

New Conversations on African Art - the Conversation Continues

October 2–November 11, 2021



Ahead of the inaugural exhibition, the Stanley Museum of Art is hosting a three-part, online symposium. *New Conversations on African Art*, moderated by Curator of African Arts Cory Gundlach, brings together scholars from across the United States and West Africa working in art history, curation, visual art, anthropology, sociology, and communication. The first of the three events, “Rethinking the Canon,” took place on October 2, 2021, and included presentations by: Sylvester Ogbechie, professor of art history at the University of California, Santa Barbara, who specializes in the arts and visual culture of Africa and its diasporas; Yaëlle Biro, curator of African arts at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; and Susan Elizabeth Gagliardi, associate professor of African art history at Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.

Sylvester Ogbechie was the first to present with “Rethinking African Art History: Canon, Terms, and Temporalities,” in which he investigated the Stanley Museum of Art’s presentation practices of African art. While referencing a wooden mask from Burkina Faso attributed to the Nunuma or Winimama peoples in the Stanley’s collection, Ogbechie explained how removing African art from its original context can enable imperialistic museum practices such as

categorizing objects. He also tied in current social justice issues, like the treatment of Haitian refugees, to emphasize how current museum practices and the African art canon deny accessibility to African artists and artists of African descent. Ogbechie encouraged museums and historians to act now—to decolonize museums, address the present legacy of colonialism, and reinvigorate restitution efforts of African art.

In the second presentation, “Seeing Beauty in Troubled Times: Distinguishing African Arts around 1900,” Yaëlle Biro discussed how African art was first received in Western and how this had a lasting impact on the African art canon and perceptions of beauty. Biro explained how the reception of African art is tied to imperialism, whether as exotic curiosities collected to display colonial power or art forms appropriated by Western avant-garde artists as a new “Classical” ideal. Biro revealed how these practices led to the paradox of beauty in the African art canon.

Susan Elizabeth Gagliardi considered the process of knowledge creation and how audiences view museums as authoritative voices in her presentation, “How do we know? Rethinking approaches to the arts of Africa.” Using objects from the Stanley’s collection as the starting point, Gagliardi explained how museum practices can obscure uncertain details while presenting information as indisputable truth. She recommended that museums should instead be embracing ambiguity and acknowledging their lack of information. If museums continue current practices, they silence the perspectives of many and harm the process of knowledge creation. Gagliardi asked that we step back to reevaluate what we know and where we get our knowledge from. Only then will we be able to reimagine our construction of the African art canon.

Following the presentations, Gundlach moderated a discussion, asking panelists “how does your rethinking of the canon of African art relate to demands for social justice in America today?” A public Q&A session concluded the engaging and fruitful discussion on how we can rethink the African art canon.

[Watch the video of this event.](#)

Continue the conversation: join the Stanley Museum of Art on Thursday, October 21 @ 7:00 p.m. for the next event of the symposium, “New Directions in Practice and Performance,” which will explore shifting ideas of taste, teaching, and scholarship in African art history. Nnenna Okore, artist and professor of art at North Park University, Chicago, Allen F. Roberts, distinguished professor of World Arts and Cultures/Dance at University of California, Los Angeles, and artist, Donté K. Hayes will present.

Rethinking the Canon - October 2, 2021



Susan Elizabeth Gagliardi is an associate professor of African art history at Emory University. Gagliardi has conducted more than thirty months of fieldwork in rural West African communities, scoured archives in Africa, Europe, and North America, and also analyzed objects in collections on the same three continents. She is the author of *Senufo Unbound: Dynamics of Art and Identity in West Africa* (The Cleveland Museum of Art and 5 Continents Editions, 2015).

Susan Elizabeth Gagliardi will consider how we have arrived at what we think we know about the arts of Africa. Viewing knowledge production as a process rather than an endpoint, she will propose alternate possibilities for approaches that can be taken within and beyond museums.



Sylvester Ogbechie is a professor of art history at University of California, Santa Barbara. Ogbechie specializes in the arts and visual culture of Africa and its diasporas, especially in terms of how art history discourses create value for African cultural patrimony in the age of globalization. He is the author of *Ben Enwonwu: The Making of an African Modernist* (University of Rochester Press, 2008: winner of the 2009 Herskovits Prize of the African Studies Association for best scholarly publication in African studies), *Making History: The Femi Akinsanya African Art Collection* (Milan: 5 Continents Editions, 2011), and editor of *Artists of Nigeria* (Milan: 5 Continents Editions, 2012). He is the director of *Aachron Knowledge Systems*, and founder and editor of *Critical Interventions: Journal of African Art History and Visual Culture*.

Sylvester Ogbechie's research considers several questions: how do we liberate our knowledge work from the stranglehold of colonial/imperial epistemologies? What is our current knowledge about African art for and who benefits from it? He investigates these concerns under the rubric

of “Rethinking African Art History”, which he will present as a protocol for decolonizing knowledge about Africa’s past, present, and future.



Yaëlle (“Yah-ell”) Biro has worked at The Metropolitan Museum of Art since 2007. She earned her PhD at the Sorbonne, Paris, France, with a dissertation focused on the reception of African art in the West during the first decades of the twentieth century, work for which she was awarded the Dissertation Prize of the Musée du Quai Branly. Among her most recent exhibitions are *The Face of Dynasty: Royal Crests from Western Cameroon* (2017) and *In and Out of the Studio: Photographic Portraits from West Africa* (2016). In 2012 her exhibition *African Art, New York, and the Avant-Garde* received the AAMC Small Exhibition Award of Excellence.

Yaëlle Biro’s presentation will investigate the shaping of African arts canon through the lens of materiality, with a focus on works in gold. Considering the turn of the twentieth century as a highly politically charged moment of heightened visibility of African works in Europe, Biro will explore the oscillating positions of gold works from West Africa within the corpus of the continent’s visual forms of expression.

New Directions in Practice and Performance - October 21, 2021



Nnenna (“Neh-nuh”) Okore (“Okoray”) is a professor of art at North Park University, Chicago. She has a BA in Painting from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and both an MA and MFA from the University of Iowa. She is a 2012 Fulbright Award recipient and has exhibited internationally. Her works have been featured in several important

exhibitions such as *Second Lives: Remixing the Ordinary*, Museum of Arts and Design, New York City; *We Face Forward*, Manchester Art Gallery, Manchester, United Kingdom; *Africa Africans*, Museu Afro Brasil, São Paulo, Brazil; and *When the Heavens Meet the Earth*, The Heong Gallery, Cambridge, United Kingdom. In 2018 her major installation, *Sheer Audacity*, was exhibited at the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, Memphis, Tennessee. Her work is in many international collections, including the World Bank, Washington, DC, among others.

Nnenna Okore's creative practice straddles elements of African aesthetics and practices of call-and-response. This presentation will speak to aspects of the African materialist and participatory practices that influence Okore's own works and pedagogical thinking. Okore will draw on historical references and memories of different African canonical art to illustrate how these influences shape, provoke, and enliven a material-bodily dynamic in her creative works.



Allen F. Roberts is the Distinguished Professor of World Arts and Cultures/Dance at University of California, Los Angeles, and an affiliated professor of French and Francophone Studies. Dr. Roberts conducted research, organized museum exhibitions, wrote books and articles, and often co-taught with his late spouse, WACD Professor Mary “Polly” Nooter Roberts (1959-2018). Allen Roberts’ most significant scholarly products have been museum exhibitions and accompanying books, with eight major exhibitions supported by NEH implementation grants based upon or directly impacted by his research.

In Yinka Elujoba’s recent *New York Times* review of the accomplishments of the celebrated African American artist/musician/filmmaker Lonnie Holley, emphasis is given to how Mr. Holley repurposes found objects into vital assemblages. “It’s about the brain,” he holds, the “same brain that produces the music produces the visual art. Allen F. Roberts calls it ‘brainsmithing’.” For some decades now, Senegalese artists have also been “brainsmithing” as they create engaging works from detritus. Roberts’ talk will focus on this practice and is based upon twenty years of research that he and his late spouse, Dr. Mary “Polly” Nooter Roberts, undertook for the prize-winning book *A Saint in the City: Sufi Arts of Urban Senegal*.



Donté K. Hayes graduated summa cum laude from Kennesaw State University at Kennesaw, Georgia, with a BFA in Ceramics and Printmaking with an Art History minor. Hayes received his MA and MFA with honors from the University of Iowa and is the 2017 recipient of the University of Iowa Arts Fellowship. His work is included in the permanent collections of the Renwick Gallery, Smithsonian Museum of American Art, Washington, DC; The Gibbes Museum of Art, Charleston, South Carolina; and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas. Hayes is a 2019 Ceramics Monthly Magazine Emerging Artist and Artaxis Fellow and the 2019 winner of the 1858 Prize for Contemporary Southern Art from the Gibbes Museum of Art.

Donté K. Hayes' research has been focused on the pineapple as a symbol which represents welcoming and hospitality, rooted in slavery and agricultural colonization of South America, the Caribbean, and the Southern United States, particularly South Carolina and his home state of Georgia. In addition to this research, his art practice pulls from his interest in hip-hop culture, history, and science fiction. Hayes will present on his research and art practice, with a focus on how they suggest the past, discuss the present, and explore possible futures interconnected to the African diaspora.

Museum Interventions - November 11, 2021



Bennetta Jules-Rosette is professor of sociology at the University of California, San Diego and Director of the African and African-American Studies Research Center. She received her BA (Summa Cum Laude) in Social Relations from Radcliffe College and her MA (1970) and PhD (1973) from Harvard University in Social Relations (Sociology and

Anthropology). Professor Jules-Rosette's research interests include contemporary African art and literature, semiotic studies of Black Paris, religious discourse, new technologies in Africa, and museum studies. Jules-Rosette and J.R. Osborn are co-authors of ***African Art Reframed: Reflections and Dialogues on Museum Culture*** (University of Illinois Press, 2020). The book offers a “sociosemiotic” study of museums as institutions as well as suggestions for museum transformations.

In her presentation, Bennetta Jules-Rosette will discuss the book's nodal model of museum classification. The five nodes are ideal types of museum organization based on historical and empirical observations that transcend stylistic and aesthetic idiolects. Nodes contrast the goals, classification and storage practices, exhibition strategies, and outreach activities of diverse museums. Jules-Rosette will also discuss the ramifications of the nodal model for the repatriation and restitution of artifacts as well as their implications for museum development on both the African continent and worldwide.



J.R. Osborn is associate professor in the Communication, Culture, and Technology program at Georgetown University. Osborn is a scholar and experimentalist of communication. His work explores media history, design, semiotics, communication technologies, and aesthetics with a regional focus of the Middle East and Africa. Osborn and Bennetta **Jules-Rosette** are co-authors of ***African Art Reframed: Reflections and Dialogues on Museum Culture*** (University of Illinois Press, 2020). The book offers a “sociosemiotic” study of museums as institutions as well as suggestions for museum transformations. The authors approach the reframing of African art through dialogues with curators, collectors, and artists across three continents, and they have given workshops on the book for academics, students, and museum professionals.

J.R. Osborn's presentation will discuss the theory and method of "unmixing." Unmixing encompasses the location and separation of semiotic and stylistic elements that compose an artwork. This method enables practices of curatorial contextualization, artistic interpretation, audience perception, and community dialogue. Taken together, these paired presentations propose new approaches for interpreting African art across the nodal categories and remixing the results.



Peju Layiwola is an artist, professor of art history and head of the Department of Creative Arts, University of Lagos. She is a member of the board of the Lagos Studies Association. She is currently the President elect and Vice President of the Arts Council of the African Studies Association, USA. She works in a variety of media and focuses on personal and communal histories which centralize Benin as both an ancient kingdom and a contemporary city. Layiwola's dual heritage of Yoruba and Benin informs her art in diverse ways.

Peju Layiwola will consider the role and concept of the museum in Benin City. She will touch on her art projects in the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum, Köln (*Resist! the Art of Resistance*) and her 2014 *Whose Centenary*. The former will show how artists engage with ethnographic materials that derive from a traumatic history, and the latter, a public art project that activates a cultural space and allows for the appreciation of visual arts in the African context where art/objects are not confined to vitrine glass cases but are appreciated and consumed within a community.