

THE AFRICAN AND OCEANIC ART COLLECTION

African art is a signature element of SAM's collections, with a distinctive history largely based on the efforts of collector Katherine White. During the 1960s and 1970s, White became renowned for her pursuit of fine art in Europe, America and Africa. She set a standard for collecting and documenting art for her generation, championing a broader definition of aesthetics that included not only masks and sculpture, but also textiles, jewelry, decorative arts, furniture and household objects. Her collection was acquired by SAM in 1981 and has been followed by two decades of collecting, displaying and interpreting art that often challenges cultural assumptions.

Four new galleries on the fourth floor of the north building are dedicated to this collection. Each mixes old and new eras of African creativity, and crosses boundaries with other cultures to offer lively comparisons for visitors to consider.

A Noble Tension is filled with figures, almost all human, whose primary occupation was to concentrate on the difficulties of life as part of an altar or shrine. Their gestures often remind people to be generous to spirits and deities, while their faces are studies in calm repose. . An array of sculptures devoted to the deities of the Yoruba-- from the master of potentiality, Esu, to the twins that commend the joyousness of children-- will be displayed. A sequence of Yoruba-influenced sculpture from Brazil shows how this religious base has moved to the American continent. Taking center stage in this room is a white Mercedes Benz, which was intended as a coffin in Ghana and will be accompanied by a projection of vivid funeral memorials.

The Ultimate Spectacle offers two different ways to view masks. The first is as static sculpture, which can be admired as inventive faces. Animal features become combined with human in ways that offer startling evidence of the beastly energy within people. The second approach to viewing masks is to remember their full character as moving performers. Numerous spaces within the gallery will showcase projected footage of masqueraders, including a 14' tall serpent mask and a recent masked rally about AIDS. SAM's partnership with a researcher who devoted his life to understanding masquerades has led to the presentation of an entire cast of characters from the Afikpo region of Nigeria, whose performances parody Europeans and satirize men who misbehave.

Intimate Information features personal art forms that would be worn or used by individuals in a range of African cultures. Hats, knives, textiles, headrests and stools offer a study of functional splendor. A display of headrests include an example from Africa's parent civilization of Ancient Egypt. Ivory containers from the early era of Portuguese exploration are compared with others from China and India. For this presentation, curators have consulted and collaborated with communities like the Maasai of Kenya and the Kom Kingdom of Cameroon, as well as cultural advisors from the Asante of Ghana and the Benin of Nigeria.

Noblesse Oblige offers a chance for African and African American artists to comment on interactions with Europe. Yinka Shonibare's *Nuclear Family* (1999) leads off with his tribute to Victorian dress with West African accents. Shonibare's accounts of being heavily influenced by the ribald humor of William Hogarth inspired SAM curators to hang two prints by the British artist nearby. Courageous criticism through art is evoked through contemporary works by Cheri Samba and Marita Dingus. Photographs by Seydou Keita and Hector Acebes of women in Mali, both taken in 1953, offer a study in two ways of depicting modern femininity.

Oceanic and Australian Aboriginal art selections have grown extensively with recent donations. An installation of The War of Nerves comprises a sequence of Asmat shields covered with protective graphics that once served as physical and psychological weapons. They are watched over by a portrait of a woman that was once perched atop a spirit house in New Guinea, whose alliance with cassowaries and wild boar inspire her formidable stare.

Painting Up Yams, Leaves and Lizards is a group of large acrylic canvases by contemporary Australian Aboriginals, who continue the legacy of one of the oldest continuous artistic traditions on earth. *Wild Yam Dreaming* (1995) by Emily Kame Kngwarreye appears to be akin to Abstract Expressionism but was created to pay tribute to pencil yam tubers growing underground that are invisible to untrained eyes. Subterranean geography also inspired a large canvas by 17 men from the Spinifex community. A short documentary introduces viewers to the methods and manners of their painting process, including a journey to their country.

Sorry Business is a term used by Aboriginals to denote a time of mourning. The gallery features a stand of hollow log coffins that are coated with paint. Wanyubi Marika's *Rirratjingu Larrakitj* (Clan Coffin, date) is an innovative example of a recent evolution of paintings from northern Arnhemland, in which sacred designs are rendered with a shimmering brilliance through cross hatching and linear patterning. A painting by Lin Onus called *Gathering Storm* (1993), employs the same sacred hatching pattern called *rarrk* for a scene of swimming fish, but also shows influences of Rene Magritte, a residency in Japan, and many years observing eucalyptus groves in the Barmah Forest.

Curated by Pamela McClusky, Curator of African and Oceanic Art.