Behind the Primitive Shadow:
History and Its Consequence on Contemporary African Art

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Acknowledgements

I first saw El Anatsui's work at the Museum of Modern Art in 2013. In New York for Barnard's admitted students weekend, I skipped an afternoon of programs, thinking I would attend college elsewhere, to visit the museum. After four hours of exploring the galleries, exhausted from the excursion and filled with contentment from my slow day, I wandered into a space that I thought would lead me back to the street. Instead, I landed in another gallery and was hit with a wave of awe. There it was— *Bleeding Takari II* (2007) by El Anatsui. A magnificent work of brilliant silver and acerbic red that towered over fellow museum-goers and me. It puckered, dipped, rippled, and bled, as if over languid limbs. Maybe it was in that moment that I decided to attend Barnard, just to stay close to that memory of overwhelming resplendence.

Discovering El Anatsui at the Met, I had the opposite experience. I went to the Met during Barnard's orientation week and walked through the Rockefeller Wing, reading the origins of the works on view. Having just returned from a year of service where I volunteered alongside people from many of these places, I thought about my friends from Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, the Northwest Territories in Canada, Colombia, Kenya, Burkina Faso, and more. Reminiscing on my time with them, I didn't expect to find the same artist who had stunned me with his work about a year before. While the piece in the MoMA surged with intensity, the work I found tucked in the African gallery stood still. Its display became a fixation and an obligatory stop on any walk through the Met with friends to explain institutional bias.

While my passion for the topic began five years ago, the formal research and writing for the thesis introduced me to histories and questions I never expected to confront. The thesis process was frustrating at times but absolutely confirmed my enthusiasm for art history and the

urgency to address these unjust histories. I am immensely proud of this project, although the work is certainly not done yet.

I would first like to thank my advisors, Dr. Kellie Jones and Dr. Yvette Christianse, for their wisdom and guidance. In office hours, email exchanges, and impromptu conversations in hallways and on sidewalks, they offered insights that challenged me to think deeper and work smarter. I am grateful to have worked with two such intelligent and supportive individuals whose collective experiences elevated this project to heights I couldn't have imagined. Thank you for your time and for allowing me to learn alongside you in what I believe was a critical and pivotal project in my life. Thank you, also, to Professor Christianse for welcoming me with open arms into the Africana Department and as one of her advisees after my late-in-the-game major declaration in October. It is rare to declare a major partway through senior year but am so happy with my decision to do so.

Also integral to my thesis process was my writing partner, Victoria Martinez, who helped keep me on schedule and motivate my work. Victoria, thank you for late night texts, regular messages of support, and commenting with acumen and humor on my chapters.

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Lastly, thank you to everyone who patiently heard my near-obsessive explanations of this project in the last year. From parties to social media, I barely stopped talking about this thesis out of pure ardor for the topic. I apologize to anyone who tried flirting with me in the last year because without a doubt, I steered the conversation to drone on about the display of African art in encyclopedic museums.

I have loved this process of learning and scholarship and hope that this passion is communicated and transferred, even partially, to those who read this thesis.

Thank you.

List of Illustrations

Introduction: A Walk Through the Museum

Reaching the Rockefeller Wing for the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas from the Great Hall of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, visitors are struck by the grandeur of the building and glittering Greek marbles seen en route to the wing. Walking past monumental floral arrangements and swirling patrons, rows of ancient vases and elegant gods and goddesses, the museum immediately communicates its authority and prominence. Anticipating the sculptures, paintings, and pieces of history that lie in the maze of galleries ahead, even these initial glimpses into the museum inspire awe.

Once inside the Rockefeller Wing, viewers are met by objects that are as grand as they are varied. Spears, masks, and statues from across the African continent made of wood, enamel, fabric, and pigment offer a stunning glimpse into creative traditions that feel so far from their home in New York City. Elsewhere in the wing, gold adornments from Costa Rica to Colombia fill glass cases and wooden statues from Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu tower over museum-goers. The variety of scale and material match the geographical variety of the wing and in just a few paces, visitors are transported from one corner of the globe to another by objects whose aesthetic variety demonstrates expansive artistic practices and creative traditions.

Entering the main gallery of African art, the first room accessible through the Rockefeller Wing's entrance from the Greek and Roman Galleries, viewers are met by glass cases along the sides of the room and an arrangement of sculptures filling the center. The most forward and dominating sculpture, *Priest with Raised Arms* (Fig. 1), is a wooden male figure from Mali, his gaze forward and arms raised straight up in prayer. The chipped wood of this sculpture and stylized representation— smooth, conical skull, exaggerated lips and neck, defined muscles in

the chest and legs— communicate a caducity about this unnamed man. The label on the statue's pedestal dates the work at "14th -17th century" and notes that the sculpture was donated from the Museum of Primitive Art to the Metropolitan Museum of Art by Nelson A. Rockefeller. While it is accompanied by two paragraphs of description, the text focuses on a broader Dogon sculptural tradition, not the work itself. This sculpture is considered one of the museum's masterpieces.[1]

Priest with Raised Arms signifies the tone for the wing— one of broader explanations often removed from individual works. The pieces are old, the information unspecific, and their histories tied to primitivism and the Rockefeller family. But behind the cluster of wooden sculptures, peering out between the priest's raised hands, is El Anatsui's *Between Earth and Heaven* (Fig. 2). Like the intermediary figure between the earthly and the transcendent, the priest's outstretched arms point towards Anatsui's work. Unlike every other piece in the gallery, this hanging sculpture is a contemporary piece, created in 2006 and hung in the wing in 2008. When looking out across the gallery, *Between Earth and Heaven* hides behind a visual mat of sculptures. In a room filled with colonial-era African art, the inclusion of a contemporary piece is unusual. Its presence could be an attempt to present a well-rounded Africa, one of the past and the present, but shroud in this colonialist legacy established by the rest of the wing, it is seen through a framework of primitivism.

The sculpture, made of pounded liquor bottle caps threaded together with copper wire, is meant to transform through light into a glittering metallic tapestry. Ribbons of red, gold, and black that run through the hanging piece, when illuminated, should sparkle "with dimension" and dance across the surface, adding new depth to the draping and ruffling. Instead, this piece, the

[1] Glueck, Grace. “A Spectacular New Wing.” *The New York Times*, 23 Jan. 1982.

only one by El Anatsui on view in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, is camouflaged. Without a single dedicated light on it and against a low mustard wall, the luminosity is sucked out of the piece. It is left flat and bare against the back of the African gallery. The work, despite its magnificence, does not have the lone strength to pull the wing out of its imperialist structure and instead, is caught in the shadow of a colonialist past that overpowers the wing. Like *Priest with Raised Arms,* this masterful work is slipping into obscurity because of it's placement and treatment within the museum.

Chapter 1: History of the Rockefeller Wing

Announced in 1969 and opened in 1982,[2] The Rockefeller Wing is the vision of Nelson A. Rockefeller, then Governor of New York and former Vice President of the United States. Originally, the thousands of works donated to the new wing were part of the Museum of Primitive Art, which Rockefeller founded in 1957 to rival European collections[3]. According to his vision, Rockefeller wanted "to select objects of outstanding beauty whose rare quality is the equal of works shown in other museums of art throughout the world, and to exhibit them so that everyone can enjoy them in the fullest measure"[4]. Rockefeller greatly admired the works collected by his family from Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, asserting that this "primitive art" should be viewed in conjunction with Western art. "Primitive" is used in consistency with this constructed category of art from these three regions. As the Met is an encyclopedic museum, "based on the polymathic ideal of the Enlightenment museum… [that] it is good… to experience the full diversity of human cultural industry in order to better understand our place in the world,"[5] Rockefeller felt that including works from these regions would round out the collection and provide a necessary comparison to Western world. His donation of works and funding from various Rockefeller family foundations gave the museum the push to collect and display art from these regions, after they lost interest in "primitive objects" in 1914[6]. Although Rockefeller had

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[2] Cotter, Holland. "An African Renewal At the Metropolitan." *The New York Times*, 2 Feb. 1996.

[3] Van Beurden, Sarah. "African Art at the Museum of Primitive Art." *Rockefeller Archive Center*, 2011. 4.

[4] Veys, Fanny Wonu. "Art or Artifact: Is that the Question? 'Pasifika Styles' at the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, and the Refurbishment of the Michael Rockefeller Wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art." *Paideuma: Mitteilungen Zur Kulturkunde*, vol. 56, 2010, pp. 268.

[5] Cuno, James. *Museums Matter: In Praise of the Encyclopedic Museum.* University of Chicago Press, 2011, pp. 123.

[6] Glueck, Grace. "A Spectacular New Wing." *The New York Times*, 23 Jan. 1982.

offered to sponsor archeological digs in South America and provide funding to collect objects from Africa and Oceania, the Metropolitan Museum of Art refused his proposals for displaying primitive art until he closed and donated the collection from his Museum of Primitive Art.

Nelson Rockefeller passed his interest in collecting non-Western works to his son, Michael C. Rockefeller, the wing's namesake. The younger Rockefeller spent significant time in the Pacific, collecting works and exploring the region with friends. He disappeared in 1961 while traveling among Asmat people in Papua New Guinea[7]. While the cause of his disappearance and death are unknown, the rumor swirling along with his legacy within the wing is that he was eaten by cannibals[8], tying the makers of the work on display with death and savagery. This presumption, the fantastical tale told to relate the Rockefeller name with the art on view, creates a harsh delineation between the works in the gallery and the people who brought them there—the savage and the civilized, the intellectual and the barbarian. This impression is not created solely by the wing, it's works or labels, but reflects "a more global vision of Tribal Life"[9] that centers "night and darkness,… sexual mutilation,… physical violence, and… the power of malevolent spirits" drawn from "a body of received wisdom" from decades of primitivist scholarship.[10]

The contextualization of the wing in this way heightens the primitivist approach that the project began with. The collection began at the Museum of Primitive Art and the structure of the collection from the perspective of the Rockefellers, who guided their wing at the Metropolitan

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[7] Glueck, Grace. “A Spectacular New Wing.” *The New York Times*, 23 Jan. 1982.

[8] Price, Sally. *Primitive Art in Civilized Places.* 2nd ed., University of Chicago Press, 2001, pp. 50-51.

[9] Ibid. 54.

[10] Ibid. 55.

Museum of Art through it's design, curation, and arrangement, follows that schema. With the grandeur of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, housing so many works from across the globe, displays project objectivity, presenting society's "highest values and most cherished memories"[11]. Museums like the Met reflect cultural values and "secular truth— a truth that is rational and verifiable"[12] but museum spaces are "selective, partial, located, the result of specific histories of collecting, and bound to the 'body' of a specific institution."[13] Although ideally museums ‘‘don’t prescribe a particular interpretative methodology,’’[14] "the museum's sequenced spaces and arrangements of objects, its lighting and architectural details provide both the stage set and the script"[15] for how a visitor interacts with the space. The Rockefeller Wing is no exception and its primitivist approach confirms this.

Considering the grouping of the wing, presenting the arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, raises confusion. Large bodies of water and entire continents separate these regions.. Artistic exchange between artists of these three places would have been minimal, if any, and the curation of the wing does not attempt to communicate that this was the case either. So why, then, would the art of these locations be displayed in conjunction with one another? The establishment of "primitive art" as a group is based on the assumption that "Primitive artists… express their feelings free from the intrusive overlay of learned behavior and conscious constraints that mold

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[11] Duncan, Carol. “The Art Museum as Ritual.” *Civilizing Rituals, Inside Public Art Museums,* Routledge, 1995, pp. 8.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Svanberg, Fredrik. “The World as Collected; or, Museum Collections as Situated Materialities.” *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies.*, 2015.

[14] Cuno, James. *Museums Matter: In Praise of the Encyclopedic Museum.* University of Chicago Press, 2011, pp. 104.

[15] Duncan, Carol. “The Art Museum as Ritual.” *Civilizing Rituals, Inside Public Art Museums, Routledge*, 1995, pp. 12.

the work of the Civilized artist,"[16] The linking force is the false category of a tribal other, sprouting from an emphasis on area studies and ethnography that encouraged cultural categorization at the inception of the wing.

The geographical arrangement of objects "complies with exhibition schemes developed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries"[17] that use anthropological approaches to present non-Western works from colonized regions. The Rockefeller collection "placed the artifacts in their ethnographic context" but within an art museum, focusing on the aesthetic value of the objects distances them from their origins, making "ethnographic collections less significant"[18] compared to other collections. Outside of their cultural contexts, objects collected lose their framework of specificity or cultural relevance. Historically, museums like the Met ‘‘are the result of empire, manifestations of historical imbalances of power by which stronger nations enriched themselves at the expense of weaker ones.’’[19] The retention of an anthropological presentation decontextualized the objects and aligns the collection with "symptoms of a colonial heritage, filled with trophies appropriated from indigenous cultures."[20]

The change of setting from an ethnographic primitivist museum to an encyclopedic art museum, like the move from the Museum of Primitive Art to the Met undergone by the

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[16] Price, Sally. *Primitive Art in Civilized Places.* 2nd ed., University of Chicago Press, 2001, pp. 32.

[17] Veys, Fanny Wonu. “Art or Artifact: Is that the Question? ‘Pasifika Styles’ at the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, and the Refurbishment of the Michael Rockefeller Wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.” *Paideuma: Mitteilungen Zur Kulturkunde*, vol. 56, 2010, pp. 272.

[18] Morphy, Howard. “The Displaced Local: Multiple Agency in the Building of Museums’ Ethnographic Collections.” *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies,* 2015.

[19] Cuno, James. *Museums Matter: In Praise of the Encyclopedic Museum.* University of Chicago Press, 2011, pp. 89.

[20] Ibid.

Rockefeller collection, changes the viewer's focus from cultural categorization to aesthetic value. Because "exhibitions mirror and reflect their institution's histories,"[21] the reception of the collection is transformed when it changes from one space to another. A problem arrises, however, when the organization and display of the objects does not reflect the altered values of a space. When "ethnographic objects are aestheticized… and the display follows a geographic and cultural lay-out," a false sense of timelessness is formed.[22] Although the wing supports the encyclopedic goals of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, "it is not self-reflective, nor does it question, provoke or push established ideas and boundaries forward."[23] The wing displays artifacts out of context, creating the illusion that all of the objects on view are meant to be viewed as they are displayed. The exhibition strategies, contrary to what Nelson Rockefeller says about promoting the artistic value of the represented regions, generate a stalled sense of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas.The broad use of "the Americas" refers to groups native to North America and pre-Colombian art of South America. A separate American Wing in the museum that displays the art of colonizers perpetuates the sense of stalled native groups in comparison to the creative advancements of European settlers in South and North America.

Despite a semantic change from "primitive" to "Africa, Oceania, and the Americas," the implications of the "primitive" hold fast within the wing. Repurposed from the Museum of Primitive Art and first managed at the Met by the Department of Primitive Art, the foundation of

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[21] Veys, Fanny Wonu. “Art or Artifact: Is that the Question? ‘Pasifika Styles’ at the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, and the Refurbishment of the Michael Rockefeller Wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.” *Paideuma: Mitteilungen Zur Kulturkunde,* vol. 56, 2010, pp. 266.

[22] Ibid. 275

[23] Ibid.

the wing's organization rests on primitivist ideals. The original department name lasted through the first decade of the wing's opening[24] and structurally, nothing changed in the organization of the works to reflect this shift. Annexing these regions together in a wing upholds this notion that the art comes from and represents a primitivist other. The grouping of these regions "in the singular [Primitive] is a popular convention which has the effect of underscoring their interchangeability, not only within each of their respective societies, but in the larger context of their colleagues throughout the world."[25] Placing the objects in conjunction with one another establishes a contrast between these objects and the Western artistic practices. This "us vs. them" mentality highlights a colonialist approach: "European vs. non-European," "civilized vs. un-civilized."

Even without the term "primitive" in the title of the wing or its corresponding department, the associations remain strong. The exhibition presents itself "as [an agent] of the colonial process,"[26] displaying objects removed from their origins by wealthy white Americans. The naming of the wing further asserts the contextualization of the objects in the museum along with this history. Despite the necessity of the inclusion in the museum for the institution to live

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[24] Concluded through comparative research in the New York Times digital database. According to available articles, the last mention of the Metropolitan Museum's Department of Primitive Art was in 1988 and the first mention of the Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas was in 1992.

[25] Price, Sally. *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*. 2nd ed., University of Chicago Press, 2001, pp. 59.

[26] Morphy, Howard. "The Displaced Local: Multiple Agency in the Building of Museums' Ethnographic Collections." *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies,* 2015.

up to its encyclopedic goals to provide "a cosmopolitan view of the world,"[27] the pieces are framed "within the context of the… admiration for the accomplishments of Primitive Man."[28]

Elsewhere in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the display of other non-Western art— Egyptian, Ancient Near Eastern, Islamic, and Asian wings— different from that of the Rockefeller Wing regions. The grouping of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas into one wing and curatorial department inspires questions of why these three locales are grouped when other non-Western regions have independent curatorial departments. The deep-rooted colonial histories of the three regions of the Rockefeller Wing give them a distinct relationship with power and dominance that maintains a sense of colonial superiority over the art. The relationship between these three regions of the world and the primitivist ideology are tied to misconceptions of tribalism associated with their native groups.

The term "tribal," as James Clifford explains, "is itself a construction designed to accomplish the task of resemblance,"[29] employing curatorial cherrypicking to string together a narrative of out-of-place objects. Linking Africa, Oceania, and the Americas through assumptions of unsophisticated tribes binds them through ethnographic impressions gathered by outside individuals, like Michael C. Rockefeller, not creative realities of these distinct cultures. The grouping under a common guise of "primitive" is born from "selecting customs that *have* been documented for *some* non-Western societies under *certain* conditions— simply exaggerating and distorting their pervasiveness in order to construct… an internally homogenous

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[27] Cuno, James. *Museums Matter: In Praise of the Encyclopedic Museum.* University of Chicago Press, 2011, pp. 62.

[28] Price, Sally. *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*. 2nd ed., University of Chicago Press, 2001, pp. 40.

[29] Clifford, James. "Histories of the Tribal and the Modern." *The Predicament of Culture*, Harvard University Press, 1988, pp. 192.

society located somewhere out beyond the frontier of the Civilized World."[30] Prioritizing a colonialist premonition of a place centers the presentation of objects around colonial dominance. Clifford situates the coinage of "primitive art" as a declaration of "the restless desire and power of the modern West to collect the world,"[31] an attempt to assert dominance over other cultures and trap them in one building, wing, or room. The imperialist "discovery" of objects and the eagerness to claim ownership over something that exists without colonialist intervention is ever-present in the Rockefeller Wing.

In the actual construction of the wing, limitations brought on by organic materials and the specifications of Nelson Rockefeller posed exhibitionary challenges. Because so many objects displayed in the wing are made of wood, bone, leather, and fur, controlling light and moisture is crucial to the longevity of the objects. The full wall of windows that faces Central Park had to be covered with a nylon coating to dim the light and block UV, a proposed pool of water, similar to the one along the Temple of Dendur in the Egyptian wing on the north side of the building, was eliminated from plans, and illumination on certain objects is limited for their protection.[32] Architecturally, design challenges because the wing mirrored the addition alotted to Egypt on the other end of the museum meant the spaces had to conform to a pre-determined structure for the sake of symmetry, instead of constructing the wing to best display the works.

However, regardless of elements outside the control of the exhibition designers, details, like the colors chosen, decorative additions, and certain curatorial choices have an impact on

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[30] Price, Sally. *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*. 2nd ed., University of Chicago Press, 2001, pp. 54.

[31] Clifford, James. “Histories of the Tribal and the Modern.” *The Predicament of Culture*, Harvard University Press, 1988, pp. 196.

[32] Glueck, Grace. “A Spectacular New Wing.” *The New York Times,* 23 Jan. 1982.

making the wing appear smaller and darker than it should. These choices close off the space and, when compared with the luminous Greek and Roman wing, go so far as to deter visitors from entering the galleries. Whereas those rooms are meticulously enhanced by titled floors, moldings, engaged columns, and marble accents to enhance the aesthetic themes of the art, the spacial designs Rockefeller Wing do not reflect and enhance elements in the works on view.

Carpeted in a mid-tone gray and painted a similar color, the African galleries are lackluster. The blend of grays dampens the colors of the works on view and with less light than neighboring galleries and no source of natural light, the setting detracts from the works. Without contrast between the pieces and their environment, the sculptures, masks, spears, and other objects lose dimension. In the African gallery, a gridded overhang cuts the room's height by several feet, making the space appear and feel even more enclosed. Instead of culturally relevant architectural details like the moldings, columns, and materials used in the Greek and Roman wing, the Rockefeller Wing's interior decoration is generic and unrelated to the objects on display. The design choices of gray tones, square tiling on the ceiling, and basic glass cases around the sides of each room and the filling the center of the secondary African gallery align more closely with a cubicle-filled office than an art museum. If anything, these design elements contribute to the false narrative of a dark and mysterious continent.

Of course, even if the design choices are not effective in promoting the art on display, incredible resources were poured into this project, costing the museum $18.3 million and taking thirteen years from planning to opening.[33] Although the money spent confirms that this endeavor was by no mean thoughtless or insignificant, it does not justify the threads of primitivism that

[33] Glueck, Grace. “A Spectacular New Wing.” *The New York Times*, 23 Jan. 1982.

run through the wing. Stubborn attachment to a nineteenth-century salvage anthropology organizes the wing in a way that does a disservice to the regions it represents. The Metropolitan Museum of Art was founded "to gather a more or less complete collection of objects to illustrate all branches of art history, from the earliest beginnings"[34] but the museum's narrow "perspective may make it harder for present members of the community to engage with the collections and to work with the institutions to utilize the full potential of the resource for present purposes."[35] Regardless of the intentions of the constructors and curators of the space, its reception by contemporary visitors ultimately dictates whether or not the space is able to properly present the works at hand.

Because of how the Rockefeller Wing is constructed, the museum's approach to African, Oceanic, and native North and South American art is so closely tied to a colonialist legacy that they are unable to display contemporary art from those regions and ethnic groups. The work is shown in a way that diminishes their cultural relationships and downplays visual appeal through an ethnographic organization. The objects reflect the "tension… between the focus on art and the fact that one was actually dealing with ethnographic objects, and therefore artifacts. A display of beautiful objects from the past tends to create a feeling that these works were made by culture

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[34] Veys, Fanny Wonu. "Art or Artifact: Is that the Question? 'Pasifika Styles' at the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, and the Refurbishment of the Michael Rockefeller Wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art." *Paideuma: Mitteilungen Zur Kulturkunde*, vol. 56, 2010, pp. 267.

[35] Morphy, Howard. "The Displaced Local: Multiple Agency in the Building of Museums' Ethnographic Collections." *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies,* 2015.

that are now dead."[36] The push and pull between art historical and ethnographic approaches to the works and regions on display creates a liminal exhibition that is ineffective on both sides.

[36] Veys, Fanny Wonu. “Art or Artifact: Is that the Question? ‘Pasifika Styles’ at the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, and the Refurbishment of the Michael Rockefeller Wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.” *Paideuma: Mitteilungen Zur Kulturkund*e, vol. 56, 2010, pp. 274.

Chapter 2: In the Context of African Art History

While understanding the historical and curatorial framework for the Rockefeller Wing is crucial to understanding the context of why the placement of El Anatsui's *Between Earth and Heaven* is problematic, realizing the relationship between the wing and African art history provides necessary perspective on what it gets wrong. Because the field of African art history is a fairly young one— the first PhD dissertation on the topic in the United States was defended in 1957[37], the same year as the opening of the Rockefeller Museum of Primitive Art— the art historical understanding of African art and how to treat it is still evolving. Core to this debate is the relationship between the language used to describe the field, the framing and contextualization of works, and how these impact a viewer's impression of the art.

The field of African art history emerged out of area studies and ethnography. "For the first decades of African art scholarship, art historians relied heavily on early anthropological sources,"[38] treating art objects as part of a cultural study from the outside. From these perspectives, objects play a supporting role in illuminating elements of a culture, whereas from an art historical perspective, the objects themselves should be the primary focus. Anthropology positions objects to prove a point and as a consequence, African art history has "been permeated with the overt functionalism that anthropology [reveres]"[39]. This strategy prioritizes the institutional goals for an object over its cultural context and places its aesthetic value last.

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[37] Blier, Suzanne Preston. "African Art Studies at the Crossroads, An American Perspective." *African Art Studies: The State of the Discipline; Papers Presented at a Symposium Organized by the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution*, September 16, 1987, edited by Abíọ́dún Rowland, Smithsonian Institution, 1990, pp. 92.

[38] Ibid. 100.

[39] Ibid.

"Adherents of the ethnological approach consider knowledge of the content… to be absolutely necessary for any appreciation of [an object], including an aesthetic appreciation"[40] but this perspective presents art objects as pieces of an anthropological puzzle, each contributing to a wider understanding of Africa, instead of demonstrating their individual artistic merit. Because ethnography relies on the segmentation and classification of culture, African art is marginalized from art of the rest of the world and at the same time, cultures across the continent become generalized among each other. This creates an overly simplified, overly othered sense of African art.

Because African art history has been studied from an ethnographic approach, it has been seen through a Euro-centric lens. The standards of European or white American art, placed on African art, create unfair expectations for these unrelated creative traditions. The cultural hierarchy was "proposed by nineteenth-century anthropologists and then adopted in the early twentieth century by Western artists and critics" and spread to be "accepted as a natural part of poplar 'common sense'"[41] that reads African art as more culturally relevant and less aesthetically valuable. To read African art, early art historians used a "mutilated concept of art… for which they attach value only to the personal aesthetic pleasure inspired in the European beholder."[42] They take these works out of their cultural contexts, both physically and ideologically, and place

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[40] Gerbrands, Adrian A.. "The History of African Art Studies." *African Art Studies: The State of the Discipline; Papers Presented at a Symposium Organized by the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution*, September 16, 1987, edited by Abíọ́dún Rowland, Smithsonian Institution, 1990, pp. 20.

[41] Price, Sally. *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*. 2nd ed., University of Chicago Press, 2001, pp. 33.

[42] Gerbrands, Adrian A.. "The History of African Art Studies." *African Art Studies: The State of the Discipline; Papers Presented at a Symposium Organized by the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution*, September 16, 1987, edited by Abíọ́dún Rowland, Smithsonian Institution, 1990, pp. 20.

them in sterilized museums for viewers to look at "the outward form of the foreign work of art" and "insert a content of their own."[43] White institutions should consider their "part in the interpretive process"[44] of these works because of how they situate the objects.

Reading African art from this perspective creates a disconnect between the content, context and the form of the objects. Removed from their cultures and studied and interpreted by outsiders, the art loses vital contextual meanings. Judging works "of art from another culture without taking into account [their] content constitutes a rupture of the genetic relationship between form and content."[45] The meanings of works become distorted by these interpretations and disconnections. Especially in the instance of objects for performance, like masks and other regalia, the "relationship between context and form— not form and function"[46] inform their use and means of viewing. Detaching a work from its context, diminishes its aesthetic value because the mode of viewing is altered. Understanding that a piece was viewed in motion and seeing it in motion, especially in community settings, create very different audience experiences. But to Western viewers, cultural detachment coupled by contextual detachment removes viewers from the work's context and content, which are closely linked. Removing these elements from the

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[43] Gerbrands, Adrian A.. "The History of African Art Studies." *African Art Studies: The State of the Discipline; Papers Presented at a Symposium Organized by the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution*, September 16, 1987, edited by Abíọ́dún Rowland, Smithsonian Institution, 1990, pp. 20.

[44] Drewal, Henry John. "African Art Studies Tody." *African Art Studies: The State of the Discipline; Papers Presented at a Symposium Organized by the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution*, September 16, 1987, edited by Abíọ́dún Rowland, Smithsonian Institution, 1990, pp. 49.

[45] Gerbrands, Adrian A.. "The History of African Art Studies." *African Art Studies: The State of the Discipline; Papers Presented at a Symposium Organized by the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution*, September 16, 1987, edited by Abíọ́dún Rowland, Smithsonian Institution, 1990, pp. 21.

[46] Ross, Doran H., and Roy Sieber. "Interview with Roy Sieber." *African Arts*, vol. 25, no. 4, Oct. 1992, pp. 51.

form leaves only an aesthetic interpretation, limited by Western cultural understanding and institutional positioning.

The Eurocentric and ethnographic study of African art manipulate the language used to describe these works and lead to a primitivist and hierarchical interpretation of them. Words like "traditional," "primitive," and "craft" create a division between Western works of "fine" art and non-Western works that stray from Western traditions. These labels given through Western preference and expectation divide and demean. Designating certain works as "traditional" gives the false impression of timelessness but while there are certainly traditions in Africa, the word elides Africa's history.[47] "Traditional" forgets that "photography has thrived on the African continent since 1839" and that "masquerade is a thriving contemporary art form funded by international corporations."[48] The assumption that African creative practice is static or unchanging is served by the language used to describe it.

As oil paint on canvas and marble sculpture solidified themselves as the cornerstones of Western fine art practice, creative traditions that employ other mediums, like the wood, cloth, and bone used across the African continent, slip to a secondary status by comparison. These materials are unfamiliar in Western "fine" art and as a consequence, "the very materials used to fashion Primitive Art [are] regarded as somehow repugnant to the sensibilities of Civilized viewers."[49] This hierarchy of material reinforces the "hidden agendas or hidden value

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[47] Tavangar, Anisa, and Karen Milbourne. “Interview with NMAA Curator, Karen Milbourne.” 6 Feb. 2018.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Price, Sally. *Primitive Art in Civilized Places.* 2nd ed., University of Chicago Press, 2001, pp. 39.

comparisons"[50] present in the arts that prioritizes certain forms, like painting and sculpture, over others, like adornments or carvings. The regions that make up "primitive" art— those of the Rockefeller Wing— "created very few objects corresponding to [painting]" and instead, proceeded "three-dimensional objects in durable materials… grafted daily easily onto the schema of sculpture." [51] As three-dimensional works fit in the Western concept of sculpture, objects that ascribe to this, like *Priest with Raised Arms*, are scaled accordingly. Difference in materiality and the sense that one is more refined than another creates the false justification of these hierarchies of art forms and origins. "Hylomorphic thinking lies at the root of other hierarchal dualisms" including "the ranking of culture above nature,… art above craft,… and it is also mirrored in the opposition of individual materials, such as marble and clay or fresco and oil paint."[52] Assuming that paintings and marble sculptures are artistically "better," localities that produce these works must be stronger or more developed. This dichotomization, and the association of African art with nature, craft, and lesser materials, creates a material "proof" of the inferiority of African art.

This hierarchy is heightened in the designation of "primitive" given to the arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. At the time of the opening of the Rockefeller Wing, then-director of the museum, Philippe de Montebello, said, "'we are closing the last gap in our encyclopedic coverage of the arts of man, placing works by artists from so-

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[50] Ross, Doran H., and Roy Sieber. "Interview with Roy Sieber." *African Arts*, vol. 25, no. 4, Oct. 1992, pp. 50.

[51] Errington, Shelly. "What Became Authentic Primitive Art?" *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 9, no. 2, 1994, pp. 209.

[52] Lehmann, Ann-Sophie. "How Materials Make Meaning." *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek (NKJ) / Netherlands Yearbook for History of Art*, vol. 62, 2012, pp. 11.

called 'primitive' regions on the level of oriental, classical, medieval and other more recognized arts of the civilized world."[53] While the inclusion of the regions of the Rockefeller Wing are necessary for the museum to encompass artistic traditions of the entire world, de Montebello's language is telling of how art history treats these places. de Montebello calls the regions primitive, not just the works themselves, making a sweeping statement about the people, cultures, practices, and structures of these vast and varied civilizations. He strikes a comparison between the "'primitive' regions" and "the civilized regions" to play them against each other as contrasting stages in human progression. Not just the development of art practice, de Montebello is commenting on the humanity of the makers of this art. The wide generalization of Africa, Oceania, indigenous North America and pre-Colombian South America is also in sharp contrast to the examples given of "civilized regions," which he designates very differently. His inclusion of "oriental" is also a vast generalization of the Middle East, South Asia, and the East Asia but these regions are much better divided and represented in the museum. Distinguishing "classical" and "medieval," two distinct European movements, demonstrates that European art is treated with much more nuance and care than art from other regions of the world.

The distinction between the "primitive" and the "civilized" in art history allows for the further dichotomization of "'modern' and 'nonmodern' societies, between 'traditional' and contemporary,' between 'popular' and 'elite' art."[54] This language creates unnecessary difference and a dangerous approach to unfamiliar works. Falsely separating the known and the unknown, especially through geographic distinctions, these designations use assumptive language to

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[53] Glueck, Grace. “Met's Rockefeller Wing Set to Open.” *The New York Times*, 3 Dec. 1981.

[54] Drewal, Henry John. “African Art Studies Tody.” *African Art Studies: The State of the Discipline; Papers Presented at a Symposium Organized by the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution*, September 16, 1987, edited by Abíọ́dún Rowland, Smithsonian Institution, 1990, pp. 43.

describe objects and places. This binary terminology "reinforces the sense of timelessness" in African art and strips works of "historical specificity," creating the "expectation of [artists] living in the past or of the continuous past."[55]

Some might also argue that the use of the word "primitive" is a tool of categorization and does not impact the reception of the works. However, the Met's renaming of the Rockefeller Wing's corresponding department from the Department of Primitive Art to the loquacious Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas demonstrates the institution conceding to the issue with the word. Its use promotes the framing of the related works as primitive. Categorizing these regions, culturally or artistically, through the word "primitive" creates the assumption that these people or places are less than those of the West, regardless of intention. Labeling Africa, Oceania, and the Americas as producers of primitive art also labels them as primitive places by association. An art historical designation on the objects cannot be removed from an ethnographic labeling of the people and places.

What is troubling, also, is how much later art history continued to use the term "primitive" after anthropology abandoned it. While "the term *primitive art* was eradicated from thoughtful anthropological inquiry" in the mid 1940s[56], art history continues to use it today, although often in quotations and sparingly. But the term cannot be eradicated as art history stands because structurally, groupings, like the regions of the Rockefeller Wing, promote the notion of a separate art of the primitive. The distinct relationship between art history and "primitive" art can

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[55] Tavangar, Anisa, and Karen Milbourne. “Interview with NMAA Curator, Karen Milbourne.” 6 Feb. 2018.

[56] Blier, Suzanne Preston. “African Art Studies at the Crossroads, An American Perspective.” *African Art Studies: The State of the Discipline; Papers Presented at a Symposium Organized by the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution*, September 16, 1987, edited by Abíọ́dún Rowland, Smithsonian Institution, 1990. 95.

also be seen in the Primitivism movement. According to the Tate's online glossary of art terms, Primitivism, a modernist movement of European artists extracting themes from African and Oceanic works, spans from the cubist appropriation of African aesthetic themes to Paul Gaugin's paintings of Tahiti. The definition says that "as a result of these artists' interest and appreciation, what was once called primitive art is now seen as having equal value to Western forms,"[57] suggesting that the recognition by white artists validates the art of Africa and Oceania. At the core of Primitivism, a European art movement, is artistic hierarchy. In this hierarchy, a wooden sculpture, like the *Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble: Head (The Great Bieri)* (Fig. 3) from Benin, is appropriated in limestone by Amedeo Modigliani in *Woman's Head* (Fig. 4) or in oil paint by Pablo Picasso in *Bust of a Man* (Fig. 5)[58], validating this wooden piece through a European interpretation in mediums more suited to European tastes. These three works are featured in the Met's Heilbronn Timeline of Art History under the Primitivism category. The Met's categorization strategies on their glossary page of Primitivism only features sixteen works of art and Benin sculpture is the sole example from the museum's former department of primitive art. The other fifteen objects included are by Modigliani, Picasso, and Gaugin.

Displaying African or Oceanic works as interpreted through European artists as proof of appreciation validates the "line of reasoning by which objects of Primitive craftsmanship do not constitute art until Western connoisseurship establishes their artistic merit."[59] Requiring that art from Africa be channeled through Western artists to become "fine art" follows the false

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[57] "Primitivism – Art Term." *Tate*, www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/p/primitivism.

[58] "Primitivism." *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, www.metmuseum.org/toah/keywords/primitivism/.

[59] Price, Sally. *Primitive Art in Civilized Place*s. 2nd ed., University of Chicago Press, 2001, pp. 68.

assumption that African artists create "'with the uneducated gaze of the savage and the childlike eye'".[60] The degrading sense that African artists are less artistically capable or intellectually engaged with their work is a concession that art historical scholarship sees the makers as primitive.

Moving the field of art history away from a primitivist approach is near-impossible considering the structural realities of the field, spanning from the ordering of museums like the Met to the European movement of Primitivism. The vestiges of colonialism are embedded in art historical dialogue and spaces. Even while approaches to "primitive" art change, the concept will likely not leave the field without a transformation in language and a reorganization of spaces. Institutional and artistic histories require the presence of the word, even as a relic to past thought, but often do so without reconciling its implications.

"Primitive" carries notions of how to read the works that fall under the category. It designates "the arts of people who are cultural and historically very different" from the Western-centric field of art history through "materialist… criteria based on economic development," claiming that differences of national wealth or material development demote the artistic capacity of a place. "Primitive" separates certain areas of art from the rest of art history, lying "at the heart of the struggle to gain full acceptance within the field of art history from African art scholars and African art"[61] and the other artistic traditions of the Rockefeller Wing.

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[60] Price, Sally. *Primitive Art in Civilized Places.* 2nd ed., University of Chicago Press, 2001, pp. 33.

[61]Blier, Suzanne Preston. "African Art Studies at the Crossroads, An American Perspective." *African Art Studies: The State of the Discipline; Papers Presented at a Symposium Organized by the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution*, September 16, 1987, edited by Abíọ́dún Rowland, Smithsonian Institution, 1990, pp. 96.

At the same time, the notion of an "'authentic' primitive" requires people who have lived "as they have for centuries, untouched by Western civilization or history."[62] These works are "art by appropriation" because they become "'art' by being… removed from a context of use and performance"[63] by Western entities that "save" a work from its original setting to be preserved in a museum. Often times, this passing between hands in the 19th and 20th centuries occurred through deceit and manipulation[64] because acquisition through a regulated art market would belie the notion of the ill-informed, childlike African maker. Even as African art is validated through Western approval, whether in collection or recreation, there is a contradictory expectation of the "authentic primitive."

Also embedded in the ethnographic and anthropological foundations of African art history is anonymity. This anonymity keeps the identity of artists and distinction between movements unknown, promoting a distance between the objects and human creativity and innovation. "The broader discipline of anthropology, long wedded to the concept of culture, has consistently underestimated the impact of persons in shaping society"[65] and because of this, much of African art history is anonymous. Because African art history grew out of anthropology, the origins of many works are lost and sweeping cultural understandings motivate their study. This distinct scholarly foundation means African art history has been studied differently, from other art historical disciplines. Whereas the remembrance of great workshops and artists prevails

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[62] Errington, Shelly. "What Became Authentic Primitive Art?" *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 9, no. 2, 1994, pp. 200.

[63] Ibid. 207

[64] Price, Sally. *Primitive Art in Civilized Places.* 2nd ed., University of Chicago Press, 2001, pp. 71-77.

[65] Drewal, Henry John. "African Art Studies Tody." *African Art Studies: The State of the Discipline; Papers Presented at a Symposium Organized by the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution*, September 16, 1987, edited by Abíọ́dún Rowland, Smithsonian Institution, 1990, pp. 36.

in other areas of the field, the anthropological base of African art history "has tended to ignore the impact and importance of individuals in creating art and culture."[66]

Disregarding the creative contributions of individuals feeds the "survey mentality," leaving "enormous gaps in… knowledge of artistic traditions in Africa."[67] Prioritizing broad cultural understandings over artist identities also allows for nuance between time or geography to be forgotten. This depersonalization of individual works places them within the context of cultures and periods but not people, places and dates.

"Many early pieces in major collections— private, public— were brought [to Europe and the United States] without any data at all,"[68] the recorded history of these works established at their point of departure from Africa. These histories begin when the works transfer to white ownership, their makers and pasts forgotten. The provenance of many African art works begins at the transfer from African to European or American hands, suggesting also that the object's life as a fine art work begins with that hand off. When a white collector decides that a piece is worth bringing back to their homeland, the work becomes art and is given a title, date, and space in a record. Without that validation, the pieces are caught in the perceived primitive and tribalist environment of its anonymous maker. Once works are categorized as "produced by anonymous artists who are expressing communal concerns through instinctual process… they are

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[66] Drewal, Henry John. "African Art Studies Tody." *African Art Studies: The State of the Discipline; Papers Presented at a Symposium Organized by the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution*, September 16, 1987, edited by Abíọ́dún Rowland, Smithsonian Institution, 1990, pp. 36.

[67] Ibid.

[68] Ross, Doran H., and Roy Sieber. "Interview with Roy Sieber." *African Arts*, vol. 25, no. 4, Oct. 1992, pp. 40.

characterized by an absence of historical change."[69] Without recorded historical specificity of the history of a work, it is associated with a culture, not an artist, and within a time frame, not a date.

Works "in a museum [have] been ripped out of [their] own private historical [contexts]."[70] The opportunity to use these objects for scholarship and bridging areas of the world have extensive social and intellectual benefits but "the virtue of scholarship… can itself become an immoral virtue when it is used to justify everything that has been ripped off."[71] Removing objects from their contexts also carries negative consequences— neglecting historical development in favor of filling geographic gaps[72] or reducing the creative power of individuals[73]. And once these art objects are in the museum, histories are erased further with the use of English names and identifiers. "More proper native names… in the identification of African art objects" would ground the works in their original histories. Titling and locating works with English and putting native names "in parenthesis or leaving them out altogether"[74] prioritizes the context of the item within an imperialist framework where its history exists after European or American intervention.

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[69] Price, Sally. *Primitive Art in Civilized Places.* 2nd ed., University of Chicago Press, 2001, pp. 61.

[70] Ross, Doran H., and Roy Sieber. "Interview with Roy Sieber." *African Arts*, vol. 25, no. 4, Oct. 1992, pp. 44.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Drewal, Henry John. "African Art Studies Tody." *African Art Studies: The State of the Discipline; Papers Presented at a Symposium Organized by the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution*, September 16, 1987, edited by Abíọ́dún Rowland, Smithsonian Institution, 1990, pp. 38.

[73] Ibid. 36.

[74] Abíodun, Rowland. "The Future of African Art Studies, An African Perspective." *African Art Studies: The State of the Discipline; Papers Presented at a Symposium Organized by the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution*, September 16, 1987, edited by Abíọ́dún Rowland, Smithsonian Institution, 1990, pp. 85.

Differences in cultural value of use or aesthetic also result in biased or improper labeling. Within the Rockefeller Wing, many objects "have 'ceremonial' uses in their original contexts… but those functions are outside [American] experience of usefulness" and are relegated into the "sacred-useless category of art."[75] Words like "'ceremony,' 'ritual,' 'rite,' initiation,' 'sacred,' 'sacrificial,' 'ancestor,' and 'totemic' occur again and again in the Rockefeller Wing labels" and "leave the casual visitor with the distinct impression that "Primitive Man" is obsessed with ritual."[76] Using English words to describe these particular functions distances viewers from the reality of these functions. While they are understood on the surface, they falsely place unfamiliar practices within familiar contexts and exclude cultural precision. Additionall, many works of African art are described as "'stylized' or 'abstract,' terms that make sense only if one imagines that the natural of obvious way to depict the world is in a style of optical naturalism."[77] Although stylization and abstraction are admired in Western art (for example, in Primitivism movement artists like Picasso), the association here assumes that art has meaning "by resembling something in the world."

If art historical categories were truly geographic and not racial, the art of "the Americas," namely pre-Colombian art from Mexico, Central, and South America and indigenous North American art, would be in the American Wing at the Metropolitan Museum instead of the Rockefeller Wing and the Ancient Egyptian art would be included with the rest of Africa. While the Met is organized largely by geography, the regions of the Rockefeller Wing are separated

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[75] Errington, Shelly. "What Became Authentic Primitive Art?" *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 9, no. 2, 1994, pp. 211.

[76] Ibid. 212.

[77] Errington, Shelly. "What Became Authentic Primitive Art?" *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 9, no. 2, 1994, pp. 209.

from other regions and grouped with each other because of ethnographic judgements. The artistic traditions represented in the Rockefeller Wing have long been neglected, although many "see it as something that is not of equal interest to… the art of the West."[78]

This reflection of ethnography in the display of African art maintains a strong anthropological approach to the presentation of the works, continuing their attribution as artifacts instead of art objects. Because of the impression of Africa as the "dark continent" and the cultural assumptions of inferiority that allowed slavery, Jim Crow, segregation, and civil inequalities that persist in the United States, the impression of African art maintains that sense of darkness and lower status. Although collected and exhibited, an assumption of "African societies and their arts [as] conservative" because "they exhibit relatively little real innovation"[79] persists. This false impression is promoted by exhibition practices that present colonial-era works in isolation, often excluding more contemporary pieces from the continent. And even when there are contemporary works on display, the colonial-era pieces set the precedent for the space, putting other works within that colonialist context.

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[78] Ross, Doran H., and Roy Sieber. “Interview with Roy Sieber.” *African Arts*, vol. 25, no. 4, Oct. 1992, pp. 50.

[79] Blier, Suzanne Preston. “African Art Studies at the Crossroads, An American Perspective.” *African Art Studies: The State of the Discipline; Papers Presented at a Symposium Organized by the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution*, September 16, 1987, edited by Abíọ́dún Rowland, Smithsonian Institution, 1990, pp. 96.

Chapter 3: Contemporary Art in a Colonial Context

The sense that African art is stalled and lacks innovation is promoted by the frequent exclusion of contemporary African works in encyclopedic museums. Excluding contemporary works in African art exhibitions communicates that there is no worthy contemporary African art, that African artists are not working in the global art market or are not worth being shown. On the other hand, the placement of contemporary African artists in environments that are so embedded in the stasis, anonymity, and primitivism of early 20th century African art history associates those qualities with the contemporary work.

While the rest of the art within the Rockefeller Wing is from the colonial era, although dates are vague and irregularly arranged, one work of contemporary art hides behind wooden Dogon sculptures— El Anatsui's *Between Earth and Heaven* (Fig. 2). This work, created in 2006 and hung in 2008, is one of two works of contemporary African art hung in the museum and the only one in the main African art gallery. The other work, *Bleu no. 1* (Fig. 5) by Abdoulaye Konaté was acquired by the Met in 2015 and hangs in a niche at the entrance of the Rockefeller Wing. While the display of *Bleu no. 1* also does a marked disservice to a contemporary work by a renown artist, *Between Earth and Heaven* better demonstrates the challenges that a primitivist organization places on the Met and the Rockefeller Wing. Not only was El Anatsui's work hung almost a decade earlier than Konaté's, but the artist himself has received much more international acclaim, both at the time his work was hung at the Met and now.

El Anatsui, a contemporary Ghanaian sculptor who lives and works out of Nigeria, first gained global acclaim in the early 2000s when he switched from carved wooden sculptures to stitched metal fragments. "An awakening interest in non-Western artists in the international art

world"[80] coincided with his first major solo exhibition outside of Africa in London. This show created the conditions to gain him attention outside of Africa. After working for decades and achieving recognition within the African continent, showing at the Johannesburg Biennial in 1995 and other major exhibitions, Anatsui's inclusion in the 2007 Venice Biennale, curated by Robert Storr, resulted in an "exponential rise in positive media attention" for his tapestries[81]. Following Venice, curators and collectors were captured in the awe and magnificence of his work, making Anatsui "the first and only black African artist to achieve global recognition at the highest levels while living and working continuously in Africa"[82]. The Met's acquisition of *Between Earth and Heaven* in 2008 followed Anatsui's heightened visibility after the Venice Bienale.

Attending university in Kumani, Ghana and living in Nsukka, Nigeria since 1975, Anatsui, is part of a significant resurgence of Igbo creative practices in the 1970s. Part of the Nsukka Group, a group of seven artists associated with the University of Nigeria, Nsukka in the 1970s, Anatsui was part of the rise of contemporary Nigerian art that occurred after the civil war in 1967. After achieving independence, "the resurgence of high-stakes regionalism… left its mark on the art" of Nigeria, resurrecting "the sense of cultural nationalism that had earlier inspired" artists.[83]

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[80] Vogel, Susan Mullin. *El Anatsui Art and Life*. Prestel, 2012, pp. 11.

[81] Houghton, Gerard. *El Anatsui A Sculpted History of Africa*. London: October Gallery, 1998, pp. 28.

[82] Vogel, Susan Mullin. *El Anatsui Art and Life*. Prestel, 2012, pp. 11.

[83] Okeke-Agulu, Chika, *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2015, pp. 259.

Uche Okeke, who became the head of the art school in Nsukka after the Biafra War, became the leader of the Nsukka Group, "which was famous for its exploration of the Igbo Uli and other West African traditional graphic forms."[84] Okeke brought a new emphasis on identity that encouraged individual experimentation with a goal of "training [students] who would be able to stand strong on values they had imbibed in college".[85] In his own work (Fig. 7), Okeke employed a "dialectic of positive-negative space," connecting "them to the visual and gestural poetry that is the hallmark of traditional Uli art."[86]

The students rallied around *uli* (Fig. 8), an Igbo style of body and wall paintings that emphasized linearity, drawing, space, and two-dimensionality. Integrating principles of *uli* into works through traditionally Western mediums, like paint and installation, encouraged "a mixing up with, a playing with, an experimenting with past and present"[87]. Students were encouraged to use negative space that would "lift or clear like a mist, revealing more of the forms it covers or holds back"[88] and toy with medium, space, and composition.

While the Nsukka Group artists are concerned with establishing individualistic works that drew from but were not derivative of traditional crafts, they do not break from the past. "The commitment to *uli* styles… is not a longing to return to the past, a nostalgia for it; it is an

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[84] Okeke-Agulu, Chika, *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2015, pp. 5.

[85] Jegede, Dele, Globalism *Ulism*: Trick or Treat, pp. 186.

[86] Okeke-Agulu, Chika, *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2015. 195.

[87] Ottenberg, Simon. “Reflections on a Symposium and an Exhibition.” *New Traditions from Nigeria: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group*, edited by Simon Ottenberg, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997, pp. 24.

[88] Okeke-Agulu, Chika, *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria,* Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2015, pp. 195.

integration of the past into the present world, richly and imaginatively."[89] This consideration of the present differs from earlier Nigerian movements, like Oshogbo art (Fig. 9), which emerged after Nigerian independence through a group of Yoruba artists. This art, drawing largely on craft traditions, spread in England and the United States by the Bier and Kennedy families respectively. Oshogbo art "is appealing to Westerners, perhaps because it appears naive and native to them"[90] and decades later, is still created in only slightly modified ways. The persistence of the Oshogbo style relates to the Western perception that because of ritual links, African art changes seldom and slowly. Institutions and collectors treat works from self-taught African artists with "something of a naive quality" as if they "supposedly [represent] the 'true' African spirit, rather than purchasing the art of academically trained African artists," like the Nsukka artists.[91] Although the Oshogbo movement is aesthetically and conceptually very different from the work of the Nsukka Group, both benefit from a rising interest in African art that occurred in the 1960s. Following "the collapse of the colonial empires, the coming of independence in Africa (and elsewhere), and the civil rights and black nationalist movements in the United States— all of which raised consciousness about African peoples and cultures,"[92] art historians and individuals gained an interest in African art that the two movements

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[89] Okeke-Agulu, Chika, *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria,* Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2015, pp. 195.

[90] Ottenberg, Simon. “Reflections on a Symposium and an Exhibition.” *New Traditions from Nigeria: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group*, edited by Simon Ottenberg, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997, pp. 7.

[91] Ibid. 14.

[92] Drewal, Henry John. “African Art Studies Tody.” *African Art Studies: The State of the Discipline; Papers Presented at a Symposium Organized by the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution*, September 16, 1987, edited by Abíọ́dún Rowland, Smithsonian Institution, 1990, pp. 32.

The Nsukka artists are aware of this dichotomy between the educated contemporary artist and the self-taught folk artist but to create harsh delineations between African art movements, whether contemporary or traditional, forward-looking or reminiscent, confines them with Western expectations of bounded art movements. Although there are differences between movements, polarizing "African traditional and contemporary art is fallacious."[93]

The challenge here, however, lies in the naming and categorization of movements for exhibition purposes. To describe emerging African artists as "modern" or part of an era of "moderism" or "modernization" associates them both with institutional development by the West and a distinct Western art movement. Describing works as "contemporary" allows them a "greater neutrality" and includes broader "forms of African art"[94] The language used to describe works, eras, and movements helps Western audiences categorize and conceptualize them so employing the language of past Western practices creates the impression that African art is chasing being Western art and struggling to keep up, instead of running an entirely different course.

Also contrary to the tracking and management of Western art, "no sharp break exists with past artistic traditions from pre-colonial times, even though there have been major shifts in the media employed in the art, its functions, and the forms of art training and art presentation"[95]. While Western movements have incredible distinction from one another, the transitions between phases of African art are not so harsh. This causes a challenge in Western museums when

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[93] Ottenberg, Simon. “Reflections on a Symposium and an Exhibition.” *New Traditions from Nigeria: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group*, edited by Simon Ottenberg, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997, pp. 24.

[94] Ibid. 6.

[95] Ibid. 24.

displaying African art because these institutions often group works by location and movement. But when contemporary African works, while visually connected, are conceptually unrelated to earlier crafts, where can they be displayed? "Attempts at styling contemporary art through anthropological and archeological prisms"[96] places them in geographic categories shaped by traditional artistic practices. An ethnographic or anthropological curatorial context places contemporary art in "a romanticized, circumscribed, and factually fractured perspective on salient essences"[97] reliant on cultural segmentation, ritual, and colonialist interpretations. This is the consequence of El Anatsui in the Rockefeller Wing.

Although he still works in Nsukka, "Anatsui's current work [expresses] global themes instead of African ones".[98] To position his work as "post-modern folk art"[99] downplays the innovative and transcendent nature of his work. To see only a reinterpreted Kente cloth adheres Anatsui's work to a colonialist view of Africa that limits artists from the continent by their traditional crafts. While West African themes are expressed through the work, his pieces are not simply cloth-like tapestries. They are painterly, sculptural, and ever-transforming, even shifting in light and dimension as a viewer walks from one end to the other.

When confronted by one of El Anatsui's works, the viewer experiences something much more visceral than a painting or sculpture might evoke because his works embody both while being neither. His works live seamlessly in a space unbounded by the categories of art history or

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[96] Jegede, Dele. "Globalizing *Ulism:* Trick or Treat." New Traditions from Nigeria: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group, edited by Simon Ottenberg, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997, pp. 190

[97] Ibid. 189.

[98] Vogel, Susan Mullin. *El Anatsui Art and Life*. Prestel, 2012, pp. 11.

[99] Odita, Odili Donald. “His Majesty's Cloth: The Sculpture and Installation Work of El Anatsui.” *El Anatsui Zebra Crossing*, Jack Shainman Editions, 2009, pp. 129.

art practice. While placed on a wall, the works shift and readjust with every rehanging. Because the draping of each piece is meant to change, the works never embody a final form. The pieces are open, not just in opportunity but in receptiveness, to reimagination. Rehanging might make a piece drip lower, stand more erect, slump towards the audience, or retreat against the wall. To jut, ripple, and fold, enter the viewer's plane, melt onto the floor, and reject set boundaries while staying contained gives each work a latent flexibility and a freedom to adapt to the specifications of a room. These pieces exist in multitudes.

One such example, El Anatsui's *Red Block* (2010) demonstrates the flexibility of his works. The work's hanging at the Des Moines Art Center in Des Moines, Iowa, the Brooklyn Museum in Brooklyn, New York, and the Broad in Los Angeles, California show how changes in hanging can transform a piece. As a monochromatic work, *Red Block* transfigures with light and arrangement as those elements bright brighter highlights and deeper shadows. In Des Moines (Fig. 10), the work hung against a dark wall with deep folds meandering across the surface and to the floor,[100] while in the Broad (Fig. 11), a similar arrangement on a white wall with shallower ripples brings attention to the near-uniform red surface.[101] The presentation of *Red Block* at the Brooklyn Museum (Fig. 12) differs the most, with a prominent crease through the middle of the work and ruched on the left upper corner that consolidates the work.[102] These three presentations demonstrate how various settings and hanging methods can create almost entirely new pieces out of the same object.

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[100] "El Anatsui Junk Transformatinos." *Des Moines Art Center*, www.desmoinesartcenter.org/calendar/eid/8A8683D46084D010/other/El-Junk-Transform/.

[101] "El Anatsui Red Block." *The Broad*, www.thebroad.org/art/el-anatsui/red-block.

[102] "Gravity and Grace: Monumental Works by El Anatsui." *Brooklyn Museum,* www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/el_anatsui.

His deliberate use of color, shape, pattern, finish, and direction create the impression of brush strokes, forming streams of pigment that flow across the surface, confronting one another and merging into rivers of gold, black, blue, silver, red, yellow— striking tones that overwhelm and excite. Each color is given a certain direction, form, and shape, creating distinct regions of tone that come together into the grand tapestries. Using direction especially, Anatsui oscillates between horizontally and vertically oriented pieces, distinguished by their arrangement and the pounded shape, to stitch a mosaic of tone. In some works, the artist organizes the colors in bands that stretch the length or width of a piece. Elsewhere, tones twist, like wild ivy growing up the side of a building, or spread out from a concentrated point.

While bound to the colors of his source materials, Anatsui is able to manipulate these pseudo-strokes through deliberate arrangement of his fragments. Pounded into a range of shapes, the artist and his assistants manipulate the metal even before their arrangement into forms. Using uniform squares, rectangles of varying widths, rounded pieces, and elongated hexagons, the dimensions of each piece are deliberate. Even though dimples from the flattening process or slight irregularities show from up close on the individual pieces of metal, the even heights and widths and careful alignment give the sense of uniformity when viewed from afar.

Through El Anatsui's arrangement of these simple scraps, the material undergoes a remarkable transformation. With a sharp command of space, composition, and material, Anatsui's pieces become congruent, shining textiles. This dexterity comes from his training in the Nsukka school where the linearity of *uli* painting was stressed to emphasize "negative and positive space, skillful deployment of space, quality of abstraction… and individual artistic variations"[103]. While

[103] Ottenberg, Simon. “Reflections on a Symposium and an Exhibition.” *New Traditions from Nigeria: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group*, edited by Simon Ottenberg, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997, pp. 8.

his work is "[distanced] from indigenous ritual… [and] geographic localism" and grounded in formal and academic training[104], Anatsui utilizes Igbo strategies to manipulate new mediums.

This transformation is most evident in his choice of material, embodying contradiction and metamorphosis. These metal pieces, found liquor bottle caps, transcend material to become medium, a sophisticated substance for art making rather than discarded and disjoined pieces taken from another object. Using liquor bottle caps evokes alcoholism, desperation, and dishevelment to audiences that often misidentify Africa as a continent awash with poverty, disease, famine, and abuse. Although the materials can leave this impression, the incredible transformation that they undergo completely reimagines their potential, while acknowledging "the contributions of colonialism"[105]. His materials acknowledge triangular trade, the eighteenth and nineteenth century transfer of goods and enslaved people from West Africa to the American colonies, to Europe, and lasting impacts of imperialism.

But despite this historically and socially aware aspect, the bottle caps rise above their original function. The caps receive attention that elevates them from detritus to precious metal. Undoubtedly, when strung together and illuminated, the scraps embody aspiration and preciousness that would never be allotted to a lone liquor bottle cap. Anatsui could more easily use larger fragments of metal but the "seemingly fragile pieces of aluminum" that he employs "demand dexterity, concentration, and large amounts of time" but provide "a different delicacy of detail" than "larger, rougher, rusted metal forms".[106]

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[104] Ottenberg, Simon. “Reflections on a Symposium and an Exhibition.” *New Traditions from Nigeria: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group*, edited by Simon Ottenberg, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997, pp. 4.

[105] Odita, Odili Donald. “His Majesty's Cloth: The Sculpture and Installation Work of El Anatsui.” *El Anatsui Zebra Crossing*, Jack Shainman Editions, 2009, pp. 129.

[106] Houghton, Gerard. *El Anatsui A Sculpted History of Africa*. London: October Gallery, 1998, pp. 40.

El Anatsui's works could read "as a post-modern form of 'folk art'"[107] because of the bottle caps but "he challenges this adroitly through scale, which helps the work escape a form of use-value to move it miles ahead of any aspect of its existing as merely a fashion accessory".[108] Instead, he is "a master alchemist… seemingly spinning straw to gold"[109] and channeling his medium through scale to rid it of an unexceptionalism. The scale eschews any notion of craft, rejecting the kente cloth interpretation and the bottle cap fascination. Because his pieces are so large, they overwhelm through physical mass, capturing light and giving that luminosity back to the viewer.

Although a reference to kente cloth, El Anatsui's "art is concerned with African cloth as metaphor, the destruction of African culture under Western impact, and the misinterpretation of African history in the West,"[110] going much deeper than an aesthetic comparison. He is interested more in "the system of plunder and piracy" now disguised as civilized negotiations that "succeed in creating the disparities and polarities now characterized as the developed and developing regions". [111] Alive during British colonial rule of Nigeria and Ghana, Anatsui recognizes the harm of colonialist deals that painted European rule of African nations as fair or justified. He addresses the imbalanced relationships that sucked wealth and resources out of Africa and into Europe, leaving many African nations with unstable governments and economies. But despite

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[107] Odita, Odili Donald. “His Majesty's Cloth: The Sculpture and Installation Work of El Anatsui.” El Anatsui Zebra Crossing, Jack Shainman Editions, 2009, pp. 130.

[108] Ibid.

[109] Ibid.

[110] Ottenberg, Simon. “Reflections on a Symposium and an Exhibition.” New Traditions from Nigeria: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group, edited by Simon Ottenberg, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997, pp. 17.

[111] Anatsui, El. “Recent Installations/ Sculptures.” New Traditions from Nigeria: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group, edited by Simon Ottenberg, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997, pp. 118.

these tribulations, just as bottle caps can be strung together to become priceless metals, individuals can overcome their circumstances and rise as a collective above the disadvantages outside of their control.

Within the context of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Rockefeller Wing, the full impact of El Anatsui's work is lost. The ethos of the Nsukka Group emphasizes a break from tradition and the reconceptualization of traditional Igbo motifs but placed in the Rockefeller Wing, *Between Earth and Heaven* is lost among the colonial-era works. Instead of advancing the wing beyond its primitivist origins, the work gets sucked into the narrative of a static creative Africa. Considering the origins of the wing— from the private Rockefeller collection to the private Museum of Primitive Art, brought to the Met under supervision by the Rockefellers and the new Department of Primitive Art— recalls the questionable history of the collection. Regardless of money spent or good intentions, the wing's is built on the legacy of primitivism. And even though *Between Earth and Heaven* was never a part of the Museum of Primitive Art and was hung after the department's semantic change, "it is not so much the type of object that is displayed— ethnographic or art— but the context… in which the objects presented"[112] that informs a viewer how to approach them. With every other object around it, El Anatsui's work picks up the spirit of the wing. As the only contemporary work in the main African gallery, *Between Earth and Heaven* is tasked with the heavy role of pulling the entire wing out of African art history's problematic past but instead, is crushed under the weight of othering and exoticizing.

[112] Veys, Fanny Wonu. “Art or Artifact: Is that the Question? ‘Pasifika Styles’ at the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, and the Refurbishment of the Michael Rockefeller Wing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.” Paideuma: Mitteilungen Zur Kulturkunde, vol. 56, 2010. 266.

Along with the historical context of the wing, poor physical presentation of the piece diminishes its impact. Anatsui's metallic tapestries should transform through scale and light, drawing viewers into the reflective surface. Because of how *Between Earth and Heaven's* placement and presentation, it does neither. Already lost behind layers of sculptures that obstruct the work from the gallery entrance (Fig. 13), the low mustard wall on which the work hangs diminishes its brilliance. Areas of yellow on the upper and lower right of the piece are lost against the dark yellow paint and the multi-colored basketweave pattern at the top becomes dull and heavy (Fig. 1). The basketweave effect should appear light, with gaps of wall showing through the thin pieces of metal that oscillate between horizontal and vertical orientation to create a faux weave. Because the mustard wall is similar in tone to the work, the negative space disappears and the area appears solid.

Also important to note in the context of its hanging is that the work was only meant to be on display for about a year. When *Between Earth and Heaven* was acquired by the museum in 2007, it was their "first major work of contemporary African sculpture" and the department's curator, Alisa LaGamma attributed Anatsui as "the most important contemporary African sculptor working" at the time. Despite these circumstances, La Gamma also planned to hang the work in January 2008 and remove it in March 2009.[113] A temporary hanging of the work without specialized lighting and on a low temporary wall is a reasonable compromise to readily exhibit an artist with traction but ten years, later becomes a gaffe. This original contextualization of the work as a temporary installation within the wing explains some of its presentation but does not excuse the display so many years later.

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[113] Vogel, Carol. “Finalists Named for Hugo Boss Prize.” *The New York Times*, 4 Jan. 2008.

With gray walls and gray carpeting in the rest of the wing, the space lacks a brightness to draw out the gold and red in *Between Earth and Heaven*. Surrounded by dull colors, the work needs all the support it can get but each additional spacial element seems to reduce its vibrance. A wooden platform in front of the piece (Fig. 14) creates distance between the viewer and the work and shortens the already low backdrop. The platform mimics the wooden bases for the freestanding sculptures earlier in the room (Fig. 13) but is unnecessary for a piece bound to a wall. Whereas the other platforms raise the sculptures while mirroring their materiality, the platform in front of Anatsui's work does not enhance the work. It is also likely that the platforms are meant to create a buffer between the viewers and the works, preventing them from touching the art, but the block is distracting and obstructive. It is another design element, like the grid overhang, that makes the room appear smaller, darker, and more crowded.

While the mustard wall, wooden block, and organization of the gallery diminish the visual impact of *Between Earth and Heaven*, no spacial choice detracts from the piece like the lighting. Anatsui's metal works beg to be bathed in light. Light determines whether or not the works can truly transform from discarded liquor bottle caps into energetic, mystifying, and shimmering pieces of fine art. The light acts as a binding tool, melding the pieces together and overlapping the individual fragments in gleaming rays that beam off the rippled pieces. In other spaces, like the deYoung Museum in San Francisco and the Broad in Los Angeles, a range of natural and artificial light bathe El Anatsui's works to bring out their luminosity. But in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, not a single dedicated light illuminates *Between Earth and Heaven*.

In a room without windows, this work needs spot lights to bring out the intensity of the gold and how the arrangement adds light and shadow. Instead, the piece relies on ambient light because the two dedicated spot light that should be on it have been removed and replaced by sensors (Fig. 15). Viewing El Anatsui's works without light can be likened to viewing masks and other costumes in the gallery sitting still being glass. Although on view, but the viewer misses the dynamism. Without light, the work is flatter, more still, the colors dulled and the sheen absent.

The diminished presence of the work because of its presentation quality feeds into the myths of a creatively inferior Africa. By placing El Anatsui in the Rockefeller Wing, the curators prioritize his Africanness over his status as a contemporary artist and by presenting the piece using sub-par strategies, underplay his importance. In the contemporary wing of the Met, works are placed on broad white walls with plenty of natural and artificial light. They are given room to breathe, space for the viewer to walk back and experience the piece as a whole or go up to it and take in every detail. The treatment of these works brings to mind why Anatsui's work does not receive the same treatment with space around it and light to enliven it.

Next to sculptures, masks, carvings, and figurines crowded behind glass cases and grouped by general geographic origin, El Anatsui is reduced to the anonymous colonial-era artist collected and exhibited by the Rockefellers. The museum must recognize that American audiences do not know how to look at African art, traditional or contemporary, and it is the institution's responsibility to better arrange, display, and explain works to interested viewers. Through their exhibition practices, the Met and the Rockefeller Wing close viewers off from entering the wing, connecting with the works, and expanding their limited impression of African art. And as the only contemporary African work in the main gallery, not to mention that the

Oceanic and American galleries do not contain any non-traditional works, the museum falsely communicates that El Anatsui is the only contemporary artist worthy of inclusion in this cultural behemoth.

When considered within the context of African art history, it is clear why Anatsui's work in the Met becomes trapped by the primitivist framework. The expectations of the works on view are established early on in the wing and follow the structures of early African art history. Anonymous makers and obscure origins create a precedent for works that are decontextualized and unrelatable. They prepare viewers to see works of art from what seems like another time and a place so unfamiliar and untouched by social advancement. This myth of the "authentic primitive"[114] taints how African art, regardless of time or medium, is viewed because it creates the sense of complete isolation from creative development and cross cultural communication. Placing El Anatsui spatially, without any recognition of the histories or injustices of past disciplines that shaped African art history and the Rockefeller Wing, also positions his work ideologically. *Between Earth and Heaven's* placement stunts its impact, creating the assumption that it is also part of the primitivist narrative. Viewers walking by do not expect to find contemporary art and without comprehensive labeling to address pieces as individually worthy instead of representations of something larger, works are perceived as parts of a whole.

To get the proper recognition, Anatsui's work would have to plead for visitors to research his accolades. Just as the other works on view were not regarded as art until their transfer to Western hands and institutions, Anatsui's work is not lifted beyond the primitive until his own

[114] Errington, Shelly. “What Became Authentic Primitive Art?” Cultural Anthropology, vol. 9, no. 2, 1994, pp. 200.

validations from Western entities are revealed. As the only contemporary work in the main African galley, *Between Earth and Heaven,* is trapped behind a primitivist shadow.

Epilogue: New Approaches to Contemporary African Art

While African art history's past is fraught with imperialist assumptions and suffered from a limited record, growing concern for the display of African art is bringing new practices of study and exhibition. In addition, influential institutions, like the Metropolitan Museum of Art, are reconsidering how they engage with black audiences, recognizing that art institutions have long been exclusive spaces, both in what they present and who they invite. Creating inclusive art spaces requires reimagining the traditional categories of an art museum and using new techniques— social media, education programs, informational materials, public installation, etc. — to bringing in new audiences.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art recognizes that the current state of the Rockefeller Wing is not the ideal presentation for the works on view. While not announced yet, the museum is in the early stages of renovating the wing. According to their 2016-2017 Annual Report, a fellow for curatorial training, a Ph.D. candidate at Columbia University, was hired "to conduct research and assist with the preparation for the reinstallation and renovation of the African art galleries."[115] However, there is no indication of what within the space will change with this project. The integration of contemporary works within the galleries is unlikely because in the president's letter at the beginning of the report, the only mention of the Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas is in the context of an eighteenth century mask.[116] And while the department purchased four works in the fiscal year, all of which from the African continent, none would be classified as contemporary art.[117] While the museum has no obligation to show

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[115] Annual Report, 58

[116] Annual Report, 6

[117] *Annual Report for the Year 2016–2017*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 14 Nov. 2017, pp. 14.

contemporary African art, in the Rockefeller Wing or elsewhere, it would serve their goals as an institution to acknowledge that exhibiting African art from limited periods of time, mediums, or methods promotes the sense of primitivism present in the space. In their updated mission statement, established in January 2015, the museum affirms their responsibility to "present significant works of art across all times and cultures"[118] so integrating contemporary African art in a rehanging of the African galleries more authentically represents this goal.

The museum's five-year strategic goals for 2015-2020 include a concerted effort to "connect to a broader, more diverse audience."[119] One consequence of the limited visibility of contemporary black artists at the Met, both on the African continent and members of the Diaspora, is a limited relationship with black viewers. As African motifs present a "symbolic basis for group identity through collective memory,"[120] a primitivist approach that limits the collection to colonial-era works also creates a limited relationship between black audiences and the museum. Outside of the galleries, the museum uses externally-facing efforts to bringing in larger audiences of black visitors. Kimberly Drew, Social Media Director, and Sandra Jackson Dumont, Chairman of Education, both play public roles in drawing in new audiences through their respective departments. The appointment of black women to these publicly-facing roles speaks to the museum's desire to better engage black communities but does not address the biases embedded within the galleries.

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[118] *Annual Report for the Year 2016–2017*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 14 Nov. 2017, pp. 11.

[119] Ibid.

[120] Brooms, Derrick R, et al. "Africa Speaks: The 'Place' of Africa in Constructing African American Identity in Museum Exhibitions." *Repositioning Race: Prophetic Research in a Postracial Obama Age*, edited by Sandra L Barnes, State University of New York, 2014, pp. 184.

Somewhat parallel to the Met's Rockefeller Wing is the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art (NMAA). This museum, also starting out in the 1960s as part of a private museum, transitioning in the 70s, and opening as a public museum in the 80s,[121] exhibits many colonial-era works but unlike the Met, the museum's curators "work across time period, medium, and geography." The space exhibits diverse examples of African art, shattering the confines of the "primitive."[122] The museum, in addition to showing works from various time periods in conjunction with each other, also does "not use the word traditional anymore" because of how it dichotomizes different art practices. The NMAA got its first contemporary work in 1966 and exhibiting contemporary art alongside other types of African art is embedded into the museum's history and legacy.

As a smaller institution, the NMAA escapes many boundaries imposed on the Met by administrative and cross-departmental complications. NMAA curators enjoy more spacial flexibility, utilize a dedicated contemporary gallery that opened in 2000, and integrate contemporary considerations into how they display all works. The museum's self-awareness contributes to their success in showing works across periods of time alongside each other because it recognizes that while its audiences come from all age groups and nationalities, the museum must "effectively translate [the works] to these audiences."[123] The museum also looks outside of itself, exploring how to engage African communities in the D.C. area. Its curators recognize that the history of many colonial-era objects, especially those donated by white

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[121] "National Museum of African Art." *Smithsonian Institution Archives*, Apr. 2011, siarchives.si.edu/history/national-museum-african-art.

[122] Tavangar, Anisa, and Karen Milbourne. "Interview with NMAA Curator, Karen Milbourne." 6 Feb. 2018.

[123] Ibid.

collectors, are embedded with connotations of imperialist power and the museum holds the responsibility for rectifying these pasts.

The High Museum in Atlanta, Georgia and the Newark Museum in Newark, New Jersey recently held major exhibitions of African art and redesigned their African art galleries. These two institutions demonstrate changing scholarship on African art history that places works from across time periods and localities amongst each other. The Newark Museum's renovated "Arts of Global Africa" gallery exemplifies this necessary shift from a condensed view of Africa to an expansive one.[124]

Beyond museum spaces, social media pages give attention to African art and democratize their access. Across social media, digital spaces are bringing new audiences to African art because they simplify processes of search and discovery and build community around visibility of African artists. Notably, Art News Africa, an Instagram-based platform for modern and contemporary African art, regularly delivers African art to its over 165,000 follower. The platform's founder, Nkechi Bakare, cites the universal appeal of "beauty and aesthetics" and the reliability of these qualities as a draw for many followers. Using social media, Bakare reaches audiences around world without the economic or geographic limitations of a physical exhibition space. She can "exhibit" artists at all stages in their careers and from across the continent and the Diaspora. As a Nigerian woman living in South Africa, Bakare recognizes the importance of African art establishing itself from an African perspective. According to her, "if you let someone else tell your story, you are going to get their version."[125] Through this popular platform, Bakare

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[124] "Arts of Global Africa Newly Reinstalled Gallery." *Arts of Global Africa*, Newark Museum, www.newarkmuseum.org/arts-global-africa.

[125] Tavangar, Anisa, and Nkechi Bakare. "Interview with Art News Africa Founder, Nkechi Bakare." 18 April. 2018.

successfully educates a large audience about African modern and contemporary art, a task many museums are unwilling to take on.

Beyond just contemporary African art, American art spaces are thinking more critically about how to engage with black audiences. Whereas in the past, the representation of black artists has been confined to colonial-era works within African art galleries, museums from the Tate in London, England, to the Brooklyn Museum in Brooklyn, New York, to the Seattle Art Museum in Seattle, Washington, and beyond are curating ambitious and successful shows that challenge the limitations put on black art. Emerging spaces like We Buy Gold are thinking further about how to engage communities, considering the relationship between art spaces and their localities and looking at how galleries are notorious gentrifiers and elite spaces. The Studio Museum in Harlem is also a leading institution that continually presents contemporary African and Diasporic works that challenge the notion of the "primitive." The Studio Museum's effort to expand public art, through their new "In Harlem" program and other installations, places contemporary black artists in front of audiences who might not have access to these works in other circumstances.

For so long, African art, contemporary and otherwise, suffered at the hands of institutional neglect, and as a consequence, fell into interpretations of inferiority. The lack of visibility for contemporary African art creates the sense that its absence signifies scarcity. With institutions willing to experiment with new structures for displaying African art, widened opportunities for exhibition and the spread of knowledge on digital platforms, and growing attention on engaging black communities and black artists, contemporary African art is gaining attention. Still, until larger institutions, those that adhere to primitivist structures, and the wider

discourse of African art history offer recompense for past treatments and face blindspots head-on, the reach of efforts elsewhere remains limited.

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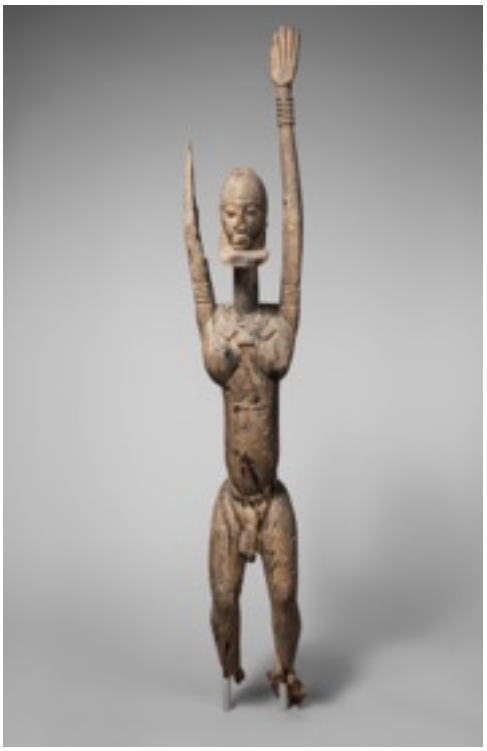

Figure 1. *Priest with Raised Arms*, 14th- 17th century.

Figure 2. El Anatsui, *Between Earth and Heaven*, 2006.

Figure 3. *Sculptural Element from a Reliquary Ensemble: Head (The Great Bieri),* 19th Century.

Figure 4. Amedeo Modigliani, *Woman's Head,* 1912.

Figure 5. Pablo Picasso, *Bust of a Man,* 1908.

Figure 6. *Abdoulaye Konaté, Bleu no. 1, 2014*.

Figure 7. Uche Okeke, March of Masquerades, 1974.

Figure 8. Mgbala Agwa, *Uli* Painting, 1983.

Figure 9. Yinka Adeyemi, *Bowing Heads*, 2003.

Figure 10. El Anatsui, *Red Block*, 2010, Des Moines Art Center.

Figure 11. El Anatsui, *Red Block*, 2010, The Broad.

Figure 12. El Anatsui, *Red Block*, 2010, The Brooklyn Museum.

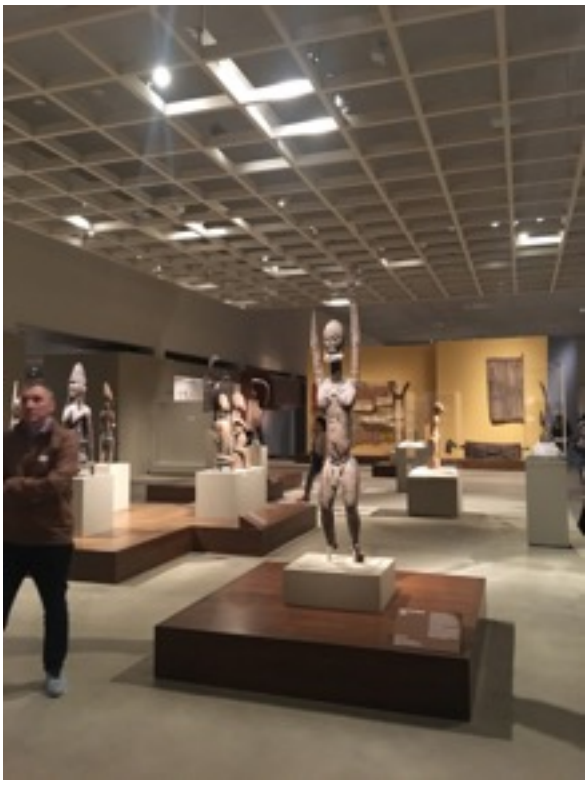

Figure 13. Installation, Gallery 350, Metropolitan Museum of Art, November 2017

Figure 14. Installation, Gallery 305, El Anatsui, *Between Earth and Heaven*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, November 2017.

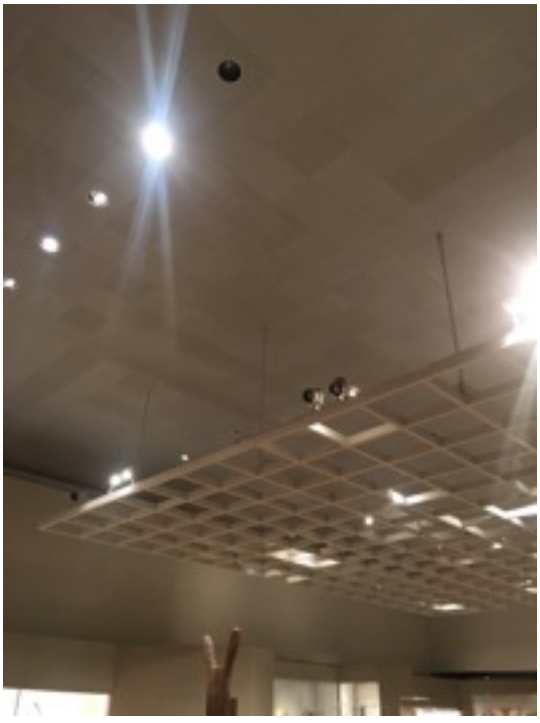

Figure 15. Lighting Tracks above *Between Earth and Heaven*, Gallery 305 Metropolitan Museum of Art, November 2017.