African Art and Culture in Maine

In recent years I have resided in Maine during the summer. Maine is one of the least ethnically diverse states in the United States. Yet, I have found a variety of African activities and individuals there. There may be others that I have not discovered, as I generally move about the state’s southern region. Maine is better known for its New England maritime art, its lobsters and fishing, and its resorts and summer camps than for any interest in Africa. The African artistic and cultural diaspora—in contemporary arts and crafts, in more or less “traditional” forms, in tourist objects, and in the presence of Africans and scholars of African art—now exist in Maine. If these have reached Maine, where are they not found now in the United States? The American experience with African art and culture is growing at the everyday grassroots level, alongside the more elite contributions of museums and universities, with which scholars are likely to be familiar.

In 2004 I arrived in Portland, Maine the day before the annual celebration of the Museum of African Culture (formerly the Museum of African Tribal Art), which I attended. This small museum, located in three rooms on the ground floor of a residential home, has been in operation for more than seven years. It was founded, and is owned and directed by Oscar O. Mokeme, an Igbo from Oba, near Onitsha, in southeastern Nigeria. Mokeme began collecting and interpreting African art in Nigeria in 1976. He came to the United States in 1979, and since then has had a varied career, attending university and operating import and export businesses. In 1998 he put that aside to found his museum.

The only African-owned museum in the United States, as far as I know, the Museum of African Culture is a nonprofit institution. Its collection consists of more than 1,500 objects, and Mokeme has many others stored in his Nigerian hometown. The museum’s main attractions consist of masks, stools, and other objects of Igbo background which have been used in ceremonies in Nigeria and, unusually for a museum, a considerable number of full-dress costumes to go with the masks. These are on display in the permanent gallery. A second, somewhat smaller gallery is used for rotating exhibitions of personal collections of individuals from Maine and nearby New Hampshire, as well as some other Igbo objects and works from other regions of West Africa. While much of the Igbo material comes from Oba and the surrounding area, which Mokeme returns to now and then, he has also brought to Maine objects from Awka, Nri, and Igbo-Ukwu (Fig. 1). There are also some West African tourist pieces on display. The Igbo masks and figures

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OSCAR MOKEME

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the Maine Community Foundation, to educate the public on issues of diversity and African culture. Mokeme would like to publish a catalogue of selected pieces in his collection.

Mokeme’s dedication to art and performance is so great that not too long ago he began paying school fees for some primary and secondary students at Oba on condition that they were willing to take part in masquerades, which are dying out as a result of social change and evangelism. And through a $15,000 grant from the Maine Arts Commission he created The Black Artists Forum of Maine, through which he is attempting to interest black artists in Maine and New Hampshire in drawing from African art, as well as providing them with a base at the museum for communication and interaction.

Mokeme is also an Igbo healer (dibia) with the priesthood title, acquired in 1982, of Ugo-Orji the First, the Ozo Dimani of Aboriji-Oba.

Top: 2. Angele Etoundi Essamba, Cameroun. La Battante (The Victor) 1990 Photograph. 96cm x 68.6cm (39” x 27”) Many of Essamba’s photographs are of faces or figures of African women. This one celebrates the beauty of an elegantly liberated African woman, sitting on a bird cage. The symbolism of freedom to fly is evident. Note the elegant headtie and the use of line and contrast.

Bottom: 3. Naglaa Ezzat, Egypt Bashakte Palace, 2001 Graphite and paper, 76.2cm x 101.6cm (30” x 40”) A scene of quiet and contemplation. A young beautiful woman in simple cloth contrasts with the rough stone structure beside and behind here. The angle of her body complements that of the stone steps, forming a “V.”

Since 1976 he has practiced what he calls “traditional pluralistic Igbo transcultural psychotherapy and healing rituals.” For healing he employs one Igbo shrine in the museum for diagnosis and another for developing cures. He treats barrenness as well as other health problems for both African-Americans and whites, but does not charge for his services; rather, he suggests donations to the museum’s endowment. The museum exhibited a healing shrine at the International Conference on African Healing Wisdom in Washington, DC on July 6-9, 2005.

The rather simple quality of the Museum of African Culture, located on a side street, sharply contrasts with the Portland Museum of Art, two blocks away, just off of a main city street, whose major building addition was designed by Henri Nicolls Cobb of the I.M. Pei architectural group and constructed in 1983. It houses a fine collection of New England artists, including Winslow Homer, as well as the Joan Whitney Payson collection, a modest collection of modern European and American art. This museum has initiated enterprising exhibitions on modern American and European artists, one containing African art: “Affinities of Form,” an exhibition of African, Oceanic, and Native American art drawn...
from the Raymond and Laura Wielgus collection at Indiana University, in 1996. The majority of the African objects in it were “traditional” twentieth-century pieces. The symbolic contrast between the two museums is evident. The substantial, well-established Portland Art Museum and the struggling, small African one tied to the entrepreneurship of an enthusiastic African and a small group of non-African followers determined to bring African art and culture to Maine, symbolize the wealth and power of the United States in contrast to the struggles of Africa and its ordinary citizens to survive and to achieve.

The Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), at the Maine College of Art (MECA) near the Portland Museum of Art, has had two contemporary African art exhibitions. One was “Beyond Decorum: the Photography of Iket Udé,” by the Nigerian artist living in New York

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Clockwise from top left:
4. Sira Sissoko, Mali
Danse des Signes Bambara (Dance of the Bambara Signs), 2004
Handmade paper and natural dyes, 43.2cm x 35.6cm (17” x 14”)
Sissoko learned to make paper at a Bamako workshop. She employs natural colors derived from henna, mud, onionskin and cinnamon, and here uses Bamana symbols to represent the powers of water, of masks and circumcision, among others elements.

5. Monique le Houeller
Resides in Abidjan, born in Hue, Vietnam
Blue Door, c. 2000
Bronze and mixed media, h 58.2cm (23”)
The work pays homage to the Toureg, with their blue robes. It is not a Toureg door, but symbolizes the openness of their nomadic life. Doors, or their absence, are important in African life. Compliments of William Karg, Contemporary African Art Gallery, New York City.

6. Roselyne Marikasi
Zimbabwe
No Time to Grieve, c. 2000
Oil on canvas, 91.4cm x 91.4cm (36” x 36”)
Marikasi’s paintings employ much blue and small, harsh strokes. Due to AIDS there is barely time to grieve before another funeral. The human images suggest dignity and cooperation in the face of a major health crisis.
created recently in plastic-coated telephone wire by Elliott Mkhize, a contemporary artist in Durban (Fig. 5). Perhaps a century ago, the woven pedestal plate was designed for secular markets far removed from southeast Africa, demonstrating that imported wire has long been an artistic medium in Zulu trading history. While extensive cultural interaction seems more visible here than elsewhere in the continent, we were reminded in this gallery that international marketing is not new to sub-Saharan cultures.

The Global Sphere barely suggested the dynamic popular culture that is currently evident in post-apartheid South Africa. Nevertheless, creative energy resonated throughout the exhibition’s presentation of fluid, interlocking, and developing spheres of human life. Mentally, the viewer returned full circle through the spheres, to the powerful and disquieting contemporary sculptures in the introductory gallery. Here again was the wall text reminder that the significance of any work of art constantly varies, in relation to each individual who contemplates it. In an exhibition of African art, it was especially refreshing to encounter emphases on the flux of continual change and on the centrality of unique personhood.

“Askng for Eyes” will be on exhibition at the William D. Cannon Art Gallery from April 23–July 9, 2006, and additional venues are also being considered. The exhibition was initiated and coordinated by art historian Teri Sowell at San Diego State University, whose students of African art were given the opportunity to enroll in her Curatorial Practices seminar, in order to develop a unique exhibition. Nineteen undergraduate and graduate students volunteered to manage all aspects of the exhibition’s development, research, fundraising, installation and graphic design, marketing, education, and community outreach, including the publication of the handsome illustrated 109-page catalogue, with 6 essays, 117 illustrations in color, collection list, and bibliography.

The catalogue is available for $20.00 plus shipping from artsfoundation@hotmail.com, or call 760-737-2903.

City, held in 2000 under the supervision of the Institute’s then director, Mark H.C. Besire, and the other, presented in 2002, was “Translation / Seduction / Displacement,” an exhibition of post-conceptual and photographic work by South African artists, curated by Lauri Firstenberg and John Peffer in 2001.

During the summer of 2004 I twice attended an exhibition, “Out of Bounds; Women Artists from Africa,” at the art gallery of the small, private Westbrook College in suburban Portland, part of the University of New England. The gallery, which never had held an African exhibition before, is quite modern—three floors with a good-sized room on each—designed by Thomas Larson, a well-known Boston architect. “Out of Bounds” exhibited the art of twenty women artists, and was curated by Mimi Wolford of Washington, DC. She founded and directs the MbAri Institute for Contemporary African Art in that city and places occasional exhibitions of contemporary African art at various sites in the United States. Her mother, the late Jean Kennedy, was the author of an important early survey of contemporary African art (Kennedy 1992). The Kennedys, and Wolford as a girl, lived in Lagos during the time of the development of the Oshogbo artists and were among their patrons, holding salons for them in Lagos and at times exhibiting their work at venues in the United States. Wolford inherited her parents’ substantial collection of Nigerian contemporary art.

While Wolford’s exhibition of African women’s art reflected her experience with Nigerian art—four of the twenty artists were from there—it had a broad sweep. Most of the artists lived in the United States, or had spent time here. They varied in age from young to senior, coming from widely different areas of Africa. In artistic experience they ranged from the well-established to those taking part in their first American exhibition. (However, neither Sokari Douglas Camp nor Madalene Odundo, two prominent contemporary African women artists, both of whom have spent periods in the United States, were included.)

Wolford writes in the exhibition brochure: “This is not an exhibition of the victimized; it showcases a group of extremely strong women, illustrating their concerns on many topics.” Well known in the United States is Nike Davies-Ondundae (formerly Olaniyi), who was represented by cloth work and some interesting early embroidery pieces that I had never seen before. One large, starch-resist cloth, Osun Festival, was typical of much of her work, depicting numerous figures and events, so that the viewer’s eye wandered about to take it all in. Ada Udechukwu, who freely interprets in Igbo 00 style, was represented by works in ink, graphite and a collage. Her art is unusual among contemporary African artists for its very personal and introspective qualities. Anele Essamu Essamba from Cameroan, who trained in art in Paris and the Netherands, presented black-and-white photographs of human figures; for example, La Battante (The Victor), an image of a woman calmly sitting on top of an african arts - spring 2000
empty cage, glorying in her freedom (Fig. 2). Naghla Ezatz from Egypt displayed large, detailed graphite drawings of women in various poses. I particularly liked her totality Palace, which depicted an Egyptian woman sitting in a contemplative mood on the steps of a palace in old Cairo (Fig. 3). The interesting abstract work of Sira Sissoko from Mali, who trained at the National Institute of Arts in Bamako, employs double sheets of hand-made paper and muted natural background colors derived from henna, mud, onionskin, and cinnamon. I found her Danse des Signes Bambu to be striking, perhaps since it reminded me of Igbo uji motifs, in employing Banana-like symbols in small strokes on background squares of dark, medium, or light brown (Fig. 4). Her art is sparse, neat, and precise. Monique Le Houssier, who resides in Abidjan though born in Hue, Vietnam, has adopted Africa as her home and has traveled widely in Africa. Her work, largely in metal, referred to the Sahel environment. Bleu Door, a bluish, double-door standing piece, has direct reference to the Toureg (Fig. 5). The painter Roselyne Marikasi, from Zimbabwe, who trained in that country but now lives in the United States, is one of a number of artists in the exhibition whose pieces commented on AIDS. In her No Time to Grieve, men, with women in the background, are lowering a casket into the ground; the title refers to the high frequency of deaths from AIDS in Africa (Fig. 6). While there were too many artists to mention them all, the exhibition as a whole was strongly expressive of African life from women’s viewpoints, with an awareness of Africa’s problems, and the need for adequate solutions. It has yet to appear elsewhere: It is worth showing again.

An earlier exhibition, which I missed, again curated by Mimi Wofford, “The Colors of Africa—Contemporary Perspectives,” occurred at the same gallery between November 16, 2001, and January 5, 2002. Consisting of seventy works by thirty-six artists from eighteen African countries, it included well-known artists such as Ibrahim El Salahi, Amir Nour, El Loko, Bruce Onobrakpeya, and Yinka Shonibare. Several photographs, including works by Tessa Tillett, opened the exhibition. The show was accompanied by a selection of the photographs, at various sites in Maine entitled “Sebastiao Salgado: Migrations—Humanity in Transition,” organized by the Portland Museum of Art. The Institute of Contemporary Art at the Maine College of Art exhibited Salgado’s No Time to Grieve. On October 4th, the ICA’s African education director, working with an after-school program, Project Safe and Smart, consisting mainly of African refugee students, showed them Salgado’s images of refugee life in Africa. She discussed with them different perspectives on refugees, but the children’s experiences often differed from those she expressed in the photographs, opening up their memories of Africa, and sometimes acting as a catharsis—art in the service of therapy. Aimee Bessire, of the school’s art history department, asked the students how they would portray their lives in Africa and in Maine. Foley gave them black-and-white throw-away cameras to document their present lives, out of which selected photographs were shown in the entry to MECA at the time of the Salgado exhibition.

There are a number of African performance groups in southern Maine, including The Nile Girls and the Acholi Boys, both from the Sudan; a Congolese girls dance group; Godfrey Banda, an mbira performer from Zimbabwe; and the dancer Brigitte Ndaya from Cameroon. In early 2005 The Nile, a restaurant in Portland serving Somali and Middle Eastern food, was started by a Somali. Refugees from that country were settled in Portland some years ago, a good number of whom have moved north to Lewiston, where the living is less costly. At Hancock, Maine, on coastal US Highway 1, several hours north of Portland, a small gallery, Arts and Africana, is run by Chriss Covert. She and her husband, Gray Parrot, have Gambian connections, visiting there at times. He learned to play the kora from a Gambian master, sings in Mandinka, and occasionally performs at Maine events, and also has a weekly African music program at a community radio station WERU-FM. Covert, who has had her gallery since 2002, is open on Fridays and Saturdays in the summer. Its contents are not unusual for an African tourist gallery except for the large selection of African cloths, which she obtains on visits to the Gambia, Senegal, and Mali, through African dealers in the United States, or from private individuals. What is unusual is that most of her cloth sales are to quilters in the eastern United States at quilting conventions and exhibitions. Much of this cloth is then cut into patches to use in hand-produced quilts, an intriguing diaspora element—Africa linked to a traditional American craft skill, which itself derived from Europe.

Another small tourist gallery, Deepest Africa Imports, run by Jackie Pelletier, is on Deer Island, further north along the Maine coast. This summer resort area is where the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts Center is located. Here, Wok Marcia Kure, a Nigerian contemporary artist residing in the United States, took a short course in fiber design in the summer of 2004. Deepest Africa Imports specializes in objects from southern Africa—loose not so much cloth as beads, dolls, jewelry, and other tourist items. The gallery owner lived in South Africa for a time and has contacts there to supply her store.

In addition to museums and galleries, Maine also hosts academic resources in African art. Dr. Aimee Bessire, a graduate of Harvard’s African art history program under Suzanne Blier, who carried out two years’ research among the Sukuma of northwestern Tanzania, is an assistant professor and chair of the Art History Department at the Maine College of Art (MECA) in Portland, where she mostly teaches African art related courses. In the 2005-06 academic year she will also teach two courses at Bates College in Lewiston, Maine. Her most recent research has been in African photography, performance traditions in the diaspora, and in the study of objects employed for religious communication in Sukuma tradition. She recently published an interesting article in African Arts on Sukuma art performance, in which mostly wood figures are employed in ritual contests (Bessire 2005). She is planning a project on the study of power objects in three
African societies, one of which may be the Igbo, working with Oscar Mokeme. She has been an active advisor on the board of his museum and in assisting Mokeme in preparing grant proposals. She works to bring together members of the Somali community in Maine through MECA's Creative Community Partnerships.

The art historian Dr. Julie L. McGee teaches in the Art History and Africana Studies program at Bowdoin College, specializing in African American and South African studies. Trained at Bryn Mawr in Northern (Dutch) Manierist painting, she then taught at Bowdoin, later working in New Orleans in a nonprofit organization with public school teachers in the Delta River Region, and teaching a course at Tulane University. In the South she discovered a love for African American and African art, but felt that the scholarship on African art within African American art history was poor. A summer program in Côte d'Ivoire with Philip M. Peek and Jerry Vogel further stimulated her African interests and she has been involved with the contemporary arts of South Africa for some five years. She taught in the CBB Cape Town program, a joint off-campus study center run by three Maine colleges—Colby, Bowdoin, and Bates—and sponsored by the Mellon Foundation, a project which closed in 2005.

Out of this experience she co-directed and coproduced, with the South African Vuyile C. Voyiaya, a 50-minute DVD, *The Luggage Is Still*...ed which specialized in contemporary Africa art. A small African Studies Program exists at the University of Washington and there is the very fine Katherine White Collection at the Seattle Art Museum. We see the profound African presence in the spread of Yoruba culture, not only in urban areas such as in New York, but in the American South and elsewhere. We see it in Moyo Okediji's recent work on the ways that African American artists have drawn from Yoruba art (Okediji 2003). And from personal experience, as a scholar of the Igbo, I am impressed with how many Igbo are teaching about African culture in American colleges and universities.

If African art and culture is now widely represented in America at a broad range of social levels, we see a profound change since the immediate post-independence period. It is my hope, perhaps idealistic, that these various forces bringing knowledge of African culture and its arts to America will somehow counteract the very poor impressions of Africa that exist today in the United States as a consequence of the continent's economic problems and its political and military conflicts. The African presence, even in the American hinterlands of Maine and Seattle, enriches the American experience. African arts and culture are now well represented in the four corners of the United States—in Florida, southern California, Maine, and Seattle, as well as in the center of this country.

To the youngest and next youngest generation of scholars of African art and culture in this country, all of this may simply be seen as part of the African diaspora with which they are quite familiar. But when I compare all of it to what existed in the US when I was a young scholar in the 1950s and 1960s, there have been remarkable developments. At those earlier dates there was virtually no movement of Africans to the US, though of course there were the descendants of African slaves, who, by and large, appeared at the time distant from Africa. The term “diaspora,” so common today in scholarship with reference to Africans and their arts and cultures in the Americas (and even in the Middle East and Asia), was primarily employed with respect to Jews. There was little interest in Africa in the United States; its continent was seen as the under influence of
European countries. Only among some African Americans was there interest in Ethiopia and in its emperor, Haile Selassie, and concern about Africa among some African-American intellectuals, such as W.E.B. Dubois (1947). But other African-Americans scholars felt that the problems of race and black poverty in America were their main concern. There was some interest in Liberia, particularly among African Americans, which dated back to the nineteenth century. There was only a little interest in African cultural and linguistic traits in the New World, then called Africanisms, for example, in the work of Melville J. Herskovits (1941) and his students, and Lorenzo Dow Turner's study of the Gullah language (1949). Natural history museums, such as the American Museum of Natural History in New York City and the Field Museum in Chicago, held strong African collections, though they rarely were presented as art, rather as ethnographic objects. African art was only taught at a few universities, and African languages, so important for the understanding of the continent's art and culture, was even more rarely present at universities. The Harmon Foundation was the major institution in the United States concerned with modern African art, particularly in the 1960s, until it was disbanded in 1967 and its collection and records dispersed (Brown 1966, Kelly and Stanley 1995:580). Only a very few American scholars had been to Africa for research.

Since those times, there has been an impressive spread of knowledge of African art and culture at many different social and interest-group levels, spurred on by the increasing presence of Africans in the United States. Africa is no longer "dark" in our country, but it is being positively received here by some, though its conflicts, dictatorships, and corruption in post-independence years have reinforced earlier stereotypes of Africans as a continent of primitives, incapable of governing themselves. Now, both positive and negative views of Africa exist side by side, I am pleased to have been, for some fifty years, associated with the increasingly favorable views of Africa and its arts and culture in the United States. May Africa continue to blossom in America, as well as elsewhere in the world.

Simon Ottenberg

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on funerary textiles from the Madagascar highlands (Betsileo); Sarah Fee's on a broad range of issues concerning cloth production and its use in the southwest; Wendy Walker and Edgar Kreb's on raffia cloths from the southeast; and Odland on a form of ikat from the Sakalava area that bears an uncanny resemblance to ikat from the Philippines. Between these four articles, we see everything from raffia and bark to cotton and silk. Indeed, even the latter is multifaceted. The biologist Richard S. Peigler, in his article on Malagasy raw silk, demonstrates that one particular silk cloth is itself a blend of mulberry silk (lanahihy) and wild silk (lanahily), a conclusion he draws from stunningly detailed photographs he took using a scanned electronic microscope (SEM).

Linton's textile collection is revealing in what it lacks as much as in what it contains. As Fee and others point out, Linton never collected European textiles, even though the Malagasy were using them extensively at the time he was there. Some of those hybrids may already be evident in the W.T. Rawleigh Collection of Malagasy Portraits dating between 1910–1930 that Chantal Radimilahy writes about. Indeed, Madagascar has had a long history of European contact, generating some of the earliest comprehensive accounts of textiles of anywhere in the sub-Saharan region of Africa. By the late nineteenth century, the French and British had greatly escalated their cloth trade to Madagascar, as elsewhere in Africa, leaving an indelible mark on local cloth production and use. In his essay on change in the weaving of Highland Madagascar, Simon Peers informs us that by the mid-nineteenth century, the Malagasy had already lost three-quarters of their previous, rather diverse, textile production. He describes the remains as the "survival of pockets of techniques and styles."

One of those survivals is the so-called lamba, a rectangular-shaped cloth woven in two parts and, depending on the context, used for either the living or the dead. Once particular to only certain Madagascar groups, the lamba and its name are now recognized throughout much of the island as quintessential Malagasy attire. The coeditors emphasize the cultural importance of the lamba all the more by including two appendices, one by Michael Razafiarivony on lamba song and another by Chantal Radimilahy on lamba and proverbs.

Change in Madagascar textile production, as Peer notes, is about more than just the survival of the old and traditional. Some weaving experienced interesting permutations as a result of European contact. By the late nineteenth century, some Malagasy weavers were replicating the designs on European traded damask, resulting in a cloth with an entirely new aesthetic. Damask-inspired cloths were so much the norm by the time Linton was there that he felt compelled to collect it, and may even have thought of it as "traditional."

After reading Kusimba, Odlund, and Bronson's volume, with its emphasis on the cultural mix that underlies Madagascar textile production, I came away convinced more by the Asian (and European) elements in Malagasy textiles than by the sub-Saharan African ones, suggesting that more attention could have been given to arguing for the latter. As well, I felt that that there could have been a more concerted effort to contextualize the cloths featured in the Rawleigh portraits as they relate, or do not relate, to the Linton collection. But overall, I praise the authors for their comprehensive, well-illustrated, and high-

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