

Reimagining Ritual and Style

2020 was a year of reckoning and reflection, a year of witnessing the need for a more just world. The Stanley Museum of Art's collections are comprised of artworks that are at once snapshots in time and portals for envisioning better futures. Curators continue to plan the inaugural exhibition with an eye on each artwork's potential as an entry point to new worlds. The Stanley's peerless African art collection, in particular, is perfectly poised to engage with emerging visions that African art not be limited to the continent, but rather, that it embody a global African aesthetic and identity.

When the new museum opens, visitors will be welcomed into 35,000 square feet of display space; the African collection will be on view in nearly 10,000 square feet. Many African objects will appear in *History is Always Now*, an exhibition

from the permanent collection featuring historic and contemporary works from around the world. Other exhibitions, on the other hand, will be devoted entirely to works from the African collection.

Reimagining Ritual and Style is the most important of the Africa-focused exhibitions in terms of physical scale and historical significance at the museum. The exhibition honors the history of *Art & Life in Africa* as a long-standing foundation that has engaged with the Stanley Collection of African Art, and that uses the life cycle as an interpretive lens for understanding African art. *Reimagining Ritual and Style* provides a critical reassessment of this approach. In order to clearly represent the role of African art in a world it has animated for centuries, and to better represent the diaspora of artists that belong to this legacy, *Reimagining Ritual and Style*

El Anatsui (Ghanaian, 1944–)
Transit, 2002
Wood: black afara, ofo, oyili-oji, ovoro
and tempera paint
60 x 24 in.
Purchased with funds from the
Stanley-UI Foundation Support
Organization, 2002.106a-o
© El Anatsui. Courtesy of the artist and
Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.



also highlights the arts of *global* Africa—rather than those from the continent proper.

Reimagining Ritual and Style will feature some of the African collection's most celebrated objects. This includes a Chokwe style *mwanangana* (figure of a chief), one of Max Stanley's personal favorites. This piece is an excellent example of the canonical style that characterizes the Stanley Collection of African Art. Additionally, Charles Kwabena Boateng's *kente* cloth—one of the largest pieces of *kente* in the collection—is at once a stunning example of a technique that reaches back centuries in West Africa and which now belongs to a global space for expressions of African identity. Meanwhile El Anatsui's *Transit* formally references the composition of *kente*: through scorched lines that evoke the violent scars of colonial rule and a title that targets mobility, *Transit* situates African art within a global conversation.

Artworks on display during the inaugural will highlight history's bearing on the present. Yet, perhaps more importantly, in personifying the values of transformation that have informed the Stanley's collecting philosophy, the artworks will offer museum visitors tools for imagining possible futures.

Angola; Chokwe artist
Mwanangana (figure of a chief), early to mid-19th century
Wood
14 1/4 x 5 1/2 x 4 1/2 in.
The Stanley Collection of African Art, X1986.576