



**THE ETHELBERT COOPER GALLERY OF
AFRICAN & AFRICAN AMERICAN ART
at the Hutchins Center, Harvard University**

**WOLE SOYINKA: ANTIQUITIES ACROSS TIMES AND PLACE
REVEALS AN ICONIC PLAYWRIGHT'S PASSIONS AND
INSPIRATIONS IN A PERSONAL, HISTORIC COLLECTION**

EXHIBITION DATES AND HOURS

October 4-December 21, 2017

The Ethelbert Cooper Gallery of African and African American Art
102 Mount Auburn Street, Harvard Square, Cambridge

Free and open to the public Tue-Sat, 10 am-5 pm

Opening reception October 3, 6-8 pm

OVERVIEW



Wole Soyinka

The Ethelbert Cooper Gallery of African & African American Art at the Hutchins Center presents *WOLE SOYINKA: Antiquities Across Times and Place*, featuring selections from the personal art collection of the Nobel Award-winning Nigerian playwright and social activist who has been amassing works for nearly 60 years. The exhibition is curated by NYU professor Awam Amkpa.

Comprising nearly 50 pieces, including antiquities made from wood, bronze, cloth, pigment and other materials, the exhibition prominently features items made and used by the Yoruba people. Works from the Congo, bronzes from Benin, and items of Igbo origin also are included. The exhibition content ranges from religious iconography to ritual pieces, to ornamental artworks, weaponry, vessels and more.

The curated collection of antiquities are placed “in conversation” with works by contemporary African artists who themselves were inspired by Soyinka’s plays and writings.

SOYINKA BIO

Wole Soyinka was born in 1934 in Nigeria and now lives in the cities of Lagos and Abeokuta. Soyinka has taught drama, literature and aesthetics at three Nigerian universities and at universities around the world. He has written novels, poems and numerous plays, many now considered literary classics, including *Death and the King’s Horseman*. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986, and was the first African writer to do so. Soyinka will give the Richard D. Cohen Lectures on African and African American Arts in November, sponsored by the Hutchins Center.

EXHIBITION DETAILS

Soyinka's collection emerged from his acquisition of sculptural works that are intertextual to his writings; he often imagined the stories behind the antiquities, and the ancestral and historical people who used them. Notable among the exhibition's antiquities: a Kuba Kete Mask from the Congo that served as a symbol of morality, dissuading ancient people who may have contemplated committing crimes; pairs of Ere Ibeji sculptures important to the Yoruba people's Ifa religion, in which twins play a special role; and a Yoruba Ife head depicting the ocean god Ori Olokun, created in the early Bronze Age.

Contemporary sculptors and painters featured in this exhibition are Peju Alatisse, Olu Amoda, Osaretin Ighile, Moyo Okediji, and Bruce Onobrakpeya. Works by choreographer Peter Badejo and filmmaker Tunde Kelani also are featured.

Notable among the contemporary works: Onobrakpeya's "Ara Ogun III," an altar-like piece by an octogenarian contemporary of Soyinka's that honors the god of creativity and destruction (often cited as Soyinka's "patron saint"); Amoda's wood and steel sculptures "Death and the King's Horseman: Mrs. Pilkings and Olunde" (2009) and "At the Ball II" (2009) based on characters from Soyinka's classic play; Okediji's "256 Ifa Eyes" (2017), an intricate acrylic and mud painting that depicts the Ifa religion's divination system and suggests modern computer codes; and Alatisse's "Abracadabra—Government Magic" (2016), an outwardly political work that critiques the Nigerian peoples' response to being "imprisoned" by their government.

Soyinka's collecting became a form of political protest, when in a fierce defense of Nigeria's social and cultural heritage in his 2007 memoir, *You Must Set Forth at Dawn*, he railed against commercial art collectors and auction houses whom he accused of profiting from pilfered African antiquities, renewing the public debate about cultural appropriation.

CURATOR'S COMMENT

Curator Awam Amkpa, who was a student of Soyinka, says the exhibition hinges on a simple question: "What happens when an artist collects?" He says the religiosity that runs throughout the exhibition is notable, especially the polytheistic thought patterns of the Ifa traditions. "In much the way that the multiple gods of the Ifa religion helped Yoruba people understand greater concepts and the relationships between themselves, the earth and higher powers," Amkpa says, "this exhibition presents relationships between the antiquities, and shows how these ancient pieces formed a founding vocabulary upon which Wole's writing -- and the contemporary artists' works -- are built."

IN-GALLERY EVENTS A free curator's tour of *Wole Soyinka: Antiquities Through Times and Places*, led by Awam Amkpa, takes place at the Cooper Gallery on Wednesday, October 4 at 12 noon.

MORE INFORMATION The Cooper Gallery is located at 102 Mount Auburn Street in Harvard Square, Cambridge, Mass. For details on the exhibition, visit www.coopergalleryhc.org or call 617-496-5777. Information on related events will be posted on the Cooper Gallery website.

ABOUT COOPER GALLERY The Ethelbert Cooper Gallery of African and African American Art highlights art in exhibitions and installations complemented by free public programming. Part of the acclaimed Hutchins Center for African and African American Research at Harvard, and housed in a space designed by prominent British architect David Adjaye, the Cooper Gallery showcases diverse cultures, archives and historical traditions. Its programs offer in-gallery engagements, workshops, and artist talks, as well as off-site academic symposia and lectures.

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MEDIA NOTE Curator Awam Amkpa and Cooper Gallery Director Vera Ingrid Grant are available for interviews. Photos of exhibition works are available.

MEDIA CONTACT John Michael Kennedy, JMKPR for Cooper Gallery
jmk@jmkpr.com
781-620-1761 (O), 212-842-1752 (C)