

The African Art Gallery

The Art Institute of Chicago
Chicago
Permanent installation

reviewed by Deborah Stokes

After many years of occupying a snug nine hundred square foot hallway leading to executive office suites, the African art collection at The Art Institute of Chicago (AIC) has been officially relocated, affording Kathleen Bickford Berzock, Curator for African Art, the opportunity to gain triple the exhibition space, increase the number of superb works from their permanent collection on public view, and recharge the objects with fresh interpretive features and framings.

At 3500 square feet, it's a considerable expansion in space, but finding the collection now requires some effort. In the past, visitors entering the AIC through its classic Beaux Arts entrance on Michigan Avenue could catch a glimpse of African art up front, where it was in sight of the imperious 1910 polished marble staircase leading to the world-renowned Impressionist galleries. Foot traffic to the repurposed space in the Morton Wing will now depend on those with an express desire to seek out the collection or those casual visitors dead-ending in the last gallery of the Morton Wing and forced to retrace their steps back out. However, the aesthetic payoff for the motivated visitor will be immediately evident.

The Morton Wing, constructed in the 1960s by Shaw, Metz, and Associates, formerly exhibited twentieth century modern artists including Pollock, de Kooning, Motherwell, Kline, Warhol, and Reinhardt. The windowless galleries with high ceilings and clean white walls accommodated large-scale paintings. Berzock worked collaboratively with Richard Townsend, Chair of African and Amerindian Art, other museum staff, and the architect, Kulapat Yantrasast, of Workshop Hakomori Yantrasast (wHY), on the design of the newly bequeathed exhibition space for both the African and Amerindian collections. To visually signal the visitor's transition from pre-Columbian to Native American to African displays, the solution was the installation of a striking gateway of laminated oak wood applied floor to ceiling between the



contiguous galleries, recalling, for this viewer, the *torii* gates to Shinto shrines in Japan that symbolically mark the transition from the secular to the sacred. In order to tailor the scale, the rectangular gateway is echoed within the African gallery by three smaller archways straddling the vitrines and subtly signaling cultural shifts while allowing for a perception of lowered height. Berzock notes, "Richard and I wanted our galleries to maintain the very open and light feeling of the large space." Notably, Yantrasast was a protégé of the minimalist Japanese architect Tadao Ando, who designed the meditative Japanese screen room within the adjacent suite of Asian galleries in 1992. According to Berzock, one of the challenges in the redesign was in "creating a physical transition from the high ceilings to the more human scale of the works of [African] art. We felt this was critical to foregrounding the works of art in the space, without building walls." Additionally, Berzock reasons that the vitrines that rise directly from the floor in the Ando Japanese screen room give the visitor the sense of sharing the space more directly with the works of art.

A series of arrangements of nearly transparent vitrines showcase the three-dimensionality of the art as many of the objects can now be splendidly viewed in the round. Overall, the concept is in line with the presentation style of many encyclopedic American art museums that fashion a formal minimalist environment to encourage contemplation and reflection. By curatorial intent and design, distractions are at a minimum, and one-on-one interaction with the objects is encouraged by allocating a space for meditation on this community of artists.

The larger space accommodates 225 objects, nearly 50 percent of the entire collection of 525. The visitor is met at the entrance with the sideway glances from three extraordinary

1 At the opening to the Art Institute of Chicago's new African art permanent collection gallery, a platform presents three large Baga headdresses, displayed with simple facsimiles of their raffia and cloth costumes. Three large, light wooden "gateway" cases set a loose structure for the space, while maintaining an open and transparent atmosphere. ALL PHOTOS: © THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

late nineteenth–early twentieth century Baga masks from Guinea: an early Nimba female shoulder mask; a Banda headdress representing a composite of animals; and a sinuous Basonyi serpent headdress, climbing toward the ceiling (Fig. 1). With this group, Berzock opted to recreate a trio of raffia costumes, analogous to illustrations from across the literature, expressing the drama of characters in full dress. It's an important and subtle gesture because it activates the collaborative imagination of the viewer to envision the masquerader's impact in performance.

The airy arrangement highlights the institutional masterpieces: a pair of Bamana Chi Wara headdresses, a group of Djenne terracotta figures, a Lulua maternity figure, a Kongo Nkisi standing male, a case with four Gabonese reliquary figures, and an important group of Yoruba works by individually named master carvers, including a veranda post by Olowe of Ise (Fig. 2), a lidded bowl and Ifa board by Areogun of Osi, an offering bowl by Obembe Alaiye, and a mother and child shrine figure by Abogunde of Ede. Clockwise, the installation gently leads the visitor from west Africa to central, southern Africa to eastern, and north above the Sahara, thereby broadening the geographic representation of tradition-based African art on view.



2 A veranda post of a king and his senior wife by the Yoruba artist Olowe of Ise, created for the *ogaga's* palace at Ikere and completed in 1914, is among the highlights of the Art Institute of Chicago's collection. It introduces the Yoruba section in the gallery, while works from the Igbo and Benue River regions of present-day Nigeria are displayed beyond.

Along with regional groupings, the new installation has also allowed Berzock to feature a more diverse range of objects including textiles, jewelry, beaded regalia, and ceramics, many acquired during her tenure, alongside the foundational collection of masks and figures. African textiles are displayed on a rotating basis in two locations along the sides of the gallery. Currently on exhibit is a Kuba cloth measuring 22 feet long. According to Berzock, special loans will be on display, including the one this author was lucky enough to see: an exquisite one-of-a-kind contemporary silk brocade based on the elaborate patterns of a *lamba akotyfahana*, a nineteenth-century luxury cloth of Madagascar's Merina people. The textile was hand-woven from the golden threads of the *Nephila madagascariensis*, a Malagasy orb spider, by a team of eighty. Mind-bogglingly, each thread consists of 96 strands of spider silk; 960 strands for the thicker brocade!

Among the surprises in the collection are works that expand the department's traditional/historic focus to include southern, eastern, and northern Africa. Two outstanding South African Thembu bride (*umt-*

3 An expanded presentation of works from eastern and southern Africa is among the highlights of the Art Institute's new African gallery. In the foreground a late seventeenth century triptych and manuscript from Christian Ethiopia reveal the strong graphic qualities of the first Gonderine style, while mid-twentieth century ensembles for a Thembu bride and groom evoke the aesthetic of abundance that befits this transition in status among the Xhosa-speaking people of South Africa.

shakazi) and groom (*umyeni*) ensembles display multiple layers of beaded and recycled adornments (Fig. 3). Also out of storage is a rare Nyamwezi female standing with outstretched arms from the Tabora region of Tanzania, exquisitely crafted Qur'an box pendant, *Ida* or *Nadif* headband, earrings and fibulae from the Anti-Atlas Mountain region of Morocco, and a lavishly hand-painted seventeenth century illuminated manuscript of *The Miracles of Mary* from Ethiopia.

Featured on the right-hand wall of the gallery is a three-monitor color video installation with a muted mix of music, voices, and ambient outdoor sound (Fig. 4). Commissioned from filmmaker Susan Vogel, the visuals comprise close-ups of a select number of objects in the installation juxtaposed with images of making

and using African art. Projected every five minutes directly onto the wall, well above eye level, the quickly edited frames quietly evoke a general cultural context using images from three of the fifty-five countries in Africa—Ethiopia, Mali, and Ghana. The two-minute video loop is perfect for twenty-first century web-surfing audiences accustomed to getting information in quick, nonlinear bytes. One refined poured-concrete bench—a signature material of Yantrasast—is available for seating while viewing. Below the video is a timeline beginning in 100,000 BCE, setting Africa within a condensed historical framework and illustrating works of art from the museum collection against a tight selection of artistic, cultural, political, and social events of human history.

Berzock has made a convincing effort to introduce visitors to an array of significant artistic traditions within the constraints of the collection and the architect's profound simplicity. The principle of projecting lightness and transparency lends a strange stasis to the material on view here, only broken every five minutes by the sound of the video replay. As noted above, many of the sculptures visible in the round are fantastic. But a Benin chief's altar head appears absolutely lost at the bottom of a case. The central space, with multiple masks mounted on long, thick metal stems, might want some rethinking.





The Olowe veranda post has been lowered so that the female behind the throne is now at eye-level—a work not intended to be seen from this vantage point. It would be nice to see Berzock push viewers even further with a nod to contemporary African artists in the AIC collection such as Magdelene Odundo, Yinka Shonibare, and William Kentridge, even though works by Shonibare and Kentridge are held in the departments of Contemporary Art and Prints and Drawings.

My few reservations notwithstanding, the appearance of the permanent African collection in this new setting is cause for celebration. I agree with Berzock, “At their best, museums are sites where . . . stereotypes can be dispelled, knowledge gained, and beauty encountered” (Fig. 5).

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4 Three video displays were commissioned from Africanist art historian and filmmaker Susan Vogel for the gallery. The large-scale, three-channel displays are projected directly onto the wall above the height of the casework and play for two minutes before disappearing for five minutes, leaving only white wall in their stead. Below, a timeline entitled “When in Africa, When in the World,” which extends from 100,000 BCE to 2010 CE, juxtaposes events in the history and art history of Africa with events elsewhere in the world.

5 Three massive Baga headdresses from Guinea are dramatically displayed on a platform near the entrance to the new African art gallery at the Art Institute of Chicago. The separation of wooden masquerade elements like these from a larger performance context in museum displays is suggested by the impressionistic facsimiles of the headdresses’ cloth and raffia costumes. The installation also helps visitors to visualize how such monumental objects are worn.

