

African Arts at 50: Teaching African Art in the Face of Apartheid

by Anitra Nettleton

In 1967 the first issue of *African Arts* was published. In 1967 I first enrolled at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg (Wits), for a BA degree, majoring in English Literature, History of Art, and Fine Art, in a class entirely of white students. This was eight years after the English medium universities in South Africa had been closed to black students under the system of apartheid.¹ Nationalist party rule had, in 1959, legislated this final educational discrimination in which black, white, “coloured,” and Indian people were separated into their own highly unequal educational systems. The mid-1960s nevertheless saw a generation of accomplished black artists (Sidney Kumalo, Ezrom Legae, Dumile Feni, among many others) emerge as powerful presences on the contemporary art scene.³ Despite the lack of access to tertiary education for these black artists, they had acquired formal art training at the men’s recreation centre in Polly Street (Johannesburg) (Miles 2004), as others such as Azaria Mbatha and Cyprian Shilakoe had done at the Evangelical Lutheran Church art school at Rorke’s Drift (Natal) (Hobbs and Rankin 2003). In this environment, the appearance of the first issues of *African Arts* probably did not have a wide impact in South Africa, although, by the early 1970s, the journal’s art competition was a space through which Louis Maqhubela, Tito Zungu, Dumile Feni, and Cyprian Shilakoe were introduced to a wider international market (Anon. 1970, 1973). Inclusion in these issues of short pieces on the winners provided a beacon of recognition for those attempting to work against the overwhelming negation of African cultural achievement inherent in apartheid’s separatism.

Under apartheid, objects made by African peoples were all placed in ethnographic museums, reflecting the Euro-American hierarchies of culture which apartheid strove to maintain. But while in Europe and the US the acknowledgement of the aesthetic value of African objects allowed them to be appropriated into the category of “art,” under apartheid ideology no such appropriation was possible in the public domain. When contemporary black artists made paintings or sculptures, they were classified in Afrikaans and at official institutions as “Bantoeunks” (Bantu-art) and thus placed on the same footing as the supposedly “primitive” forms of historical African art.

The art-history syllabi of all the Fine Arts Departments in South African “white” universities were, at that time, entirely Eurocentric, with some attention paid to white South African artists working within accepted European modernist modes (Nettleton 2006). In the three years of my undergraduate degree and the subsequent two of Honors courses, I, like most other students in these privileged and exclusively white spaces, had absolutely no formal exposure to any form of indigenous African art. Yet, in that predigital age, there lurked in the periodicals section of the art and architecture library at Wits two issues of *African Arts*, at which hardly anyone ever

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Celebrating African Arts at 50 and Its Place in Africa

by Tobenna Okwuosa

The first copies of *African Arts* I saw were in Jean Borgatti’s office at University of Benin, Nigeria, during her 2002–2003 Fulbright tenure. Then I was a graduate student in Painting. I was impressed by the sharp color and black-and-white photographs that give more life to the essays. I got my first two copies of *African Arts* (vol. 23, no. 3, July 1990, and vol. 34, no. 4, Winter 2001) as gifts when I came to the Fowler Museum, UCLA, to give a talk on my artistic project at Worcester State College (now Worcester State University), in Worcester, MA. I was at WSC for three months as the first recipient of the Philip L. Ravenhill Fellowship, administered by the Fowler Museum. In one of the two copies I got, Philip Ravenhill wrote the First Word titled “The Challenge of History.” Ravenhill, in this introductory essay, mourned the practice of exhibiting African arts without history, which according to him entrenched the notion of “otherness.” His conclusion was that “failing to deal with the history of Africa, all too often we fail to deal with its present” (Ravenhill 1990:8).

African Arts has the reputation of being “synonymous with the study of African art” (Roberts 2005:1). I, more artist and critic than historian, am greatly honored to have been asked to join the illustrious scholars who have written First Words or op-ed pieces for *African Arts*. Since 1967, *African Arts* has presented 1,470 articles of various types and lengths, 999 book reviews, and 676 exhibition reviews. The journal itself came into existence about ten years after the first PhD in African art history was awarded to Roy Sieber, and the second to Robert Farris Thompson (Ross 1992:6). With the journal’s objective to cover traditional and modern art and expressive culture of Africa and its diasporas, most Africanists have found it to be an important journal in which to be published. Indeed, it was the first journal devoted to African expressive culture distinguished by full-color illustrations. Over its years of existence, the journal has made available well-researched studies as well as insightful reviews of exhibitions and publications. Equally important, it provided dramatic illustrations covering a broad spectrum of the arts and their context—singularly important in the pre-Internet age.

Herbert Cole (2007:4) reveals that the initial idea that led to the founding of *African Arts* by Paul Proehl came from Proehl’s “discussion with the artist El Salahi on an airplane in 1965 or ‘66.” Cole further states that “Both Proehl and John Povey, the first editor, felt all arts and especially modern/contemporary ones deserve real play in their new venture, so from the first issue until 1975, more than fifty recent artists were featured, if only in fairly short articles” (Cole 2007:4). If *African Arts* gave more attention to “traditional” African art after the mid-1970s, it has evolved with the field, rediscovering contemporary African art. Although initially adjudged “inauthentic” and “derivative,” contemporary African art has continued to increase in its production and attracts research interest, compelling John Povey to ask, after the 1989 Triennial, “What are we going to do about contemporary African

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looked. These, the issues of 1967 and 1968, were to be my introduction to a world of images, aesthetics and knowledge unavailable elsewhere in Johannesburg, except, surprisingly, the Michaelis Art Library in Johannesburg's Public Library, which had a complete run of volumes from 1967 onwards. Starting an MA (by dissertation) on African art, I took out a personal subscription in 1973, but the Wits library only started subscribing from 1974. Prior to 1977, there were no academics in South Africa who had specialized in this area, so *African Arts* was to be a fundamental resource for me. That I was in a position of enormous advantage within the wider educational landscape of South Africa, having access to libraries in which these journals were housed and the means to buy my own subscription, was something of which I was constantly aware.

I introduced African art courses at Wits in 1977, first at postgraduate level, but then increasingly as part of the undergraduate curriculum. For many years, Wits was the only South African university with an Art History syllabus that included African art. While we were able to import books for the library, the availability of the many articles based in deep and sustained field-research in the pages of *African Arts* was to be key to our ability to teach. Some black artists and scholars excluded from our libraries had access to *African Arts* through the United States Information Service in Johannesburg or through private individuals' libraries.⁵ The journal's articles provided not only images and information, but also models for methodological approaches for use in our own research.⁶ But the focus of the journal also endorsed the view that African art was largely confined to sculpture of one kind or another, from west or central Africa, both of which views we quickly came to dispute.

The many *African Arts* articles that dealt with museum collections were also important in this history. Prior to 1978 there were no collections of artworks from Africa easily available for public viewing in South Africa.⁷ Through the 1960s and 1970s, one or two collectors acquired canonical pieces of historical African art and organized some exhibitions, many of which were staged at public museums⁸ not accessible to black viewers. Collections of South African historical African art were confined to ethnological museums across the country and were never displayed as "art," because "art" in official apartheid thinking was something made by Europeans (Nettleton 1989). One of these museums was housed in the Anthropology Department of Wits and in its vitrines and stores was hidden William Burton's collection of Luba and Songye materials from the 1930s, alongside many other treasures (Leibhammer and Rankin-Smith 1992). As the "authentic" pieces advertised for sale in *African Arts* were from west and central Africa, the Burton collection was to provide us with an "authentic" base. But this categorical exclusivity also prompted us to value, collect, and display objects made by South African makers in the same space and to the same degree as contemporary works classed as "art" within the western episteme. The Wits Art Museum, funded by the Standard Bank of South Africa, not only established a collection of historical African art, but also expanded an understanding of what of "African art" comprised through the inclusion of beadwork, cloth, ceramics, and contemporary arts (Nettleton 2008, 2009).

Yet there were some problematic issues that threaded through our endeavors to put African art on the academic map as a legitimate area of study, and many of these are still unresolved today. Our students were, until the mid-1980s, all white, and they were reading in the pages of *African Arts* and books acquired over the years a view of African art/material culture that was researched and told almost exclusively by white researchers.⁹ It was a view that also largely excluded South Africa, unwittingly playing into apartheid ideology.¹⁰ We all know the reasons for this; some of us will acknowledge the degree to which it reflected power relations in the supposedly postcolonial period, but it is something which, as I look back on the forty-five years I have spent researching African art in South Africa, has been increasingly troubling.

In the first seven years of my teaching of African art at Wits, from

art? ... [T]he issue ... will not go away. Why does the subject appear so resistant, or equally accurate, why are we so resistant to the subject?" He goes on: "We don't like modern African art because it doesn't fit within our comfortable disciplinary boundaries—in fact it challenges them at the profoundest levels" (Povey 1990, quoted in Stanley 2012:139). In Janet Stanley's opinion, "Nineteen Eighty-Nine marked a watershed year for modern African art studies" (Stanley 2012:139).

In its years of existence, *African Arts* has shown sufficient dynamism and growth and has focused on different subjects such as the traditional masks, sculptures, ceramics, textiles, architectures, body arts, festivals, ephemeral arts, contemporary arts, authorship, and authenticity. *African Arts* appeals to a wide spectrum of readers due to its dual nature as journal and magazine with content including scholarly articles, popular arts, exhibition reviews, and advertisements. The periodic self-evaluation and sending out of questionnaires are strategies the editors have used in improving the journal. Dialogue and First Word have been used to bring diverse views to the publication. In today's supposedly globalized world, in which the "politics of exclusion" that privileges artists and scholars who live in the West over those who live in Africa continues to exist,¹ giving someone who is based on the continent of Africa an opportunity to write the First Word shows a commitment towards a greater representation. As an artist and scholar based in Nigeria, I'm happy to have been asked to write the First Word of the 50th anniversary issue, to show the relevance of the journal in Africa.

Returning to Ravenhill's First Word: Through his essay, I began to understand some issues concerning African arts in the West and the importance of history. Ravenhill's First Word is in a special issue on *Portraiture in Africa* (Part I), guest edited by Jean Borgatti and in which Marla Berns published an article. These two individuals played different roles in my coming to the US: Jean gave me the call for the Ravenhill Fellowship application, and Marla was and is still the director of the Fowler Museum that administered the fellowship. After returning to Nigeria in 2005, I received a teaching appointment in a university, and these two issues of *African Arts* served as my guide in writing academic articles. I once used Dana Rush's article "Contemporary Vodun Arts of Ouidah, Benin" (vol. 34, no. 4, winter 2001), to prove to a senior colleague who said that it is wrong to use the first person singular in an academic essay, that it is allowed. But for the authoritative nature of *African Arts*, the disagreement would have continued.

In 2011, I was one of the scholars, writers, and artists based in Africa who received a Getty Foundation/ACASA Travel Grant for the Fifteenth Triennial Symposium held at the University of California, Los Angeles. During the Triennial, the James S. Coleman African Studies Center, publisher of *African Arts*, gave away back issues to those who came from Africa, and I benefitted from that generosity. With 126 issues of *African Arts* now on my bookshelf, I have more art journals than my university library and many other university/college libraries in Nigeria. This is a disturbing reality, even though *African Arts* is available on JSTOR digital archive, and scholars, researchers, and students in Africa are happier for it—should they actually be able to access the journal. This is more easily said than done in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, and certainly Nigeria, where Internet connections are unreliable and one cannot remotely access digital data bases, but must physically visit the library during the hours when it is open. Professor Borgatti has commented that at the University of Benin's Ekenwan Campus, the location of the Fine and Applied Arts Department, the university-provided Internet connection has been sporadic at best, and the data bases are accessible only at the main campus library. She frequently resorted to accessing JSTOR via American universities with which she was affiliated, using a personal modem, and downloading articles needed by students. It should be noted that one of the few remote access possibilities is through the American Embassy's e-Library. (To register for an e-Library account

1977 to 1985, there were no formal classes in which black students could engage in this area. Through the 1970s to the mid-1990s I conducted informal, invited classes on African sculptural traditions at centers like FUBA, FUNDA, the Open School, the Africa Centre, and the Johannesburg Art Foundation where black students were able to enroll. Until 1985, few of the students at these classes would ever have access to the libraries that housed *African Arts*, and their only encounters with the journal might have been at the workshops to which I took copies for them to look through. The extraordinary images in the journal were often inspirational for most black students, especially those who were admitted to Wits in the late 1980s, as was the experience of seeing African art being taken seriously and accorded respect. Yet there was always a sense of discomfort in these situations, prompted by ambivalence. Some students challenged the right of white scholars to present this material at all; their concern was not only that much of the art under discussion was originally part of rituals, but that people from outside the culture could not fully understand their significance. Others, however, found the material and the ways in which it was presented affirmative of African cultural concepts and inspirational for their own artistic production.

In recent months the stakes relating to who has the right to speak about African art have been raised exponentially by a vociferous group of young black scholars. Their view is that African heritage has been misappropriated by white academics under a system of colonial control. Alongside their demands that the visible monuments of colonial and apartheid domination be removed, they want their voices to be heard in producing the knowledge that defines African histories and art.¹¹ *African Arts* has, since its inception during the dark days of apartheid, through the dawn of our democracy, to the postcolonial and global present, shifted in its focus and its scope, and now hopefully it will provide a platform for many more African voices to be heard.

Notes

that gives you access to JSTOR, US films, and other resources, go to tinyurl.com/ircregistration and follow the directions.) Anyone with a tertiary degree or studying for one can register. We should lobby for a full run of *African Arts* in the license they maintain!²

Going through private, public and institutional libraries in Africa, a significant number of issues of *African Arts* can be found, thanks to the generosity of mostly American individuals and institutions. In her evaluation of the journal, Peju Layiwola, a scholar and artist who lives and works in Nigeria, who also benefitted from the James S. Coleman African Studies Center's giveaway of back issues at the Fifteenth Triennial, said: "I have found the *African Arts* journal a great resource: first as a graduate student between 1989–1991 and much later, cited it as a reference material for my students of art history. However, I find there is a near absence of writings of scholars based on the African continent in the journal. In fifty years, I would say that the journal has fared well but more needs to be done to correct this imbalance."³ Then the pertinent question is: Could the "near absence of writings of scholars based on the African continent in the journal" be a conscious act of exclusion? I don't think so. Rather, I have reasons to believe that the "imbalance"—dominance of articles by Western scholars and a handful of African scholars in the diaspora—is a reflection of the ratio of submissions made (more from scholars in America and Europe, and a few from scholars in Africa). The strong peer-review is also another factor that whittles down the few submissions from Africa. In spite of that, *African Arts* readers desire "to see more articles and discussions by native Africans, not outsiders" (Futa 1992:12).

As the journal enters its fiftieth year, the editors have to find ways to get more African scholars based on the continent to make submissions; and I believe that with more submissions from Africa, more will be published. And by publishing more articles by African scholars on the continent, people will see that *African Arts* is not just a journal about African art by "outsiders" but a journal in which "insiders" have a strong voice. Nomusa Makhubu, a scholar and artist

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African Arts (ISSN 0001-9933 print, 1937-2108 online) is published quarterly by the University of California, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1310, in spring, summer, autumn, and winter. For editorial information and advertising rates, write *African Arts*, The J.S. Coleman African Studies Center, University of California, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1310. Phone: 310-825-1218. Fax: 310-206-4746. Email: afartsedit@international.ucla.edu (editorial); afartsbus@international.ucla.edu (operations). The opinions of contributors and advertisers are not necessarily those of *African Arts*.

Subscription information: *African Arts* is distributed by The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA 02142. Subscription and address changes should be addressed to MIT Press Journals, One Rogers Street, Cambridge, MA 02142-1209. Phone: 617-253-2889, US and Canada 800-207-8354. Fax: 617-577-1315. Email: journals-orders@mit.edu. For fastest service and more information, subscribe online using our secure server at <http://mitpressjournals.org/aa>. Subscription rates: print and electronic, Individuals \$94.00, Students/retirees \$54.00, Institutions \$216.00; electronic only, Individuals \$87.00, Students/retirees \$43, Institutions \$187.00. Canadians add 5% GST. Outside the U.S. and Canada add \$23.00 for postage and handling for print edition. Individual JSTOR Access Fee: \$25 for Volumes 1–43 online from JSTOR. Prices subject to change without notice.

Single issues: Individuals \$23.00; institutions \$51.00. Canadians add 5% GST. Outside the U.S. and Canada add \$6.00 per issue for postage and handling. Prices subject to change without notice.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *African Arts*, MIT Press Journals, One Rogers Street, Cambridge, MA 02142-1209. Periodicals postage paid at Boston, MA and at additional post offices.

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African Arts is abstracted and/or indexed in IBZ: International Bibliography of Periodical Literature; SCOPUS; MLA International Bibliography

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African Arts Journal Consortium
Printed in Hong Kong.

1 See Nettleton (2006) for a discussion of how this impacted on art education in universities in South Africa.

2 The term “coloured” was, and still is, used in official South African parlance to denote persons of mixed race.

3 See the essays in Carman (2011) and Van Robbroeck (2011) for a history of some of these artists.

4 Coincidentally 1977 was also the year in which Walter Battiss published an article in *African Arts* on the Rorke’s Drift Centre (Battiss 1977).

5 For example, the collector and dealer Vittorino Meneghelli had a library of African art books and a subscription to the journal, and he allowed artists like Lucky Sibiyi to use this library.

6 In the period in question Elizabeth Schneider, Sandra Klopper, and I all completed PhD degrees on historical/modern arts among siNdebele-, isiZulu-, and tshiVenda-speaking peoples respectively. Catherine Vogel, Hazel Friedman, and Dian Levy completed MA dissertations on sePedi-, seTswana- (Ntwane), and siNdebele-speaking peoples’ arts. Jane Duncan obtained an MA on contemporary artists working in Limpopo. All graduated from Wits.

7 Some South African museums, like Iziko’s South African National Gallery, the Natal Museum in Pietermaritzburg, or the National Culture History Museum in Pretoria, had holdings of west and central African objects, but these were never displayed. In 1978 the Wits Art Galleries started a collection of African “art” as defined in places such as the pages of *African Arts*. As Wits was open to black visitors, anyone could access displays of this collection. See Klopper (2004) for a critical account of collecting African Art in South Africa.

8 Among these were The Pretoria Art Museum and the Art Museum at the University of Stellenbosch (Nettleton 2013).

9 That this was still the case in the mid 1990s is reflected in Oguibe’s (1995) review of the book *Africa; Art of a Continent* that accompanied the Africa ’95 Festival in London. It is also borne out by the overwhelming whiteness of presenters at ACASA triennial symposia over the years.

10 Thomas Matthews (1977, 1979) published two articles in *African Arts* on mural painting in South Africa. These were, significantly, the only articles on South African traditional arts in the journal prior to 1985, when a special issue with South African arts as a central focus was published (Nettleton and Vogel 1985). Here the emphasis was still largely on two-dimensional forms. The idea that South Africa lacked a sculptural tradition was embedded in almost every general book on African art published between 1960 and 1990, because much of the sculpture produced in the region was primarily functional (Nettleton 2007).

11 These are often students aligned with the #Rhodesmustfall and #feesmustfall movements, but also include young academics who have formed associations like the Black Mark Collective (<https://blackmarkcollective.wordpress.com>). I have been a direct target of the latter’s critique.

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who lives and works in South Africa, is one of the few “insiders” whose articles have been published in the journal. She said: “*African Arts* has been beneficial for both my research and teaching. It has been a useful resource. Classic articles by scholars such as Robert Farris Thompson, Rowland Abiodun, Herbert M. Cole, Sidney Kasfir, Henry John Drewal, Donald Cosentino, Chika Okeke-Agulu, Ikem Stanley Okoye, and many others have informed my teaching and research. There are very few journals like it. I recommend it to my students often.”²⁴ In conclusion, *African Arts* is an authoritative journal and its relevance to scholars and students in Africa cannot be overemphasized. The journal surely occupies a place of pride in Africa.

Notes

1 Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie (2010) queries Okwui Enwezor’s practice of using mostly African Diaspora artists in his definition of contemporary African arts through the mega-exhibitions he has curated. The same issue of exclusion that affects artists living and working on the African continent is raised by Rikki Wemega-Kwawu (2012). The practice or politics of exclusion is implied in Peju Layiwola’s statement: “I find there is a near absence of writings of scholars based on the African continent in the journal” (personal communication, June 22, 2016).

2 Jean Borgatti, personal communication, July 12, 2016.

3 Peju Layiwola, personal communication, June 22, 2016.

4 Nomusa Makhubu, personal communication, June 26, 2016.

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