The Skowhegan Medal for Sculpture, given this year to El Anatsui, is a tremendous acknowledgment of the career record of one of the most critically acclaimed sculptors working in the global contemporary art scene today. For nearly fifty years, Anatsui insistently demonstrated an unflinching commitment to formal innovation by constantly questioning and reimagining established languages and processes of sculpture. In this time, he has produced an extensive body of work that is at once intriguing, profound, inventive, polysemic, spectacular and epic.

A graduate of the sculpture program of the acclaimed Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Anatsui’s career direction was determined not so much by the still neo-colonial 1960s curriculum of the art school as by his identification with the progressive cultural politics championed by Ghanaian and African intellectuals and cultural nationalists of the independence era. Specifically, during the presidency of Kwame Nkrumah, the foremost advocate of African self-determination and proponent of Pan-Africanism and African Personality, Sankofa—an Akan term for “go back and pick”—became the paradigm of postcolonial Ghanaian cultural nationalism. Sankofa, illustrated by the adinkra symbol depicting a bird swallowing its own egg, suggested the relevance of African cultural traditions for the continent’s present and future, and thus became the ideological and conceptual ground on which Anatsui built his artistic career.

Anatsui’s earliest post-Sankofa work consisted of round wood reliefs inspired by trays used by Kumasi traders for displaying their wares. On these trays, he carved adinkra motifs and other designs focusing on the dynamic relationship between the rich symbolism and graphic power of adinkra signs. Once aware of this possibility of simultaneous evocation of significant form and idea in adinkra, Anatsui, who in 1975 joined the faculty of the Fine and Applied Arts Department at the University of Nigeria, expanded his field of artistic resources to other West African design and sign systems, and syllabaries, including Igbo Uli, Efik Nsibidi, Bamun and Vai scripts.

A survey of Anatsui’s oeuvre clearly shows a systematic determination to use readily available material to develop work that is as formally sophisticated as it is conceptual multilayered. For instance, in the late 1970s at the end of Africa’s postcolonial euphoria, he produced a series of terracotta sculptures which he called Broken Pots. Although inspired by pottery traditions of the Ewe peoples of Ghana and Togo, the “pots” were entropic forms rather than as utilitarian vessels and derived their conceptual charge from the recyclablility of pottery clay. In his hands, the broken pot form symbolized postcolonial Africa, which despite its contemporary dire circumstances, had internal potential for rejuvenation.

The latest phase of Anatsui’s work, which began in the late 1990s consists of the now globally familiar monumental structures constructed respectively from locally
manufactured liqueur bottle tops, offset printer's aluminum plates, and rusted steel graters used for processing garri, a West African staple food. In addition to their astonishing visual splendor, these metal works simultaneously evoke Africa's rich artistic traditions, the ravages of slavery and colonialism, the distress of the postcolonial condition, processes of climate change, and the complicated modalities of political and cultural globalization. In these metal works is a surprising fusion of form, color, and movement, that transform them into what one might describe as metamorphic objects—sculptures that by their infinitely reconfigurable, fragmentary form instantiate the popular African maxim: "no condition is permanent."

For his career achievement as a sculptor, Anatsui has received the Praemium Imperiale Award for Sculpture (2016), Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at the 56th Venice Biennale (2015), and Kansai Telecasting Prize, Osaka Triennial (1995). He was elected to the American Academy of Design (2018), American Academy of Arts and Letters (2014) and is an honorary member of the Royal Academy of Art (2013). His work is in the collection of The British Museum (London), The Smithsonian National Museum of African Art (Washington DC), Museum of Modern Art (New York), Centre Pompidou (Paris), Museum Kunst Palast (Dusseldorf), Setagaya Museum (Tokyo), National Gallery of Contemporary Art (Lagos), the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), Guggenheim, Abu-Dhabi, and several other major public collections.

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