

The University of Iowa has long been known for the richness of its museum's holdings in African art, and last year a state-of-the-art facility opened to house it. The new African installations take a sharp departure from those of the past at this institution—and entirely for the better. We had the opportunity to speak with Cory Gundlach, the museum's curator of African art, about the new perspectives he has brought to the updated presentation.

Jonathan Fogel: *The new Stanley Museum of Art at the University of Iowa opened in August of 2022. This was a project that was a long time in realization. Can you tell us what necessitated the new building and what considerations went into its design?*

Cory Gundlach: The flood of 2008 wiped out a big portion of downtown Iowa City, and the arts campus of the University of Iowa was hit hard. The School of Art and Art History, the university art museum, and the departments of music, theater, and performing arts were either relocated or renovated extensively. With the opening of the new The Stanley Museum of Art on August 26, 2022, it was the last to recover, through a relocation to its current location, immediately south of the university's Main Library downtown, about a block west of the new Voxman Music Building.

On April 1, 2018, the University of Iowa Museum of Art was renamed The Stanley Museum of Art in honor of a 10-million-dollar gift from Richard (Dick) and Mary Jo Stanley. Working with former director Sean O'Harrow (now director at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art), museum staff worked with BNIM architects and other team members to develop plans for the new museum (FIG. 1). The placement of the new museum was perhaps its most important design consideration. Surrounded by the Main Library, which is also home to Special Collections and other important archival resources, and the Campus Center for Recreation & Wellness, and the Department of Education, the Stanley Museum is now ideally placed in a centralized location on campus. Access is clearly intended for all students, rather than only those who study art, and the general public is also welcome,



NEW PERSPECTIVES

The Stanley Museum of Art

Interview with Cory Gundlach by Jonathan Fogel

free of charge. Inside the museum, all galleries are located on the second floor and collections storage is on the third floor, well above the flood plain. A total of fifteen galleries are arrayed along a north-south axis. The new building is distinguished by a lightwell that runs the height of the entire building and is fully exposed to the elements. While this allows natural light into the building, complete control is maintained over all the lighting in the galleries to protect the artworks on display.

For the inaugural exhibition, titled *Homecoming*, I curated the east side of the museum, and I placed a strong focus on the African collection through a series of five separate installations.

J.F.: *We published an article on your museum's extensive collection of African art in our winter 2002 edition. But for the purposes of our discussion here, would you tell us a little about the genesis and growth of this important collection?*

FIG. 1 (above): Exterior view of the new Stanley Museum of Art, designed by BNIM. Photo: Nick Merrick © Hall+Merrick, 2022.

C.G.: The first African objects to enter the collection are linked to Roy Sieber and the exhibition he curated on campus in 1956 (FIG. 16). Thanks to Christopher D. Roy's three exhibition catalogs on The Stanley Collection of African Art, as well as material published by Sarah Clunis and Victoria Rovine, many people know about its origins. The collection was started by Dick Stanley's parents, C. Maxwell (Max) and Elizabeth (Betty) Stanley. Betty was the first to collect African objects while she was with Max in Ganta, Liberia, in 1960. She purchased them from George Way Harley, a well-known medical missionary in the area. In the mid-1970s, Max bought a collection of objects from Norman Thorn, a Stanley engineering consultant based in Abidjan. Shortly afterward, he also bought an Ouagadougou-style Mossi *wan-nyaka* crest mask (FIG. 2) from Peter and Nancy Mickelsen, who also recently donated a Boulssa-style Mossi mask (FIG. 3) to the museum in memory of Roy. Both masks were published in Roy's book, *Mossi*, part of the *Visions of Africa* series edited by Constantine Petridis. In the US, the Stanleys purchased their first work, an *ibej* figure, from Merton Simpson in 1973 (FIG. 4) and most of

FIG. 2 (bottom left): Crest mask with costume, *wan-nyaka*. Ouagadougou style, Mossi, Burkina Faso. Before 1979.

Wood, pigment, fiber. H: 215.9 cm. Ex Peter and Nancy Mickelsen until 1979; The Stanley Collection of African Art, Muscatine, Iowa, 1979. University of Iowa, The Stanley Museum of Art; The Stanley Collection of African Art, inv. 1979.43.

FIG. 3 (right): Black mask, *wan-sablaga*. Boulssa style, Mossi; Burkina Faso. Mid 20th century.

Wood, textile, glass beads, raffia, cowry shells, pigment. H: 129.5 cm. Ex Peter and Nancy Mickelsen. University of Iowa, The Stanley Museum of Art; gift of Peter and Nancy Mickelsen in memory of Christopher Roy, inv. 2019.1.



FIG. 4 (above): Male twin figure, *ere ibeji*. Yoruba; Nigeria. Early to mid 20th century.

Wood, string. H: 23.5 cm. Ex Merton Simpson, New York, until 1973; The Stanley Collection, Muscatine, Iowa, 1973–1986. University of Iowa, The Stanley Museum of Art; The Stanley Collection of African Art, inv. X1986.41.





FIG. 5 (above): Mask.
Tabwa; Democratic Republic of
the Congo. C. 1940–1950.
Glass beads, fur, leather, feathers.
H: 40 cm.
Collected by Marc Felix in the mid 1970s
in the DRC/Zambia border area east of
Lake Mweru. Ex Elizabeth Stanley.
University of Iowa, The Stanley Museum
of Art; The Stanley Collection of African
Art, inv. X1990.656.



FIG. 6 (left): Mask.
Bamileke; Grassfields,
Cameroon.
Early to mid 20th century.
Wood, copper, brass tacks. H: 40 cm.
Ex Marc Felix until 1985; The Stanley
Collection of African Art, Muscatine,
Iowa, 1985–1990.
University of Iowa, The Stanley Museum
of Art; The Stanley Collection of African
Art, inv. X1990.601.

the objects that Max collected conformed to this genre and aesthetic: he focused on wooden masks and figures sculptures.

Ulfert Wilke, the University of Iowa Museum of Art’s founding director, encouraged Max to take art collecting more seriously, and when on a visit to view art in New York, the Stanleys may have first met Belgian art dealer Marc Felix. In terms of quantity and quality, he was to become a key resource for the Stanley Collection (FIGS. 5 and 6). The relationship with Felix was facilitated by Christopher Roy, who, upon recommendation by Roy Sieber, served as the Stanleys’ lead art collection adviser, while also teaching African (and other “non-Western”) art history. After Max passed away in 1984, and when Betty began collecting again, she expanded the scope of the collection with textiles and other objects that were equal or superior in quality to examples acquired by Max. Victoria Rovine later developed the museum’s African textile holdings significantly when she became the museum’s first full-time curator of African art. Subsequent curators, such as John Warne Monroe, added two of the best masks in the African collection: the Igbo-style maiden spirit mask from the William W. Brill Collection (FIG. 7) and a Sande mask by Lansana Ngumoi (FIG. 9). During Catherine M. Hale’s tenure as curator of the African collection, the museum also acquired a fine Winiamia-style plank mask from the Thomas G. B. Wheelock Collection (FIG. 8).

J.F.: *Has the new facility prompted additional growth for the collection? And are there areas within it that you’re targeting for new acquisitions?*

C.G.: Absolutely, though I can speak best about growth during my term here. After serving as a curatorial research assistant at the museum in 2012 and 2013, I accepted the position as full-time curator in July of 2015. Since then, I’ve overseen numerous gifts and acquisitions, including significant holdings of African pottery from private collections that are currently on view in the new installation. I also accepted the third and final gift of African art from the Dr. Meredith Saunders Collection, much of which is also on view. Between



FIG. 7 (above):
Maiden spirit mask,
agbogho mmuo.
Igbo; Nigeria.
Mid 20th century.
Wood, pigment. W: 47 cm.
Ex The British Museum, London;
Ralph Nash, 1968; William W. Brill,
New York, 1969; Sotheby’s New
York, New York, 17 November 2006,
lot 62.
University of Iowa, The Stanley
Museum of Art; John Harrison Estate
Acquisition Fund, inv. 2006.377.

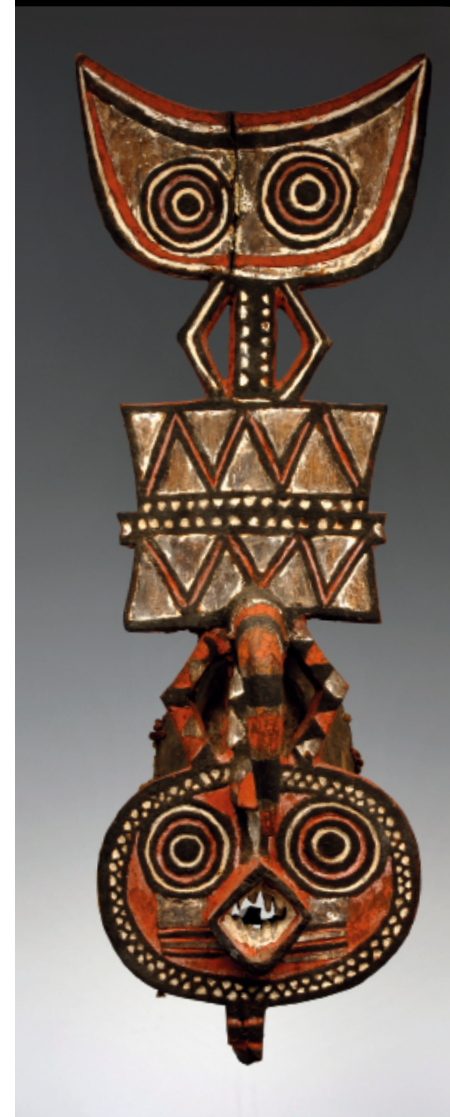


FIG. 8 (left):
Plank mask.
Winiamia; Burkina Faso.
Before 1974.
Wood, pigment, fiber. H: 81.9 cm.
Ex Thomas G. B. Wheelock, New
York/Nashville; Sotheby’s, Paris, 17
July 2011, lot 59.
University of Iowa, The Stanley
Museum of Art; The Stanley
Museum of Art; purchased with
funds from Mary Jo and Richard H.
Stanley, inv. 2011.27a-c.

FIG. 9 (right):
Lansana Ngumoi (Gola,
active early 20th century),
Sande society mask, *sowei*.
Gola or Vai; Sierra Leone.
C. 1915.
Wood, shell, grass, rawhide.
H: 94 cm.
Collected in 1975 from elders who
were charged with decommissioning
the object.
Ex Charles Miller III, 1977–2006.
University of Iowa, The Stanley
Museum of Art; purchased with
funds from the Stanley-University
of Iowa Foundation Support
Organization, inv. 2006.34.



FIG. 10 (right): Gallery view of the installation of ere ibeji from the J. Richard Simon Collection of Yoruba Twin Figures. Photo: Cory Gundlach.



2016 and 2019, I purchased a collection of objects that, according to Cynthia Becker, is the only complete Moroccan Ait Khabbash-style wedding ensemble (FIG. 11) in an art museum collection. I acquired it because of its beauty and because relatively little art of North Africa is represented in the collection. In 2017, the Stanley Museum received the J. Richard Simon Collection of Yoruba Twin Figures through a bequest. With over 300 figures, twelve major styles associated with *ere ibeji* are represented in this extraordinary collection, and about a third of it is currently on view (FIG. 10).

Around this same time, I also discovered that the University of Iowa Museum of Art did not have a Collections Plan, and so I created a focus group with museum staff in order to form one. The final draft of that document is now available on the Stanley Museum website. In order to build upon the strength of traditional objects in the collection, the museum is now focused on acquiring modern and contemporary works by artists of color. This is not to say that the museum is no longer interested in pursuing historical

objects. It is surprising to me, for example, that there isn't a single example of traditional figure sculpture from the Lagoons region of Côte d'Ivoire represented in the collection! More important, however, is the fact that we have very, very little modern and contemporary art from Africa and its diaspora, and so I have focused on this over the last few years. This includes commissions by Eric Adjetey Anang, Donté K. Hayes, and Nnenna Okore, and the purchase of works by Abdoulaye Konaté, Hervé Youmbi, Peju Layiwola, Taiye Idahor, and Wangechi Mutu. Work by each of these artists has a direct relationship with traditional African art in the collection. In the inaugural installation, I have called attention to this and other objects that have little or nothing to do with Africa because I want the public to think about the global context of African art. I am especially excited about Youmbi's work, which is not merely the only mask by a contemporary artist from Africa in the permanent collection, but an object that engages directly with the institutional values that surround African masks in a museum context.

J.F.: *Considerations about the display of African art have changed over the years since the previous museum was installed. How have you addressed this?*

C.G.: Given my experience with African art exhibitions in the US, Europe, and West

Africa, and my regular research on this subject, I have no delusions about whether my approach to curating African art is entirely new. Internationally it's not, but it certainly doesn't conform to the status quo for exhibiting African art in Iowa. For a long time, most African art exhibitions here have revolved around the life-cycle theme and culture-area paradigms represented among various manifestations of the museum's long-running *Art & Life in Africa* project, which was launched by Roy in 1985. My departure from this approach is most evident in two of the new installations I curated, *History Is Always Now* and *Fragments of the Canon: African Art from the Saunders and Stanley Collections*. Together these demonstrate the Stanley Museum's support of social justice as a central part of its institutional vision. Overall, the African collection occupies about half of the museum. Where else can you find this in a university art museum in America?

History Is Always Now places African art in conversation with art from around the world. On the one hand, the goal of the exhibition is to emphasize a global context for African art precisely because the history of display for African art here has been almost entirely continental. This silo effect also shapes exhibitions of contemporary work from the continent, in which traditional work is viewed as a limiting factor. I disagree with both approaches, and I find it useful and interesting to mix things up. This forces the viewer to think about traditional African art as something more than a functionalist solution to social cohesion within a clan or ethnic group, and it provides a broader context for what

constitutes contemporary artistic practice. I refuse to present traditional art as something that necessarily compromises contemporary art, and vice versa. During my time as a student at Iowa, Roy avoided teaching and curating contemporary art altogether, and he made no bones about his lack of interest in it. In 2001, Rovine broke Iowa's curatorial mold with *African Inspirations: Sculpted Headwear*, which displayed Sonya Clark's contemporary work along with traditional headwear from Africa in the permanent collection. In *History Is Always Now*, I've broadened the artistic relationships to include work beyond the African Diaspora. I show Anatsui's *Transit* (FIG. 13) with Robert Arneson's *Minuteman*, for example, within a larger constellation of artworks about human rights. I show an extraordinary example of traditional Hausa-style embroidered trousers (FIG. 12) beside Okechukwu Emmanuel Odita's *Panel Four Njikoka Series*, which represents a Nigerian man with northern and southern

FIG. 12 (below): Embroidered trousers. Nupe; Benue River, Nigeria. 1900–1950. Cotton, wool. W: 200.7 cm. Ex Richard Meyer Gallery, New York, until 1997. University of Iowa, The Stanley Museum of Art; Stanley Support of African Art Programs, inv. 1997.61.



FIG. 11 (above): Woman's wedding ensemble. Ait Khabbash style; Morocco. Mid 20th century. Cotton, silk, synthetic blend fabric, silver, amber resin beads, velvet, wool, nonferrous metal, plastic. Dimensions variable. Ex Addi Ouaderrrou, Moroccan Caravan, LLC, until 2016/2017. University of Iowa, The Stanley Museum of Art; museum purchase with support from The Stanley-University of Iowa Foundation Support Organization, inv. 2016.70, 71; 2017.19, 20, 22a-c, 23, 24a-c, 25a-c, 26.



FIG. 13 (left): El Anatsui (Ghanaian, b. 1944), *Transit*, 2002. Ex Artist Alliance Gallery, Accra. Wood, pigment. H: 152.4 x 61 cm. University of Iowa, The Stanley Museum of Art; purchased with funds from the Stanley-University of Iowa Foundation Support Organization, inv. 2002.106a-o. Image courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.



FIG. 14 (above):
Gallery view of *Fragments of the Canon: African Art from the Saunders and Stanley Collections*, curated by Cory Gundlach, showing African masks and Eric Adjete Anang's 2017 *Red Fish Coffin*.
Photo courtesy of The Stanley Museum of Art.

FIG. 15 (left):
Mask. Bobo; Burkina Faso. Early 20th century. Wood. H: 175.3 cm. Ex Meredith Saunders. University of Iowa, The Stanley Museum of Art; gift of Dr. Meredith Saunders, inv. 1986.62.

styles of dress. Some may view my approach as anachronistic, while others may see it as inspired by contemporary relevance. Maybe both positions are correct. Part of what I want to do as a curator is to use the permanent collection at Iowa to engage with history creatively, and especially with respect to art from Africa.

Artists involved in *Environment and Object: Recent African Art*, an exhibition held in 2011 at Skidmore College, were wary of “African” as a qualifier to their identity as contemporary artists, and I respect this. Does my decision to display traditional work from Africa with work by El Anatsui, Okechukwu Emmanuel Oditia, Taiye Idahor and Peju Layiwola necessarily “Africanize” all the artists and objects involved? I don’t think so, but this isn’t really the point. My goal is to achieve a balance between the artistic strengths of this particular collection and to show how it resonates with contemporary values that surround it. Not all of these values are contingent upon African identity.

My departure from curatorial conventions at the Stanley Museum also appear in *Fragments of the Canon* (FIG. 14). This installation is about the canonization of African art and how representation factors within this process.

The Dr. Meredith Saunders Collection is the only collection of African art in the museum assembled by a Black American. Saunders was a medical student at the university when Sieber was here studying African art history. I’m not sure if Saunders saw Sieber’s African art exhibit on Iowa’s campus in 1956, but this may have informed his decision to begin collecting African art about a decade later. Several objects from the collection were first exhibited in *African Art from Iowa Private Collections*, curated by Roy in 1981, but other than a Bobo-style *nwenka* mask shown several times, the collection has received relatively little attention historically. Though the Stanley Collection is widely recognized as superior and has been more-widely used, both collections have their strengths. Like the Stanley Collection, the Saunders Collection includes objects that were made for the tourist market. It has other examples that are not in line with mainstream aesthetics in the West, though it also includes beautiful objects with a surface quality that demonstrates a history of physical use (FIG. 15). If artistic quality is the reason for Saunders Collection’s absence from the canon at Iowa, it is important to show it in conversation with objects that have embodied the qualitative standard. *Fragments of the Canon* presents this conversation and invites the public to consider value judgments about African art from both collectors’ perspectives.

The other three new African installations are devoted the strength of three genres within the collection: masks, pottery, and textiles. *About Face: African Masks in Iowa* begins with the first African mask that entered the museum collection (FIG. 16). During recent consultations with Henry Drewal, we attributed the mask to the Anago Master, whose work features a distinctive, rectilinear treatment of the ear. One area of this installation encourages viewers to consider shared formal relationships among masks associated with different cultural groups in West Africa. This is my hat-tip to Patrick McNaughton’s 1991 essay on horizontal masks and is my way of avoiding an approach to display by ethnicity. Separate areas highlight masks from Burkina Faso, Central Africa, and sculptural masterpieces such as the *mmuo* mask and Sande mask mentioned above, and an



epa mask from the Stanley Collection recently treated by conservator Stephanie Hornbeck (FIGS. 17a and b). Youmbi’s multimedia installation is included as well, and is flanked by masks from Mali and Cameroon that it responds to stylistically.

Centering on Cloth: The Art of African Textiles is the first exhibition that the public encounters as they enter the galleries devoted to the African collection on the second floor. The idea here is to maintain the privileged status that Sieber provided for African textiles

FIG. 16 (above):
Anago Master (c. 1801–1900), Gelede mask. Yoruba; Nigeria. 19th century. Wood. H: 31.1 cm. Ex Altman Antiques, Los Angeles, until 1956. University of Iowa, The Stanley Museum of Art; Mark Ranney Memorial Fund Purchase, inv. 1956.4.



in his exhibition of 1972. It is also a testament to many important acquisitions secured by Rovine, who significantly developed the museum's African textile collection. It is a threshold and gateway to the arts of Africa as they appear in galleries around it. For those that enter the galleries by way of the stairwell, they will first encounter the museum's collection of African pottery, which I curated with Boureima Diamitani (FIG. 19).

J.F.: *I understand that some of the installations you've mentioned are on ongoing rotation due to conservation considerations. Do the subjects of these installations change with each rotation?*

C.G.: Major themes within the inaugural installation will remain consistent throughout its duration, except for two installations: this fall, the museum will open a temporary exhibition of Plains Indian ledger art that will be on view until January 2024, and another exhibition about the Black Midwest opens in the fall of 2024. These two installations are part of a Terra Foundation grant-funded initiative for "curating in cohorts" led by guest curators Jackie Rand and Kat Reynolds.

J.F.: *Now that the new building is open to the public, what else is in store for the Stanley?*

C.G.: The public can expect to see a full roster of exciting programs at the Stanley Museum of Art. Following the three-year period that encompasses the inaugural installation, the museum will begin hosting temporary exhibitions. This August, the museum will also publish *In a Time of Witness*, a major catalog of works from the permanent collection paired with contributions from writers and poets associated with the Iowa Writers' Workshop, International Writing Program, and Translation Program. Edited by my colleague Derek (DK) Nnuro, curator of special projects at the museum and a novelist in his own right, the publication will feature a wide selection of artwork from the collection and texts by some of the most important writers of our time.

It has been a long time since the museum has published a catalog devoted to its African collection, and a lot of things have changed



FIG. 18 (left):
Altar, boli.
Bamana; Mali.
20th century.
Mixed media. H: 45.7 cm.
Ex Galerie von Miller, Frankfurt and Munich until 2008.
University of Iowa, The Stanley Museum of Art; purchased with funds from the Friends of the Stanley Museum of Art, inv. 2008.26.



FIG. 19 (above):
Gallery view of the African pottery collection co-curated by Cory Gundlach and Boureima Diamitani.
Photo courtesy of The Stanley Museum of Art.

recently in the field of African art studies. In the fall of 2021, I hosted "Reimagining Ritual and Style: New Conversations on African Art," a three-part symposium on African art studies with a brilliant group of guests from the U.S. and Nigeria. Along with ideas addressed in this symposium, I plan to build upon those in the inaugural installation to publish a new catalog on the African collection in Iowa. Now that the collection is finally back in the Stanley Museum of Art and recovery from the flood of 2008 has reached a close, it is also time to organize a traveling exhibition that offers new perspectives on this beautiful collection.

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FIGS. 17a and b (left):
Possibly Oba Fasiku Alaaye of Ikerin (c. 1871–1976), Epa mask.
Yoruba; Nigeria.
Probably mid 20th century.
Wood, glass beads, pigment.
H: 150.5 cm.
Ex Galerie Schwarz-Weiss, Munich, until 1978; The Stanley Collection, Muscatine, Iowa, 1978–1986.
University of Iowa, The Stanley Museum of Art; The Stanley Collection of African Art, inv. X1986.318.