

African art exhibit designed to comment on Spencer's founding collection

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LAWRENCE — As they were preparing to mount an exhibition marking the centennial of Sallie Casey Thayer's gift of thousands of art objects to the University of Kansas, curators at the Spencer Museum of Art realized that while Thayer collected works from every continent, none were from Africa outside of Egypt.

So Cassandra Mesick Braun, curator of global indigenous art, and Jessica Gerschultz, assistant professor of African & African-American studies, decided to cooperate on a companion exhibit that would draw on the museum's holdings of African art and Gerschultz's own research on and collection of African artworks.

"Race, Gender and the 'Decorative' in 20th Century African Art: Reimagining Boundaries" opened at the museum Nov. 11, two weeks after "Civic Leader and Art Collector: Sallie Casey Thayer and an Art Museum for KU." The African art show continues through May 7, while the Thayer exhibit closes Feb. 4.

The African art exhibition includes paintings, textiles, ceramics and even a full Yoruba masquerade costume.

“We decided to contextualize the almost total omission of Africa from the founding collection by bringing to light different problems and issues that existed at that time and that have persisted throughout the 20th century in the way African art has been collected and displayed in U.S. museums,” Gerschultz said.

In the early 20th century, Gerschultz said, “decorative” was often a pejorative term for feminized and racialized artistic practices considered crude, even criminal, by some European theorists. And while Thayer had a taste for art considered decorative, apart from some Coptic Egyptian textiles and “ancient” objects, she collected nothing from Africa.

“At the time the founding collection was donated in 1917, the European colonization of Africa was in full force,” Gerschultz said. “And while artworks were being collected, sometimes forcibly, from throughout the African continent and placed in museums, they were mainly in ethnographic museums or natural history museums, and this was in large part due to the racial categorizations that were mapped onto the African continent. So this exhibition takes race as well as gender as shifting constructs that impacted the work of 20th-century African artists as well as how artworks were collected and categorized in the United States.”

Indeed, many of the African objects in the Spencer Museum’s collection today were originally housed in the university’s Museum of Anthropology. It wasn’t until 2007 that the Spencer assumed stewardship over its former ethnographic (or non-archaeological) collections. Other items from the anthropology collection are now held by the Museum of Natural History and its Biodiversity Institute collection.

Mesick Braun said that, for the time, Thayer was broad-minded in her taste for art.

“I was always very impressed with the founding gift because it included a lot of works of art that weren’t being considered for inclusion in museums – Native American art, forms of Asian art,” Mesick Braun said. “The fact that it was a female collector in and of itself was kind of noteworthy, but the fact that she was collecting things like Native American moccasins or cradle boards alongside Winslow Homer paintings and considering them on equal footing was actually fairly radical for the time.”

Now the Spencer holds 10,000 objects in its global indigenous art collection, and it was to that collection that Gerschultz and Mesick Braun turned when they began to cultivate the current show.

“I thought it would be a great way to bring out some of our African art but also to have it in conversation with the founding collection exhibit,” Mesick Braun said.

Indeed, a couple of items in the current show have never before been displayed. Some, on the other hand, are old favorites. And several come from Gerschultz's personal collection. She has been studying Tunisian art for 10 years and is publishing a book on modernism in this North African country.

Jellal Ben Abdallah was the last living member of a group of artists called the École de Tunis, or Tunis School. He died Nov. 9 at age 96. His painting, "Underwater Orchestra," and two smaller related works are part of the current exhibit. It's the first time his work has been collected and shown by a U.S. museum, Gerschultz said. She arranged for the museum to purchase the painting, a study for a ceramic tile mural, from Ben Abdallah. The artist and his nephew, Amin Bouker, gifted the two miniature works.

"The inclusion of not only works that Jessica has collected but that have arisen out of the years of deep research is further reflecting the museum's role as a facilitator of research and again harkening back to Sallie Casey Thayer's vision of art for education," Mesick Braun said.

Other objects on display include a group of small Akan brass weights used for measuring gold dust in trans-Saharan trade, South African pottery, jewelry and more.

The mid-20th century masquerade costume was used in a Yoruba masquerade called Egungun, in which masked dancers embody the spirits of deceased ancestors. Mesick Braun said that not only is it "a fairly rare example" of an intact costume, but it shows how religious pluralism is a fact of life for many in Nigeria. The cloth panels of the costume incorporate an Islamic prayer rug.

"The fact that we have an object that was used in Yoruba traditional religion that affirms the presence of Islam in the area feels really significant," Mesick Braun said.

Egungun masquerades take place annually in Nigeria, and people who use the Spencer's mobile phone app to explore the exhibition can click on a link to see a video of a performance.

"It really enlivens the object and looks completely different," Mesick Braun said.

Photo: Jessica Gerschultz (left) and Cassandra Mesick Braun with the Egungun masquerade costume on display at the Spencer Museum of Art.

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