with *sankofa* (Image 1), one of the numerous *Adinkra* symbols, each with a different meaning. The idea of *sankofa* is concretely manifest in Anatsui’s artistic practices. The developing interest in the idea of *sankofa*, which is the name of a stylized pattern used in traditional weaving and symbolized as a bird looking back toward its tail, is also reflected in Anatsui’s artistic practices. (Kwami, 2020, p. 375). *Sankofa*, one of the symbols of Ghana and depicted with the figure of a bird, turns his head backwards towards the golden egg on his back, symbolizes historical wisdom. The motif, a geometric abstraction of the object, has a symbolic import. *Sankofa* means ‘return to the past in order to build the future’; the concept gives the message that it is necessary to move forward into the future by learning from the past (Willis, 1998, p. 189). In other words, the concept of *sankofa* emphasizes that progress is only possible by looking to the past. Here the past acts as a guide and the valuable knowledge of the past is brought into the present. The concept states that a person should not be afraid to try to undo past errors (McLeod, 1981, p. 128). This phenomenon should also be evaluated from a postcolonial perspective. The determining factor in reading something as “postcolonial” is its context. In addressing the concept of *sankofa* in his artworks, Anatsui utilizes the idea itself rather than directly depicting the symbol. In this way, the artist continues to preserve African cultural traditions and identity.

The artist incorporates references to African history in his installations. The waste problem caused by colonialism and the increase in industrial activities, the direct relationship of alcohol imports with slavery and the resulting cultural erosion in the region are the main issues that the artist addresses in his artworks. These stylized representations, embodied in the metal hangings, are used to rediscover values lost during the colonial period. According to a personal communication (1989), the methods used in Anatsui’s art practices “evoke the brutality of colonialism in Africa” (Nzegwu, 1998, p. 124). The quotation is a statement on the artist’s wood practices, whereas in the Anatsui corpus, the metal hangings are a continuation of these practices and continue to problematize colonialism. Colonialism has had a major impact on various factors in Africa, as well as on the region’s art history. In the African perspective, a dialog is established between British colonial culture and contemporary postcolonial culture. In this context, Anatsui must have understood *sankofa* as an argument for critical examination of the consequences of the notion’s encounter with the West and other colonial forces in the postcolonial period (Okeke-Agulu, 2010, pp. 37-38). Anatsui defines *sankofa* syndrome as a reaction to the oppression of the people of the region in order to disregard their culture and replace it with the culture of the colonial powers (Anatsui, 1993, pp. 50-51). This is a statement to protect the local values of the people. *Sankofa* is built on a conceptual foundation. Developing the conceptual framework of the artworks over time, the artist combines historical research with biographical elements. He brings his previous experiences to his artworks. Anatsui’s art draws on various sources. The political history of the region he grew up in and academic education he received as the colonial policies allowed for cross-cultural interactions, allow his installations to be considered from the perspective of both African and European art. In this way, a dialog is established between the local and the global.

It should be known that Anatsui’s local language, which synthesizes the local and the global, is an integral part of her installations, which find a place in the discourse of contemporary art. Synthe-

sizing non-Western and Western practices as an outcome of his position between the local and the global, the artist reinvents sculpture. Shaping African art, which is seen as other besides Western art and aesthetic judgments, with its own cultural specificity, the artist analyzes differences in a common field in a context where intercultural interaction is evaluated. Anatsui interprets forms that evoke the cultural with a contemporary perspective and localizes the material in this way, presenting the audience with a visual narrative for the direct transmission, expression and solution of problems related to the current conditions of the continent. Anatsui's use of old and waste materials in response to new discourses and ideas in his artworks is based on Anatsui's Western education as well as the African tradition of recycling and reusing waste commodities in everyday life as a result of overconsumption. The creation of large-scale installations from industrial waste offers a space for referencing contemporary Western art. Recycling, one of the main issues addressed in twentieth-century Western art, developed as an outcome of environmental concerns, is adopted as a way of approaching the artwork by El Anatsui, who demonstrates a broad sensitivity to various African traditions such as weaving.

Reshaping cultural elements in his site-specific installations, the artist uses the kente cloth as a recurrent theme. Treated as an economic commodity, cloth also has an aesthetic value. The material, which is an industrial product in its own meaning, is a commodity in terms of commercial concerns; however, changing the status of the object makes it no longer a commodity (Kopytoff, 1988, p. 69). In this regard, the object, which is an industrial waste, takes on a subjective meaning due to its place in Anatsui's artworks. Henceforth the material is an aesthetic object that is the subject of art. Similar to the aforementioned aluminum bottle tops, reading traditional kente weavings in the context of art means recognizing both the aesthetic quality of the object and the fact that it is a commercial commodity. Anatsui's use of kente cloth as a theme expands the boundaries surrounding the field of practice in contemporary sculpture. The metal pieces stitched together evoke the traditional African craft of weaving. Although there are similarities between them, the weaving technique of traditional kente cloth and Anatsui's technique for assembling aluminum bottle tops are undoubtedly quite different. African cloth, characterized by its vibrant colors, weaving technique and craftsmanship, makes an appearance in Anatsui's artworks, but there is no obvious depiction that directly points to the cloth. Olu Oguibe (2024, p. 274) regards that Anatsui's reinvention of the form with bottle tops is not to do with fabric. The artist is only inspired by the qualities of the cloth and utilizes its symbolism. The symbolism of the woven cloths reinterprets African aesthetics through Anatsui's creative method, which includes various mediums, with a rich accumulation of experience in the process.

Obviously, Anatsui warily avoids depicting traditional kente cloth in his artworks. The artwork titled "Red Block", created by the artist in 2010, is an example of this conclusion in *Image 2*. The artist evokes without directly depicting, utilizing the reflective qualities and formal values of the aluminum material, which dazzles with its vibrant colors, to convey the color symbolism of the kente cloth. Through the manipulation of light and volume, the installation creates a perception of fluidity and movement with its draped and curved areas, which gives the work the appearance of fabric. The sculptural possibilities and movement potential of the metal sheets are the main reason for the change and dynamism in the formal values of the installation. Draped and folded hangings resemble a cloth with a flexible character with its

nonfixed form. On metal wall hangings, deep shadows formed by sculptural folds are achieved by shaping found objects. One can easily draw an analogy between the nonfixed form of the artworks and the dynamic character of the cloth. However, the artist is not trying to weave cloth with malleable metal sheets; rather, he uses cloth only as a metaphor. Through the metaphor of the kente, the artwork serves as a visual medium for conveying the continent's history and local values. The artwork also points to the negative consequences of the trade network between Europe and Africa, such as the destruction of social, cultural and historical identity and the repression of the local.

#### Image 2.

Anatsui, E. *Red Block [Installation]*. 200 3/4 x 131 1/2 in. (509.91 x 334.01 cm), Aluminum (liquor bottle tops) and copper wire, Photo courtesy, Jack Shainman Gallery, 2010



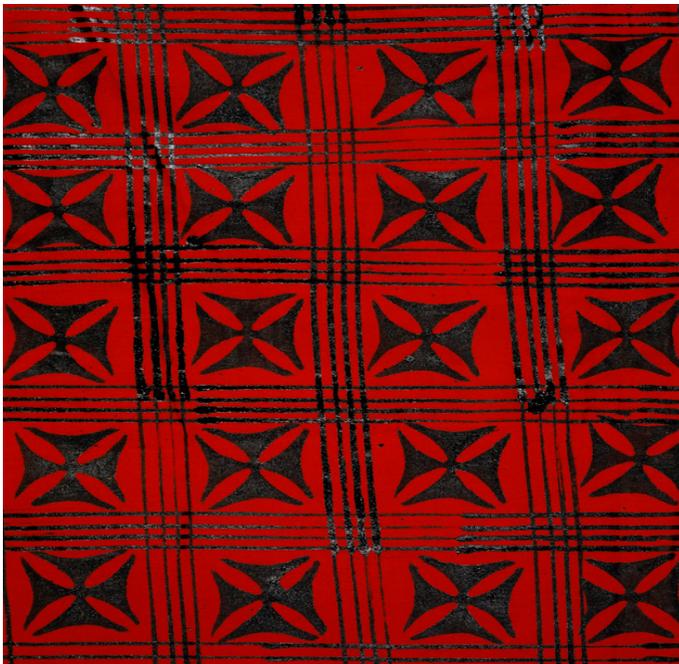
Abstract and symbolic expression occupies a large place in indigenous African art. In the absence of written sources, cloth is a symbol that conveys information to express daily experiences as part of life in Africa. The cultural importance of the cloth in Africa must be noted. The ongoing history and culture of the people of the region, in other words, all of its values, may be read through the various qualities of local cloths such as colors, patterns and motifs. Each color used in Kente cloth has a different meaning. In Ghana, as in many parts of Africa, funerals have great symbolic value, and mourners wear Adinkra cloth dyed in dark, somber colors such as russet red, blue or black (Gillow, 2009, p. 88; McLeod, 1981, p. 149; Spring, 2012, p. 208). Renaming the cloths with these colors as "mourning fabrics" would be a naming that supports the intended use of the colors. The Adinkra cloth (*Image 3*), named after a group of symbolic motifs, is often worn at funerals as an occasion for reflection on life; in the artist's words, "So our way of bidding farewell is to wear these clothes with signs that are saying something encouraging, admonishing, reflecting on life" (Anatsui & James, 2008, p. 43). Inspired by local traditions, some of Anatsui's practices carrying these colors should also be read in line with historical references. The flattened bottle tops bear the names of various gin, whiskey, wine, rum and vodka brands. The beverages were used as an exchange in the slave trade. In this con-

text, it is inferred that the artist criticizes colonialism in relation to African history. The colors and formal implications of the bottle tops transform the metal sculptures into a cloth of mourning.

The color red symbolizes the blood shed by African peoples in order to regain their independence, which means struggle. From another perspective, the color red is associated with anger, blood, war and fire as part of the court dress in Nigeria, while in another part of the country it is not seen as a threat and danger, but is associated with success and achievement (Picton & Mack, 1989, pp. 11-13). Venice Lamb, referencing Kofi Antubam's Ghana's Heritage of Culture (1963) and citing "several informants in Bonwire" in an endnote, states that "Red is commonly worn for loss, sadness, death or dissatisfaction. Sometimes red is worn at political meetings to indicate anger" (1975, p. 141). Anatsui uses the color as a metaphor for the repression of the region's cultural values and its historical destruction. Contrary to popular belief, Anatsui does not associate the color red with blood and violence, instead he thinks of violence that is not destructive but comes with blood as well, like childbirth (Anatsui & James, 2008, p. 48). The sankofa, an Adinkra symbol often used in the artist's past practices, gives its name to a post-independence ideological movement to learn from history. With the idea of sankofa, added to the subjective dialogue between color preference and childbirth in his artworks, it is inferred that the artist considers the color red as a kind of "rebirth". On the other hand, the cutting, flattening and twisting of bottle tops in order to bring them to the same dimensions and to achieve the final form are acts of violence. More precisely, the artist refers to recent African history with all the qualities of the material.

### Image 3.

*Unidentified. Mourning Body Wrapper Textile (adinkra kobene). 104 x 136 in (264.16 x 345.44 cm), New Orleans Museum of Art*



### Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the article is to read the historical, cultural, political and environmental factors that determine Anatsui's approach to the material with a holistic perspective, which explores

the possibilities of aluminum bottle tops and gives it a new meaning by bringing its identity to a new context.

### Methods

The paper uses the methods of qualitative research based on the analysis of current materials. In addition to providing a theoretical basis for the research, the literature review also gives a historical context to the data obtained. The data collection technique utilized is the analysis of existing documents. The paper includes the views of historical researchers and art critics and their comments on the subject under consideration. The reason for choosing El Anatsui's metal hangings as the subject of the research is his bold criticism of the colonial actions of the West and other colonial forces that led to the historical destruction of Africa as a local, his sensitivity to the issues of waste management, recycling and sustainability on the overconsumption that emerged as a result of these actions, and his mission to preserve and transmission of cultural values. It is aimed to contribute to the literature by evaluating the research with a holistic approach within the framework of history, politics and culture.

### Conclusion

In this final section of the paper, the conclusions reached in line with the research conducted and the data obtained are presented. In the context of plastic arts, it is inferred that the meta, aluminum bottle tops, which is the basic element of the work, is a unique medium preferred by the artist to convey his subject matter beyond the materials, techniques and forms used in traditional sculpture, and the elements that determine the artistic value of this medium are equal to the political, historical and sociocultural elements that lie at the origins of the geography. The problematization of the symbolism of the material and the way it is submitted to perception within the discursive framework of El Anatsui's artistic practices is made possible through the use of available local resources and the identification of postcolonial identity discourse and cultural biography. Conceptually and sometimes implicitly incorporating traditional elements into his research, the artist not only situates his artworks in a local context, but also experiments technically, offering a different perspective on the sculpture.

The artist transforms the bottle tops he found by accident into artworks with flexible readings and open to singular interpretations. On the other hand, it should not be disregarded that the artist has an issue that he wants to convey directly. How and in which way Anatsui conveys his issue to his artworks is considered as constituting a critical space that focuses on thought through the resolution of visual language. The target of the artist's current critique is the various themes he repeats in his artworks. Anatsui addresses a range of issues such as the problem of identity in the context of recent African history, political instability, the visual expression and transmission of cultural heritage, presenting a critical perspective on consumer society, sustainability and recycling. Going beyond conventional materials and forms of representation, the artist presents a new narrative on the aforementioned issues. These issues constitute the subtext of the material used in artistic practices. The practices make a connection between West Africa's long-standing textile tradition and the industrial waste materials from cultural encounters as an outcome of colonialism. In his artworks, he synthesizes local traditions and global factors. The artist reflects the representation of abstract elements such as identity and belonging in his artworks with me-

taphorical objects. In the abstract metal sheets, a connection is made between the search for national unity in the postcolonial period and the traditional kente cloth. Recycling process, carried out by a team of part-time assistants, links to social life in the sense that it involves a collective endeavor; the search for unity manifests itself in the studio process.

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## Image References

### Image 1.

<https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/sankofa-bird-276213> (Retrieved: August 10, 2025).

### Image 2.

<https://elanatsui.art/artworks/el-anatsui-red-block-2010> (Retrieved April 11, 2025).

### Image 3.

<https://noma.org/collection/mourning-body-wrapper-textile-adinkra-kobene/> (Retrieved: August 11, 2025).

## Yapılandırılmış Özet

Araştırmanın temel amacı, Ganalı çağdaş sanatçı El Anatsui'nin geleneksel olmayan nesne kullanımının sanat yapıtları üzerindeki etkisinin değerlendirilmesi ve materyale yaklaşımını belirleyen unsurların bütüncül bir bakış açısı ile okunmasıdır. Araştırmanın diğer bir amacı ise Anatsui'nin yapıtlarında Afrika geleneklerindeki sanatsal kaynakların önemini incelemesidir. Metal asmaların, Afrika'nın köklerinde yatan siyasi, tarihsel, sosyokültürel ve çevresel unsurların bir yansıması olduğu ve sanatsal değerini belirleyen bu unsurlar ile eş olduğu çıkarımı yapılmaktadır. Araştırmanın içeriğini oluşturan pratikler üzerine alternatif bir bakış açısı sunulması ve beraberinde literatüre katkı sağlanması amaçlanmaktadır. Özgün bir araç olarak sanatçının subjektif yorumu ile yapıtlarda işlenen metal materyal, tarihi, niteliği ve estetik değeri ile ele alınmaktadır.

Konu kapsamında analiz edilen veriler, nitel araştırma yöntemleri ile sunulan literatür taramasının bir çıktısıdır. Literatür taraması, araştırma için teorik bir temel sağlamanın yanı sıra elde edilen verilere tarihsel bir bağlam da kazandırmaktadır. Yararlanılan veri toplama tekniği mevcut dokümanların incelenmesidir. Makalede tarih araştırmacılarının ve sanat eleştirmenlerinin görüşlerine ve değerlendirilen konu üzerine yorumlarına yer verilmektedir. El Anatsui'nin metal asmalarının araştırma konusu olarak tercih edilme sebebi bir yerli olarak Batı ve diğer kolonyal güçlerin Afrika'nın tarihsel tahribatına neden olan kolonyal eylemlerine karşı cesur eleştirisi, bu eylemlerin bir çıktısı olarak ortaya çıkan aşırı tüketim üzerine atık yönetimi, geri dönüşüm ve sürdürülebilirlik meselelerine olan duyarlılığı ve kültürel değerlerin korunması ve aktarımına ilişkin sahip olduğu misyondur. Anatsui'nin meselesini nasıl ve hangi yol ile yapıtlarına aktardığı, görsel dilin çözümlenmesi ile düşünceyi merkeze alan eleştirel bir alan olarak değerlendirilmektedir.

Çağdaş Afrika sanatının tarihsel perspektifi içerisinde önemli bir yere sahip olan El Anatsui (1944), 1975'ten beri yaşamını sürdürdüğü Nijerya'da, bölgenin düşünsel iklimini belirleyen postkolonyal atmosfer içerisinde tıpkı bir etnograf gibi yerel değerleri incelemekte ve yapıtlarında görselleştirmektedir. Anatsui'nin sanatı, değeri anlamında muhafaza edilen bir atık nesnelere bütünüdür. Sanatçı geleneksel heykel anlayışını, geleneksel olmayan bu materyal ve yöntemler ile sorgulamaktadır. Anatsui, yakın Afrika tarihi bağlamında kimlik problemi, siyasi istikrarsızlık, kültürel mirasın görsel ifadesi ve günümüze aktarımı, tüketim toplumuna eleştirel bir bakış açısı sunulması, sürdürülebilirlik ve geri dönüşüm gibi bir dizi meseleyi yapıtlarında ele almaktadır. Sanatçı, geleneksel materyal ve temsil biçimlerinin ötesine geçerek yukarıda belirtilen meseleler üzerine yeni bir anlatı sunmaktadır.

Sanat nesnesine dönüştürülen metaya nasıl ulaşıldığı ve yorumlandığı, sanatçının Afrika tarihi ve kültürüne olan merakı ile biçimlenir. Anatsui, kendi kültürel mirasını benimseyerek yerel değerlerini eserlerine aktarmaktadır. Anatsui'nin geri dönüştürülmüş materyallerden yapılan büyük ölçekli sanat eserleri, geleneksel heykel sınırlamalarının ötesine geçerek Afrika kültürel mirasını doğrudan heykellere dahil etmektedir. Kültürel değerleri yapıtları aracılığı ile aktarmaktadır. Geçmiş ile şimdi arasında bir bağlantı kurulması, dahası Afrika tarihi ve mirasının şimdiye taşınması, sanat pratiklerini ve bunların temelinde yer alan felsefeyi yıllar içerisinde geliştiren ve derinleştiren Anatsui'nin yapıta yaklaşımını belirleyen değerlerdir. Sanatçı, sıradan nesnenin olanaklarını araştırmakta ve yapıtları aracılığı ile materyalin ifade ettiği anlam ile ilişkisini izleyiciye aktarmaktadır. Sanat yapıtına dahil edilen endüstriyel ürünün kimliği, materyali yeni bir bağlama taşıyan ve ona estetik bir nitelik kazandıran sanatçı tarafından belirlenmektedir. Sanatçı materyali manipüle ederek endüstriyel atıkları resim ve heykel disiplinlerini bir arada görünür kılan aşkın bir sanat formuna dönüştürmektedir. İşlevsel bir özelliğe sahip endüstri ürününün sanat yapıtı olarak tanımlanması, söz konusu ürünü sahip olduğu anlamdan yalıtılarak yeni bir bağlamda konumlandırmaktadır. Bu yeniden bağlamsallaştırma, yapıtlarında kullanmak üzere işlediği materyalin özgün doğasını reddetmekte ve ona yeni bir nitelik kazandırmaktadır. Plastik sanatlar bağlamında irdelendiğinde yapıtın temel elemanı olan metanın, alüminyum şişe kapaklarının, geleneksel heykel sanatında kullanılan materyallerin, tekniklerin ve biçimlerin ötesinde sanatçının meselesini aktarmak üzere tercih ettiği özgün bir araç olduğu ve söz konusu bu aracın sanatsal değerini belirleyen unsurların coğrafyanın köklerinde yatan siyasi, tarihsel ve sosyokültürel unsurlar ile eş olduğu çıkarımı yapılmaktadır. Materyalin sembolizmi ve algıya sunulma biçiminin El Anatsui'nin sanatsal pratiklerinin söylemsel çerçevesi dahilinde sorunsallaştırılması, mevcut yerel kaynakların kullanılması ile postkolonyal kimlik söyleminin ve kültürel biyografinin tanımlanması sonucu mümkün olmaktadır. Kavramsal olarak ve kimi zaman örtük bir şekilde geleneksel öğeleri araştırmalarına dahil eden sanatçı, yapıtlarını yalnızca yerel bir bağlamda konumlandırmaz aynı zamanda teknik açıdan deneyler yaparak heykel sanatına farklı bir bakış açısı sunmaktadır.

Sanatçı, söylemlerini biçim aracılığı ile iletmek için bireysel deneyimin ötesine geçmektedir. El Anatsui'nin pratiklerinin özünde ekonomik, politik ve sosyal bağlamda değerlendirilmesi mümkün postkolonyal bir kimlik söylemi bulunmaktadır. Yapıtlarında ekolojik ihmal, yoksulluk, siyasi çatışmalar ve istikrarsızlık gibi postkolonyal sorunlara yer vermektedir. Anatsui'nin sanatı bölge tarihine ayna tutmaktadır. Bu sebep ile Anatsui'nin estetiği çağdaş sanatta Afrika kültürel kimliğinin tasviri için bir katalizör olarak kabul edilmelidir. Uygulamaları, yerel sanatsal gelenekler ile doğrudan ilişkilidir ve geleneksel Afrika sanatının primitif ve sembolik olma özellikleri taşımaktadır. Sanatçı, enstalasyonlarında Afrika tarihine ilişkin referanslara yer vermektedir. Kültürel olanı çağrıştıran formları çağdaş bir bakış açısı ile yorumlayan ve bu yol ile materyali yerelleştiren Anatsui, izleyiciye, kıtanın mevcut koşullarına ilişkin sorunların doğrudan aktarımına, ifadesine ve çözümüne yönelik olarak görsel bir anlatı sunmaktadır.