Daniel Yohannes Family African Gallery
Denver Art Museum
reviewed by Shannen Hill

The Denver Art Museum has opened the doors to a new “wing”—a building by Daniel Libeskind—and with it a permanent gallery for its African collection. This is great news since no other public collection of African art is on display in any state that shares Denver’s time zone. The DAM administration, however, has not really embraced the responsibility that attends this fact (but more on that later). The museum is fortunate to employ a curator who is without question one of the most innovative minds and compelling writers working in African art history today: Dr. Moyosore Okediji, associate professor at the University of Colorado-Denver. Although the DAM embraces a team approach to installations (which appears to diminish its curators’ influence), the fine permanent exhibition of African art here is principally Okediji’s achievement. The educational components are both well conceived and enjoyable. Credit here largely goes to Heather Nielsen, master teacher for Native Arts and head of Community and Family Programs.

Visitors are wisely advised upon entrance that “The time to view Africa as an exotic far-off land has passed” (Fig. 1). A Senufo wooden bed hangs above at a dramatic 60º angle. Nearby, an Esu dance wand and a Tola Wewe drawing, Urban Immigrants (2004), provoke a journey of reconsideration as to what, where, and who constitutes the Africa of our day. These set the stage for a circular tour of art from the continent with a sprinkling of diasporic works. (Disconcertingly yet typically, Yinka Shonibare, an African of superstar status, is included in the Modern and Contemporary holdings. All others mentioned here are in the African gallery.) Okediji has avidly collected contemporary works since he began working for the DAM in 1999 and, now that Africa has a gallery, these paintings, drawings, and sculptures are intermixed with classic works. Named artists are given primacy of place; thus, the common prejudice that Africa’s artists were “anonymous” is countered for mindful viewers. Among the eight works on view by known, living artists, one also finds pieces by the Master of Ikerre (late nineteenth–mid twentieth centuries), Olowe Ise (c. 1873–c. 1938), and Master of the Owu (c. 1850–1925). Others are labeled “artist not known”—my preference would have been for “artist not recorded.” In these ways Okediji’s message—borrowed from Fernando Alvim—“The time to view Africa as an exotic far-off land has passed”—causes debate among visitors, with some in full agreement and others insisting that Africa is “different.”

According to Nielsen, the environs and interactive nature of African masquerade served as a metaphoric guide for the installation. Okediji imagined a choreography of visitors moving through the space observing art installed at varying heights, objects on view at every turn, a performance that adapts the living arts to the necessarily fixed museum displays. The layered sounds of masquerade are evoked through multiple large quotes from African artists affixed throughout the gallery, through the music stations, where visitors can enjoy a huge trove of African tunes in numerous styles, and in a children’s interactive game wherein individual instruments are heard based on which icon is selected. The idea plays out well. The art that is secured in place is sensed as but one part of a dynamic and theatric experience.

Furthering the masquerade metaphor, viewers are welcomed to take part in the installation. For Nielsen, “Experiences matter ... [we want to engage visitors’] life experiences, opinions, imaginations, and fantasies.” To do so, she and Okediji authored text that aims to help viewers “relate on a personal level” to the art. A Sowei mask is a case in point. Here a Mende author and Okediji affixed a huge quote: “A person can’t be beautiful without a departed twin has “gone to Lagos” to make a

1 Entrance to the new African gallery at the Denver Art Museum. A quote from Fernando Alvim—“The time to view Africa as an exotic far-off land has passed”—causes debate among visitors, with some in full agreement and others insisting that Africa is “different”.

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fortune for the family. They learn about lost-wax casting and that Asanti peoples used gold as a currency until the British introduced coins in 1905. They learn that gold weights are associated with “an Asanti proverb”—though this should be amended to read “proverbs,” since context is everything in their recitation. Regrettably, the inset guide for the Kongo display has pictures without dates; thus, visitors may believe that those taken between 1905 and 1915 represent the present day.

Modestly extended labels offer another means of imparting knowledge. Nine objects enjoy this privilege, and the information on them sometimes makes the viewer think about global relations. For instance, the label for a beautiful Fang Ngil notes, among other things, that French colonial administrators banned Ngil societies, and with it the making of like-named masks. The text beside a heavily and brightly painted oil diptych by Romanus Isichei takes up contemporary political strife. The copy to Still Searching (2001) describes the artist’s metaphorical use of colors and forms, each meant to convey political turbulence and social fragmentation. The meandering footprints that cross the two canvases impart the dislocation of refugees who must repeatedly relocate. One work that would benefit from an extended label is Okediji’s thought-provoking display of Akire mud-based paintings and the videos that record their making (Fig. 2). Okediji’s commission of these works for the museum enables visitors to see “something no one has: women muralists of Ile Ife.” But this privilege is lost on viewers, and I suspect that Okediji will answer debates that his commission generates as he writes his book on the subject. All this said, the video footage—seven screens divided into a three-part ritual labeled “Preparing ... Painting ... Praying”—is stunning.

The DAM does exemplary work in creating educational displays for children, and in the African galleries Nielsen and Okediji have lived up to this fine standard. The gallery contains a small space for art-making and visitors can hang their signed creations on a wall beneath a Tola Wewe quote: “Your art work is like your fingerprint.” Elsewhere children are encouraged to place a hand upon a video monitor to watch an animated relay of “A boy’s journey” within a Yaka mask. Highly pleasurable for young ones—certainly inventive—this video and mask are installed inside a nook that kids crawl into (Fig. 3). It is a space all their own. After laying a small palm upon the screen, a cartoon dancer greets the kids, “Jambo!” (This is, perhaps, the one African greeting that American children learn in schools.) The masked figure hops into the air, off the North American continent, and paddles a canoe across the Equator to Central Africa. Here the ten-year-old joins his fellow initiates “at school where they learn to hunt, fish, perform ritual songs and dances, and carve and decorate masks.” Eventually the young men return home singing and dancing and wearing masks like this one.” The animated dancer then paddles back to North America and crawls into a schematic of the DAM cubby. Now the Yaka mask near the monitor lights up.

As to the classic works, all but one on view were made between about 1850 and 1950. Most are beautifully crafted. Besides those noted elsewhere, my eye was enraptured by a Luba
hip mask, and I admired a delicate nineteenth century Asanti gold scale. A rare door by the Master of Ikerre is splendid to see, but visitors who approach the gallery through its front entrance likely miss it because it is behind a partition outside of the circular loop (Fig. 4). A fine Ethiopian harp is displayed among other musical instruments (Fig. 5), one of which is installed inside the expansive platform; we look down into a Yaka split drum. These are near the music station where visitors can rest and tune out (or into!) the world around them. Other noteworthy paintings on display include Soliloquy: Life’s Fragile Fictions (1997) by the ever-poetic Moyo Ogundipe and The One-Legged Don’t Always Speak (M’Bukus No Bokam Sempremente) (1992), by Fernando Alvim (Fig. 6). Francis Nnaggenda’s Spiritual Messenger (c. 1970), a fantastic sculptural work made from recycled metal, is nicely placed.

Steve Osborne’s display mounts are expertly crafted. Elegantly minimalist, they never distract from the art. I marveled at the delicate mounts for the Asanti gold weights and combs from several cultures, and that for a long wood and ivory Kuba pipe. Dan Kohl and Lehlan Murry designed the display cases and lighting within them. The largest display case—undulating and mountainous—is centrally placed, holds many objects, and nearly fills the gallery (Fig. 7). It is an ambitious design and, although it imposes a kind of claustrophobic response to the gallery, it does overcome the problem at the heart of the matter: DAM administrators offered too little space to African art from the get-go. In all but three cases the lighting is awful because it interferes with the art. It is atrocious in the cases with Central African sculpture. It is impossible to really see, let alone enjoy, a fine Luba rendition of a diviner’s spirit wife that is situated near the floor. Here lights set to illuminate a Benin plaque from above shine through the glass atop the Luba sitter. Nearby, four sculptures—by Yaka, Songye, Kongo, and Kuba artists—compete mightily with expensive, silver-toned halogen lights that project out into their space (Fig. 8). The designers need to recess them. Okediji said that they liked the “industrial look” and then, after a pause, he wryly added, “because there’s so much industry in Africa.” In some cases, however, Kohl and Murry got it right: The lights illuminating a Baule figure are embedded in the case above it and do not compete with the viewer’s attention. Rather, this fine work and its neighbor, an Ose Sango, rivet our attention.

Now to the limits of the gallery itself. Okediji, Nielsen, and others have done fantastic work with the regrettably small space that DAM administrators gave to African art. Libeskind’s entrancing new building more than triples the square footage of exhibition space at the DAM to 205,042 square feet. The DAM owns more than 900 objects by African artists, but just 80 are on view and they are crammed into a space that is just 2,689 square feet. Surely the Modern and Contemporary Department could have made do with a bit less than its 19,278 square feet. (“But the art is so much larger,” one hears in protest.) And Oceanic art, with its monumental works? It has a scant 1,620 square feet and the ceiling in this otherwise cavernous building is quite low. The DAM owns Oceanic works that can never be displayed in this space. Perceptions aside, the size of individual works is not the issue. As ever, museum politics dictate such decisions.

The Museum Guide has a misleading cross-section diagram (Fig. 9) that has the African and Oceanic galleries situated east of those for Modern and Contemporary art. (Mind you,
the true directional axes of these spaces.) Having seen this schematic months prior to the opening, I was thrilled to think that African art would have so much space. In reality, African and Oceanic art are tucked away in spaces that lie directly upon the numbers 3 and 4 on this diagram. One thinks, wryly, that Modern and Contemporary art trump all other considerations.

The African and Oceanic galleries are what one friend calls “by-the-way spaces.” They are as much an afterthought to DAM administrators as they were to architect Daniel Libeskind when he repeatedly described his creation as a space for Modern and Contemporary art and illustrated his talk only with images of these galleries. African and Oceanic are the only galleries at the DAM that are not accessible on their own. One can only approach them through galleries devoted to Western art. The residue lingers. In trying to study marvelous works behind Plexiglas, Okediji said to me, “You see your shadow. And through yourself, you see the object. And though you may not know it, it’s also reflecting on you.” When I shared my disappointment over an Oceanic display—narrowly encased and troublesomely lit—he hinted at his own frustration: “It’s like salad. You don’t have to cook it.” Although we laughed, in truth it is a tiresome complaint. Museum administrators, please hear me: Give African art the space it is a tiresome complaint. Museum administrators—those who dictate how much space curators and educators/community builders are given to share art and knowledge—lack such sound foresight and dedication.

**Notes**
1. Okediji is also curator of Oceanic art at the DAM.
2. Heather Nielsen, “A New Denver Art Museum: Re-defining the Museum Experience.” Lecture, University of Denver, November 1, 2006. All Nielsen quotations and citations are from this lecture, or from personal communication on October 3 and November 7, 2006.
3. Okediji had the marvelous idea of setting the museum’s egungun mask in motion through the circular path that visitors use, but DAM conservators nixed it. Now the mask rotates slowly on a pedestal set at a distance. Undeterred, Okediji is making his own egungun, less precious than the DAM’s, to realize his vision (all Okediji citations and quotations from personal communication on October 3, 2006). Heather Nielsen also plans to have a local artist make something resembling a Central African nkisi nkondi on site, with input from students enrolled in a class.
6. The docents are too timid. They venture into the galleries only so far (about six paces) and on two occasions cut and run with great enthusiasm back to the modern and contemporary displays. “This mask was used in a masquerade,” offered one flatly. Another docent gamely took her charge on the full circular tour of the space, and although she tried to say something substantive, her remarks about two Yoruba pieces were factually incorrect. The museum really must do something about this. For better or worse, docents educate. When considering the display of Akire mud-based paintings and the videos that record their making, one expects something more than, “It’s really a ritual so I think it’s special. And they chant and whatever.”
7. Docent quotes and three presentations witnessed by the author on October 3 and November 7, 2006.

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**This cross-section of the Denver Art Museum (including its original 1971 building, designed by Gio Ponti at right) appears in the Museum Guide given to visitors upon admission and on a large display in the Libeskind building’s lobby. It misleads. African and Oceanic galleries are really situated in small rooms that lie respectively upon the numbers 4 and 3 on this diagram.**