



# THE POWER OF NOW

A STUDY OF

AFRICAN ART NOW:  
MASTERPIECES FROM THE  
JEAN PIGOZZI COLLECTION

AT

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF  
AFRICAN ART

MARCH 2006

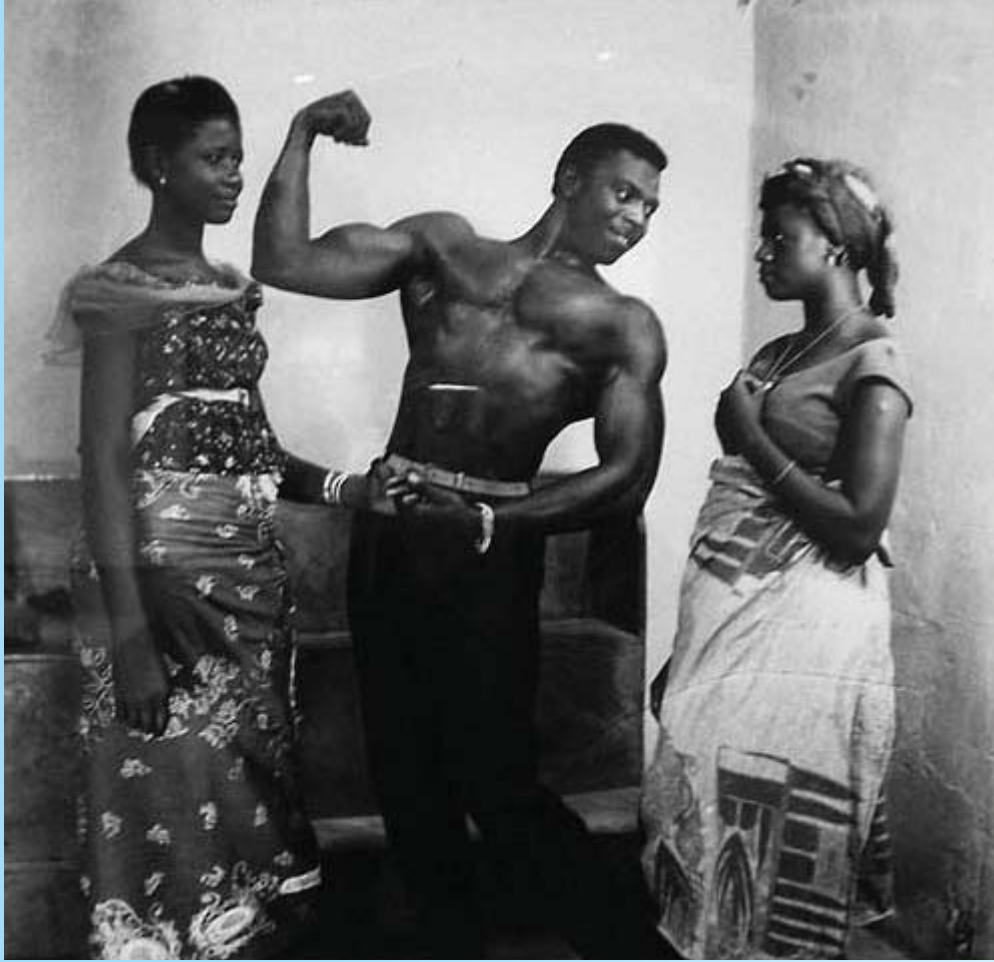


Smithsonian Institution  
Office of Policy and Analysis



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# PREFACE

The Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) has been commissioned to review many Smithsonian exhibitions. In general, visitors have been cordial, positive, and thoughtful—but typically restrained. Not so with *African Art Now: Masterpieces from the Jean Pigozzi Collection*. In my five years as Director of OP&A, I cannot recall another exhibition to which the response has been, on the whole, quite so enthusiastic.

Evidence for this can be found in this report, which presents an overview of thoughts and perspectives provided by *African Art Now* visitors who consented to interviews with OP&A staff, or who offered their ideas as written comments. Throughout the report, immensely favorable and often deeply heartfelt feelings are evident toward the works on display—both as moving examples of artistic self-expression, and as manifestations of the creative turmoil of the African continent as it struggles with the changes and challenges of the present day.

Conducting this study required the application of subtle interviewing skills to elicit visitors' insights in a natural way. OP&A staff members Lance Costello, James Smith, and Ioana Munteanu ably conducted the bulk of the interviews. James analyzed the resulting data and wrote the report. I thank them.

I am also most grateful to Jean Pigozzi for expressing his keen interest in visitors' reactions to contemporary African art; and to Sharon Patton, the Director of the National Museum of African Art, for asking OP&A to undertake this study as part of a broader effort to assess the museum's success in exposing the public to African art and culture, and doing so while meeting the highest standards of excellence.

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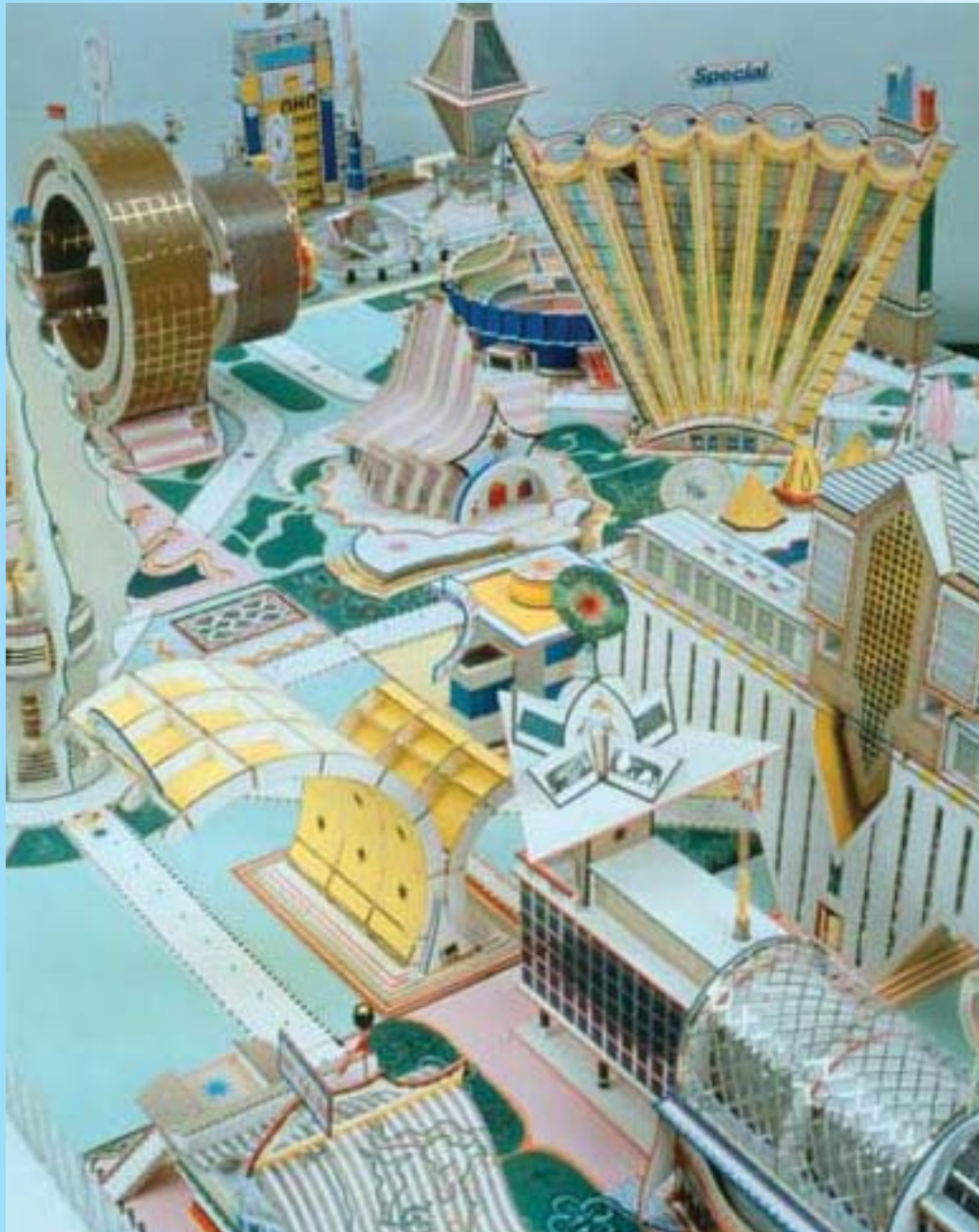


# INTRODUCTION

From November 16, 2005 through February 26, 2006, the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art (NMAfA) hosted *African Art Now: Masterpieces from the Jean Pigozzi Collection*, an exhibition organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and the Contemporary African Art Collection (CAAC) in Geneva. *African Art Now* displayed highlights from the CAAC, an extensive private collection created over the last 15 years by Italian venture capitalist Jean Pigozzi and curator André Magnin.

The exhibition featured paintings, drawings, sculptures, photographs, videos, and installations by 28 artists that showcase the creativity, color, beauty, and power of contemporary African art. The spacious layout occupied most of the museum's main exhibition floor, allowing space for multiple works by most of the artists on display. Wall text provided information on each artist's background and artistic philosophy, with additional explanatory text on selected works and themes.

Shortly after the exhibition opened at NMAfA, the Museum's Director asked OP&A to conduct a visitor study of *African Art Now*. The study was not intended to answer specific questions so much as to sound out visitors' thoughts on subjects such as the place of contemporary art at NMAfA; the aesthetic, emotional, and intellectual qualities of the art on display; and the overall themes or messages of the exhibition.





# METHODOLOGY

Between November 18, 2005 and January 7, 2006, OP&A staff members conducted 41 semi-structured interviews with visitors at several locations within or immediately outside the exhibition. The study team generally attempted to identify individuals who were exiting the exhibition, or appeared to be winding down their visit. (However, the non-linear layout of the exhibition—with multiple entrances and exits—resulted in a few interviews with individuals who had not yet seen parts of the exhibition.) Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and systematically coded to bring out ideas raised by multiple interviewees.

Interviews ranged in length from less than 2 minutes to over 25 minutes. Random sampling was not attempted, but interviewers did try to talk with a variety of visitors. Some characteristics of the interviewees are as follows:

- » A total of 55 individuals participated in 41 interviews.
- » More females than males were interviewed—34 interviewees were female.
- » Forty interviewees were U.S. residents; 11 were from foreign countries (including 3 from Africa); one was a U.S. expatriate living in London and doing business in Africa.
- » Ages ranged from seven years old to retirement age.
- » All interviewees were visiting alone or with friends and family; none was part of an organized tour of the exhibition.

The OP&A study team also observed visitors as they walked through the exhibition, and had access to unsolicited written visitor comments received by NMAfA. The study team rejected the possibility of a formal written survey, in part because the non-linear layout of the exhibition rendered an exit survey impractical.

Because of the qualitative methodology employed for this study, the study team wishes to caution the reader that inferences about the views of the overall population of exhibition visitors should not be drawn from it. This study is intended to open a suggestive window into visitors' thoughts and impressions, rather than to provide hard data on narrowly-defined issues. The strength of a qualitative approach is that visitors are able to express their thoughts in their own words, thus providing more nuanced and deeper insights into how some visitors saw *African Art Now*.



# FINDINGS

Most interviewees were enthusiastic about the exhibition. Among those who spoke to study team members at length, many demonstrated a palpable sense of excitement or satisfaction, and almost all were impressed with the exhibition at some level. Even among those who did not comment at length, the overall assessment was typically positive. The show appeared to have broad appeal, engaging visitors ranging from art history majors with an interest in contemporary African art to individuals who wandered in by chance, with no expectations or particular interest in contemporary art.

This “Findings” section reports on some of the key points raised by interviewees when discussing their experiences of the exhibition. It is arranged into five sections:

- » “The Exhibition” presents interviewees’ comments about the significance and appeal of the show itself;
- » “The Art Itself” offers interviewees’ observations about specific pieces within the show, as well as their overall impressions of the exhibited collection;
- » “Underlying Themes” presents interviewees’ ideas about the underlying messages and ideas of the exhibition;
- » “Presentation” explores interviewees’ thoughts on how the art was presented, including both the physical layout and the contextual information provided by labels and wall text;
- » “Criticisms and Suggestions” notes a few places where interviewees suggested the exhibition could have been better.

## The Exhibition

In this section, we present interviewees’ general impressions of the value and significance of the exhibition itself.

### A Unique Opportunity

Many interviewees (and written comments) thanked the Museum and the CAAC for bringing such a rich selection of contemporary African art to the public. They noted that art lovers in the Washington area—indeed, throughout the United States—have

few opportunities to see what African artists are producing *today*; and that even when they do, the scope is rarely comparable to what was offered in *African Art Now*:

What made me want to see this show is that I feel you rarely see contemporary African artists, and I really wanted to see what people in Africa are creating in contemporary times.

I've never seen this comprehensive an exhibit of contemporary African art.

This is a fantastic collection. It struck me that these artists would never be exhibited outside their own countries if it wasn't for this collection.

**A few interviewees specifically expressed the hope that *African Art Now* would help to build interest in, and a constituency for, African contemporary art in the United States:**

It's nice to have this coming here, and hopefully building a wider acceptance for contemporary art from Africa. ... I find a lot of other museums seem to either ignore it entirely or focus on one or two artists from one or two regions, and forget about the broader scope.

### An Expanded Picture of African Art

A number of interviewees commented on how the exhibition took African art out of the history books and placed it squarely in the present day. There was a broad consensus among interviewees who discussed this issue that "African art" has been widely stereotyped as a purely historical genre, consisting of masks, carvings, textiles, and other objects originally created to serve utilitarian or ritualistic ends. By contrast, interviewees were pleased to see powerful evidence that art continues to live and evolve in Africa today:

Thanks for bringing contemporary African art to Washington DC. I think it's crucial for Americans to see that African art extends beyond traditional depictions of wood carvings and masks.

I'm seeing another side of African art that's different from what I've been trained to think of as "African art."

I'm not just seeing a time capsule. ... This is living; this is connected to what's going on right now.

A lot of Americans have stereotypical views of Africa, so you think you're going to come here and just see masks and spears and Kente cloth. ... It's just like if we go

to another country and all they had was early American folk quilts—that’s not who we are.

**At the same time, several of the interviewees who made this point were quick to add that they were not denigrating traditional African arts. Rather, they favored a balance of the two that honored the traditional, while striving to present the modern as a living extension of the same cultures and forms:**

The contemporary has its place, and so does the traditional. I do want our young generations to see the traditional. If [young African Americans] don’t see the traditional, what have they lost? They don’t really know.

The more historical [arts] show you value of the heritage of Africa, and just how much richness and wealth is there. And the modern—you can probably relate to it more. You see that these people have the same concerns we do—the same vibe. So I think you get a better connection with the modern art.

**One interviewee, a local African-American female in her 30s, went so far as to suggest that the introduction of more modern and contemporary art might draw in visitors who would otherwise pass over NMAfA:**

Unfortunately, Americans are narrow-minded, so they think a museum of African art is just masks and Kente cloth, and they think “Oh, I’ve seen that.” . . . But if you bring in modern art and do things that express the diversity of the cultures, I think more people would want to come. Honestly, *I* haven’t come before, although I’ve been to other [Mall] museums. But now, I’m like, “Wow! It’s not just more Kente cloth! It’s real art, and they’re doing the culture justice.” Or—forget about the culture—they’re doing these *people*, these *artists*, justice.

### **An Expanded Picture of Africa**

**A number of interviewees discussed how a show such as *African Art Now* could help to correct myths and misconceptions about Africa itself. Specifically, several interviewees thought the diversity of the art on display was a valuable antidote to the tendency to lump Africa’s myriad cultures into a single homogenized stereotype:**

I think the exhibition is putting a face on Africa, as corny as that sounds—showing the diversity of personalities. I mean, it’s a huge continent, and too often we just



label it “Africa.” But there are so many nations and so many cultures and so many people. And even within those cultures, there is so much diversity.

On some level, I guess I *knew* there would be great diversity, given the enormity of the continent. But it was reinforcing to actually see that.

**Some interviewees also noted how the art on display led them (or might lead others) to recognize that, despite its many political and economic problems, Africa is a continent where life and joy persist—as opposed to the simplistic vision of an Africa wracked by crisis from tip to toe:**

One’s image of Africa is so significantly and pleasantly enhanced. It was a joy to visit and see.

You hear so many negative things about Africa—the famines and genocides and AIDS crisis. ... But there’s also a lot of joy. I’ve been to South Africa and Tanzania, and people are so very welcoming. ... Seeing this [brings out the] good side of life in Africa again.

**On the other hand, one interviewee—a young African-American male of Somali descent—cautioned that the power of an exhibition like *African Art Now* to challenge stereotypes and transform visitors’ images of Africa should not be overstated:**

A lot of the meaning of art—maybe *all* the meaning of art—lies with the audience, what they take from it, and their interpretation of it. So if you come in with a lot of stereotypes, you wouldn’t leave drastically changed, I don’t think. Unless you’re looking to reshape yourself.

Indeed, his companion, a young woman from Ethiopia, noted that parts of the exhibition might even *reinforce* preconceived notions about “[how] ‘primitive’ Africa [is], or about how Africa has just so many political problems and so much pain and suffering.”<sup>1</sup>

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1 She singled out Willy Bestor’s Apartheid collages as examples. Other interviewees also mentioned Romuald Hazoumé’s “Benin Roulette” as an instance of artwork that supported the image of Africa as a deeply troubled continent.

## The Art Itself

This section discusses visitors' responses to the art itself, both in terms of individual pieces and in terms of the collection as a whole. Included here are visitors' observations about the general character of the art and the collection; their intellectual and aesthetic judgments about it; and their emotional and visceral reactions to it.

### General Impressions

Interviewees used words such as "beautiful," "creative," and "inventive" to describe their general impressions of the art. Many also noted the frequent use of bright, vivid colors. Some of the more enthusiastic descriptions of various pieces or the whole collection included "exciting," "phenomenal," "vibrant," "powerful," and "moving."

A few interviewees also ventured opinions on the aesthetic complexity of the artwork. Among this small cohort, there was no trace of a consensus; yet interestingly, opinions on this matter seemed to have little effect on overall assessments of the exhibition. For example, one interviewee explicitly judged the artwork to be "childlike," and another even used the loaded term "primitive" to describe the dominant aesthetic. Yet both of these individuals saw this simplicity as a strength rather than a limitation, and offered a favorable overall assessment of the art. Other interviewees described the aesthetic on display very differently—as "mature," "sophisticated," and "aware." And unsurprisingly, these interviewees also tended to be impressed with what they saw.

### Variety and Scope

Many interviewees were struck by the variety, scope, and diversity of the art, both in terms of the media and in terms of the artists, subjects, and forms of creative expression:

There was an interesting variety. There was painting and sculpture and photography. I could tell that they had been very sensitive in trying to showcase as many different genres as possible.

I really appreciated the mixture of photography, sculpture, and paintings. This exhibit did a great job of reflecting the diversity, depth, and beauty of African art.

OP&A: How does this compare with other African contemporary art shows you have seen?

Visitor: Much wider in scope. Granted, most of the ones I've seen have been here; and I liked them very much. [But] I'm glad this is able to go further and show a much broader spectrum of artists from around the continent.

### Accessibility

**Interviewees consistently alluded to the *accessibility* of the art—particularly in comparison with some other examples of contemporary art from Africa and elsewhere:**

OP&A: How does this art compare with other modern art?

Visitor: It's much more approachable. There's a lot of narrative content in this art, and I personally respond to narrative content.

Even with my limited knowledge, this is art I can appreciate—as opposed to some of the other modern things I've seen from Africa. Maybe I haven't been exposed to the really good things.

There's not as much of the conceptual abstraction that you see a lot of in modern art.

**Several interviewees attributed this accessibility to a refreshing lack of concern with the pretensions of the fine art world, and a preference for direct artistic self-expression over aesthetic or intellectual calculation:**

I don't get that there's a "studied-ness" about any of the expressions. For the most part, I get that there's a direct connection to what life is like, as opposed to what a piece of art is "supposed" to be.

I don't think this work was made to be hung in a fine art show. And because of that, it wasn't limited or concerned with the stipulations that the fine art world often puts on artists.

**In discussing the uncalculated character of much of the art, several interviewees alluded to the fact that many of the artists were not formally trained in fine art. A few visitors suggested that this might actually be an advantage in creating works to which ordinary visitors can relate:**

Most of them weren't formally trained in art, and they seemed really motivated to do what they're doing. . . . Maybe if I knew more about art, I could critique them better. But coming really from outside the art world, I just enjoyed their statements, which I think are very accessible.

If they're not trained, [their art reflects] *exactly* what they are. It's an honest reflection of how they see things—not what somebody else has imposed on them. So I find people who *aren't* trained are far better, because art is supposed to be personal and individual.

### Emotional Engagement

The study team was also struck by some interviewees' descriptions of how the art engaged them at a deeply emotional level. The lack of calculation discussed above—and relatedly, the sense voiced by several interviewees that many of the artists seemed to be concerned primarily with expressing their own personal feelings, experiences, and judgments—clearly played a role in eliciting such emotional engagement. For the most part, the emotional connection felt by some interviewees was discussed in terms of the vitality, power, and vibrancy of the art:

It's very *alive*. It's really very wonderful, actually. I was very moved by it. It's great.

You could see the passion and creativity [of the artists] in doing something that they just feel they should be doing, whether because they've been inspired, or just feel socially responsible to make these pieces. I definitely think it came through in the works. A lot of them could just consume me.

I always enjoy seeing what's here, and this today has blown us away, I would say. . . . They are making something that resonates with me emotionally.

I gravitate toward a more immediate type of art that's a reflection or expression of feeling and emotion. . . . There are some things here where I really *personally* felt a direct connection, to the heart.

One interviewee, a middle-aged Colombian of African descent, also talked about the emotional pull of an undercurrent of sadness that he perceived in the art. His words are notable for their poignancy:

This is something very personal with me. I think some of these things have a little sadness, you know? Because I think we [African peoples] have something inside that cries.

### African Character

The study team was interested in determining whether interviewees perceived the works in the exhibition as, in some sense, distinctively *African*—as opposed to pieces of contemporary art that happened to be from Africa. Many interviewees did indeed note the presence of African forms at the root of much of the art:

I liked the fact that I could still see traditional origins in the modern art, because I like traditional African art.

You cannot hide its roots or where it comes from. You could tell that the source is Africa.

**Those who perceived this cultural rootedness generally considered it a major strength:**

There are some universals in aesthetics, and I think that is wonderful. But I also think one has to produce art from where one is and where one has come from. ... It has to grow from inside the culture with which you have been brought up.

[I liked the works] that built on the traditions—showing how modern artists work with their traditional pasts. Pieces like the funerary posts or the masks raise a lot of interesting questions about the relationship between contemporary and tribal traditions. ... I found the pieces that work least well are the ones where the artists aren't focusing so much on their own artistic traditions, but seem to be appropriating the ideas of the West and Western art, and not working in their own voice.

**However, some interviewees had more difficulty seeing the distinctively African side of the art, or downplayed the importance of this dimension:**

I think it mirrors modern art movements all over the place. Obviously, there are always influences of particular cultures; that's why you get what you do.

OP&A: Did it seem to have any roots in the traditional African art?

Visitor: Some of it, yeah. ... But I think that the art world right now is so global. And in a way, it is hard to relate that this is only African art.



My impression—even though the individual pieces are unique to the experience of the artists—is that it's not unlike other modern art.

**Another interviewee suggested that the aesthetic of *African Art Now* was more reminiscent of African Diasporic art than of African traditional art per se:**

This artwork looks more like African-American art, actually. It also looks like what I've seen in the Caribbean. There's definitely an Afro-Diasporic strand that looks familiar.

**Finally, several interviewees, while not denying that African traditional forms lay at the roots of much of the art, were more intrigued by the global influences on these forms:**

The style is interesting; you can see some of the European style, some American.

I love Hieronymus Bosch—he's a fourteenth century [European] artist—and one of the paintings [Bodo's "River of Delight"] is inspired by his work. So it was interesting to see a contemporary translation of a Bosch piece.

I keep coming back to these [Bodo paintings], not only because they are so colorful, but because they remind me of Dali or the surrealist period in European painting. I've never seen any pieces like this before. I've definitely seen [African] pieces with vivid, color, but not so surreal.

I like to see how this shows the evolution, and how the Western and other different views have impacted African artists.

## Found Materials

**Many interviewees were fascinated by the creative use of found materials:**

They use materials that I wouldn't have thought of as artistic materials—found objects. That does intrigue me. The tin cups in those collages on Apartheid, and whatever else is found in there. The gasoline cans. The porcupine quills in those two [Goba] sculptures.

I think they are really shaped by what's around them. Some of the pieces were just made from fragments that they found in the trash and things like that. I think that's kind of representative of modern art as a whole: just taking what's around you and forming it into a statement.

**Even a seven-year-old visitor was intrigued by this aspect of the exhibition:**

It was what they had around them to use, because in Africa they must not have enough paints. So they just use the environment around them.

**Some thought that this use of found materials might have been necessitated, at least in some cases, by the artists' poverty or lack of access to standard artistic supplies. Those who took this view tended to see the found-object pieces as examples of how creative artists can fashion marvelous art even without good materials:**

[I'm impressed that] that people who are without material means find a way to make art just with whatever is present. I mean, this doesn't apply to the fine painters. But the fellow [Kingelez] who constructed a whole cityscape out of found objects; or the faces made out of the old automobile parts [Dakpogan]. Those are just magical.

**Others were not certain whether the found materials reflected the difficult conditions in which the artists worked, or a conscious decision made for aesthetic or symbolic purposes. (The latter interpretation is supported by the wall text for the Adéagbo, Hazoumé, and Dakpogan works.) But to at least one interviewee, this made no difference in his enjoyment:**

You don't know if it's for artistic reasons, or just because they don't have the resources. But whatever the case is, they still make good art.

**A few interviewees dismissed the significance of the found-object art in the exhibition, noting that the use of found materials was commonplace in contemporary art:**

You know, you can see in Europe a lot of people just pick up junk and make art from that, and it's the same thing.

I think the use of found objects is pretty prevalent in contemporary art. It's not something unique to this exhibition.

**However, two interviewees pointed out what they saw as crucial differences between the use of found materials in mainstream Western contemporary art and their use in *African Art Now*:**

You could tell [these pieces] were *really* made from what was around the artist! I can think of an artist today who uses, quote-unquote, “found materials” that you *know* she purchased for the piece. In this show, the material really *is* reflective of the environment.

There’s definitely a different type of craftsmanship. I find the American [found-object] art almost Lego-like in the way the pieces are put together. . . . I feel like [with the American artists], the found objects are used in their actual form, and put together. But with these, it’s like the pieces were further broken or bent or manipulated before they were put together. I looked at it and saw *work*.

## Underlying Themes

The study team was also interested in discovering the overall themes that visitors read into the art on display in *African Art Now*. This was not done in the spirit of judging whether they could identify the curatorial intent of the show. Rather, the study team wanted interviewees to discuss the underlying themes that *they personally* took away from the exhibition, regardless of what the exhibition’s organizers may have intended. Some interviewees declined to identify such themes, implying that they saw the exhibition simply as the sum of its individual parts—an assortment of remarkable pieces with no underlying message. Similarly, a few interpreted the exhibition as a celebration of the *diversity* of the art coming out of Africa today:

OP&A: What do you think the exhibit’s main theme was?

Visitor: I think it was really the diversity of expression. It seemed to connect to a whole range of sensibilities and situations.

Others, however, offered more substantive suggestions about what the exhibition as a whole might mean.

### Universality

Some interviewees saw the underlying message of the show as a comment on the *universality* of certain aesthetic sensibilities and human concerns. One interviewee expressed this idea in the following words:

I can look at the pieces and see something familiar today. . . . It felt like it was something that anybody could look at and maybe it would remind you of something from your own history or background.

**As a specific example, this interviewee—a middle-aged African-American woman who was probably a young girl at the time of the civil rights movement in the 1960s—described how Bester’s Apartheid installations conjured up images of the civil rights struggle in the United States:**

It reminded me of some work I’ve seen on segregation in the South. It just took me back to the mule trains and to the poor people’s movement that Martin Luther King was trying to organize. It took me back to some photographs I had seen of that stuff. So it felt like my own personal experiences.

**Another interviewee, a white retired local female educator, agreed that the themes and issues raised by *African Art Now* transcended cultural boundaries, and added some thoughts on how the artwork’s aesthetic character also had a universal quality:**

Any Renaissance master could have come in here and said, “I love the color; I love how you expressed it; I love how you made the viewer engage with what you’ve done here”—even though it’s done differently from how they would have done it. There is an aesthetic culture expressed here that can be *easily* appreciated by us as Westerners. . . . The love of beauty to enhance one’s life—I think that’s a universal that comes through in this exhibit.

### Overcoming Adversity

**Another idea suggested by interviewees was that *African Art Now* represented triumph over adversity—in the sense that many of the artists no doubt have worked under conditions unfavorable to the blossoming of their talent (in terms of political instability and poverty; scarcity of artistic supplies; isolation from dealers, galleries, and collectors; and so on). These interviewees saw these artists’ ability to create beauty and meaning in the face of great adversity as the underlying thread of the exhibition:**

Overall, I was impressed mostly with how people can endure even through the roughest times. There was one guy who was sent to a punishment camp because he didn’t hold a job or something, and his [artwork] reflected that.

They don’t have much, but they try to give [their art] this feeling of richness. I think that was very interesting.

Several interviewees brought out the related theme that the works on display collectively represented a drive to transcend grim realities—poverty, injustice, violence, and so on—through the medium of art:

I think a lot of this art makes an incredible bridge between reality and fantasy.

However, it should also be noted that some interviewees were actually struck by the *lack* of any (implicit or explicit) sense of the difficulties of the environment in which African artists must often work:

What I think is lacking (and it doesn't *have* to be there) is a feel for the places where these artists live and the conditions in which they work—which I imagine are horrendous. The deprivation, the poverty—it's all gone.

### Social and Political Themes

Finally, a number of interviewees saw social commentary as the underlying thematic web that connected much of the exhibition. At the highest level, several interviewees identified as a major theme the tension between modernity (with its imported mores, technologies, politics, economics, and tastes) and tradition in African societies:

I would say [the theme here is] the pairing of Africa, with all of its traditions and cultures, and the influences of the modern world.

It tells you that there is a struggle between tradition and the way the world is moving. There are fears. They're commenting, I think, about many aspects of life: sexuality, war, politics. There is a large sense of the visionary in this exhibit.

Other, more specific social themes were also discussed, with some interviewees noting more than one. Some of these were associated with particular artists or pieces. For example, interviewees who discussed *gender roles* mentioned works such as Moke's "My Husband Has Enough Money to Buy Me the Most Fashionable Clothes," Samba's "What Solution for the Men?" and Depara's photographs of preening musclemen. Interviewees who identified the *economics of poverty and waste* as a major theme pointed to Hazoum's "Benin Roulette" and Dakpogan's masks. Those who saw the challenges of *new technologies* as an underlying idea mentioned Onyanga's "Jetliner in the Pacific (Airport 1977)" (and may also have been thinking of pieces such as Mansaray's technological fantasies and Kouakou's robotic figures). Those who focused on themes of *race and racism* noted Bester's Apartheid installations and Samba's "What Future for Our Art?" And those who discussed the impact of *imported fashions and*



*tastes on Africa specifically pointed to Sidibé’s Kinshasa photos, and may also have been influenced by works such as Ledy’s “I Do Not Understand.”*

Similarly, some interviewees also saw political themes as prevalent throughout the exhibition:

Given what a lot of the African countries have gone through, a lot of [the pieces] are very politically charged.

I liked the juxtaposition of the political statements with the art.

OP&A: What’s impressive about this exhibition?

Visitor: I guess to me it’s the political statements—the reflection of the culture is very strong in this show.

**One interviewee brought the social and political sides together, eloquently voicing his view that a major theme of the show was the role art plays in driving the political processes of effecting change in society:**

It reinforced my understanding that art is a vehicle by which you can make social change, [and] that social commentary requires artistic renderings. Without art, you don’t have a real dialogue about what’s going on in your society. It usually starts at that level and bubbles up, as opposed to coming from government down. . . . I thought that the artists who addressed social justice issues or social problems within their communities and nations did so in a very meaningful way—presenting what was going on, but also doing it with some humor.

However, again a caveat is in order. While many interviewees explicitly or implicitly alluded to the influence of social and political themes throughout the exhibition, others appeared not to see this dimension at all. One interviewee even explicitly downplayed it:

OP&A: Did anything surprise you?

Visitor: I think I expected it to be more political.

## Presentation

The assessment among those who commented on NMAfA’s presentation of the art was generally positive. Comments in this area fell into two general categories: the physical design and layout, and the level of information provided by the wall text and labels.

## Design and Layout

The study team explicitly asked interviewees about their opinions on the physical presentation—design, layout, lighting, and so on. No one raised any serious reservations about it, although some admitted it had not made any particular impression on them one way or another. Among those with definite opinions, however, praise was the norm, with particular emphases on the spaciousness of the layout and how the lighting and spacing brought out the subtleties of each individual work:

I liked the design. I liked the wide-open spaces. I liked that I could move back and forth on a piece; I can see it up close and I can see it far away. I like that it's grouped by the artists, so you can see an artist's body of work.

Fantastic display! The vivid colors are shining and the intense, beautiful faces of the photography are displayed perfectly.

The lighting of the exhibition was on point. It gave time to really focus on the artwork.

I thought it was particularly well laid out. It was nicely done, with lots of space and lots of room for each thing to be distinguished.

**One interviewee also approvingly mentioned the multiple placements of the introductory text to the exhibition:**

The [introductory wall text] shows up in several places, and I think that's excellent. It's good for visitors, no matter where you're coming into an exhibit, to know clearly what you're walking into.

**A few criticisms of the physical layout were also voiced, although even in these cases the overall impression was typically positive:**

We weren't aware that it was on both sides when we came off the elevator, so maybe you need a little sign at the gift shop saying you can go in on either side. But I did think it was very inviting, very easy to go around.

The flow is a little confusing; maybe because there was a desire to have freedom for the patron to just sort of go and wander as they wanted. But I found myself saying, "Well, okay, do I go left, do I go right, where do I go now?" [Laughs] But other than that, I think it was very well done. I think the space lends itself well; I like the openness of it.

Interestingly, in contrast to a number of interviewees who specifically praised the spacing and openness of the installation, one interviewee indicated that she would have preferred a presentation that packed much more art into the same space.

### Information

The question of the appropriate level of contextual information to include in a display of non-Western art has exercised exhibition planners and art critics for decades, and will not be settled by this study. At one extreme, inclusion of anything more than basic label information is judged to demean both the art (which should be appreciated for its aesthetic qualities, rather than understood in anthropological terms) and the viewer (who is assumed to be able to form his or her own opinions). At the other extreme are those who want to see as much contextual information as possible, on the assumption that the “elitist” minority who want “art for art’s sake” can simply ignore this information, while others will appreciate the art better if they know more about its social or historical context.

**Among visitors interviewed for this study, most seemed satisfied with the amount of information provided in the labels and wall text:**

OP&A: What did you think of the wall text on the artists and their works?

Visitor: I think it was very good. This is the third or fourth thing we’ve done today, and if it had not been just about the right length, we probably would not have taken the time to read it!

OP&A: Did the wall text help?

Visitor: Absolutely. . . . There are works with the French text on them, and [the wall text] would translate it, so that was pretty helpful. You would get the sense of irony or tragedy that it was trying to portray. So I thought that was pretty good; the wall text was helpful.

I love how Americans display exhibits, because they bring in a lot of information. . . . I love that you have a continent map, and you show where it’s come from. It’s a lot of educational information—for those who want it, of course.

**In particular, a number of interviewees expressed their appreciation for the biographical information on each artist adjacent to his or her work:**

I loved reading about the artists, and then seeing their work. And I loved knowing about their lives and knowing where they live now.

OP&A: Did the wall text add anything to your understanding of the art?

Visitor: Yes, mostly for their biographies—just seeing where they live now, whether they still considered Africa to be their home, or whether they were expatriots. . . . With the “Baptism” piece, it said that the artist was trying to use this to communicate to his family why he was so devoted to his art. He was trying to show why he needed to do this.

OP&A: Did the wall text contribute to your appreciation of the art?

Visitor: Yes, it definitely did. It helped me to understand pieces that maybe I wasn’t so familiar with, like the 51 drawings [by Bouabré]. It’s easy to get lost in all the little tiles; [it helped] to read it and see these were folk tales or people’s stories about themselves from all over that this one man reproduced.

**None of the interviewees indicated that his or her experience was marred by a lack of information. Even where interviewees found something intellectually puzzling, the art still tended to work on an aesthetic and visceral level. Indeed, a few interviewees explicitly discussed how understanding was not a prerequisite to enjoyment of the works in *African Art Now*:**

Some of the meaning might be lost on me. Although I could look at it visually, some of the cultural concepts I don’t think I could grasp. But I could still enjoy it.

There were a lot of things I didn’t quite understand. If you don’t know the history, it’s hard to understand what they’re trying to say. But it is moving. . . . And I wouldn’t say it was “bad” confusion; I’d just say it makes you realize there’s a lot you don’t know, and you want to go find out.

**Nonetheless, a few interviewees did indicate they would have preferred more contextual information. In some cases, they pointed to specific works that they felt could have benefited from more explanation:**

With [Bester’s “Tribute to Biko”], I wanted to see more about who Steven Biko was—because it was done in memory of him, but it didn’t really say who he was. I know he was an activist. I just don’t know what he did.

I think there are so many stories here, and it would be appropriate to have more information. For example, this [Efiambelo sculpture] with the turtle: there’s this white man with a turtle, and underneath there are black figures supporting it. Is that talking about slavery? It’s one thing to interpret abstract art and make up

stories; it's another when there's an intentionality here that we want to know more about.

OP&A: Would you have liked to see more explanation?

Visitor: Well, for this [Efiambelo sculpture], yes. I have *my* impression of what he was trying to say. But I would like to know, is that what he was [really] trying to say?<sup>2</sup>

There isn't enough information about the objects and their relation to society. They are beautiful; they're incredibly neat. [But] they stand somehow in isolation. ... To understand the history behind them would enhance them and give them another, deeper dimension.

**On the other side, no one indicated his or her experience was marred by information overload either—although at least one interviewee held that, the “visitors-can-always-ignore-it” argument notwithstanding, it is *possible* to have *too much* information:**

It's very hard to do this properly. If you have too much text, it just becomes a kind of sermon.

**A few interviewees indicated that they personally did not read much of the wall text, and would not have missed it had it not been there:**

Before I read something or before someone tells me about something, I want to look at [the art] and see what I get from it. Let me think about what *I* feel about the artwork. Give me the person's name and the time period, and let me do the rest. Let me use my imagination.

OP&A: Did the wall text help you?

Visitor: No. I actually didn't read very much. I just looked at the maps, at where it came from. I like to *not* look at the labels, because I like to pick up my own symbolism. I probably just looked at the artist and the country, and that was it.

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2 The question of interpretation came up several times with respect to the Efiambelo sculptures in part because many of the interviewees were conducted at the entrance/ exit where these were prominently located.



## Criticisms and Suggestions

In the course of the interviews (and of reviewing the written comments volunteered by visitors), the study team noted a number of suggestions for improving the exhibition. Most were minor, but one criticism that came up several times did raise an interesting question about the CAAC itself: a few visitors wondered why the show was so overwhelmingly skewed toward works by male artists.

This exhibit is absolutely amazing, [but] there should be more than two woman artists represented.

My big question is, “Why weren’t there any female artists?” ... I am bringing a group of females in on Saturday and I am wondering how we are going to address that.

Two interviewees also noted somewhat critically that several works in the show—most notably the photography by Sidibé and Depara—simply did not qualify as “contemporary” art, and could not be considered a reflection of Africa today:

I thought it was very interesting that it was called *African Art Now*, when a lot of the photographs, for instance, were taken in the 1960s. Almost fifty years old! You would never see that at MoMA; something 40 or 50 years old would never be considered “contemporary.”

OP&A: Does this tell you anything about life in Africa today?

Visitor: It seems more like life in Africa about twenty or thirty years ago, with some of the pieces.

One interviewee—while admitting that *African Art Now* worked well on its own terms—suggested that a series of more focused shows might allow for greater depth than a single encyclopedic exhibition:

I could tell that there had been an effort to show as much as possible. But at the same time, I think it could be just as valuable to have an exhibition that was “African Painting Now” or “African Sculpture Now”—something that didn’t try to be *everything*.

Other criticisms and suggestions were decidedly less weighty. All of the following suggestions—some of which are obviously more practical than others—were mentioned in interviews or on written comment sheets as desirable changes or additions:

- » Have posters of iconic works from the collection (Samba, Keita) available in the gift shop.
- » Provide a complementary carry-away brochure with information on the artists and works similar to the wall text.
- » Play African music in the background within the exhibition.
- » Provide translations for *all* non-English text on the artwork.
- » Include photographs of artists' studios.
- » Offer tours by native African guides who could provide a first-person perspective on the cultures and styles represented in the exhibition.
- » Bring in one (or more) of the artists represented in the show for a residency at NMAfA during the exhibition's run; have him or her conduct discussions of the art, or simply work in a "visible" studio within or adjacent to the installation.

# CONCLUSIONS

The place of modern and contemporary African art at NMAfA has been a controversial issue since former Director Sylvia Williams first expanded the Museum's mission to include collecting and displaying these genres. Previous work by OP&A has suggested that many NMAfA docents, board members, and colleagues at peer institutions are less enthusiastic about modern and contemporary art than about the traditional art that was once NMAfA's exclusive focus. One of their concerns seems to be that modern and contemporary art are considered inaccessible by many visitors.

This study found no evidence for that view. The overwhelming sense among the visitors to whom the study team spoke was that *African Art Now* was both accessible and deeply engaging—regardless of visitors' level of knowledge about contemporary art, or their preconceptions about it. The wall text on the artists and their works appeared to contribute to the exhibition's user-friendliness, but the art also stood up well on its own from both the aesthetic and affective perspectives.

*African Art Now* appeared to garner no less praise for its beauty and craftsmanship than the traditional-art-based exhibitions at NMAfA studied by OP&A in the past. Where it differed was in the precise way in which interviewees connected with the art. *African Art Now* stimulated interviewees to ponder present-day questions about the cultures and societies of Africa, the role of art in these societies, the effects of globalization, and issues such as gender roles, poverty, and the effects of technology. In this sense, it appeared to appeal to visitors in a rather different way than traditional art.

Sweeping conclusions about the appeal of contemporary art at NMAfA certainly cannot be drawn from a single study. But what the present study does suggest strongly is that well-chosen and well-presented contemporary art is appealing to NMAfA visitors and offers unique benefits that complement what visitors derive from traditional art displays.



# APPENDIX I: FAVORITES

So many different artists, displays, and works were cited as “favorites” by interviewees that attempts to generalize about the relative popularity of the works would be pure guesswork.

Instead, what is presented here is a cross-section of comments about certain works from among many that could have been quoted. The quotations were selected on the basis of their insight and depth, rather than on the basis of the works to which they pertain. This is by no means an exhaustive list of the artists and works cited by at least one interviewee as “favorites.” Others that were mentioned as particularly interesting by interviewees included Dakpogan, Efaimbelo, Kwei, Moke, Samba, Sidibé, and Tayou.<sup>3</sup> It is not inconceivable that, given enough interviews, every artist in the exhibition would have been cited as a “favorite” sooner or later.<sup>4</sup>

## Apagya

Those photographs look like something that maybe came out of the 1932 World’s Fair, where people would be photographed in the “kitchen of the future.” And it’s very much the same feeling—although this is so much more poignant, when you think of it. . . . I think of almost everything here as tending to bring up that issue of the disparity between reality and fantasy in those photographs. I mean, that really hits you right in the kisser.

## Bester

The Apartheid pieces were really very powerful.

What I noted was the art that was dedicated to Steven Biko, from South Africa. . . . I remembered as a child watching the movie *Cry Freedom* as I looked at that.

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3 Dakpogan, Samba, and Sidibé in particular were mentioned frequently and with great enthusiasm. However, the comments offered on these works were not as memorable as those presented below.

4 Indeed, some artists may have been cited as “favorites” without the study team picking up on it. In some cases, references to favored works were cursory and unclear. For example, one interviewee’s praise for the “one with the monkeys” may have been a reference to Lilanga’s paintings.

## Bodo

I keep coming back to these, not only because they are so colorful, but because they remind me of Dali or the surrealist period in European painting. That was unexpected; I've never seen any pieces like this before. I've definitely seen [African] pieces with vivid color, but not so surreal.

## Bouabré

I liked the little postcards. In each one, if you bothered to read the inscription, it's its own little world. And then a minimal image, so there's more of a chance to fill in the blanks.

In sense they're like a cartoon story. But the style was so very different from anything I've seen, even in a graphic novel. It captured such a powerful atmosphere of a different way of thinking—perhaps a traditional way of thinking, but also a sense of comedy and delight. I would like to have carefully read through all of those to follow the story to the end, but I didn't have the time.

## Depara

I liked the [photograph] with the little kids posing as Apollos. That one was pretty funny. It was these little kids trying to show off their muscles—which they did not have; they were really skinny. It was an interesting picture. ... Not funny as in "ha ha ha" funny, but funny as in what their mentality was: not having much, but still having a good time and posing in front of the camera.

## Gedewon

I read his history on the side, and he came out of a religious background. So a lot of what he did, I thought, represented [Ethiopian] religious artifacts. I saw a lot of crosses, eyes, snakes. You had to get closer to look, because you couldn't really tell exactly what it was; it was very convoluted. Then you would step back and see an outer pattern. ... I thought it was just gorgeous, even though the images didn't make all that much sense to me. Especially after I read the side and saw one represented "wealth," and the other, "love." I thought "*hmmm...?*" [Laughs]

## Hazoumé

I really appreciated the artist who used the gas cans to talk about oil and its impact. There are persons who risk their lives in Benin to bring gasoline in—surrounded by these huge gas tanks, becoming almost suicide bombers, in an odd way.

The one in there with the motorcycle and all the gasoline cans all over it—I mean, you feel the emotion, right there when you're looking at it.

Remember the motorcycle with the gas cans? And then the explanations: "Alright, we're sending our junk back to the West." [Laughs]

## Keita

I think what he achieved through that commercial work is what many artists I see in, say, the United States *try* to achieve, and it seems forced.

The image of a father and his baby is so loaded. You can't take it at face value. That's what art is—taking something and interpreting it for yourself. But it left so much room for you to read life into it.

## Kingelez

The [Kingelez] city is a place where, if you stand and look at that, it makes you feel better—like there's a better life, a better way to be. I asked the guard how he felt about it, and he said he liked to imagine himself in an airplane, zooming in and landing in that city.

## Mahlangu

The brilliance of the colors and the high quality vinyl paint that she uses were just overwhelming. It was a very rich moment, and I stood there for quite some time. That kind of harkens back to the traditional for me, when I think of African art. But it was done in a very contemporary way. So that was an interesting mix.



## Onyanga

That shows the combination—which is so common in Africa—of technology as both good and bad for them. It can bring them [positive] things, but often it brings them disaster. That message comes through in that painting very strongly. And it made [my companion] **very** uncomfortable.

## Photographs (General)

The photographs are outstanding. Personally, of the presentation, the photographs were the most interesting. But then again, it may be because my generation [finds it easier to understand things] through an actual visual presence, rather than through the imagination—the mind creating the artwork.

I liked the photography particularly. I had not really seen any photographs from the '60s in Africa, so that was pretty good. . . . It was nice to see such positive images of Africa, and also of the '60s. You see '60s photos from Europe and the fashion world and things like that, but not really African ones.

## Toguo

I loved the series of watercolors called "Baptism." The depth of watercolor! You could tell that he just did a single wash on most of them. And I loved his use of abstraction. It was just like everything all at once, but still simple and classical. It was one of those things where the more you looked, the more there was to see. I was hypnotized.

# APPENDIX II: YOUNG VISITORS

In addition to interviewing adult visitors, the study team made an effort to determine how younger visitors responded to *African Art Now* by observing school groups touring the exhibition, and by talking with NMAfA docents and the children themselves. Although school groups ranged from grade school to high school level, the comments presented here pertain mainly to the children at the younger end of this spectrum—through elementary school. Except where indicated, quotations are from docents.

The study team's overall conclusion was that many, although not all, of the pieces in the exhibition held considerable appeal for younger visitors, even smaller children. Indeed, one docent suggested that children, on the whole, tended to get even more personally engaged with the art than adults, because "they respond to its flashy, eye-catching colors and textures."

This was a common theme among the docents interviewed by the study team, who indicated that younger children were drawn in by the bright colors, unusual shapes, and creativity on display throughout the exhibition:

What the kids like are the colors, the brightness, the vivacity. ... Because of the colors, it's easier to get their attention than with the traditional art.

With one exception—the Keita photographs, which docents agreed intrigued many young visitors—the works mentioned by docents as being particularly effective in capturing kids' attention demonstrated one or more of three characteristics: bright colors; found materials; and allusions to technology. These included the following:

- » Kingelez's cityscape ("Kids' eyes light up when they see it, and they rush up to it—which sets off the alarms.")
- » Dakpogan's masks (One young visitor noted that he "liked the trash people." Another said, "Whoever did it was really creative—using all these pieces of junk to do a mask that looks scary or droopy or funny.")
- » Bester's collages ("The students are fascinated by the three South African pieces, because they can get close to them and pick out things.")
- » Goba's sculptures ("They like those because of the extreme colors, and because they have something carnivalesque to them. And you have the porcupine quills—which is a real piece of Africa.")

- » Lilanga’s paintings (“Lilanga comes over very much as a cartoonist.”)
- » Kouakou’s carved robots
- » Efiambelo’s funerary posts
- » Mansarray’s works

Mansarray in particular seemed to hold a special attraction for younger visitors that escaped many adult visitors. Interestingly, docents indicated there was more to this than a juvenile fascination with fantastic gadgetry, and that many children immediately picked up on the violent undercurrents in these works. (“They say, ‘These are machines that kill!’”) One docent indicated that the juxtaposition of Mansarray and Lilanga worked particularly well for children:

The way [the Lilangas] are placed opposite these machines of destruction is wonderful. Because the kids look at the machines, and they are fascinated—but they are scared too, because you see this thing breathing fire and dripping blood and boots stomping. But then you turn over here, and they are delighted with the fanciful aspect of these two paintings.

On the other hand, pieces that were singled out as especially difficult for younger visitors to relate to included Bouabré’s sketches, Gedewon’s talismans, and Adéagbo’s installation. A few others, such as the works by Bodo and Cheri Samba, elicited mixed reactions from children; docents indicated that children found these visually appealing, but were also somewhat confused by them:

They are very puzzled by the complex paintings like the Bodos. They are staring at all those funny, bizarre creatures, all naked. American kids have a lot of problems with nakedness. ... The Cheri Sambas are [also] very complicated for young audiences. Even when I translate the French for them, I think those work much better for [older visitors], because there is that whole message of frustration with colonization and with the art world. That is not evident for young audiences.

Observations of school tours by the study team also suggested that while the main appeal of the exhibition for children may have been visual, a skillful docent could induce at least some young visitors to get beyond the surface and fathom some of the deeper purpose of the art. This was the case even with highly political works such as Bester’s Apartheid collages and Hazoumé’s “Benin Roulette.” For example, after a

brief background talk on the gasoline runners of Benin by the docent leading the tour, the following exchange with a group of sixth-grade students was observed at the Hazoumé installation:

Docent: What do think the wall symbolizes?

Girl #1: It's crossing from life to death.

Girl #2: It shows an accident—he's running into a wall.

Girl #3: Crossing the border.

Another child in this group commented on the Bester pieces, "It was kind of upsetting to think about how all these black people got shot and how they got killed and everything. It made you think."

Docents also indicated that kids' fascination with parts of the exhibition was clear from the impromptu questions and comments raised by young visitors (such as whether anyone was ever actually buried in Kwei's onion coffin), and from their thoughtful responses to questions posed by docents ("I ask the students how many patterns they see in [the Keita photo of the reclining woman], and they find things I didn't even count, like the scarification on her forehead").

However, it is important to attach some caveats to these generally positive comments. Among the school groups observed by the study team, the level of excitement and interest varied considerably. The personality and skill of the docent or guide leading the tour clearly had something to do with this, but in some cases the reasons for such differences could not be determined by observation and appeared to have more to do with the collective "personality" of the group itself.



# IMAGE DETAILS

All images courtesy of the National Museum of African Art

## Cover, Top:

I Like Color (J'aime la couleur); Cheri Samba; 2003; Acrylic and glitter on canvas

## Cover, Middle:

Zanzibrrrrrace; Romuald Hazoumé; 2003; Metal, plastic and copper

## Cover, Bottom:

Wagon (Kakebeen); Willie Bester, 1993; Wood, bone, metal, leather, oil paint and newspaper on board

## Page iv:

Apollo in Sitas District (Appollon du quartier Sitas); Depara; 1963, printed 2004; Gelatin silver photograph

## Page vi, Top:

The Jetliner in the Pacific (Airport 77); Richard Onyango; Acrylic on canvas

## Page vi, Bottom:

Come On Board!; Philip Kwame Apagya; 2000; Chromogenic photograph

## Page 2:

Kimbembele Ihunga; Bodys Isek Kingelez; 1994; Paper, cardboard, polystyrene, plastic and other found materials

## Page 4, Left:

Untitled; Koffi Kouakou; 2000; Painted wood, metal and plastic

## Page 4, Right:

Night Bird (Zanhé); Calixte Dakpogan; 2002; Steel, plastic, iron, glass and other found materials

## Page 26, Top:

Different Things that Concern Families; George Lilanga; 2000; Acrylic on canvas

## Page 26, Bottom:

Running Shoe, Samuel Kane Kwei; 1997; Enamel paint on wood, rope, leather and foam rubber

## Page 34:

Allien Resurrection; Abu Bakarr Mansaray; 2003; Ballpoint pen and graphite on paper



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