

UCLA

UCLA Previously Published Works

Title

“Daringly Experimental and Versatile”: African Arts and the Contemporary

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5624t8jp>

Journal

African Arts, 50(1)

ISSN

0001-9933

Author

Nelson, Steven

Publication Date

2017-03-01

DOI

10.1162/afar_a_00328

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

african arts

“Daringly Experimental and Versatile”

Author(s): Steven Nelson

Source: *African Arts*, SPRING 2017, Vol. 50, No. 1 (SPRING 2017), pp. 16-21

Published by: UCLA James S. Coleman African Studies Center

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/48550766>

REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/48550766?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



UCLA James S. Coleman African Studies Center is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *African Arts*

JSTOR

“Daringly Experimental and Versatile”

African Arts and the Contemporary

Steven Nelson

It's fair to say that *African Arts*' 1993 coverage (vol. 26, no. 1) of the Center for African Art's exhibition "Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art" constitutes a watershed moment in the journal's relationship with contemporary African art. Including wildly differing reviews by Olu Oguibe and Francesco Pellizzi as well as a response to them by Sidney Kasfir, the journal used the 1991 exhibition as a vehicle for thinking about the state of contemporary art on the continent. Moreover, with a first word by Thomas McEville that explicitly asked about the very category of "contemporary African art," this particular issue of *African Arts* followed and reinforced debates raging about contemporary art at the time. It also helped to define how Africanist art historians would think about the field—at least in the journal's pages—into the early twenty-first century. From that moment, in addition to groundbreaking research articles on modern and contemporary African art, First Words, exhibition and book reviews, as well as dialogues would analyze, pick apart, and try to make sense of contemporary African art, often in relation to traditional, classical forms.

As someone who read these debates and participated in some of them, my first inclination on the occasion of *African Arts*' fiftieth anniversary was to write about 1993 as the centerpiece of a historiography of contemporary African art as constructed in the pages of the journal. But as I perused its earliest issues, I became fascinated with what came before "Africa Explores." I knew that the journal had covered contemporary formations in some way, and I knew through my own research that John Povey, UCLA professor of African literature and one of the journal's founders, had gone to the 1966 First World Festival of Negro Art in Dakar. Despite such things I had never thought about the place and an import of the contemporary in those early volumes. Open the very first edition of *African Arts/Arts d'Afrique*, as it was called

STEVEN NELSON is Director of the African Studies Center and Professor of African and African American Art History at the University of California, Los Angeles. He is also a former editor of *African Arts*. He is currently completing two books titled, "On The Underground Railroad" and "Structural Adjustment: Mapping, Geography, and the Visual Cultures of Blackness." nelsons@humnet.ucla.edu

at the time, and you will see that contemporary African art was there. Moreover, it existed on equal footing with everything else. Such a striking combination was not missed on *Los Angeles Times* art critic Henry Seldis, who noted that this "slick" new magazine "is a double-barrelled [*sic*] publication that already in its first issue combines articles on origins and traditions by noted scholars with evaluations of contemporary African art and artists by critics of international repute" (Seldis 1967). In 1971 the editors further demonstrated their commitment to contemporary art in publishing a photograph of then UCLA Chancellor Charles Young and Irene Shapira in Nairobi, standing next to a large wood sculpture by Francis Nnaggenda (Fig. 1).

African Arts' relationship to contemporary African art before the journal's academic turn of the 1980s and before the 1990s ascendance of contemporary African art in the international arena is far deeper than it might appear to be at first glance. Working from such a conviction, this essay explores *African Arts*' editorial, political, social, and emotional aspirations as a means to understand better the complex framing of contemporary African art and artists during *African Arts*' first few years.

Sometime in 1966, law professor Paul Proehl, then director of the UCLA African Studies Center, went to Khartoum, where he met the Sudanese artist Ibrahim el Salahi. The professor was struck by the myriad African, Muslim, and European influences in the artist's *oeuvre* (Proehl 1967:58). This powerful encounter must have been on Proehl's mind during a launch for the newly born journal *African Arts/Arts d'Afrique* held at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) on November 1, 1967. Here, on this overcast, autumn Wednesday evening in New York City, he cited contemporary African art as a primary impetus for the publication's founding. Further, Proehl threw down the gauntlet, telling *New York Times* art critic Grace Glueck that the magazine aimed "to get rid of the nonsensical notion that contemporary African art consists of little hippo carvings turned out with an axe" (Glueck 1967). Proehl's comments aptly described a journal that, like the African Studies Center itself, aimed at smashing general perceptions of Africa and Africans as primitive and unchanging. Indeed, in the journal's second issue, the editors explicitly state

1 In 1971, *African Arts* (vol. 4, no. 3) covered UCLA Chancellor Charles Young's visit to a contemporary art exhibition in Kenya.

Chancellor Young at the Nnaggenda Exhibition in Nairobi

This cheerfully casual photograph shows UCLA's Chancellor Young and Mrs. Irene Shapira admiring one of Francis Nnaggenda's massive wood carvings. It was shown to the editor on a recent visit to Nairobi as a "holiday shot" without any expectation that it would be featured in our magazine, as it does not focus solely on art. Some *African Arts* readers may feel that it is nothing more than a family Kodak snap and as such it should be relegated to those homely evenings when it could be viewed only by uncomplaining friends. Yet we decided to print it because it indicates how many people and programs of UCLA—our sponsoring institution—are continuously associated with appreciative support for the exciting contemporary art now being produced in Africa.

The presence of these two UCLA people at this important exhibition was fortuitous, yet it demonstrates the commitment that UCLA is making in projects related to Africa. Many of these efforts establish valuable, if sometimes tangential, results from which support for African arts—and *African Arts*—may be generated.

Francis Nnaggenda held an important exhibition of his sculpture in the garden of the medical buildings of the University of Nairobi. Readers will recollect the discussion of the work of this distinguished artist in the article by Sidney Kasfir featured in Volume III, Number 1. Nnaggenda works on a deliberately monumental scale, and his massive pieces in both wood and welded metal were appropriately displayed in the open air where their heroic proportions were subtly complemented by their natural surroundings, rather than appearing compressed by the restrictive effect of the too proximate walls and ceilings of a gallery display.

It happened that the occasion of the opening of this exhibition coincided with



the visit to Nairobi of Dr. Charles Young, the Chancellor of the University of California at Los Angeles. He visited the display accompanied by UCLA Professor of Art Nathan Shapira, and his wife Irene. Professor Shapira is on leave at present, acting as head of the Department of Design at the University of Kenya in Nairobi. Both his interest in contemporary art in general and his particular University position permit him to work most closely with people in the Art Department such as

Francis Nnaggenda, and with other prominent East African artists whose work he has sponsored and encouraged.

Nnaggenda himself is planning a major one-man exhibition in New York which will provide the opportunity for some of our readers on the east coast to see the impressive work of this African sculptor at first hand. Granted the enthusiasm of both our Chancellor and a UCLA Professor of Art, we hope that the collection will also be brought to Los Angeles. ■

their desire "to remove the stigma that attaches the word 'primitive' to African arts," instead making it understood as "part of the whole artistic heritage of the human race" (Proehl and Povey 1968:2). Along such lines, *African Arts*' mission was "to record the art of the African past, to provide an outlet for the contemporary African artist, and to stimulate the creative arts in Africa" (Proehl and Povey 1968:2). This ambitious goal took as a given not only that Africa has a deep history, one that could be told through the study of its arts, but also that the continent is modern, vibrant, and constantly evolving.

Arising in the euphoria of African independence, coming on the heels of the 1966 First World Festival of Negro Art in Dakar, arriving a few years after the 1961 founding of the Peace Corps, and developing in the midst of burgeoning American Black Nationalism, *African Arts* was never planned as a straight-on academic journal. Indeed, it sought to bridge the gap between academic and general readers. Povey was explicit on such a point, telling Seldis, "Although scholarly in approach, our aim is not to publish and record the minutiae of fundamental research but to

present a colorful magazine as exciting as the art of Africa, which is daringly experimental and versatile" (Seldis 1967).

Furthermore, the editors considered their new journal to be a showcase for a modern Africa. And in its direct engagement with African artists and writers, in the absence of African institutions that could produce such a publication, *African Arts* viewed itself as an agent of change, as a conduit through which Africans could push their creativity and showcase it for an international audience. Such a goal came from the editors' conviction that contemporary art, literature, music, and performance were part and parcel of African lives. Not forgetting African Americans and Black Nationalism, *African Arts* also saw as part of its mission the fostering of diasporic connections that would buttress black subjectivity and constitute a basis for peoples of African descent to claim a diasporic history. Contemporary art was central to these grand desires, and through the first decade or so of the journal's life, it served as a critical site for advancing the journal's social, political, and emotional agendas.

Proehl and Povey, along with their colleagues Arnold Rubin and

african art note cards




african arts has published an attractive series of three black and white prints by Jacob Afolabi of Nigeria, Cyprian Shilakoe of South Africa, and Hezbon Owiti of Kenya. They are on fine quality paper, folded to make them ideal for personal notes or greetings for every season and occasion. Boxed in dozens with matching envelopes, four of each design: \$2.50.

A box of these note cards would make a welcome addition to your gift subscriptions. We will send them just before Christmas with a greeting card announcing that your friends can look forward to a year of **african arts**. Please use the order blank, page 88.

2 In 1972, the journal was promoting the work of contemporary African artists through selling a set of notecards with black-and-white prints of works by Jacob Afolabi, Cyprien Shilakoe, and Hezbon Owiti.

(below and right)

3 The opening spread from an Artist Portfolio in the first issue of *African Arts*, featuring the work—and words—of Ibrahim el Salahi. The first three volumes of the journal published bilingually in English and French; here the article opens with a French precis, while subsequent pages of the article are in English.

Colin Young, adopted a multifaceted approach to contemporary art, one noteworthy not only for its breadth but also for its openness and experimentation. Perhaps as a means to become as experimental as they saw the arts of the continent themselves to be, *African Arts*' coverage of contemporary art took the form of artist portfolios, scholarly and experiential essays, coverage of film, overviews of contemporary art in various locales, dispatches on the contemporary scene in various African (and, at times, European) cities, as well as reviews of books and exhibitions. Moreover, between 1967 and 1974, *African Arts* sponsored at least one exhibition of contemporary art, and established a competition that recognized the best new art on the continent. In autumn 1972 (Fig. 2), the journal announced the production of a series of notecards featuring black and white prints by artists Jacob Afolabi, Cyprian Shilakoe, and Hezbon Owiti. For \$2.50 buyers received a box of twelve, including four of each design.

The first issue of *African Arts* featured a portfolio of Ibrahim el Salahi's work. No doubt emanating from Proehl's 1966 encounter, the fourteen-page-long, richly illustrated feature highlighted the artist, his *oeuvre*, and his world (Fig. 3; see el-Salahi 1967). Readers were able to take in twenty-three of the artist's paintings and drawings, seven presented in full color. They were also able to see photographs of the artist at home, in his studio, with his wife in New York City, and with Alfred Barr, Jr., the famed first director of MoMA. An accompanying overview articulated the artist's training at the Slade School of Art in London; the influence of Africa, Arabic script, and Islamic religion on his work; and how the combination creates a formal tension between representation and abstraction. The overview notes the centrality of the artist's African origins and highlights the primary role that familial Islam plays in his work. Beyond the photographs and reproduction of the work, the portfolio included several statements by the artist on his work.

A PAINTER FROM THE SUDAN

Rhythm and structure of the Arabic alphabet underlie most of his forms

THE EMBRYO. Hamilton Gallery, London, England./Right

MOTHER MOURNING FATHER./Below Right

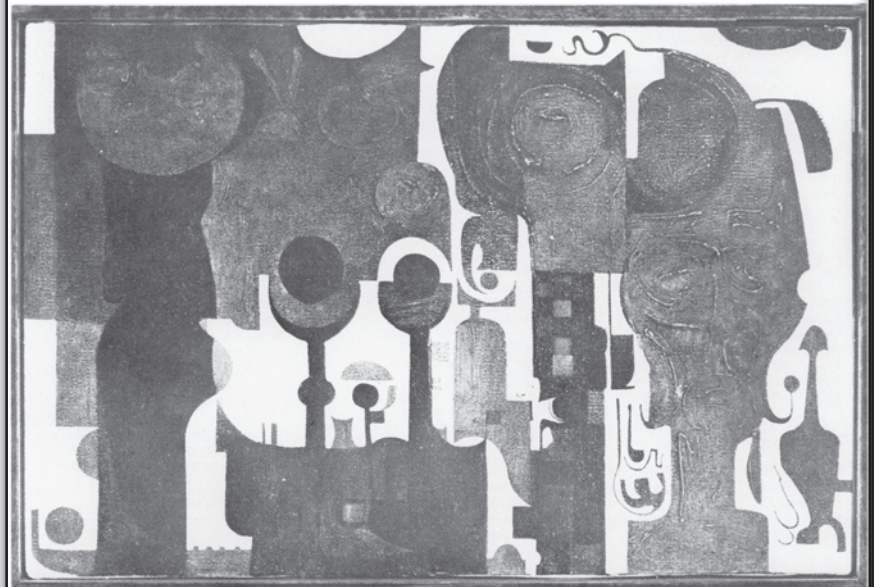
THE MOSQUE. Museum of Modern Art, N.Y., Elizabeth Bliss Parkinson Fund./Below

EL SALAHI

L'impact de l'oeuvre de Salahi est puissant et immédiat. C'est une expérience de transcendance inconsciente. L'œil se sent arrêté. Malgré la grâce, malgré la fluidité de la ligne—aussi sublime que puisse être le jeu combiné du pigment, Salahi impose une réaction saisissante et agressive. L'indifférence n'existe pas dans ce pays. Pendant l'instant où l'image passe de l'œil à l'esprit, il se crée une excitation intense, nous pénétrons dans ce monde auquel nul n'échappe, où les rêves se rattachent à nous, parlent

de nous. Là, les éléments humains, nus, incultes, décharnés, cruels, à la fois auto-défensifs et auto-destructifs, à leur état pur, s'accroissent et pèsent avec une étonnante véhémence, demandant à être reconnus, exigeant une place égale auprès de l'esprit—stérile et ambitieux—à son éveil.

L'invasion s'opère à tant de niveaux changeants de la conscience, qu'il y a, à un point donné, fascination et émerveillement devant la façon dont cela se produit dans un regard . . . nous soupesons la question,



El Salahi is an artist who had trained in London; an artist who was a Rockefeller Fellow at MoMA in 1965; an artist who had traveled throughout much of the world; an artist who by 1967 had exhibited in Africa, Europe, and North America; an artist whose work sits in the collections of MoMA, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and London's Victoria and Albert Museum. The *African Arts* editorial team, clearly impressed by his internationalism, lauded his accomplishments and experiences. Yet for the editors, there was a distinct tension between the global and the local, between el-Salahi's worldly experiences and his Afro-Islamic upbringing. At various points in their essay, the editors remind readers that despite the artist's worldliness, despite rubbing elbows with the likes of Barr, despite his travels, he was African at heart and the myriad influences on his work were put in the service of articulating a kind of primordial African spirit.

Proehl and his colleagues understood the subjectivity of contemporary African artists, defined by experiences of modernity, colonization, and in some cases, formal training and travel, as multifaceted. Both accepting of and uncomfortable with these complex formations and influences, the editors admonished artists to strike a delicate balance between home and away lest they become fragmented subjects who are strangers to themselves.

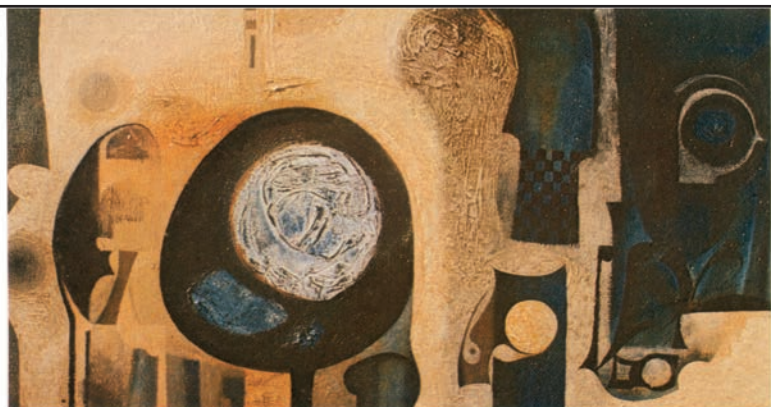
They write:

An African artist will learn from the arts of other continents. He must and will reject becoming "European" and aping the contemporary devices of the art schools of Paris and New York. Yet he cannot be only African. The traditional is restrictive in its imposed forms, and artists must always adventurously extend their technical skill into personal idioms. Somewhere between the inhibiting forms of tradition and the too facile fashionable fads of contemporary art in the West, rests the legitimate area in which the African artist can create—observing and integrating foreign experiences and relearning from his own past. He becomes an individual when his work derives from both elements of his life. At the Dakar Festival of the Negro Arts, held in 1966, the painter, [Elimo] Njau, displayed this knowledge with beautifully simple symbolism. After summarizing the heady debates at this meeting, which had demanded total Africanization of the arts, he took off his beautiful African robe and exposed underneath his European shirt and tie declaring: "I am an African but I come to you by way of Europe" (Proehl and Povey 1968:1–2).

Proehl and his peers made a serious effort to understand how myriad influences could help African artists see their African selves anew. On this score, the editors' complex ideas on contemporary African art and artists—perhaps filtered through their perceptions both of traditional African art and modern Western art à la Barr and MoMA—would define the kinds of art supported by awards and seen on the pages of *African Arts*.¹

But the connection of contemporary art and identity was only one of the issues *African Arts* sought to develop. To gain knowledge and perspective, the editors published accounts of contemporary art from around the continent. They also amassed letters and dispatches that described the contemporary scene in cities they considered to be centers of African culture production and/or important in terms of the dissemination of the contemporary arts. In a letter from Addis Ababa, Solomon Deressa (1969) explains that while there are some bright lights on the scene, particularly painters Skunder Boghossian and Afework Tekle, Ethiopian artists suffer due to the lack of a viable art school, critical apparatus, and patronage. In a 1967 letter from Nairobi, Hilary Ng'weno also points to the lack of infrastructure, noting that the recently opened Paa-ya-Paa Gallery is the only place where "the serious artist can exhibit his work without worrying about tourist tastes" (Ng'weno 1968:69). She also tells readers that this spot has become a critical site for the exchange of ideas amongst artists and writers. Notes from London (Duerden 1967) and Czechoslovakia (Wokoun 1973) discuss exhibitions and their places as burgeoning sites for the display of contemporary African art (Fig. 4). Dennis Duerden, author of the London missive, also muses, like the journal editors, on the relationship of the local and the global and how African artists should balance this seeming opposition. For him, artists should avoid hiding under an African ethnocentrism defined in his mind by Négritude and "African personality" (Duerden 1967:27).

In addition, the editorial board and some contributors, like the commentators from London and Prague, explored the reception of contemporary art both at home and abroad. One key example exists in Sidney Kasfir's 1969 essay "Nnaggenda: Experimental Ugandan Artist." While investigating Francis



enracinés sur place. La réponse n'est pas facile . . . nous sommes alors emportés encore une fois. Il se cache ici un secret. Des réponses semblent s'offrir, mais la réponse est dans le rêve à venir. Dans le dernier rêve.

Les toiles de Salahi ne naissent pas seulement d'un concours de pigments et d'huile; elles ne doivent pas leur vie seulement aux raffinements de la technique; elles acquièrent l'existence à travers les vibrations impétueuses de la vie elle-même qui y est retenue,

mouvante et haletante, avec une éloquence si pénétrante, que c'est une expérience plus vivace encore que ne le serait notre propre rêve.

La matérialisation d'une conception nouvelle de la forme, la couleur et la texture de la nature organique et inorganique est séduisante dans sa simplicité—mais vitale dans sa vérité.

Cette œuvre est fortement empreinte de la couleur locale, mais Salahi dépasse les limites d'une nation. Il affirme que la peinture contemporaine est univer-



YEMI BISIRI, Oshogbo, Nigeria: *Warrior on Horseback*. Collection of Ulli Beier.



TWINS SEVEN SEVEN, Oshogbo, Nigeria: *The King Cock in Ibembe Forest*. Collection of Ulli Beier.



SKUNDER BOGHOSSIAN, Ethiopia: *Cosmological Explosion*.



SKUNDER BOGHOSSIAN, Ethiopia: *The Birth*.



4 A London exhibition of contemporary African art at the Transcription Centre, featuring works by Yemi Bisiri, Twins Seven-Seven, and Skunder Boghossian, was the subject of a "Letter from London" in 1967 (vol. 1, no. 1).

Nnaggenda's global and local influences and analyzing how they are expressed in his work, she asks critical questions concerning how Western expectations of African art affect the artist's ability to experiment in his *oeuvre*. By doing so, Kasfir, as Ng'weno did in Nairobi, critiques the intricate web of relations that involve artist, patron, and art market; moreover, she provokes her readers to question their own expectations about what contemporary African art should be (Kasfir 1969:11). On the whole, the dispatches and Kasfir's questions aligned neatly with the concerns of *African Arts'* editorial board.

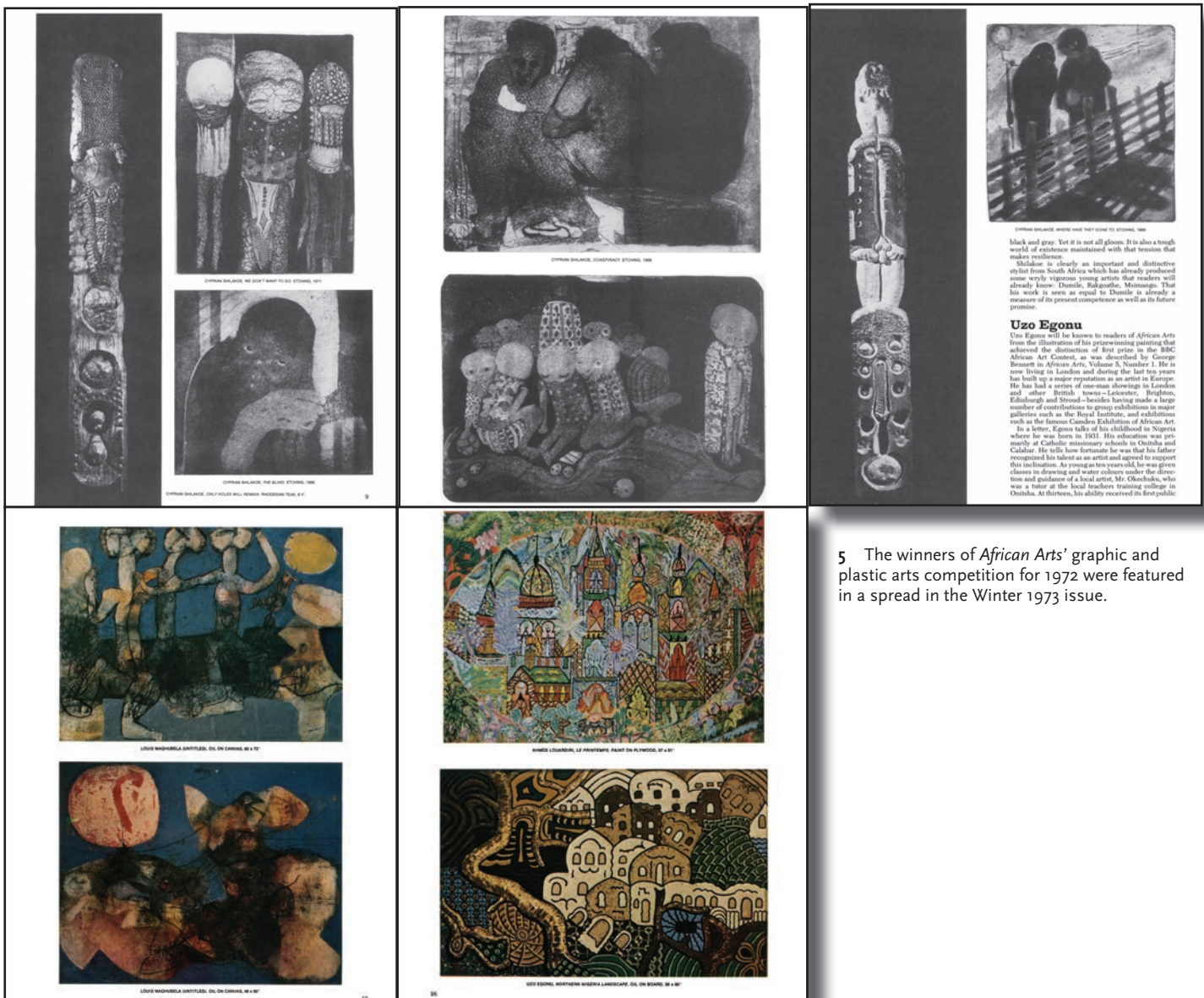
The *African Arts* editors acted as explicit advocates for contemporary artists, and their activity was not confined to the journal's pages. From the beginning, Proehl and his colleagues endeavored to set up competitions that would foster creativity in the arts. For its own part, between 1967 and 1974, *African Arts* staged a competition of arts and letters, offering prizes of \$1,000 to the winners. In even years, events were held for the graphic and plastic arts. These contests became quite popular, and over time the editors would split the prize money among various winners. The winners' work was also published in the pages of the journal.

As catalyst of art production, the editors placed themselves, not

unproblematically, in the position of arbiters of taste and quality, and in their way, they not only reported on but also affected the directions that artists would take in their work. In their judging, the editors were faithful to the framing of the contemporary that attracted them to the work of artists like el-Salahi, Twins Seven Seven, and Mode Muntu, among others. The art favored by the board tended to be that which could exist as comfortably on the continent as in the international arena. At the same time they were attracted to work that was indelibly "African."

By the late 1970s, the openness and the experimentation that had characterized *African Arts'* coverage of the contemporary arts had all but disappeared. That is not to say that contemporary art was no longer considered, but as African art history began to professionalize and as more research was being done on the continent, the journal's focus shifted more towards primary research in the field and, along with it, exhibitions of traditional African art.

In 1990 John Povey, in a First Word, provocatively asked, "What are we going to do about contemporary African art?" (Povey 1990). While his direct target was the recent Arts Council of the African Studies Association Triennial Symposium that had taken place in Washington, DC, the longtime advocate of



5 The winners of *African Arts'* graphic and plastic arts competition for 1972 were featured in a spread in the Winter 1973 issue.

contemporary African art understood what he saw as the disdain for the modern and contemporary as product of what—in his mind—was an unfortunate anthropological turn in the discipline. “We don’t like,” he sarcastically wrote, “modern African art because it doesn’t fit within our comfortable disciplinary boundaries—in fact, it challenges them at the profoundest level” (Povey 1990:1). Povey then explained that contemporary African art requires a shift in our thinking, that it forces use to change our paradigms.

I can’t help thinking that such a view of contemporary African

art led Povey and his colleagues some twenty-three years earlier to use it as a wedge that would force a reconsideration of what Africa means at home and away. I can’t help thinking that the closing in of the field he spoke of was also a turn away from the “daringly experimental and versatile” qualities he so admired in African art and, I would suspect, in the early issues of *African Arts*. I would like to think that the “daringly experimental and versatile,” and the intellectual openness and interdisciplinarity that define *African Arts'* first decade, could provide an exciting and provocative roadmap for the journal as it enters its sixth decade.

Notes

1 I suspect that there’s more to be written on the relationship between African Arts and the Museum of Modern Art, but that’s outside the scope of this essay.

References cited

Deressa, Solomon. 1969. “Letter from Addis Ababa.” *African Arts* 2 (2):42–22, 62.
 Duerden, Dennis. 1967. “Letter from London: The London Exhibition of Contemporary African Art/1967.”

African Arts 1 (1): 27–29, 69.
 el-Salahi, Ibrahim. 1967. “A Painter from the Sudan.” *African Arts* 1 (1):16–26, 70–71, 74.
 Glueck, Grace. 1967. “U.C.L.A. Publishing Magazine on African Arts.” *New York Times*, Nov. 3, p. 50.
 Kasfir, Sidney L. 1969. “Nnaggenda: Experimental Ugandan Artist.” *African Arts* 3 (1):8–13, 88, 11.
 Ng’weno, Hilary. 1968. “Letter from Nairobi.” *African Arts* 1 (2):66–69.

Povey, John F., and Donald J. Cosentino. 1990. “First Word.” *African Arts* 23 (4):1, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14.
 Proehl, Paul. 1967. “First Word.” *African Arts* 1 (1):1, 58–59.
 Proehl, Paul, and John F. Povey [The Editors]. 1968. “First Word.” *African Arts* 1 (2):1–2.
 Seldis, Henry J. 1967. “Magazine of African Arts Makes Bow.” *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 2, D5.
 Wokoun, Alois. 1973. “New African Art in Czechoslovakia.” *African Arts* 6 (3):44–49.