Digging Deeper...

... into African Art

by Laura Holland

Yes, every picture tells a story. But for western Massachusetts collector Charles Derby, every piece in his collection of African art has at least two stories to tell. First, there’s the history of the object: what it is, plus where, when, and why it was made. (Who made it is often unknown. These are not examples of art for art’s sake, but beautifully crafted functional items deeply entangled in daily life.) Second, there’s the often-intriguing tale of how each item came into Derby’s possession, traveling across continents, cultures, and contexts. To those narratives add a third angle, conveyed in the selection of objects for 5 Takes on African Art: Exploring the Charles Derby Collection at the University Museum of Contemporary Art. Four graduate students at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and a professor at Westfield State University co-curated the exhibition by defining individual perspectives on African art and assembling thematic mini-collections in specially designed cubicles. And finally, add a fourth dimension, with 42 Flags: Paintings by Fred Wilson encircling the five cubicles, like a conceptual corral of contemporary art.

A cast-iron toy fire truck helps explain Derby’s passion for collecting. He was around five years old, he recalls, playing in a sandbox in Acton. “I must have been a kid who dug deeper than most,” he smiles. Digging down, he discovered the antique toy, and he still prizes his inaugural buried treasure.

He switched his focus to tribal art, some forty years ago, with two nested Native American baskets purchased for the grand sum of nine dollars from an estate sale in Haydenville. “Bells went off,” says Derby. “I realized my calling in life was to collect tribal art.” Honoring family background (a mix of

Yoruba Bottle Stopper, Nigeria, from the Collection of Charles Derby

JEFF ANTKOWIAK PHOTO
Wampanoag and New England settler), he began with Native American objects, but connoisseur and collector Paul Rabut led him to appreciate African art. “I dreamed about one of Paul’s pieces, and I had to have it. I have it still.”

Derby’s first African piece was a wooden male figure from the Congo, with mirror-glass eyes and a magic bundle of snake or lizard skin bundle around its neck—making it a potent figure for fighting evil. But that’s only part of its story. Its provenance adds another angle. Rabut bought the sculpture from a family in Sag Harbor, New York, that had owned it since the 1850s. As a seaport, Sag Harbor played a role in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. “So it makes sense that a piece from the Congo could end up in Sag Harbor,” notes Derby.

In “Take 1: Diasporic Consciousness,” curator Vick Quezada (working towards an M.F.A. in Studio Arts) selected pieces carrying evidence of “a lived life.” A drinking cup from Zaire, for example, was originally carved from bush buffalo horn for Kuba warriors, but Reed Paige Clark, the general customs receiver in Liberia in the early 1900s, was its first identified owner. Clark brought the horn to the United States, where his family donated it to the Manchester (NH) Municipal Historical Society, which de-accessioned it to the Hurst Gallery in Cambridge. The cup’s Diasporic adventures continued when Derby acquired it in a trade that evokes barter more than business. “Hurst loved Polynesian clubs,” says Derby, “and my wife [retired art teacher Blanche Derby] was happy to see me get rid of weapons.”

Ironies abound as African objects find their way around the world. A four-inch tall bottle stopper from the Yoruba in Nigeria has a backstory steeped in Western art. Tristan Tzara, a founder of the Dada movement, once owned the piece and traded it to fellow artist Josef Hermann before Derby bought it at auction.

In “Take 2: Authenticity,” curator Elizabeth Upenieks (candidate for a Master’s in Art History) considered colonial influences and issues of tourist trade versus traditional art. So, compare and contrast. One carved wooden stool decorated with an elephant motif was made for tourist trade. “I got it because it was a beautiful piece,” Derby says. Another stool, made for Ashanti tribal uses, goes beyond beauty to reveal the wear and tear of cultural context. As Derby explains, each person has his or her own stool, "For me, collecting is a spiritual quest ... and each piece also has spiritual meaning.”

— Charles Derby
and after someone dies, the soul of the departed enters a cylinder carved below the seat.

But two caveats. First, Derby explains, stools like this come to market if/when families convert to Christianity or Islam and abandon their ceremonial items. “It’s not like some family is crying for the soul of an ancestor trapped in New England,” he says. Second, Upenieks notes, seeking validity in age and evidence of wear may be a Western construct. Indicating the complexity of “authenticity,” she cites the work of Thomas Ona, one of the few identified artists. A trained Yoruba sculptor, Ona [1900-1952] combined colonial-style clothing—pith helmets and umbrellas—with African-style figures, in works created to sell to Europeans.

Coming from varied academic disciplines, the five curators inevitably found individual frames. Kiara Hill (a doctoral student in African American Studies and Public History) had been studying working-class black women’s lives in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including the exploitation of women’s bodies under and after slavery. She noted, in contrast, that the female figures in Derby’s African art collection exert religious power. For “Take 4: [Womb]an,” Hill selected pieces in which women’s bodies link the physical realm with the spiritual. For example, a hardwood Gelede mask from the Yoruba People was worn in ceremonies that celebrated female elders and appealed to female deities. And a Luba chief’s staff—an essential sign of power—is topped by the figure of a seated woman that was a symbolic receptacle for spirits of past Luba chiefs.

“Take 3: Restless Spirits” also mediates between the worlds of the dead and the living. Curated by Imo Imeh (Professor of African and African-American art), this “take” presents more than fifty Ere Ibeji, which are a type of sculpture created by the Yoruba when a twin dies. The Yoruba have a high rate of twin births, and an intriguing mythology that has shifted its view of twin births from being an evil to portending good fortune. The basic idea is that when a twin dies, its spirit will haunt or harm the living twin. So, to appease the spirit, a sculpture serves as surrogate, and the family cares for as it would care for a living child—feeding and clothing it, and so on. Whether the twin died in infancy or old age, it is portrayed in the idealized prime of life. And it is always small scale, so the mother or surviving twin can carry

42 Flags: Paintings by Fred Wilson

As a contemporary artist, Fred Wilson often takes the museum as his medium. Museum contents are fair game as his materials; his method entails creating juxtapositions that inform, challenge, or upend expectations. With the paintings of 42 Flags, he does something somewhat different, but essentially the same: changing context; raising uneasy questions. He removes the colors from African national flags to emphasize their formal structure and symbolic detail in schematic black on beige. And he raises issues of emerging identity for African nations—the majority created during the 1950s and 1960s with liberation from colonialism—and the meaning of the color black in Africa and within what he calls “a tribal/cultural setting.” As these flag paintings hang on the walls of the University Museum of Contemporary Art, they surround the five cubicles that contain 5 Takes on African Art and offer additional context for items identified by the narratives of their tribal origin and cultural use.
it around. As Imeh points out, unlike other African sculptures that represent deities or abstractions, “With the Ere Ibeji, we know for certain we are dealing with images of people who actually lived. That makes these sculptures special.”

“In African art, we don’t have much information about the artists,” Imeh continues, “but we do have the powerful presence of the collector.” Curated by Yingxi Lucy Gong (who received her Master’s degree in Art History this year) “Take 5: The Collector” explores what the collection reveals about the collector. In a beaded divination pouch from the Yoruba People, the diviner figure holds a python overhead, emanating power waves. A swirl of symbols—fish, net, turtle shell, and royal insignia—implies the diviner draws power from a water deity. As Derby suggests, fisherman and diviner are similar roles, because the diviner casts out a spiritual force, like a net, to catch pieces of the future. “It’s possible the diviner himself or some family member beaded it, since it is so complex in implications,” Derby speculates. The harmonious colors of European beads (brought to Africa explicitly for trade) date the pouch to the late nineteenth-early twentieth century. Adding an ironic element, the sacred pouch is beaded over a British military officer’s canvas bag for carrying cartridges.

But this African divination bag also brings home Derby’s long-time engagement with the I Ching [a book of Chinese philosophy and divination], his Grandmother Carrie’s skill reading tea leaves, and his repeated reliance on finding wisdom and guidance in dreams. While some believe tribal objects lose potency when removed from their original context, Derby would not agree. Whether it rests in documented historical details or it raises a series of unanswered questions, every object’s story fuses spiritual with mundane. “For me, collecting is a spiritual quest,” he says, “and each piece also has spiritual meaning.”

5 Takes on African Art: Exploring the Charles Derby Collection and 42 Flags: Paintings by Fred Wilson, University Museum of Contemporary Art, University of Massachusetts Amherst, through December 10, 2017.