

ASAFO FLAGS FROM GHANA

What are Asafo Flags?

Asafo Flags are created by the Fante people of the West African country of Ghana. The flags are visual representations of military organizations in Fante communities known as “Asafo.” The Asafo, or “companies”, each have their own flag, name and number. Smaller towns have at least one company, and larger towns have up to fourteen. The primary role of the Asafo (and their flags) was to exert power, exercise political influence and maintain codes of conduct within Fante communities.

How They Are Used

Asafo flags are displayed at funerals, annual festivals and other ceremonial occasions, where they are placed on central shrines and paraded and waved through villages and towns. Intense rivalry among companies once led to violent confrontations, but today this is channeled into peaceful competitions. Asafo flags are still being made in Ghana today.

Narrative and Storytelling

Narrative and storytelling are common themes among the flags, giving visual representation to specific Ghanaian proverbs, containing characters (animals and human) who symbolically tell the story of the proverb based on a specific company's history.

Artistic Process

Asafo flags can be stitched, appliqued and/or embroidered. Cotton is the primary material used, but other luxury fabrics are often incorporated. Made exclusively by men, the craft is kept in specific families with nephews and sons serving as apprentices.

Colonial Influence

The British Union Jack appears on flags created before Ghana gained its independence in 1957. Colonial military influence on the Asafo is also evident in their practice of marching in formation, labeling companies by name and number, as well as carrying and saluting flags.

Student will Explore:

- Non-western art forms and practices
- How the written word can be expressed and understood through visual designs
- Visual storytelling through symbolism tied to a specific cultural context
- Cross cultural influence and appropriation
- Textile art processes, including applique, embroidery and stitching



Unknown Fante flag maker
Asafo Flag (*frankaa*)
Ghana, 1950s
Stitched, appliquéd and embroidered cotton
Gift of Barb Rich, 2014-11-013

This colorful flag may represent the proverb “Only a brave man will go under a big tree” or venture into the unknown. The tree is being guarded by coiled snakes, a bull and a lion or leopard. The distinctive black and white border may designate a particular flag maker.



Unknown Fante flag maker
Asafo Flag (*frankaa*)
Ghana, 1900–1950
Stitched, appliquéd and embroidered cotton
Gift of Barb Rich, 2014-11-006

Several proverbs relate to images of European cargo ships: “When a big ship is wrecked, everyone on board suffers,” meaning that whatever happens to the company touches every member; and “The ship is ready to sail and can carry a load of any size,” referring to the company’s readiness for battle or any challenge. In this flag, both the ship and the whale symbolize the strength and superiority of the company.