

BOMI ODUFUNADE IN CONVERSATION WITH SIMON OTTENBERG

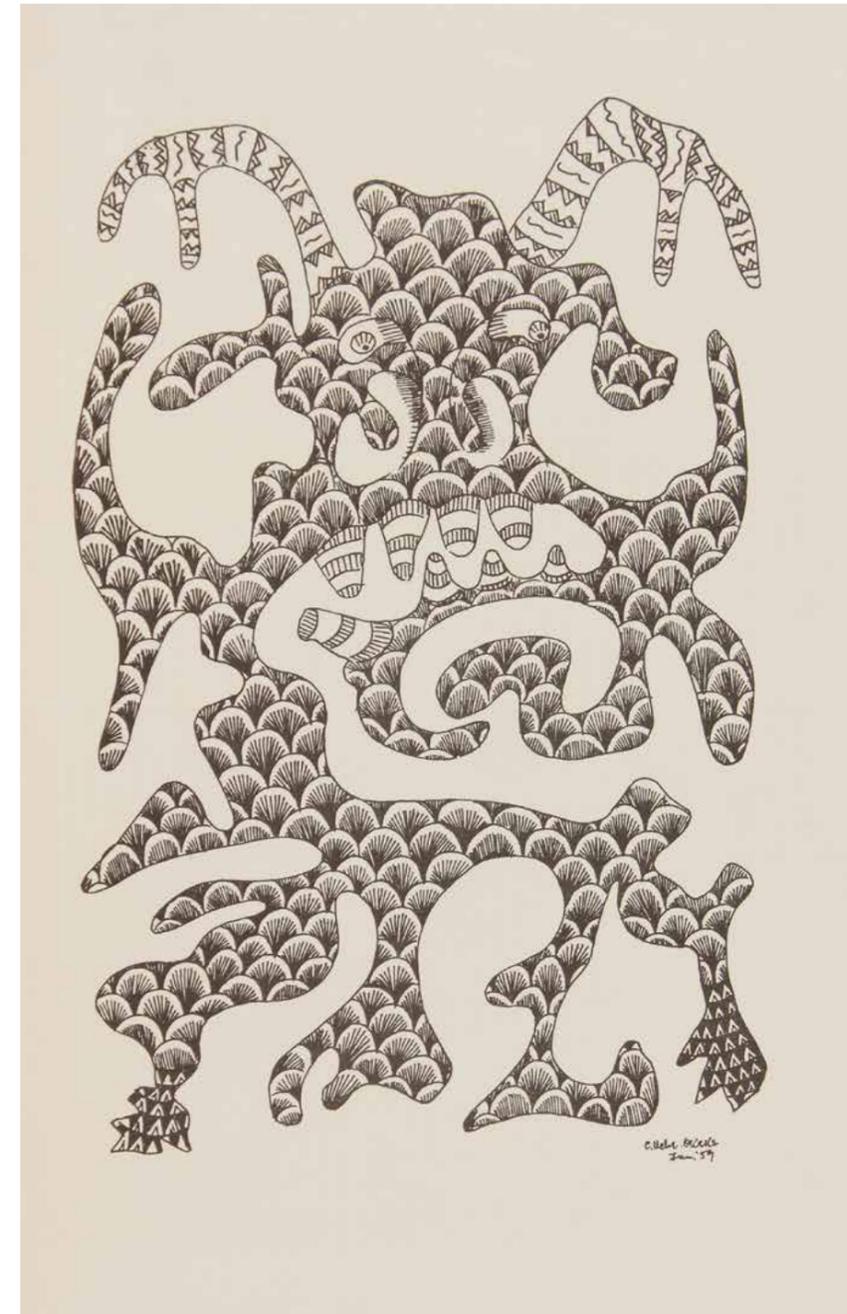


Installation view: *The Art of Translation*

What begun as a research trip to Nigeria in the 1950s, resulted in what is now regarded as one of the most important collections of the arts of Africa in the world. In over 50 years, Dr. Simon Ottenberg, professor emeritus at the University of Washington in Seattle built a renowned and historic art collection, acquiring works of painting, sculpture and prints throughout Africa, as well as assembling a compelling collection of carvings, masks, household tools and ceremonial objects. The collection's strength lies in its historical richness, documenting the varying traditions of artists producing work on the continent from 1950 to 1991 amidst the Pre- and Post-independence period. It is a testament to Ottenberg's occupation as a cultural anthropologist, wherein, he collected works for pleasure and for research interests, never seeing them as investments.

In 2012, he gifted 145 major works of modern and contemporary African art from his personal collection to the Newark Museum in New Jersey, where a selection of works are now on view in the exhibition, *The Art of Translation*. Presenting a historical overview of modern and contemporary Nigerian art, the show features 24 works spanning the 1940s to 2000, by artists including Bruce Onobrakpeya, Jacob Afolabi, Obiora Udechukwu, Ada Udechukwu, Chinwe Uwatse, Olu Oguiibe, Chika Okeke-Agulu and Marcia Kure. The noted scholar says, "I collected West African objects until the mid-1980s for pleasure. By then, good affordable African pieces became hard to find and I stopped. But between 1992 and 1997, I did research on contemporary Nigerian art, curated an exhibition, and wrote a book, for which I purchased works from Nigerian artists."

The Art of Translation is a powerful survey, both in its scale and focused presentation. It openly illustrates the story of a nation grappling with cultural and social evolution within the geopolitical landscape of Pre- and Post colonialism. Grouped in chronological order, the works, all on paper, reveal the aesthetics, and cultural contexts of art in African society. The show comprises of many captivating gems including works by one of the pioneers and masters of modern art, Akinola Lasekan. This early watercolour of a famous Yoruba king, Ajaka of Owo or Ajaka Owa (ca. 1944) painted while Nigeria



Uche Okeke, *The Unknown Brute*, 1959, lithograph of an ink drawing on paper, 30 x 20cm
The Simon Ottenberg Collection, gift to the Newark Museum, 2012, copyright the artist

was still a British colony; the Cubist Abstract work, *Njikoka Series* (1982) by E. Okechukwu Oditia, revitalises the tired traditions of Western art challenging conventional forms of representation; and a suite of ink drawings from the *Oja Suite* (1962) by Uche Okeke. In 1960, Okeke declared in the Zaria Art Society Manifesto, "Our new society calls for a synthesis of old and new, of functional art and art for its sake." He formed a rebel arts group with fellow artist, Bruce Onobrakpeya and others adopting new styles within the artistic process. The drawings highlight the process of their construction, making evident the diligence with which they were made. Embracing a new visual language from *uli*, an Igbo painting tradition, this group of works demonstrates that the drawings remain contemporary and relevant, continuing to engage.



Akinola Lasekan, *Ajaka of Owo or Ajaka Owa*, ca. 1944, watercolour and gouache on paper, 60 x 50cm
The Simon Ottenberg Collection, gift to the Newark Museum, 2012



Chika Okeke-Agulu, *Knotty Affair*, 1993, watercolour on paper, 37.5 x 55cm
The Simon Ottenberg Collection, gift to the Newark Museum, 2012, copyright the artist

“We are thrilled to be the home for this important collection,” adds Dr. Christa Clarke, the museum’s Senior Curator, Arts of Africa. “With Dr. Ottenberg’s transformative gift, the museum can present more comprehensively, the creative contributions of Africa’s artists over the past century, and in doing so, contribute to an expanded understanding of art movements across the globe.”

Omenka’s London and New York editor, Bomi Odufunade speaks to the enigmatic scholar about Africa, collecting and his legacy.

OM: You started collecting over 50 years ago. What specifically led you to collecting the arts of Africa?

I studied Anthropology at Northwestern University from 1949 to 1953, the first major African Studies program in the United States. Our two major professors (Melville J. Herskovits and William R. Bascom) had both collected African art and were enthusiastic over it. Then I went to Nigeria in the early 1950s to study Afikpo social organization, kinship and local level politics. There I discovered these wonderful traditional-style masquerades, some with over fifty masqueraders and so I studied that too. This resulted in an article in a book, *Humorous Masks and Serious Politics at Afikpo*, and a book, *Masked Ritual of Afikpo: The Context of an African Art*. I used to pass through Lagos and sometimes visited Ibadan. In both places, and in galleries, I came upon the interesting work of painters, sculptors

and printmakers, employing European art techniques (which they sometimes modified in Nigeria) and African scenes, both traditional and modern. I was intrigued by this new art and collected some works in Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Europe and the United States and continued to do so until almost recently. In the 1960s, there were maybe twenty Nigerian modern artists in the country. By the time I studied a group of artists from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in the 1970s, there were several hundred of them, many trained in Nigerian universities, technical colleges and schools of education. I collected many works from Nsukka, which forms the heart of my modern African collection, now at the Newark Museum.

OM: What other works do you have in your personal collection?

I am a collector at heart and have also collected several hundred

Northwest Coast Native American and Canadian First peoples' silkscreen works. This grew out of living since 1954, in the Pacific Northwest, where, as in Africa, I watched the development of ethnic consciousness and the related arts in local Native American communities. I have donated some three hundred of these silk screen works to two Seattle museums.

OM: What was your first purchase?

I do not remember what my first purchase was. Perhaps it was a work by Kevin Echeruo, a young, not yet well-trained Igbo artist, who had a show in Enugu in 1960. It was a village scene, a genre work. Unfortunately, he died of illness at the time of the Biafran war. When I bought these modern works in the early days, I knew virtually nothing about them or their artists. They were low in price and I had a little money in my pocket. I just liked them; sculpture, painting and prints.

OM: Many works in the collection demonstrate artists engaging in their countries' cultural and aesthetic traditions such as in Nigerian artist, Uche Okeke's *The Unknown Brute* (1959) and drawings from the *Oja Suite* (1962) where the artist is evoking a new visual language derived from *uli*, a traditional Igbo design. Would you say your selection of works is a reflection of your anthropological background when choosing and acquiring pieces for your collection?

As an anthropologist, I tend to focus on the social lives of artists and how this influenced their art. I am not trained in art history and have difficulty describing art works in art historical terms. I was never trained to see. An art historian can look at a work of art and tell how it was built up, and is more conscious of contrasts in planes and in colours than I am. I am interested in the lives of artists.

OM: Your personal collection is remarkable for its number of iconic Pre-and Post independence period works by Nigerian artists. Included in the selection of paintings gifted to Newark Museum are various notable works such as, *Ajaka of Owo* or *Ajaka Owa* (1944) by one of the pioneers of art in Nigeria, the late Akinola Lasekan and E. Okechukwu Odita's *Njikoka Series* (1982), father of renowned artist Odili Donald Odita. Why is Nigeria so significant and important to your collection?

Because Nigeria is where I did much of my research and because it is rich in artists, formerly traditional ones, and now modern ones. There are now over several thousand practicing modern artists in Nigeria, numerous galleries in Lagos, some in Abuja and Ibadan, and a Lagos art auction house.

OM: You have also acquired works by artists from South Africa, Sierra Leone and Ghana. Are there any other artists from other countries on the continent that particularly interest you but have yet to purchase?

Yes, there are other artists, but living in Seattle and not travelling widely, I am not as aware of them, as I otherwise might be. I would have liked to collect Ibrahim El-Salahi, a Sudanese artist, and the South African artist, Gavin Jantjes.

OM: The growth of technology on the continent has led to experimentation of digital photography and video among artists. What are your interests, if any, in say new media?



E. Okechukwu Odita, Panel 4-Njikoka Series, 1982, screenprint on paper, 87.5 x 44cm
The Simon Ottenberg Collection, gift to the Newark Museum, 2012, copyright the artist



Marcia Kure, Emerging from the Whirlwinds - for Chika, 1997, watercolor and pencil on paper, 75 x 55cm
The Simon Ottenberg Collection, gift to the Newark Museum, 2012, copyright the artist

I have not followed new media. Though I like the video work of William Kentridge, the South African artist, and I found his recent Metropolitan Opera direction of Shostakovich's *The Nose*, fascinating. I would like to collect some of his art.

OM: What is the last work of art you recently purchased?

I do not remember the last work I obtained. It was a few years ago.

OM: In 1997, you were instrumental in conceiving the seminal exhibition, *The Poetics of Line: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group*, at the National Museum of African Art (Smithsonian) in Washington. Are there any other exhibitions you would like to see or initiate?

I was involved in an exhibition which you may not know of, at the Seattle Art Museum. I donated a fairly complete range of masks from Afikpo, the Igbo group. Pam McClusky, the Curator of African Art at Seattle Art Museum, suggested that I go back and collect dresses and costumes, that she would include a masquerade of mannequins for the exhibition. For the past five years, there have

been twenty five mannequins, fully dressed in masquerade costumes, representing two masquerade forms at Afikpo in the African section of the Seattle Art Museum. I would also like to see some exhibitions of work by Muslim traditional and modern artists from the Western Sudan area, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Mali, Senegal, and so on. Their art, while rarely representative, has been neglected.

OM: What will happen to the remaining works in the Simon Ottenberg collection?

The remaining works in my modern African collection will go to the Newark Museum, my Native American works to the Seattle Art Museum and The Burke Museum at the University of Washington.

The Art of Translation: The Simon Ottenberg Gift of Modern and Contemporary Nigerian Art is on view at Newark Museum, 49 Washington Street, New Jersey through to 26 January 2014, or visit www.newarkmuseum.org.