Hlobo’s work—which was not even displayed in the Detroit debut of this exhibition of six artists—is described as “stitch[ing] together a torn South Africa through abstract forms,” a characterization that both glosses over the artist’s interest in gender and sexuality and reductively burdens his work with entanglement in South Africa’s famous history of apartheid (Fig. 4). More frequently, Hlobo’s weaving of soft ribbons or industrial rubber connotes genitalia and innuendo and is paired with a title in Xhosa. Since the exhibition gives no direction on how these particular works by Hlobo depart from the typical themes of the artist, the viewer flattens Hlobo’s art practice and reads these works as simple portrayals of “his country as a headless monster.”

In spite of the flimsy framework, the majority of pieces on display are very compelling. Elias Sime’s Tightrope Contrast (2017; Fig. 5) is a dazzling grid of eighty panels meticulously covered with electronic wiring. Following his penchant to work with electronic detritus, Sime masterfully reworks meters of cables into a complex composition that is equally engaging when viewed from a distance or close up. Many of the rectangles in Tightrope Contrast are self-contained abstract patterns, though a few instances of continuity across panel borders belie the work’s cohesive cacophony.

Equally compelling are Serge Alain Nitegeka’s paintings, particularly Found Mass I and II (Figs. 6–7). The clean geometric forms are masterful examples of hard-edge painting and dynamic color balancing. Though the labels again draw an oversimplified relationship between the abstracted forms and a physical referent in Africa (“His works are abstract aerial views” inspired by “his home city of Johannesburg”), Nitegeka speaks of his rigid style as a tool to gain control. His oeuvre addresses the psychological reality of forced migration, a phenomenon that is not only topical for today, but also personal to the artist.

The works chosen for this exhibition are certainly all abstract in their visual form, but only a few—and especially Audio’s—are based on physical or traditional referents. And it is true that the participating artists are all connected to the African continent. But constructing an exhibition from this simple premise, without offering sufficient nuance or context, is to undermine the impact of the insightful work from all six artists. Though this installation offers a polished veneer, its potential to generate an insightful analysis on abstraction remains untapped.

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**exhibition review**

**World on the Horizon: Swahili Arts Across the Indian Ocean**

*curated by Allyson Purpura and Prita Meier*

*Krannert Art Museum, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

*August 31, 2017–March 24, 2018*

reviewed by Nichole N. Bridges

The exhibition *World on the Horizon: Swahili Arts Across the Indian Ocean* debuted at the Krannert Art Museum (KAM), University of Illinois, before traveling to the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art and the Fowler Museum at UCLA. Coorganized by KAM senior curator Allyson Purpura and former University of Illinois assistant professor of art history Prita Meier, the installation of this exhibition at the Krannert—the project’s home venue—may be considered closest to the scholars’ original vision. Purpura and Meier emphasize the arts presented as being reflective of a “world on the horizon,” which introductory wall text defines as “an outward looking ethos—one of encounter and possibility … connecting people on the Swahili Coast with faraway places.” The sprawling installation, showing many intricately detailed objects, reinforced this attitude by encouraging exploration and close looking. Meandering sightlines and glimpses into adjacent galleries through wall cut-outs at selected corners and odd angles in the space offered visitors continuous connections with the show’s rich selection of arts and their vast geographical origins throughout the exhibition. Spacious galleries, a light gray wall color, and bright lighting created a sense of openness throughout, reinforcing the notion of broad horizons so quintessential to the Swahili spirit emphasized (Fig. 1).

An animated digital map prefaced for the visitor the vast and interconnected Swahili worldview. The video sweeps across a map, originating at Kasongo in eastern Congo, pausing momentarily at Lake Tanganyika, then progressing eastward to such coastal cities as Dar es Salaam, Mombasa, Lamu, and Zanzibar. This mapping then moves up to the Arabian Peninsula, on to India, and back across the Indian Ocean to the African continent. Moving swiftly from place to place, this didactic tool emphasizes movement and contact rather than the stagnation and isolation suggested by static maps and borders. Appearing before the visitor ever encountered...
art, the map suggested that Swahili boundless-ness transcends even the objects to come.

The exhibition was organized thematically into six sections. The first, “Between Land and Sea: Objects in Motion,” introduced the Swahili material world through a range of portable objects. This section was arguably the show’s most diverse in content, with many object forms and types presented. Through its breadth, the section served as an introduction to genres that would reappear in later sections.

There were large-scale nineteenth-century works, including an iconic Swahili Coast wood chair (kiti cha enzi) from Zanzibar, a massive, beautifully carved wood chest on wheels (Fig. 2), and an ornately woven man’s coat made in the Kashmir region of India that was owned at separate times by Zanzibari and Omani elites (Fig. 3). There were also exquisite jewelry and hair ornaments of gold, silver, and ivory, with elements originating from Oman, Yemen, Zanzibar, Kenya, and Tanzania. A less ostentatious group of nineteenth- to twentieth-century works included a Makonde lipiko mask portraying a turbaned “Sikh” character, a trio of Zaramo leaders’ staffs, and ivory side-blown horns from Congo.

Also included in this initial section was a relief-carved ivory tusk from the Loango Coast of the lower Congo, which happened to be mislabeled as originating from Zanzibar. This misattribution, however minor, meant a missed opportunity for visitors to consider concretely, beyond gallery texts elsewhere, an important source of Swahili elites’ wealth that allowed them to accumulate the material goods filling the galleries. Scenes portraying enslaved Africans in trading caravans adorn the tusk. In a project necessarily oriented toward the Indian Ocean, the Loango ivory’s origins on the Atlantic Coast support a complementary view of the reach and scope of Swahili trade—bolstering the view to the
interior hinted at by the selection of Congolese ivories and the digital map’s inclusion of Kasongo as an important origin site. That aside, the breadth of the objects’ origins and mobility evoked wonder about their trajectories and those of their owners—both around and beyond the Swahili Coast, and, however implicitly, the paths taken by the objects into museum and private collections around the world.

“Architecture of the Port” highlighted architectural fragments such as doors, door frames, and posts in wood and stone (Fig. 4). This section addressed the vast sources of these objects’ surface decoration—incorporating, according to the curators, Gujarati, neo-gothic, and British Raj imagery. It also served as the show’s first formal introduction to the use of Arabic calligraphy and Swahili language for surface decoration, whether for imparting religious or secular admonitions, or as illegible abstractions utilized strictly for ornament. As such, this section segued perfectly to “The Presence of Words,” which brought to life the verbal richness—drawn from both Swahili and Arabic languages in Roman and Arabic scripts—that embellish already-opulent forms. A stunning selection of nineteenth-century illuminated Qur’anic manuscripts (Fig. 5) and amuletic jewelry were complemented by secular objects such as ceramic bowls with Arabic inscriptions and a whimsical group of bicycle mud flaps and woven fans inscribed brightly with wise and witty statements in Swahili.

The following section, “Ocean of Adornment,” riffed lushly on some of the genres previously encountered by including an expanded array of both amuletic and decorative jewelry in addition to a wealth of exquisite adornments made for ornamenting every part of the body from head to toe in almost every precious and semi-precious material imaginable (Fig. 6). If only to avoid the appearance of relegating the “domestic arts” to an afterthought, “At Home in the World: Swahili Interiors,” which concluded the exhibition, might have been better placed adjacent to or incorporated into one or more of the previous sections. The assortment of additional kitichawenzi chairs and smaller objects—including worked glass and metal ewers, spoons and snuff containers, wood game boards and coconut graters, a woven palm fiber mat, and more—are lovely and vitally provided quotidian objects to counterbalance the items made for more conspicuous display or ceremonial use seen previously. However, these objects did seem somewhat anticlimactic following the luxurious spectrum of personal adornments and were overshadowed by the captivating photographs that surrounded the “Ocean of Adornment” section.

A large group of colonial-era postcards and modern studio portraits, grouped under the heading “Trading the Gaze: Photography on the Swahili Coast,” fittingly filled the walls surrounding the objects of personal adornment by showing Swahili individuals wearing many of the object types displayed. Demonstrating Swahili self-fashioning and ethnic diversity in photographic form, the images provided a striking juxtaposition between pictures destined for objectification under the colonial gaze and those where Swahili individuals and families were subjects fully empowered as patrons of the studio and participants in their
own portrait-making. The mid-twentieth-century studio portraits originate primarily from the Parekh Studio in Mombasa and Studio Bakor in Lamu. Some of the most surprising examples, produced by the latter, feature playful photomontages evocative of Dadaism, Surrealism, and Afrofuturism (Fig. 7).

The first major traveling exhibition dedicated to surveying Swahili arts, World on the Horizon is an important contribution to the field. The exhibition brings to life the expansive Swahili worldview through rich materiality and makes aspects of Meier’s research on the subject accessible to general audiences (see Meier 2009, 2016). At the Krannert, World on the Horizon primarily served an academic audience of students and faculty, with generous in-gallery texts for section panels and object labels. Traveling to two additional venues—especially the Smithsonian—ensures and itinerant movements across geography and culture. World on the Horizon perpetuates our discipline’s ongoing efforts to challenge “one-tribe one-style” approaches to examining African art (Kasfir 1984). While the transcultural nature of the Swahili Coast and its arts may not be a surprise to African art scholars, this presentation offers general audiences a rare opportunity both to extend their understanding of African art beyond west and central Africa and to reconsider Africa in a global context with the Swahili Coast as a case study for the brilliance resulting from cross-cultural confluence. Enriched by loans secured in collaboration with the National Museums of Kenya and Bait Al Zubair Museum in Oman, World on the Horizon offers scholars and collectors alike an expanded vocabulary of what may be considered Swahili arts through its remarkable assembly of wondrous, worldly things.

The exhibition is accompanied by an edited volume: Prita Meier and Allyson Purpura (eds.), World on the Horizon: Swahili Arts Across the Indian Ocean (Champaign, IL: Krannert Art Museum, 2018, 384 pp., photographs, $49.95 softcover).

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References cited


exhibition review

The Power of Gold: Asante Royal Regalia from Ghana

curated by Roslyn A. Walker

Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, TX

April 15–August 12, 2018

reviewed by Jessi DiTillio

In Ghana, the independent nation formerly known as the Gold Coast, gold has functioned as currency, regalia, symbol, and medium of diplomacy. Curator Roslyn Walker designed the special exhibition The Power of Gold at the Dallas Museum of Art by using its titular medium as an entry point for exploring the structures and visual culture of the Asante Empire. Spanning three centuries, The Power of Gold: Asante Royal Regalia from Ghana presented over 250 objects in a range of media, including crowns, sword ornaments, ceremonial furniture, textiles, pectoral disks, weapons, a state umbrella, musical instruments, and jewelry that illustrate the breadth and complexity of Asante material culture. Drawing on the DMA’s collection of African art, which they began cultivating in 1969, as well as a selection of prominent loans, The Power of Gold was the first American museum exhibition dedicated to Asante regalia in over thirty years and foregrounded the complex integration of material, political, and economic culture in the Asante empire since its early eighteenth century origins.

The catalogue and didactic labels for the exhibition presented gold as both the backbone of an historical investigation of West African economy and a symbolic marker of status, wealth, and cultural power. The exhibition opened with a mural-size reproduction of an early nineteenth century illustration by Thomas Edward Bowdich that presents a spectacular rendering of the “First Day of Yam Custom” (Bowdich 1819). The drawing’s festive royal umbrellas with golden finials, uplifted musical instruments, whimsically illustrated masks, and elaborate jewelry display the ornate spectacle of such royal events in the early nineteenth century (Figs. 1–2). The mural-sized reproduction functioned as an astute opening to the exhibition by providing a view of gold’s important role in social events and demonstrating the prominence and diversity of ornate gold objects that characterized traditional festivities.

The exhibition also opened with one of its most remarkable objects, recently acquired by the DMA: a cast gold spider produced during the reign of Asantehene Kwaku Dua II (Fig.