

BERNARD DE GRUNNE



URHOB



+ABSTRACTION

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BERNARD
DE GRUNNE
2025



Preface

The re-opening of the Metropolitan Museum's Michael C. Rockefeller Wing—home to its collection of African, Oceanic, and art of the Americas—felt like the perfect moment to host a private exhibition celebrating innovative approaches to these fascinating fields. Over twenty years ago, my good friend Dr. Bernard de Grunne introduced me to Alisa LaGamma, the Michael E. Pulitzer Curator of the Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. Our shared passion evolved into a wonderful friendship, and I have been fortunate to serve as head of the department's visiting committee. My deep interest in this field really grew out of conversations with Bernard that began during his PhD work at Yale, while I was pursuing my law degree. Many years later, those discussions led to several exhibitions—such as *Fetiche*, where I juxtaposed African pieces with works by Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst, and Richard Prince, among others—and a show presenting Grade Society Figures from Vanuatu with sculptures and gouaches by Alexander Calder.

Urhobo sculpture, in particular, has always thrilled me because of its monumental scale. So much of African art collected in the West is more modest in size—whether Benin heads from the 16th century or Fang, Songye, and Hemba sculptures. There is also a long history of small-scale masterpieces, such as Luba headrests or Chokwe chief figures. But Urhobo carvings are exceptionally large and typically depict a full figure, giving them a bold presence that feels contemporary in both scale and spirit.

The opportunity to assemble five of these figures followed from an Instagram post, in which I saw one of these monumental sculptures on view in Belgium. With Bernard's help, I was lucky enough to bring that very work stateside. I later asked Bernard if it might be possible to assemble a group of them—an unprecedented undertaking here in the United States (or, for that matter, anywhere else outside their original context in the Niger Delta). Through a series of fortunate events, we succeeded in assembling five Urhobo "kings and queens" for display, timed to coincide with and celebrate the Metropolitan's grand reopening after an extensive, three-year renovation.

Inspired by these powerful sculptures, I thought to include a group of works by other artists that might spark dialogue and highlight their beauty in fresh ways. Immediately, I thought of Merton D. Simpson—known to most as "Mert"—the storied dealer of African art, jazz musician,

and accomplished artist. He was a member of the Spiral Group, a New York-based collective of African American artists that came together in the months before the 1963 March on Washington to discuss their relationship to the civil rights movement and the shifting landscape of American art, culture, and politics. Founded alongside artists like Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis, and Emma Amos, Spiral considered how Black artists should relate to American society during a moment of stark inequality. Thinking about Mert led me to the work of his peers, some of whom I knew well—like Richard Mayhew, a fellow member of Spiral, whose estate my gallery represents—and others whom I'd only admired for years. At the opening for one of our Richard Mayhew exhibitions, I had the good fortune of meeting Peg Alston, a major dealer of African American art and a collector of African art as well. Her encouragement helped me move forward toward a compelling exhibition, in part an homage to Mert's lifelong vision and dedication to both African and African American art.

Although the works on view are not strictly by Spiral members, they include a spectacular painting by Norman Lewis and Richard Mayhew's final monumental canvas. I have also included Alma Thomas for her brilliance, as well as El Anatsui to build a direct connection back to the African continent. The show further includes key pieces by Jack Whitten, Sam Gilliam, Ed Clark, Melvin Edwards, and of course, a painting by Merton D. Simpson that brings the narrative full circle.

Why abstraction? While I have organized more figurative exhibitions than anything else, abstraction felt necessary here. The Urhobo sculptures are so compelling, literal, and figurative, that I wanted to consider abstract surfaces and imagery to offset and expand the visual conversation—providing a different way to engage the eye.

Finally, I would like to thank my friend Dr. Bernard de Grunne for his invaluable help in this and many other projects, as well as the artist, galleries, curators, and collectors who supported this initiative. I hope you enjoy the show and join me in celebrating the re-opening of the Rockefeller Wing.

Adam Lindemann
Venus Over Manhattan



Huge, Fearsome or Handsome Beauty. Urhobo and Igbo Monumental Sculpture from Nigeria

By Bernard de Grunne

African art, like most art, was meant to be seen in the company of other works. In Europe, even the greatest paintings or sculptures were intended to be seen as part of a palace or church, surrounded by related works.

Series of works of art reveal something about the way artists work. Usually, sculptures in sets were made to join existing ones, providing the opportunity to see the influence of earlier styles upon those of succeeding generations. Occasionally, an entire artistic program was executed over a short period of time, when a new ruler or cult was established, or after the destruction of a shrine or palace. These large commissions allowed the artist an opportunity to work through certain formal problems and required him to constantly vary the elements. In contrast, separate works executed by an artist for different clients are likely to resemble each other closely. Objects in groups provide insights into style that single works cannot. Some ensembles are composed of works so different in aspect that we would attribute them to different artists or to "archaic" or "later" periods if we did know otherwise.

This exhibition of five major over-life-size Urhobo statues which rank among the best of Urhobo artists, together with five Igbo figures from their neighbors, offers a unique opportunity to admire and discuss African art in the context of the relationship of one sculpture to another.

The Urhobo, who number about 1.5 million, occupy the western fringe of the Niger River delta in southern Nigeria, where the green rainforest belt descending from Benin City meets the alluvial plains of the delta proper. The Urhobo and Ijo, two of the largest cultural complexes of the Niger delta, have been largely overlooked and the Urhobo of the Western swampy coastal portions of the Niger Delta covered by mangrove that inhabit these low-lying often water-logged regions, have been neglected by European missionaries and scholars. The consequence was that until 1960, the year of freedom from colonial rule, little Urhobo culture was known in the international community.

Monumental Urhobo statues form families of ancestor spirits -the founding men and women of a community whose powers and fame were such that, in time, they were elevated to the status of divinity or *edjo*.¹ These founders are remembered as both families and warriors. Hidden away in the confines of a shrine building, each sculptural ensemble includes images of men, women and children, and attendants divided into two distinct groups. These statues reflect a contradiction inherent much in Urhobo art: they are held to be both fearsome (to mortals) and beautiful to the spirit world. One is male and alludes to military imagery. The other is female and alludes to the feminine powers of procreation.²

¹ Edjo is defined as a generic name for all spiritual beings that are believed to exist in another sphere, a spiritual force that can attached to a group of individuals who carried out particularly heroic acts. Cf. Perkins Foss, "Reunited: two Urhobo shrine sculptures", in *Tribal Art*, n° 73, Autumn 2014, p. 132

² Perkins Foss, *Where gods and mortals meet: continuity and renewal in Urhobo art*, New York, Museum for African Art/Ghent, Snoeck, p. 86

These superb statues come mainly from the Agbarho and Agbon, area which once had more of these shrine groups than any other part of Urhoboland. (Fig. 1). Between 1850 and 1925 this area prospered from the palm oil trade, and these communities were substantially wealthier than much of Urhoboland, making artistic commissions possible. Some were photographed by Foss in 1968 but by 1972, many of the images had been sold. Indeed, much had changed there: Christian movements were making headway, younger people were not following the older customs and European interest in Urhobo art was increasing.

The largest figure (Cat. 1) of this group is a portrait of a male warrior seated in the classic dynamic sculptural pose, half standing, half sitting. The artist has subtly modified the normal human proportions by shortening the legs and extending the size of the powerful torso and

arms. Furthermore, a curved, raised ridge extending from shoulder to shoulder across the chest represents a stylized depiction of a double strand of pearls worn by members of a title society, alluding to the realm of community leadership.³ At the center containing the pectoral one finds a small medicinal calabash of protective herbal ingredients that ensure successful military exploits. Four other statues by the same artist and most likely belonging to the same shrine are in the collections of the Nelson Atking Museum of Art, Kansas City (Cat 2), the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (Cat. 4) and a private collection (Cat. 5). A fifth statue (Cat. 3) belonging to the Metropolitan Museum of Art could also be included in the group, although it lacks the tension of the curved back and the short muscular legs. All five works can also be identified by a unique coiffure with a protruding square peg emerging from the top of the skull, possibly used to insert an elaborate coiffe.



Fig. 1 - Village of Oherhe, Statue of Owedjebo Founder hero of Oghrerhe.

Photo Perkins Foss, 1969 in: Perkins Foss, *Where gods and mortals meet: continuity and renewal in Urhobo art*, New York, Museum for African Art/Ghent, Snoeck, 2004, p. 80, fig. 40 et p. 85, fig. 43

³ Foss, op. cit., 2004, p. 88

A pair of male and female statues (Cat. 6 & 7), carved by a second Urhobo artist, has a more eroded surface and a different type of ceremonial coiffure. The male figure displays a European style top hat inspired by those worn by European merchants who visited the region in the 19th century. In his right hand he holds a cutlass, symbol of a swiftly striking force capable of mortal destruction. In his left hand he holds a spear that he thrusts downwards towards the earth—aimed not at mortals, but as a spiritual message to the powers of the earth. The female figure shows a different hairstyle of three pointed crests worn by women of titled rank in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Another pair of male and female shrine figures, very thoroughly described by Foss, ranks, in his opinion, among the best of Urhobo artists.⁴ This sculptor's style is characterized by the almost pneumatically swelling of the chest, the finely faceted surfaces of the legs and, of course, the elegant curvature of the back which is sculpted in a gradual top-to-bottom curve, while at the same time having a slight side-to-side concavity. As Foss remarks, this double curvature is rendered so precisely only by the most skilled Urhobo artists.

Urhobo people use art as a metaphor for their existential struggles. Their art suggests that they see themselves as living in two worlds - physical and metaphysical. Urhobo art is a moral medium. Its shrines and icons of worship advocate doing good. The Urhobo see the world as sanctioning a moral imperative; those who do good will be rewarded and those who do evil will be punished, either in this world or the next. For the Urhobo, collaboration is a prerequisite for life; no single person is in self-sufficient. Everyone is complemented by others.

Igbo statues, like those of the Urhobo people and the Grassland Kingdoms of Cameroon, has traditionally been displayed in groups of five to thirty sculptures. This sacred assembly mirrors the ethnographic reality of their usage among the Igbo and Urhobo. As the leading scholar of Igbo art, Herbert Cole described so well, especially in the north-central Igbo region of Onitsha/Awka, one often found large groups of up to fifteen statues displayed in one location and representing either

conceptual deities such as Earth, Rivers, War or more temporal gods such as remote founding ancestors and legendary heroes.⁵

These representations, varying in size from 18 in / 45 cm in height to over life size, are carved in a conventionalized, symmetrical pose and are housed together as generic "families" in elaborate shrine buildings at the center of each village group. (Fig. 2)

The canons of Igbo statuary are fairly stereotyped in what Cole describes as "an iconic convention from which there is little deviation". A noticeable preponderance of the statuary depicted in my 2010 catalogue on Igbo statuary were male.⁶ All statues are represented standing in a frontal pose with legs slightly apart, the arms framing the torso, the hands extended forward with the palms turned upwards. Their arms and legs are decorated with representations of ivory bracelets and anklets, as well as brass leg coils, which were documented on young Igbo brides by George Basden in his pioneering study published in 1921.⁷

One notices a formal contrast between the naturalistic modeling of the body and the more stylized and blocky hands and feet. Female figures tend to display fairly elaborate hairstyles typical of Igbo female aesthetics. The majority of statues show *ichi* scarification on the chest, stomach, and face.

The omnipresent gesture of open palms and the rich, deeply incrustated patina are two important iconographic features of this art style. Again, Cole provides us with a detailed explanation of the meaning of the gesture: "this gesture shows not only the open-handedness or generosity of the gods as well as their willingness to receive sacrifices and presents. The gesture also means 'I have nothing to hide' suggesting honesty and a good face".⁸

As for the colors, women usually paint the images with celebratory beautifying pigments. These cosmetics are also influenced by worshippers. Many statues are yellow, the color of peace and parts of their faces are white, color of purity. Other sculptures are repeatedly rubbed with red camwood giving them a rich smooth surface,

⁴ Foss, op. cit., 2004, pp. 88-89 & Foss, op. cit., 2014, p. 132

⁵ Herbert M. Cole and Chike C. Aniakor, *Igbo Arts Community and Cosmos*, Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1984, pp. 89-94

⁶ Bernard de Grunne & Antonio Casanovas, *Igbo. Monumental Sculptures from Nigeria*, TEFAF Maastricht, 2010

⁷ Arriving in the late autumn of 1900, George T. Basden, a young British man newly ordained as an Anglican priest, was sent to Nigeria by the Church Mission Society. His volume is the product of his two decades of observation and remains an important contribution to anthropological knowledge of the Igbo. Cfr. George T. Basden, *Among the Ibos of Nigeria*, London, Seeley, Service & Co Limited, 1921, p. 96

⁸ Cole and Aniakor, op. cit., 1984, p. 92



Fig. 2 - Festival of images of the annual outing of tutelary Igbo deities in the village Oteri, outside of the tall wall surrounding the compound of the major god Eke.

Photo Herbert Cole, 1966, in : Bernard de Grunne & Antonio Casanovas, *Igbo. Monumental Sculptures from Nigeria*, Bruxelles, 2010, p. 8, fig. 3

much admired both in their statuary and in Igbo human beautification practices.⁹

Igbo statuary is meant to be displayed and admired in groups ranging from five to thirty sculptures. According to Cole, these series are generally not carved by a single artist, and one notices more than one masterhand per shrine.

The style of the Neni Master from the village of Umunri, represented here by one statue (Cat. 13), is characterized by an elongation of the body, a modeling of the shoulders in an elegant arc, a more geometric treatment of the facial features and a unique coiffure consisting of a quadri-lobed skull cap.

A second artist, the Master of the *ichi* Scarifications, always covers the entire front of the face with *ichi* scarifications. (Cat. 11). His modeling of the body is quite distinctive: it is less naturalistic and instead of indicating the flesh and bones of the human body, the body is very smooth as if

the skin was almost stretched like a tightly fitted costume. The arms are not bent in the classical Igbo pose with palms upturned, and except for the face, which is almost completely covered by scarifications, the artist has only indicated two small oval-shaped scarifications on the upper chest.

These marks are the prerogative of the *Ozo* title society, which is believed to have originated in the community of Umunri, right at the center of production of this monumental sculptural style.¹⁰ The *ichi* fashion of decorating the face goes back about one thousand years in the Umunri area, being found in a slightly different manner on small bronze human heads and figures discovered at Igbo-Uku and dating to the 9th-10th century A.D.¹¹ We cannot postulate a continuity of a thousand years for the Igbo statuary, but a reasonable time span should be at least two to three hundred years.

⁹ *Ibidem*

¹⁰ G.I. Jones, *The art of Eastern Nigeria*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 37

¹¹ Cfr. Tom Phillips, *Africa. The Art of a Continent*, London, the Royal Academy, 1995, p. 383, fig. 5.45a & 5.45b

In the wider scope of African art history, a formal principle applied to these Urhobo and Igbo styles concerns the size of statues within each altar. According to data given to Herbert Cole, "the concept is of an entire family unit, each member depicted as a separate image, with hierarchies reflected in the size of the figures and their surface elaboration".¹²

This principle according to which the height of each statue is directly proportional to the genealogical importance of the person represented is used among other groups in West and Central Africa.

Human figures of varying size, some of them near life-size in height, are well-known manifestations of the Batoufam chiefdom in Cameroon. (Fig. 3). These figures, displaying some of the regalia of kingship such as stools, prestige caps, drinking horns etc. are commemorative and generic renderings of royal ancestors, testifying to and recording dynastic successions. Such figures are carved during a king's reign or that of his successor, and in theory there should be a memorial figure for each king of the dynasty since the inception of such sculptures. In the Chiefdom of Batoufam in Cameroon, Father F. Christol photographed in 1925 a row of monumental statues representing six generations of kings and queens of Batoufam until the famous usurper Njiké who was the ruler at that time. Ancestor memorial statues are sheltered within the royal palace, and the frequency of their appearance varies

between chiefdoms, from the extreme exclusivity of the public funeral celebration for a king to a regular display for an annual celebration.¹³

Urhobo and Igbo shrines with their abundance of statues can be compared to the central portal of the Gothic cathedral of Chartres, where both images of important Old Testament kings and queens are displayed. (Fig. 4). Such a complex form contains many traits which belong to different formal sequences, each representing successive solutions to visual problems.¹⁴ Therefore, the date of manufacture of an art object (its absolute age) is as important as its systematic age, i.e. its position in various formal sequences of which it is made. Of course, each sequence evolves according to its own particular schedule: its time has a particular shape. In consequence, chronologically simultaneous artistic achievements can occupy different places within their own time frame, one appearing early in its own formal series, another appearing much later. They both fall in the same period but differ in age. The rose window at Chartres has a systematic age unlike that of the ogival vault.

The study of the geographical distribution of shrines and their contents could very well become a new approach to an art history of sculptural styles in African art.

¹² Cole and Aniakor, *op. cit.*, 1984, p. 91

¹³ Tamara Northern, *The Art of Cameroon*, Washington D.C., National Museum of Natural History, 1984, pp. 35-38 and Pierre Harter, *Arts anciens du Cameroun*, Arnouville, Arts d'Afrique Noire, 1986, p. 54

¹⁴ George Kubler, *The Shape of Time. Remarks on the History of Things*, New Haven, Yale University Press. 1962, p. 114



Fig. 3 - Commemorative Royal Ancestral Figures of the kings and queens of the Batoufam kingdom, Cameroon.
Photo Father F. Christol, 1925, in : Pierre Harter, *Arts anciens du Cameroun*,
Arts d 'Afrique Noire, Arnouville, 1983, p. 54, fig. 42

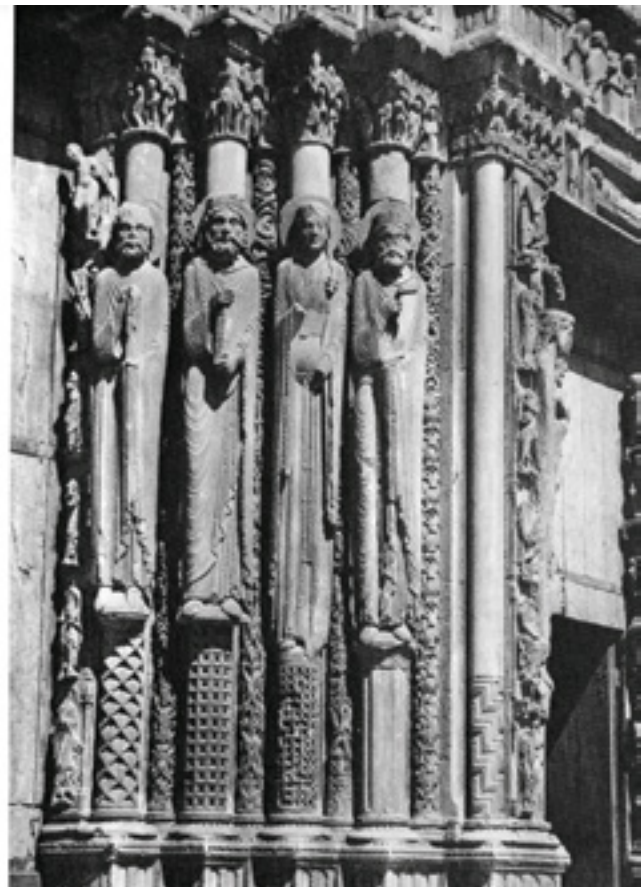
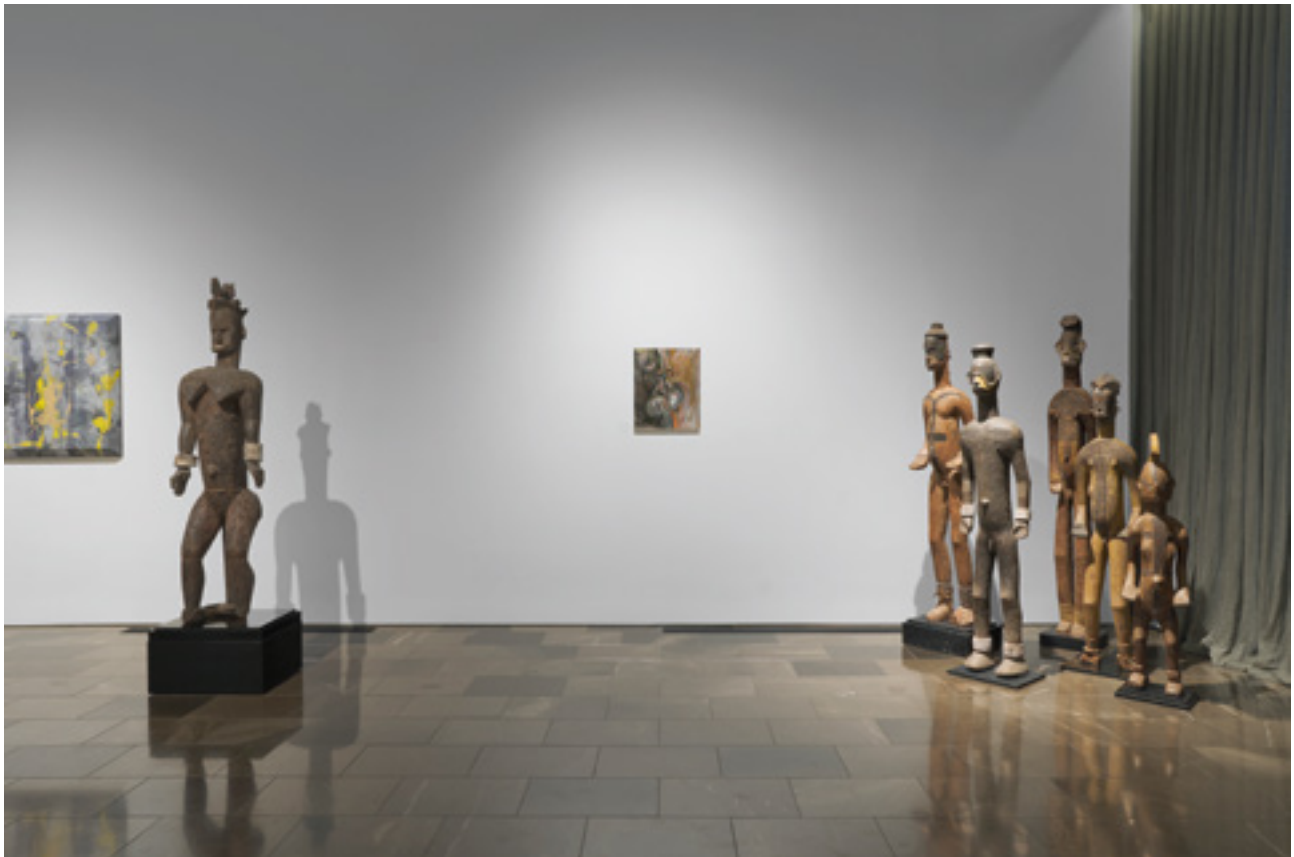


Fig. 4 - The Central Portal at Chartres with both male and female figures of Old Testament prophets
and important royal figures of kings and queens, in : Whitney S. Stoddard, *The Sculptors
of the West Portals of Chartres Cathedrale*, W.W. Norton & Company, 1987, plate XVII

African Art



1

Urhobo Male Figure, Southern Nigeria

Height: 187 cm (73.6 in)

Mid-19th / Early 20th century

Carved wood, natural pigments

Provenance:

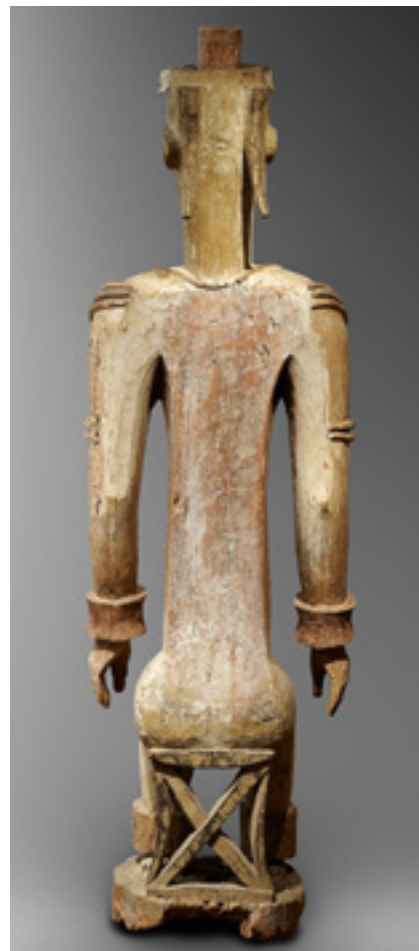
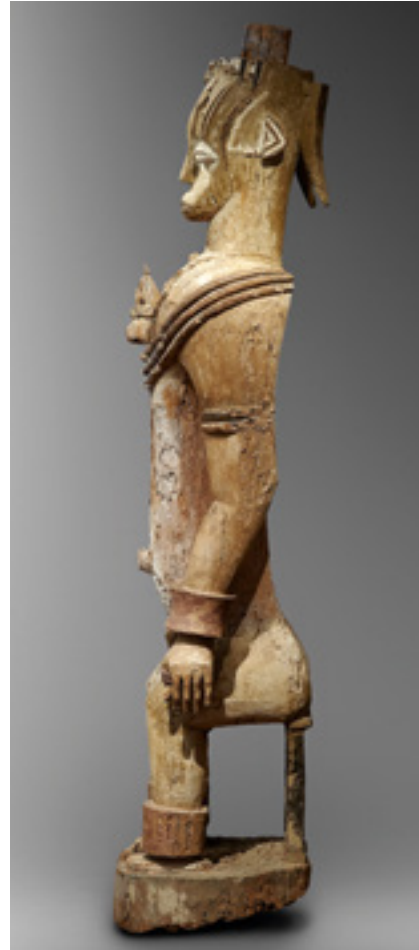
Purchased by Marc Felix, Brussels, *circa* 1970

Philippe Guimiot, Brussels, 1972

Collection Roger Vanthournout, Izegem

Collection Patrick de Pauw, Brussels

Bernard de Grunne, Brussels





| 2

Urhobo Male Figure, Southern Nigeria

Height: 124,5 cm (49 in)

Mid-19th / Early 20th century

Carved wood, natural pigments

Provenance:

Wright Gallery, New York, 1983

Entwistle Gallery, London, 1986

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas
City, MO, 1986, inv. n° 86-7

Publication:

Bernard de Grunne & Robert Faris Thompson,
Chefs-d'œuvre inédits de l'Afrique Noire, Paris,
Fondation Dapper/Bordas, 1987, cat. 191



| 3

Urhobo Male Figure, Southern Nigeria

Height: 151 cm (59.5 in)

Mid-19th / Early 20th century

Carved wood, natural pigments

Provenance:

Henri Kamer Paris, New York

Collection of Nina and Gordon Bunshaft, 1979

New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv.
n° 1995.64.5. (Bequest of Nina Bunshaft, 1994)

Publication:

Arts d'Afrique Noire, Summer, 1975, n° 14, pp.
10-11, adv. Kamer & Cie





| 4

Urhobo Male Figure, Southern Nigeria

Height: 144,8 cm (57 in)

Mid-19th / Early 20th century

Carved wood , natural pigments

Provenance:

Museum of Fine Arts Houston (MFAH),
inv. n° 2010.66, 2010

Publication:

Christiane Falgayrettes-Leveau, *Corps
Sublimes*, Paris, Musée Dapper, 1994, p. 186



**Urhobo Male Figure,
Southern Nigeria**

Height: 142 cm (55.9 in)

Mid-19th / Early 20th century

Carved wood, natural pigments

Provenance:

Former Maud and René Garcia Collection,
Paris

Publication:

Perkins Foss, *Where gods and mortals meet: continuity and renewal in Urhobo art*, New York, Museum for African Art/Ghent, Snoeck, 2004, p. 56, cat. 34



|6

Urhobo Female Figure, Southern Nigeria

Height: 165 cm (65 in)

Mid-19th / Early 20th century

Carved wood, natural pigments

Provenance:

Collection Jacques Kerchache, Paris, 1974

Pierre Bergé, *Collection Anne et Jacques Kerchache*, 12 juin 2010, lot 311

Collection Michel Perinet, Paris

Christie's Paris, *Collection Michel Perinet*,
23 juin 2021, lot 53

Collection Michel Chambaud, Brussels

Publications:

Jacques Kerchache, "Les arts premiers de l'est nigérien", in *Connaissance des Arts*, n° 285, Paris, novembre 1975, p. 68

Antonio Casanovas and Alain Bovis, *Nigeria, Collection Jacques Kerchache*, Paris, Galerie Alain Bovis, 2006, fig. 16





Urhobo Male Figure, Southern Nigeria

Height: 211 cm (83 in)

Mid-19th / Early 20th century

Carved wood, natural pigments

Provenance:

Collection Roland de Montaigu *circa* 1980

Collection Michel Chambaud, Brussels

Publication:

Sotheby's New York, *Important Tribal Art*,
12 May 1992, lot 149

Paul Matharan, *Arts d'Afrique. Voir l'invisible*,
Bordeaux, Musée d'Aquitaine, 2011, p. 106,
cat. 95



The spokesman of the Okpe village group
wearing teeth-of-bush pig with a top hat.

Photo Perkins Foss, 1969

in : Perkins Foss, 2004, p. 74, fig. 39.



Urhobo Male Figure, Southern Nigeria

Height: 145 cm (57 in)

Mid-19th / Early 20th century

Carved wood, natural pigments, metal

Provenance:

Collection of Georges Loiseau, Abidjan,
circa 1970

Private collection, France

Bernard de Grunne, Brussels

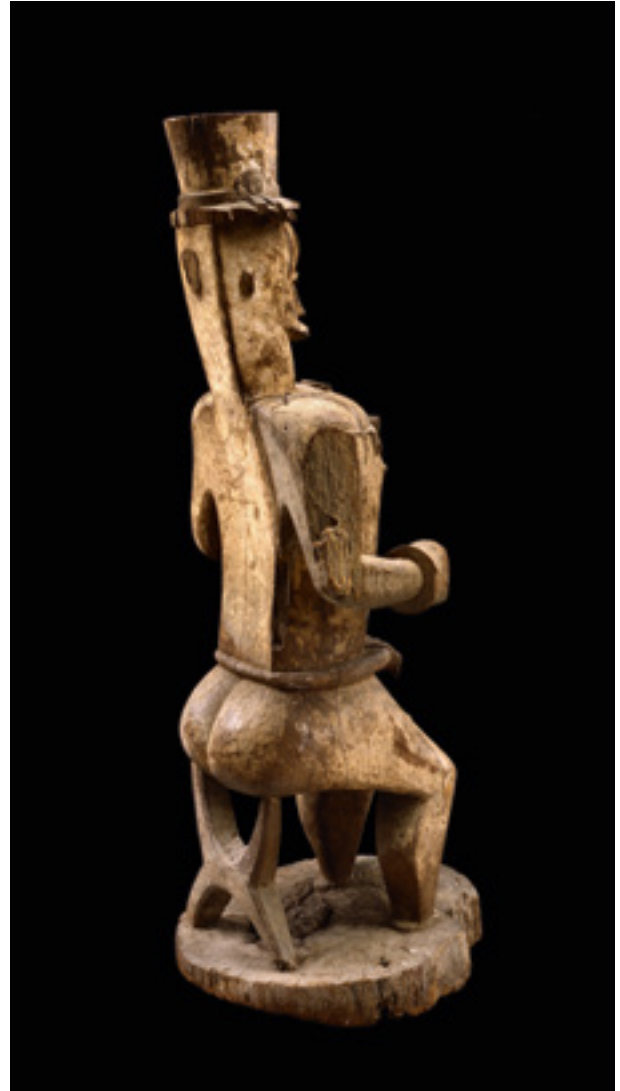
Collection Jean-Louis Danis, Lyford Cay,
Bahamas

Publication:

Perkins Foss, *Where gods and mortals meet: continuity and renewal in Urhobo art*, New York, Museum for African Art/Ghent, Snoeck, 2004, p. 88, cat. 51

Siegfried Göhr *et alii*, *Afrikanische skulptur, Der Erfindung der Figure/ African sculpture. The invention of the Figure*, Köln, Ludwig Museum, 1990, p. 123, cat. 37

Perkins Foss, "Reunited. Two Urhobo Shrine Sculptures", in *Tribal Art*, n° 73, Autumn 2014, p. 131, fig. 1





Urhobo Female Figure, Southern Nigeria

Height: 138 cm (54.3 in)

Mid-19th / Early 20th century

Carved wood, natural pigments

Provenance:

Philippe Guimiot, *circa* 1970

Collection Baudouin de Grunne, Brussels

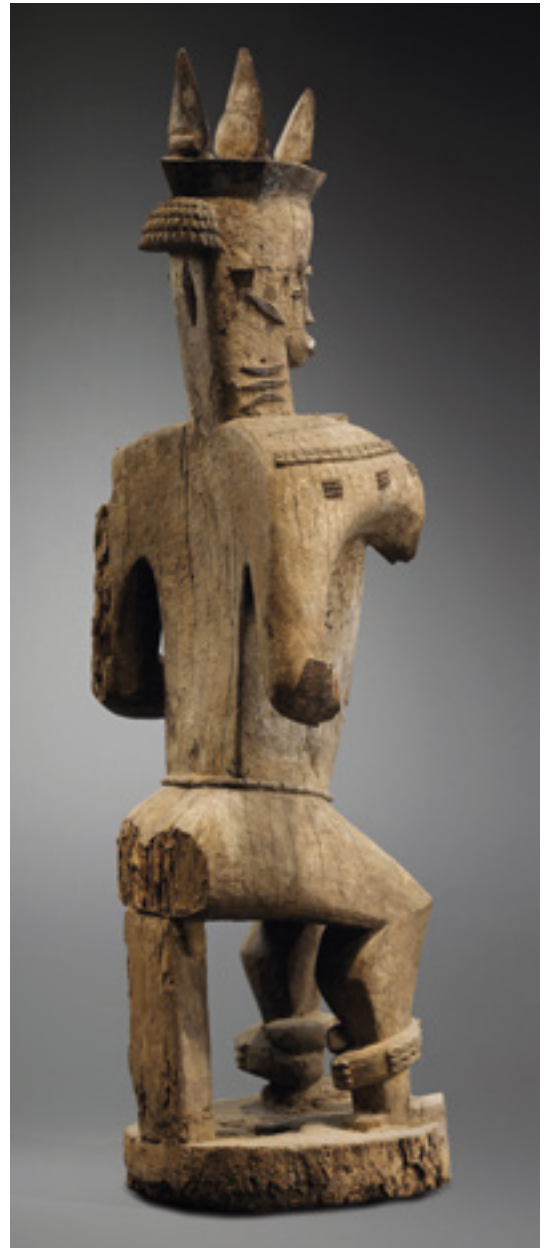
Collection Jean-Louis Danis, Lyford Cay,
Bahamas

Publication:

Luc de Heusch *et alii*, *Utotombo, L'art d'Afrique
noire dans les collections privées belges*,
Bruxelles, Palais des Beaux-Arts, Bruxelles,
1988, p. 172

Perkins Foss, *Where gods and mortals meet:
continuity and renewal in Urhobo art*, New York,
Museum for African Art/Ghent, Snoeck, 2004,
p. 89, cat. 52

Perkins Foss, "Reunited. Two Urhobo Shrine
Sculptures", in *Tribal Art*, n° 73, Autumn 2014,
p. 131, fig. 2





|10

Igbo Male Figure, Southern Nigeria

Height: 168 cm (66.1 in)

Mid-19th / Early 20th century

Carved wood, natural pigments

Provenance:

Jacques Kerchache, Paris

Publication:

Bernard de Grunne & Antonio Casanovas,
Igbo. Monumental Sculptures from Nigeria,
TEFAF Maastricht, 2010, fig. 4



**Igbo Male Figure,
Southern Nigeria**
by the Master of Ichi scarifications

Height: 162 cm (63.8 in)

Mid-19th / Early 20th century

Carved wood, natural pigments

Provenance:

Jacques Kerchache, Paris

Publication:

Bernard de Grunne & Antonio Casanovas,
Igbo. Monumental Sculptures from Nigeria,
TEFAF Maastricht, 2010, fig. 14



Igbo Female Figure, Southern Nigeria

Height: 118 cm (46.5 in)

Mid-19th / Early 20th century

Carved wood, natural pigments

Provenance:

Jacques Kerchache, Paris

Publication:

Ekpo Eyo, *Two Thousand Years Nigerian Art*,
Lagos, Department of Antiquities, 1977, p. 201

Jacques Kerchache *et alii*, *Chefs-d'Œuvres de
l'Art Africain*, Grenoble, Musée de Grenoble,
1982

Jacques Kerchache, *Scultura africana. Omaggio
a André Malraux*, Rome, De Luca Editore, 1986,
pp. 121- 125

Bernard de Grunne & Antonio Casanovas,
Igbo. Monumental Sculptures from Nigeria,
TEFAF Maastricht, 2010, fig. 19



|13

Igbo Male Figure, Southern Nigeria by the Neni Master

Height: 150 cm (59.1 in)

Mid-19th / Early 20th century

Carved wood, natural pigments

Provenance:

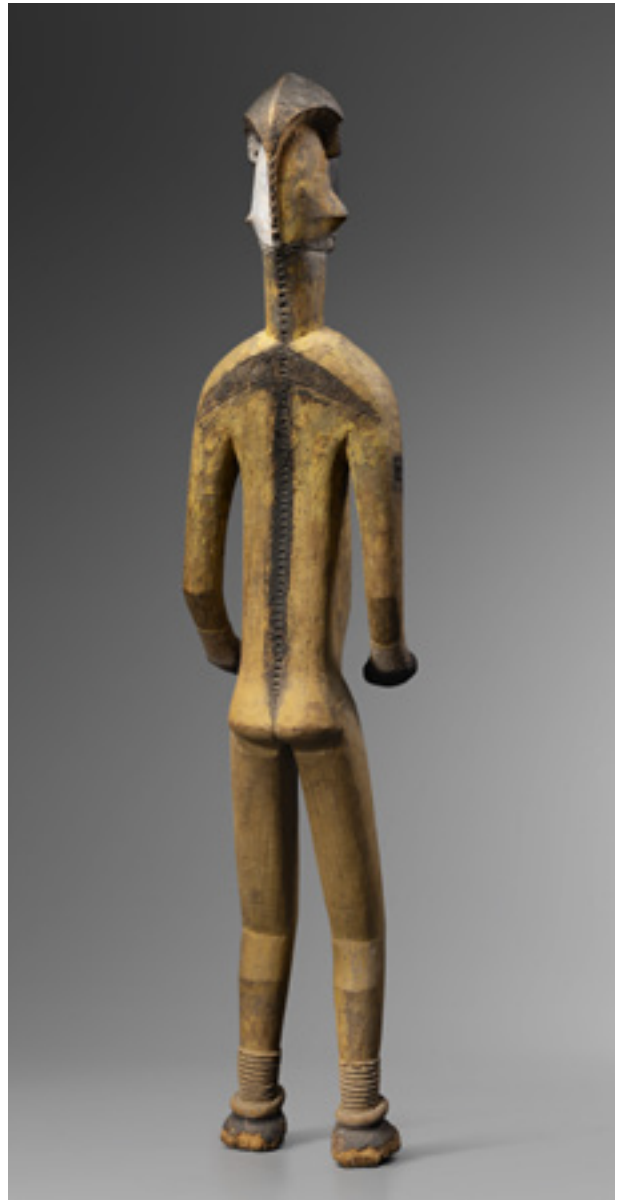
Maître Loudmer, Hôtel Drouot, Paris,
Arts primitifs, 30 juin 1988, lot 185

Collection Hubert Goldet, Paris

Maître de Ricquès, Hôtel Drouot, Paris,
Collection Hubert Goldet, 30 juin 2001, lot 143

Collection François Fahys, Paris

Private Collection, Belgium





| 14

Igbo Male Figure, Southern Nigeria

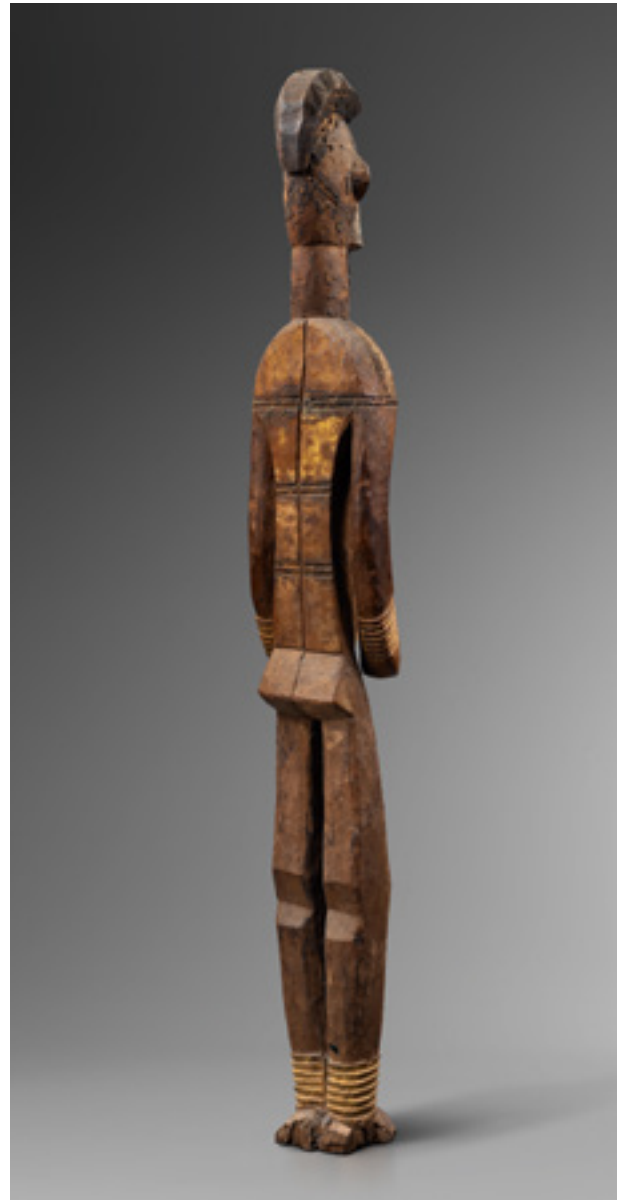
Height: 178 cm (70 in)

Mid-19th / Early 20th century

Carved wood, natural pigments

Provenance:

Private Collection, Belgium





Urhobo + Abstraction

Urhobo + Abstraction brings five monumental Urhobo sculptures into conversation with abstract works by acclaimed African and African American artists. In the spirit of Robert Farris Thompson's *Flash of the Spirit*, the exhibition highlights how the sculptures' spiritual, communal, and formal dimensions continue to resonate in diverse modern and contemporary practices. With key works by **El Anatsui, Ed Clark, Melvin Edwards, Sam Gilliam, Norman Lewis, Richard Mayhew, Merton D. Simpson, Alma Thomas, and Jack Whitten**, the show spotlights recurring themes—ritual resonance, material transformation, rhythmic abstraction, and ancestral invocation—while examining how each artist's personal, historical, and socio-political contexts shape their creative language. Organized in collaboration with Dr. Bernard de Grunne, the exhibition will be on view from May 1, coinciding with the reopening of the Metropolitan Museum's Michael C. Rockefeller Wing.

Carved by master artisans of the Urhobo people from Nigeria's western Niger Delta, the five monumental figures at the exhibition's core embody spiritual authority and warrior might. Among the few life-size, full-figure carvings to emerge from Africa, these sculptures once stood in private sanctuaries, receiving reverence in annual festivals that honored pivotal battles and protective ancestors. Their arched backs, concave cheeks, prominent jaws with articulated teeth, and intricate surface detailing reflect both regional stylistic traditions and the depth of Urhobo cosmology.

Placed in dialogue with the Urhobo sculptures, each abstract work offers a unique engagement with African heritage, diaspora histories, and personal expression. Ed Clark's brushstrokes echo the figures' dramatic contours, channeling the energies of mid-20th-century New York and Paris. Richard Mayhew's "mindscape" meld landscape, memory, and spirituality, paralleling the sculptures' coloration and unseen presences. Norman Lewis's sinuous lines and intuitive compositions capture the spiritual undercurrents and shared resilience at the heart of Urhobo carvings. El Anatsui's monumental tapestries, composed of re-purposed bottle caps, speak to colonial exchange, consumerism, and communal labor—qualities that echo the transformative ethos of Urhobo shrine arts. Merton D. Simpson—an artist (and member of the Spiral Group), collector, and dealer of African art—bridges these worlds in his paintings, drawing on a deep understanding of African forms to fuse ancestral echoes with modern abstraction.

Urhobo + Abstraction highlights how historical, emotional, and formal motifs travel and shift across the diaspora. Some artists draw explicit inspiration from African aesthetics; others find parallels in shared spiritual or communal impulses; still others question or deconstruct such connections. Rather than presenting a linear progression from "traditional" to "modern", the exhibition foregrounds a living continuum that maintains Urhobo carving traditions—among the most accomplished in Africa—as vibrant, spiritually charged, and ever-relevant.

Contemporary Art



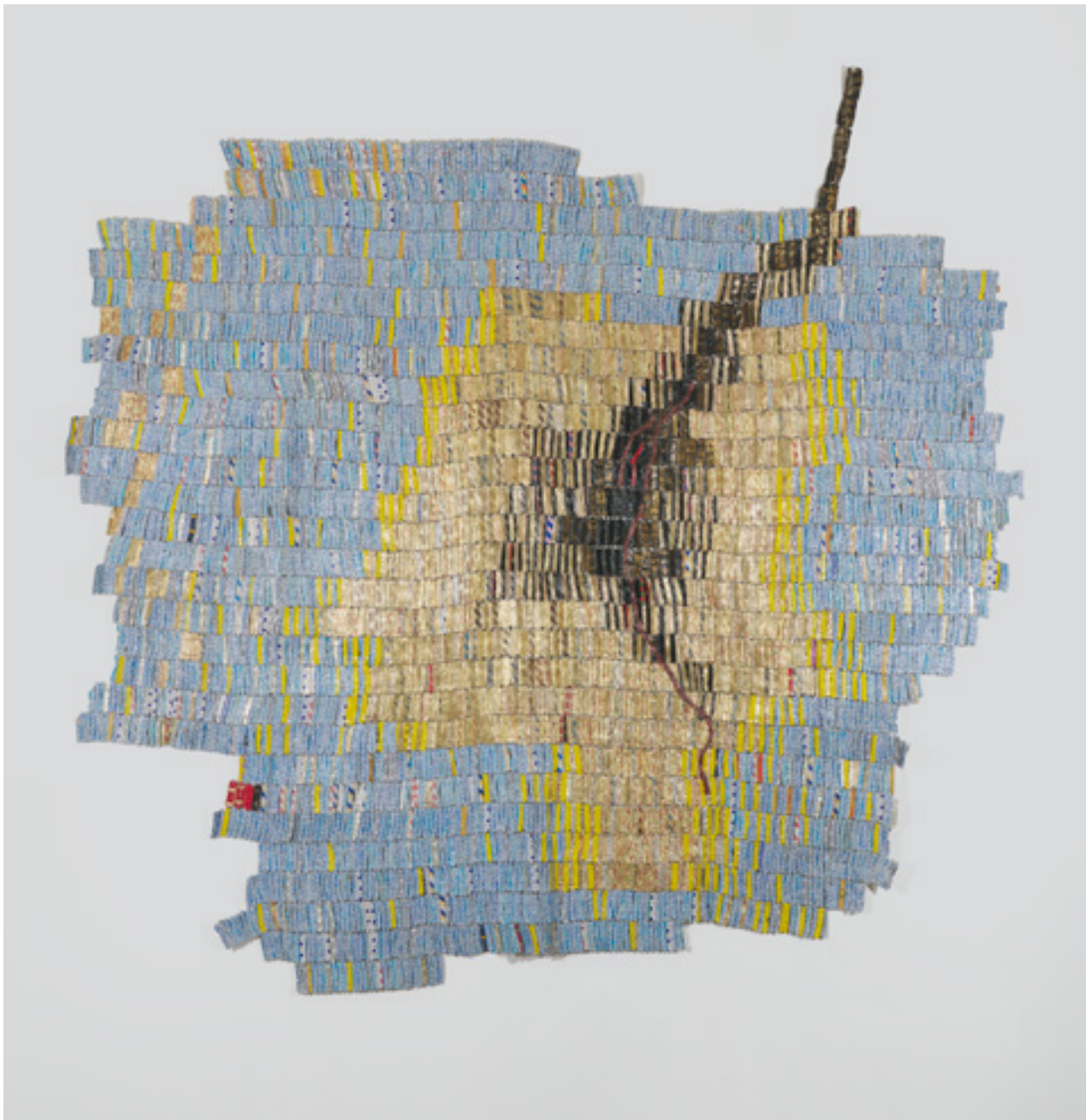
| 1

El Anatsui

Enlightened, 2012

Found aluminum and copper wire

110 x 103 in (279,4 x 261,6 cm)



|2

Ed Clark

Untitled, 1995

Acrylic on canvas

66 ¼ x 70 in (168,3 x 177,8 cm)



| 3

Melvin Edwards

A Sign of X, 1984-1994

Welded steel

29 ½ x 13 x 13 in (74,9 x 33 x 33 cm)



| 4

Sam Gilliam

A Glistening, 1967

Acrylic on canvas

43 x 62 1/2 in (109,2 x 158,8 cm)



|5

Norman Lewis

Sheaves, 1975

Oil on canvas

50 x 67 in (127 x 170,2 cm)



|6

Richard Mayhew

Overture III, 2023

Oil on canvas

Work: 48 x 60 in (121,9 x 152.4 cm) / Framed: 50 x 62 in (127 x 157,5 cm)



Merton D. Simpson

Confrontation II-A, 1974

Oil on canvas

24 1/8 x 19 5/8 in (61.3 x 49.8 cm)



Alma Thomas*Red Rambling Rose Spring Song, 1976*

Acrylic on canvas

53 ⅛ x 35 ¼ in (134,9 x 89,5)



|9

Jack Whitten

Third Testing (Slab), 1972

Acrylic on canvas

34 ¾ x 35 ⅛ in (88,39 x 89,15 cm)





URHOBO & ABSTRACTION

FEATURING

EL ANATSUI
ED CLARK
MELVIN EDWARDS
SAM GILLIAM
NORMAN LEWIS
MERT SIMPSON
ALMA THOMAS
RICHARD MAYHEW
JACK WHITTEN



I would like to thank Adam Lindemann and the 'Venus Over Manhattan' team for taking on this unique project, as well as Professor Foss, who was crucial for the understanding of Urhobo culture. Many thanks also to Jean-Louis Danis and Michel Chambaud for their wonderful loans.

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African Art

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Cat. 10-14 © Bernard de Grunne, photos Frédéric Dehaen, Bruxelles

Contemporary Art

Cat. 1 Private Collection

Cat. 2 Private Collection

Cat. 3 Courtesy the artist and Alexander Gray Associates, New York

Cat. 4 Private Collection. Courtesy Peg Alston Fine Arts, New York

Cat. 5 Private Collection. Courtesy Salon 94, New York

Cat. 6 Courtesy the Estate of Richard Mayhew and Venus Over Manhattan, New York

Cat. 7 Courtesy of Bill Hodges Gallery, New York

Cat. 8 Private Collection. Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC

Cat. 9 Private Collection. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York

Coordination: Inès de Spa, Brussels, and Zach Fischman, New York

Map: Adèle Gallé, Esther Le Roy Studio

Layout: Christine Roland, Snel

Front & back cover : cat. 1, cat. 8, cat. 9

Page 1: *Edjo shrine for the water spirit Ovughere. Ovu Inland, Agbon Village Group, 1969.*

Photo Perkins Foss, 1969 in: Perkins Foss, *Where gods and mortals meet: continuity and renewal in Urhobo art*, New York, Museum for African Art/Ghent, Snoeck, 2004, p. 80, fig. 40 - p. 84, fig. 42 - p. 85, fig. 43

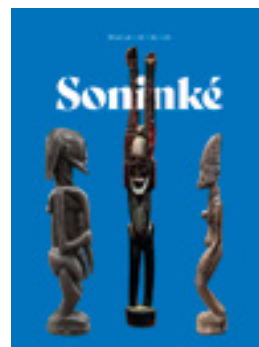
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2025



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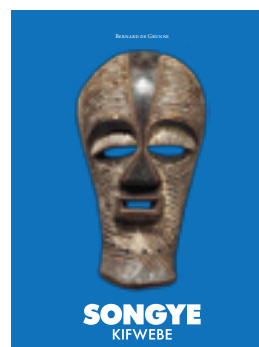
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2019



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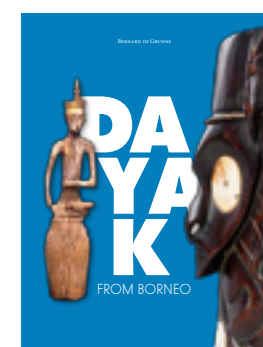
2016



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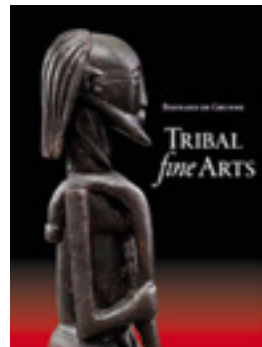
2011



2011



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2008



2001



2001



1998



1983



1982



1980

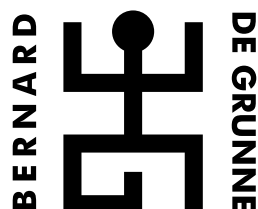


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