In 1961, the Harmon Foundation, a leading American organization devoted to the support and promotion of African and African American artists, opened its landmark exhibition of contemporary African art entitled *Art from Africa of Our Time*. The Museum of Modern Art in New York also exhibited its first acquisition of contemporary African art, *Men Taking Banana Beer to Bride by Night* (1956) by the Tanzanian and Makerere-trained artist Sam Ntiro (Fig. 1) that year. The simultaneity of the Harmon Foundation show and the MoMA purchase was crucially important, drawing attention to African artists' modernity in a moment of shifting relationships between the United States and Africa. By 1961, many African nations had gained independence from colonial rule. During the same year, the Freedom Riders protested segregation in the American South; Congolese independence leader Patrice Lumumba was killed in a CIA-supported assassination plot; and eminent Pan-Africanist W.E.B. Du Bois emigrated to Ghana. Within the changing social and political contexts of colonialism, decolonization, and independence in Africa, artists developed new visual languages, and exhibitions such as *Art from Africa of Our Time* enabled American audiences to recognize their shared aesthetic and political concerns.

This transformative political and aesthetic moment is the backbone of the upcoming exhibition *African Modernism in America, 1947–1967*, which will tour from late 2022 through 2024. Organized by Fisk University Galleries in Nashville, Tennessee, and the American Federation of Arts, it will be the first major traveling exhibition to examine the complex connections between the new art that emerged in Africa during the 1950s and 1960s and American art and cultural politics. The exhibition will present new research undertaken by co-curators Perrin M. Lathrop (independent), Nikoo Paydar (independent), and Jamaal B. Sheats (director of Fisk University Galleries) over the past five years and will include archival documents, films, music, and photographs they encountered in the Fisk University Special Collections and the Harmon Foundation Papers and Photographic Archives at the Library of Congress, the David C. Driskell Center at the University of Maryland, and the National Archives of the United States, among other research sites. In addition to the research of its co-curators, the breadth of the arguments offered in *African Modernism in America* also relies upon the work of the exhibition catalogue contributors, including scholars Chika Okeke-Agulu, Kate Cowcher, Ozioma Onuzulike, and Paul C. Taylor. The catalogue, edited by Perrin Lathrop, will feature newly commissioned essays by these scholars, an interview with the late David Driskell by Jamaal Sheats, and an archival collage by the sculptor Ndidi Dike based on her commission for the exhibition, with an
introduction by fellow artist María Magdalena Campos-Pons. The book will also include critical artist biographies of all the artists in the exhibition written by a wide-ranging group of experts from across Africa, the United States, and Europe that will ensure the book’s status as an important reference for African modernism. The show reveals a similarly transcontinental network of artists, curators, and scholars that challenged assumptions about African art in the United States and thereby encouraged American engagement with African artists as contemporaries.

ART FROM AFRICA OF OUR TIME: EXHIBITING AFRICAN MODERNISM IN AMERICA

African Modernism in America, 1947–1967 will situate the work of the artists on display within the international power dynamics that characterized the decades following the end of World War II. All of the artists in the exhibition used their art to respond to the time in which they were living, a period marked by the promise of liberation movements and the shadow of Cold War-era international politics. The show will recognize the radical insistence on African artists’ contemporaneity in the literature, exhibitions, and discourse of their time and guide visitors towards an understanding of the motivating forces behind the formal and conceptual innovations on view within the galleries. The exhibition will unfold across four sections. The first will provide an overview of the different venues and organizations in the United States that supported the work of African modernists in the 1950s and 1960s; the second will review the contemporary art spaces founded on the continent in the years surrounding independence; the third will focus on the effects of transatlantic exchange between Africa and America on the work of both African and African American artists; while the fourth, a new commission by sculptor Ndidi Dike, will investigate the role of women in developing narratives of African modernism.

Each exhibition section will layer historical context with a focused examination of individual artists and artworks, pairing objects with archival documents, films, and photographs that enable the artists themselves to narrate their ambitions and processes. An illustrated timeline identifying important historical, political, artistic, and social events impactting the artists working across the geographies covered by the exhibition will be employed throughout the show’s sections to counter, in Johannes Fabian’s words, the persistent “denial of coevalness” of African arts, histories, and people with Eurocentric conceptions of modernity (see Fabian 2002).

African Modernism in America will open with the section “Art from Africa of Our Time: The Modern African Artist” to introduce the places and people who supported the display and promotion of modern African artists in the United States during the Cold War era. These include sites like the Harmon Foundation, HBCUs, the Museum of Modern Art, and artist Merton Simpson’s New York art gallery, which all exhibited then-contemporary art from Africa in the United States. The influence of these venues was wide-reaching, and their presentation of African art impacted art collecting in America. The section begins with a selected restaging of the 1961 Harmon Foundation exhibition Art from Africa of Our Time, which was the Foundation’s first survey of contemporary African art from the independence era and served as the blueprint for later continent-wide contemporary African art exhibitions that toured across America in the 1960s with the Foundation’s support. Featuring a range of styles and subjects, this opening section will include key artists and works from the 1961 exhibition, such as Ben Enwonwu’s engagement with indigenous artmaking practices.
in his c. 1949 ebony portrait of Samson Imade, a Benin carver (Fig. 2), an early example from Gerard Sekoto’s Blue Head series (Fig. 3), and Ethiopian artist Mamo Tessema’s Warrior from 1960 (Fig. 4), a compelling example of the artist’s abstracted figural sculptures. Though the 1961 exhibition included her still-life painting of a magnolia bloom, African Modernism in America will instead display Jamaican-born artist Suzanna Ogunjami’s 1934 painting A Nupe Princess (Fig. 5), a work in Fisk’s collection. The imagined portrait of an African royal, through which the artist lays claim to her African heritage and culture, challenges our understanding of African identity through the lens of diaspora.

In addition to featuring selections of artwork that the Harmon Foundation included in exhibitions like Art from Africa of Our Time, the first section of the exhibition will use archival film footage and documentary photographs to visualize the audience that would have come together at the openings of Harmon Foundation exhibitions in New York and elsewhere. The Foundation documented their early involvement with the African American art world in New York City in their film The Negro and Art (1933), which featured the prominent figures in attendance at the Foundation’s fifth exhibition of paintings, sculpture, and photography by African American artists and who supported the Foundation’s patronage of artists involved in the Harlem Renaissance. The film features shots of visitors touring the exhibition, including writer and scholar Alain Locke, the presidents of HBCUs like Hampton, Fisk, and Tuskegee, and philanthropic leaders of the day from organizations like the Phelps-Stokes Fund, which later hosted the 1961 exhibition Art from Africa of Our Time in their headquarters. Though preceding the historical scope of African Modernism in America, we plan to include the 1933 film as supplementary material in the first section of the exhibition to demonstrate the established network of White and Black leaders the Harmon Foundation built upon when later promoting the work of African artists in America and to visualize for visitors the complex racial politics that governed the physical navigation of the segregated American art world.
Known for their connections with prominent African Americans, the Harmon Foundation became a gatekeeper for African artists seeking entry to the American art scene at mid-century. The first section of the show will highlight the Foundation’s early engagement with modern African art in the postwar era that culminated in exhibitions like *Art from Africa of Our Time* and publications like *Contemporary Artists of Africa* (Washington 1960) and *Africa’s Contemporary Art and Artists* (Brown 1966). From 1947, when Akinọla Laṣekan (Nigeria) became the first African artist to contact the Harmon Foundation, through the Foundation’s closure in 1967, director Mary Beattie Brady and assistant director Evelyn S. Brown corresponded with artists, administrators, and organizations from across Africa to gather information about modern African art in the independence era. The display of artwork and archival material from the Harmon Foundation collection at Fisk and their archives at the National Archives and the Library of Congress will help *African Modernism in America* reconstruct the transnational networks that the Foundation enabled. These decades following World War II and preceding the global political, cultural, and racial reckoning of the late 1960s coincide with widespread American investment in fighting the cultural Cold War.

Though the Harmon Foundation was not funded by the United States government, it kept good connections in the State Department and among America’s network of liberal foundations, as well as longstanding ties to the African American community, which Brady and Brown called upon to facilitate the visits of contemporary African artists to the United States and organize exhibitions of their work (Walter 2003). Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the Foundation maintained its relationships with African American intellectual leaders and placed exhibitions of modern African art at HBCUs like Howard University in Washington DC, Fisk University in Nashville, and Hampton University in Virginia, among others. These exhibitions hosted by HBCUs, including those of Nigerian artists Ben Enwonwu and Akinọla Laṣekan, aimed to foster, according to Mary Beattie Brady, “the growing feeling for the value of the native cultures of Africa” among African Americans.4

The Harmon Foundation’s reputation for supporting Black artists through exhibitions was widely known. In his influential 1943 volume *Modern Negro Art*, artist, art historian, and Howard University professor James A. Porter credited the Foundation’s annual exhibitions as “among the greatest stimuli to the artists of the New Negro Movement” (1992: 97). Though their patronage was viewed as paternalistic by many leading African American

---

6 Akinọla Laṣekan (Nigeria, 1916–1972)
*A Street in Kano* (c. 1947)
Watercolor on paper; 24.77 x 33 cm
Fisk University Galleries, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1991.1068
*Photo: courtesy the Laṣekan Family*

7 Akinọla Laṣekan (Nigeria, 1916–1972)
*Ogedengbe of Ifesha in the Kiriji War* (c. 1958–59)
Oil on canvas; 68.6 x 88.3 cm
Fisk University Galleries, Gift of the Harmon Foundation, 1991.1121
*Photo: courtesy the Laṣekan Family*
artists, including Norman Lewis and Romare Bearden, for its privileging of sociological value over aesthetic merit, the Foundation continued to be utilized as a resource because their expansive network of support was unavoidable. Therefore, along with information about his artistic career in Lagos, Nigeria, Laṣeke sent a selection of works on paper to the Foundation, which they began to exhibit in early 1948, first at the Countee Cullen Branch of the New York Public Library in Harlem (Fig. 6). Selections from this body of work will be on view in African Modernism in America, in addition to later paintings like Ogedengbe of Ilesha in the Kiriji War (c. 1958–59) (Fig. 7), sent at Evelyn Brown’s request during preparations for Art from Africa of Our Time.

A few months after Laṣeke’s initial contact with the Harmon Foundation in June 1947, Ben Enwonwu wrote to Charles S. Johnson, the renowned sociologist and the first Black president of Fisk University. Enwonwu was encouraged by his friend from the West African Students Union in London, George Padmore, a leading Pan-Africanist journalist who had previously studied medicine at Fisk University, to reach out to Johnson for help planning a trip to the United States. Enwonwu wrote to Johnson about his aim to exhibit his art in the United States and his interest in “Negro African” art and in Fisk’s reputation for the study of African art in its art department. Johnson responded enthusiastically, putting Enwonwu in touch with Aaron Douglas, Richmond Barthélé, Alain Locke, and Mary Beattie Brady, who Johnson called “the mainspring in the arrangements for exhibitions of the work of Negro Art.” The US State Department and the British Information Service eventually cosponsored Enwonwu’s tour of the United States in October and November 1950, with the Harmon Foundation responsible for arranging an exhibition of his work at Howard University and scheduling a series of lectures, demonstrations, and events at universities and other institutions in New York, Washington, DC, Boston, and Vermont.

HBCUs like Fisk, Howard, and Hampton were important venues for the display of modern African art in the 1950s and 1960s, and their collaborations with African artists, and with the Harmon Foundation, will be highlighted in African Modernism in America. Founded across the American South in the wake of the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation as institutions of higher education for newly freed formerly enslaved peoples of African descent,
these were some of the only schools open to Black students far into the twentieth century, and some of the earliest institutions in the United States to adopt the study of African art and culture in their art departments. Although they were initially focused on vocational training, under the direction of artists like Aaron Douglas, James V. Herring, and James Porter the art departments at Fisk and Howard shifted in the mid-twentieth century to theoretical and socially conscious curricula (Powell and Reynolds 1999: 113–14).

Influenced by philosopher Alain Locke’s writings, including his famous “Legacy of the Ancestral Arts,” Douglas, especially, developed an international approach for his teaching at Fisk, where he became chairman of the Art Department in 1939, after completing a mural cycle at the invitation of Charles S. Johnson earlier in the decade (Locke 1997: 254–68). Following Du Bois’s conception of cultural Pan-Africanism, which was also influential among African artists like Lasèkkan and Enwonwu, Douglas’s Fisk murals emphasize and celebrate a rich African American past (Kirschke 1995: 110–14). Bringing this historical awareness to his teaching, Douglas presented examples of Egyptian, Persian, Assyrian, Greek, Roman, and sub-Saharan African art, in addition to European art history. In his classes, he emphasized the importance of ancient Egyptian and other African civilizations to modernity and encouraged his students to become ambassadors of African American culture (Earle 2007: 43–45). This kind of African American ownership over world culture was also promoted as the mission of Fisk’s Carl Van Vechten Gallery, the organizing venue of African Modernism in America.9

Reflecting on plans for a touring exhibition of Ben Enwonwu’s work during his 1950 travels to the United States, Mary Brady wrote that she hoped to encourage the student body at Howard to connect to “the modern cultural achievement of West Africa, as a bridge among living people in the world of today and not in the glass showcase field of the primitive.”10 Countering expectations about African art as being limited to historical or “traditional” wood sculpture, Enwonwu’s exhibition at Howard showcased the modern African artist’s contemporaneity. Paintings from this exhibition now in Fisk’s collection, including Oba Akenzua II (1949) (Fig. 8) and The Ghosts of Tradition (1949) (Fig. 9) will be on view in the first section of African Modernism in America to highlight the collaboration between the Harmon Foundation and Howard professor and curator James V. Herring in organizing Enwonwu’s exhibition in Washington DC. A wide range of Black Washington elites attended the opening, including Alonzo J. Aden, director of the Barnett Aden Gallery, and Emmanuel Ledan, a Haitian representative to the Pan-American Union (Fig. 10).11 Though an audience for modern African art was slow to develop among the White art world, Enwonwu and other African artists had a receptive audience among African Americans (Ogbechie 2008: 105). Where possible, the exhibition and catalogue will reproduce archival images of the individuals who supported the African artists of their time.12 As Claude Barnett, founder of the Associated Negro Press, wrote to Enwonwu the year after the artist’s visit, “Negroes in the United States are just awakening to an appreciation of their ties with Africa.”13 Enwonwu’s visit to the United States thus generated opportunities for Africans and African Americans to come together and share their creative and political struggles. This exhibition recognizes and centers that awakening.

Brady’s attempts in 1950 to generate interest in Enwonwu’s work among powerful art world elites, including curator René

---

d’Harnoncourt of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, were less successful in these early days of the Foundation's promotion of modern African art. D’Harnoncourt dismissed Enwonwu out of hand, insisting to Brady that

[d’Harnoncourt] was in touch with everything in the present-day art achievement of Africa and he knew all about the past and he could tell me quite frankly, if I understood him correctly, that nothing good had been produced in Africa, or practically nothing good in the last fifty years. That most of it was either a direct copy of the old or terribly derivative of the European.¹⁴

While Brady and her colleagues at Howard hoped to encourage an expansion of American understanding of African art beyond primitivizing stereotypes, the influential MoMA curator focused on maintaining control over those boundaries. As art historian Sylvester Ogbechie has noted in his monographic study of Enwonwu, certain Euro-American audiences were not prepared to allow African artists into modern art discourse on their own terms.¹⁵

Though the Harmon Foundation partnered with various organizations, including HBCUs, throughout the 1950s to stage exhibitions of African artists, interest and engagement in African modernism expanded among a wider audience around 1960, as many African nations gained independence. At this time, the Foundation, in addition to organizing survey exhibitions like Art from Africa of Our Time, increased their sponsorship of research...
into then-contemporary African art, supporting the work of Forrester B. Washington, a pioneer in the field of American social work who developed an interest in contemporary African art. Washington published his volume *Contemporary Artists of Africa* under the Harmon Foundation Division of Social Research and Experimentation in 1960. Evelyn Brown updated and expanded Washington's fundamental preliminary study in her later publication *Africa's Contemporary Art and Artists* (1966). Both books aimed to compile information on contemporary African artists, their work, and their individual contributions, which they found to be scattered, uneven, and lacking throughout their research process. Commenting on the dismissal of African artists by those at the forefront of the study of African arts in the West at mid-century, like MoMA curator René d'Harnoncourt, Washington aptly wrote, “It would almost seem that today's African artist has been snowed under in the rush to gather material on the illustrious achievement of his ancestors” (1960: iii).

The year 1960 thus marked a shift in American enthusiasm for African modernism. The efforts of the Harmon Foundation, HBCUs, and other organizations in exhibitions like *Art from Africa of Our Time* were met with increased interest from the art establishment, including the Museum of Modern Art. Trailblazing art dealer and abstract expressionist artist Merton D. Simpson, a member of the Spiral group, founded his New York art gallery to generate interest in both the historical and contemporary arts of Africa. The first section of *African Modernism in America* will highlight the impact of this influential commercial space on the increased visibility of African artists in America. Simpson organized an exhibition of work by Sam Ntiro during the Tanzanian artist's visit to the United States in 1960 (Fig. 11) from which, as previously mentioned, MoMA acquired its first work by a contemporary African artist for its collection (Fig. 1). MoMA later purchased a painting by Skunder Boghossian, who held two exhibitions at Simpson's gallery in the early 1960s, in addition to a work by Ibrahim El-Salahi. After MoMA director Alfred H. Barr, Jr. attended the First International Congress of African Culture in Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia (now Harare, Zimbabwe) in 1962, MoMA accepted into their permanent collection gifts of paintings by Zimbabwean artists Joseph Ndandarika and Thomas Mukarobgwa, whose *View You See in the Middle of a Tree* (1962) (Fig. 12) is a planned loan for *African Modernism in America*. The exhibition and promotion of African modernism in the 1960s also influenced private collecting. In 1967, for example, MoMA curator Dorothy Miller advised David Rockefeller to purchase *Vision of the Tomb* (1965) by El-Salahi (Fig. 13) for Chase Manhattan Bank's exemplary art collection. The expected loan of this work will be a highlight of the introductory galleries of *African Modernism in America* as it speaks to the investment in modern African art among a wide-reaching network of American art patrons.

**MAPPING MODERNIST NETWORKS IN AFRICA**

*African Modernism in America* will also review the shifts in the art world that took place on the African continent during the independence period by spotlighting the numerous galleries,
literary journals, and art education programs founded at this time. “Mapping Modernist Networks in Africa,” the second section of the exhibition, will highlight the continent-wide networks instrumental in the development of these new, forward-thinking spaces for the display and discussion of postcolonial modern art. The section will feature the work of artists involved in art venues like Paa ya Paa Gallery in Kenya, the Kibo Art Gallery in Tanzania, the Nommo Gallery in Uganda, and the Mbari Artists and Writers Club and artist Afi Ekong’s Gallery Labac in Nigeria, all of which supported a new generation of artists after independence. Our show’s didactics will reproduce diverse ephemera from their varied programs in the form of exhibition announcements and pamphlets, publications, posters, newspaper coverage, and documentary photographs that were collected and archived by the Harmon Foundation in the 1960s. They will stress the collaborations these art spaces and workshops fostered across the continent and with other international Cold War-era cultural organizations.

The Mbari Club in Nigeria, for instance, was a critical venue for a transnational group of African modernists, including Demas Nwoko, Uche Okeke, Jimo Akolo, Skunder Boghossian, Ibrahim El-Salahi, Malangatana Ngwenya, and many others. *African Modernism in America* hopes to feature paintings like Demas Nwoko’s *Children on Cycles* (1961) (Fig. 14) and Uche Okeke’s *Ana Mmuo (Land of the Dead)* (1961) (Fig. 15) from the first Mbari exhibitions in Ibadan in 1961 to exemplify the type of work and new visual languages that motivated a postcolonial creative network of artists from across Africa and its diaspora to come together in the independence era. The energy and community supported at the Mbari Club was also influential for African American artists, including Jacob Lawrence, who visited Nigeria in 1962 with the support of the American Society of African Culture.

During this first visit, Lawrence exhibited selections from his *War Series* (1946–1947) (on loan from the Whitney Museum of American Art) and his *Migration Series* (1940–1941) (on loan from the Museum of Modern Art) in Lagos and Ibadan. In his *War Series*, Lawrence described his complex experience of racial segregation and community while serving in the Coast Guard during World War II, an experience familiar to his West African colleagues who, as colonial subjects, were asked to give their lives to a war that was not their own. *Victory* (1947) (Fig. 16), a work known to have traveled for exhibition in Nigeria that we hope to include in *African Modernism in America*, isolates a single recruit’s negotiation of the physical and emotional tolls of the war. The Nigerian press covered Lawrence’s 1962 exhibitions, reproducing *Victory* alongside a text that highlighted the Pan-African connections of Black emancipation the work enabled. In 1964, Lawrence returned to Nigeria and spent eight months producing a body of work inspired by the country.17

This second section of the exhibition will also consider transatlantic connections between African and African American artists...
beyond Angophone Africa. Pan-Africanism was fostered in the 1960s through a series of festivals held at various sites on the continent, including the World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar in 1966, that convened Pan-African creative and diplomatic leaders in the literary, performing, and visual arts. *African Modernism in America* will include paintings by Senegalese modernists Papa Ibra Tall (Fig. 17) and Iba N’Diaye whose work tested the boundaries of Négritude ideals articulated by their patron and president Léopold Sédar Senghor, the convener of the 1966 festival in Dakar. The US government sponsored African American involvement in the 1966 festival. Therefore, we plan to supplement this section with African American filmmaker William Greave’s United States Information Agency-funded documentary of the event to explicitly refer to the intersection of national and international politics that underwrote the motivations of such transnational celebrations on the African continent.

**AFRICAN/AMERICAN: PAN-AFRICAN ARTISTIC EXCHANGE**

The third section of the exhibition, “African Modernists in America,” will highlight the establishment of meaningful connections between African and African American artists in the United States and in Africa through transatlantic artistic exchange supported by organizations motivated by Cold War-era diplomacy. The Harmon Foundation’s efforts to mediate growing agitation for African independence by connecting African American academic institutions with African artists and leaders highlighted in the first section of *African Modernism in America* was not an endeavor they pursued alone. Aaron Douglas, head of the Art Department at Fisk University, for example, was deeply invested in African independence movements and traveled throughout West Africa in the summer of 1956. In correspondence with his friend Prince Eket Inyang-Udoh III, the Obon of Okon in Eastern Nigeria and a member of the Nigerian Independence Delegation, Douglas expressed his sympathies and pride in Nigeria’s impending independence, stating “Let me say how pleased I am that you should call me brother. I am humble and deeply grateful for the honour. I am sure you know the sincere regard I hold for you personally and also for the peace, welfare, continued development and progress of your nation.” Douglas further expressed his commitment to African independence by joining the Afro-American Committee for Gifts of Art and Literature to Ghana, founded to promote the donation of art and literature to Ghana by Black artists and writers in celebration of the nation’s Independence Day (Knappe 2007: 222).

In 1956, Douglas and his wife, Alta Sawyer Douglas, traveled to Lagos, Nigeria; Accra, Ghana; and Dakar, Senegal, after completing a tour of Europe. Douglas sketched the scenes he experienced in these West African coastal capitals and exhibited the watercolors at Fisk in October 1956. Coverage of the exhibition and Douglas’ trip to West Africa reported that the artist was “impressed with the energy the people in the urban areas displayed and with their eagerness for independence.” One watercolor from this series, a street scene from his time in Lagos, will be on view in *African Modernism in America* (Fig. 18). In the painting, the city appears as the picture of modern urban life. Sketched during a morning visit to the neighborhood surrounding the Marina in Lagos Island, the center of the sprawling city, his composition of figures arrested in states of work and rest relies on the conventions of the photographic snapshot. In this and the artist’s other sketches, Douglas sought to capture his observations of West Africa’s urban life and of a continent on the cusp of independence.

Douglas was also interested in creating space for his African artistic compatriots to represent themselves through their art. In early 1959, Douglas viewed Nigerian modernist Akinola Lasekan’s scenes of Nigerian life and people at the Market Place Gallery in New York, which exhibited a selection of the Nigerian artist’s earlier work sent to the Harmon Foundation in 1947. Douglas chose a sampling of Lasekan’s paintings for Fisk’s annual Festival of Arts in April of that year, including grisaille watercolor ethnographic portraits, line drawings, and watercolor sketches of village scenes (Fig. 6). Unlike Douglas’ urban impressions of West Africa, the watercolors Lasekan chose to send to the United States in 1947 tended to picture the “authentic” rural life the artist imagined would interest
an American audience. Douglas gave a lecture about the work and possibly supplied a line drawing inspired by the exhibition to grace the cover of the exhibition pamphlet (Fig. 19). A photograph of Douglas with the watercolor Ọwọ Olumore Orchestra accompanying a review of the show in the Nashville Banner is indicative of his enthusiastic support of Laṣekan's work (Fig. 20).

By exhibiting their work side by side along with supporting archival materials, *African Modernism in America* will demonstrate how Laṣekan and Douglas used watercolor sketches to picture their observations of changing ways of life in Nigeria. Douglas, caught up in the Pan-African politics of the independence movement, focused on the urban built environment in his documentation of his time in West Africa. Laṣekan, painting more than ten years earlier in the examples available to Douglas in 1959, aligned his modernity with commercial success as an artist, sending picture postcard-inspired scenes he predicted would appeal to Americans eager to own a piece of African “authenticity,” however fraught or romanticized a concept. Invested in the cause of Nigerian independence, Douglas presented Laṣekan’s work from the late 1940s to lay claim to the historical information about Nigerian life and culture contained within their frames and to celebrate a society in transition. As curator of the exhibition at Fisk, Douglas affirmed the key role African Americans played in shaping the narrative of African contemporaneity and independence among American audiences. *African Modernism in America* will expose the exhibitions and individuals who negotiated the changing attitudes towards African authenticity that African artists like Laṣekan exploited in the years leading up to independence from colonialism.

In the 1960s, after many African nations had gained independence, other American organizations like the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the American Society of African Culture (AM SAC), and the Congress for Cultural Freedom began to support the work of African artists internationally, often with diplomatic intentions that *African Modernism in America* will draw out. El-Salahi, Boghossian, Ntiro, Tessema, Mohammad Khalil (Sudan), Mohammed Melehi (Morocco) and other African artists traveled to the United States to study in the 1960s with this Cold War-era sponsorship. Skunder Boghossian’s time in the United States in the early 1960s and engagement with Pan-Africanism was especially meaningful for his development of a style steeped in what he termed “afro-metaphysics” (n.a. [Harmon Foundation] 1965). In fact, Boghossian painted *Ju-Ju’s Wedding* (Fig. 21), a work that exemplifies his shifting style, during his brief but productive stay in Tuskegee, Alabama in the summer of 1964. We hope to borrow this work, acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in 1966, for the exhibition.

---


As artists responded to Pan-African independence and civil rights movements, exhibitions of contemporary African art in the United States became instrumental in encouraging African American artists to deepen their personal links to the African continent. In addition to Aaron Douglas, African American artists including Elton Fax, John Biggers, James A. Porter, and others traveled to the continent in the late 1950s and 1960s and created work in response to the places and people they encountered. Examples of these works, including Porter’s *Street of the Market, Zaria* (Fig. 22) from his time in Nigeria in 1964, will be included in *African Modernism in America*. Such visual documents will be complemented in the galleries by the albums of Pan-African musicians like the American pianist Randy Weston, who, along with artist Elton Fax, another artist in the exhibition, toured Africa with support from AMSAC, an organization later revealed to be funded by the CIA, and whose album *Uhuru Afrika* (1960) celebrated independence across Africa.

Artist and art historian David Driskell, professor of art and chairman of the Department of Art at Fisk University from 1966 to 1977, also made numerous trips to Africa. Driskell’s longstanding interest in Africa and African art is clearly visible in pieces such as *Yoruba Forms #5* (Fig. 23), made in 1969, the year he traveled to...
West Africa for the first time. Inspired by his encounters on the African continent, Driskell hosted artists including Peter Clarke (South Africa), Ladi Kwali (Nigeria), and Lamidi Fakeye (Nigeria) at Fisk during his tenure there. Clarke’s That Evening Sun Goes Down (1960), a work in Fisk’s collection, portrays a Black township in South Africa through narrowly prescribed shapes, representing the social and political lives of Black South Africans under apartheid (Fig. 24). The presentation of such works especially resonated with audiences fighting segregation in the American South. Kwali was the first woman to attend the Abuja Pottery Workshop in Nigeria; her hand-built forms insist upon the continued importance of indigenous ceramic practices to modernism in Africa (Fig. 25). Kwali toured the United States in the early 1970s, giving demonstrations on the campuses of HBCUs and inspiring American artists including Viola Wood, another artist in the exhibition, who was instrumental in bringing Kwali to Nashville.

**ARCHIVING AFRICAN MODERNISM**

The exhibition concludes with “The Politics of Selection,” a new commission by Lagos-based sculptor Ndidi Dike that will interrogate the collecting histories presented in the show, including those of the Harmon Foundation. For her commission, Dike will investigate the material presence and absence of women in the story of African modernity and expand out from an examination of one of the major archives of African modernism, the Harmon Foundation Papers in Washington, DC. As stated, *African Modernism in America* will open with a selected restaging of the Foundation’s 1961 exhibition *Art from Africa of Our Time*. The exhibition featured the work of artists working across the African continent and aimed to bring “into the limelight what all the artists in Africa are really doing in terms of today.” Yet, of the more than fifty artists exhibited, only six were women. The Foundation’s commitment to an expansive understanding of modernism was shaped under the direction of Mary Beattie Brady and Evelyn S. Brown, two White American women. Brown, in particular, spearheaded efforts to map Africa’s artistic landscape in the independence era, corresponding, as previously mentioned, with artists, administrators, and organizations from across the continent. The archive of her correspondence with artists, photographs of artworks, and ephemera from arts organizations founded in post-colonial Africa shapes our understanding of the development of modernist networks on the continent. Though this archive is one of the most robust and focused records of a particular moment of African modernism, it is necessarily incomplete, informed by selective viewpoints, biases, prejudices, allegiances, and omissions encountered and perpetuated in its formation.

For her commission, Dike will focus on the role of women, from Africa and elsewhere, in the development of modernism and the narratives around its presentation, the forms of their silencing, and their strategies of visibility. Dike will travel to the United States in 2021 with the support of the Warhol Foundation to conduct research in the Harmon Foundation and Fisk University archives; her research in select archives in Nigeria, including at artist and dealer Afi Ekong’s Bronze Gallery is already underway (Fig. 26). The research that will underpin Dike’s collage installation investigates the women, both artists and administrators, who informed the development and presentation of artistic production in Africa, including figures like Suzanna Ogunjami, Etso-Ugbodaga Clara Ngu, Afi Ekong, Ladi Kwali, Nora Majekodunmi, and the leaders of the Harmon Foundation, Evelyn S. Brown and Mary Beattie Brady. Building on previous series like *Fiction Steeped in Reality* (2018), in which the artist collaged transparencies of found images from her personal archive with layers of latex to interrogate the intersectionality of personal and historical memory, Dike’s new installation will employ historical documents and photographs to call attention to the politics surrounding the persistent underrepresentation of women artists within the history of modern African art and to question the complex and contested histories of White patronage of both African and African American artists. Though independence across Africa transformed the visual languages and artistic identities possible for African modernists working into the 1960s, “The Politics of Selection” will confront the inherent power dynamics and inequities present in the historical presentation of African modernism, informed by the residues of colonialism and Cold War-era international politics. *African Modernism in America, 1947–1967*, opening at Fisk University, a site that is itself central to the story of the exhibition, will give space to the complex political and aesthetic shifts that accompanied the growing interaction between African and African American artists as contemporaries on either side of 1960.
Notes
1 Upon their closing in 1967, the Harmon Foundation also donated selections from their collection to the Smithsonian and to Hampton University in Virginia.

2 The exhibitions tour has been managed by Andrew Eschebacher, Ph.D., director of curatorial affairs at the American Federation of Arts.

3 White real estate developer William E. Harmon founded the Harmon Foundation in 1922 to promote racial equality and presented annual awards for African American achievement in business, education, fine arts, literature, music, race relations, religious service, and science. The breadth of artistic submissions permitted the Foundation to organize annual exhibitions of African American visual art to coincide with the awards. Under the directorship of Mary Beattie Brady, the Foundation continued their annual awards through 1955, partnering with figures like Alain Locke and others.

4 Mary Beattie Brady kept Nigerian Public Relations Officer Harold Russell abreast of Ben Enwonwu’s activities during the artist’s visit to the United States in fall 1950. Letter from Mary Beattie Brady to Harold Cooper, November 10, 1951, Box 2, File 11, Harmon Foundation Papers, 1929–1994, David C. Driskell Center Archives, University of Maryland.

5 Letter from Ben Enwonwu to Charles S. Johnson, September 2, 1951, Box 2, File 7, Harmon Foundation Papers, 1929–1994, David C. Driskell Center Archives.

6 Letter from Charles S. Johnson to Ben Enwonwu, October 24, 1951, Box 2, File 11, Harmon Foundation Papers, 1929–1994, David C. Driskell Center Archives.

7 Mary Brady wrote to Ben Enwonwu when making preparations for his 1950 visit. “In order to avoid confusion, I have endeavored up to the present time to keep my connection with you through your contacts in the British Information Services. The Embassy in Washington and the Colonial Government in Nigeria. All of these groups, together with the Cultural Division of our State Department have been concerned in getting my organization to do what it could to help arrange a traveling exhibit for you in this country and a series of engagements for you to make a personal appearance.” Letter from Mary Brady to Ben Enwonwu, August 16, 1950, Box 2, File 7, Harmon Foundation Papers, 1929–1994, David C. Driskell Center Archives.

8 Enwonwu was aware of the challenges posed by segregation in preparing for his trip to the United States, inquiring about “this nasty colour bar.” Philip Treweek, “The Harlem Renaissance: A Journal of the African Diaspora,” 1:1, 2005, p. 68.

References cited


The exhibition tour was managed by Andrew Eschebacher, Ph.D., director of curatorial affairs at the American Federation of Arts.

Enwonwu found willing patrons during his trip to the United States, including the parents of piano prodigy Philippa Schuyler, who purchased one of his paintings for their daughter Princess. Letter from Mary Beattie Brady to Ben Enwonwu, December 28, 1950, Ben Enwonwu File, Box 87, Records of the Harmon Foundation, Inc., Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

The catalogue features essays by the intellectual, cultural, and creative underpinnings for the work he brought to the United States, countering some of the press's insistent casting of him as a “primitive” artist.

In her interview with the artist conducted by the Foundation in 1950 and press coverage of Enwonwu’s work was utilized in an interview, Enwonwu narrated the intellectual, cultural, and creative underpinnings for the work he brought to the United States, countering some of the press's insistent casting of him as a “primitive” artist.

Aaron Douglas Papers, Box 7, Folder 1.


Enwonwu found willing patrons during his trip to the United States, including the parents of piano prodigy Philippa Schuyler, who purchased one of his paintings for their daughter Princess. Letter from Mary Beattie Brady to Ben Enwonwu, December 28, 1950, Ben Enwonwu File, Box 87, Records of the Harmon Foundation, Inc., Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

The exhibition tour was managed by Andrew Eschebacher, Ph.D., director of curatorial affairs at the American Federation of Arts.

Enwonwu found willing patrons during his trip to the United States, including the parents of piano prodigy Philippa Schuyler, who purchased one of his paintings for their daughter Princess. Letter from Mary Beattie Brady to Ben Enwonwu, December 28, 1950, Ben Enwonwu File, Box 87, Records of the Harmon Foundation, Inc., Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

The exhibition tour was managed by Andrew Eschebacher, Ph.D., director of curatorial affairs at the American Federation of Arts.