

Sallie Casey Thayer and African Art

Expansive in both time period and geographic scope, Sallie Casey Thayer's founding gift of art to the University of Kansas in 1917 numbered more than 7,000 works, rich in textiles, furnishings, household objects, and other kinds of "decorative" art. However, aside from several Coptic textiles and other objects from Egypt, Thayer did not collect African art. This gap, while noticeable today, was consistent with predominant late 19th- and early 20th-century European and North American beliefs that "art" and "Africa" were mutually exclusive.

While living in Chicago from 1908 to 1911, Thayer first collected art through her participation in a social network of women collectors, curators, and dealers, several of whom had affiliations with the Art Institute of Chicago. Neither this institution nor the private galleries that Thayer frequented showed African objects, then regarded as ethnographic specimens or "primitive" curiosities because of racist and evolutionist beliefs. For Thayer and many of her contemporaries, interactions with Africa, its material culture, and peoples were generally limited to the staged settings of world's fairs and natural history museums. For example, Chicago's 1893 World's Columbian Exposition presented Africa as a prized possession of France and the British Empire. It featured a "live" display with 69 exploited inhabitants who offered fairgoers a "direct" encounter with a Dahomey Village. Frederick Starr, the developer of this reconstructed village and an anthropologist at the University of Chicago, was a vocal proponent of evolutionism, utilizing such exhibits and giving public lectures to expound racist views about the inferiority of Africa compared with America.

Thayer, who modeled her vision for a civic museum in part on the Art Institute of Chicago, would not have seen African art at that venue during her lifetime. Only in 1927, when the Chicago Women's Club presented a traveling exhibition organized by the Harlem Museum of African Art, did the Art Institute feature objects collected from Central Africa during Belgian rule. The groundbreaking program, pairing this display of more than 100 works with paintings and sculptures by esteemed African American artists, sought to legitimize what was then an emergent category: "African art."

Written by Kristan Hanson

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unrecorded Batwa Artist

active Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda

bark cloth, 1994

from Burundi

bark, pigment

Gift of Reinhild Janzen, 2017.0084

Male Batwa artists created this bark cloth in teams by removing bark from a variation of fig tree cultivated over many years. This remarkable process of cloth production begins during the rainy season. Artists cut the bark and peel it away from the tree. They then wrap the tree for protection using leaves. This protection is removed shortly after new bark begins to grow. With every new growth of a bark layer, the quality of the bark improves. Bark from a single tree can be harvested over 30 times before the tree is too aged to harvest. The artists then stretch the bark strips using various methods and tools, including cylindrical wooden mallets. The grain direction plays a large role in the final size of the stretched piece. After stretching, the cloths are dried. The final cloth coloration depends upon the particular tree. In some areas, artists use different types of trees because of regional ecological factors, and this results in amazing color variations ranging from bright orange to pale white. Although the cloth is made exclusively by male artists, both men and women use bark cloth in many ways, including as dress for ritual occasions and for other ceremonial purposes. The cloth becomes more flexible with wear. This piece was never worn. Dr. Reinhild Janzen purchased this piece from a Batwan artist through a non-governmental organization while working in the region. Patronage through tourism is now a major source ensuring the ongoing production of bark cloth.

Written by Morgan Severt

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unrecorded Amhara or Tigray artist

active Ethiopia or Eritrea

anklet, late 1800s–early 1900s

from Danakil Desert, Ethiopia

brass, incising

Source unknown, 2007.2999

This anklet is from the Danakil Desert in Ethiopia. Made from brass by a male metalsmith, it has a convex shape that curls into cylinders on each end of the cuff. In order to produce its shape, the artist softened the brass by heating it until it glowed red and then formed the shape by hitting it with a hammer anywhere there was a curve. To make the inside of the anklet, the artist soldered an additional piece of brass. The patterned linework and circles on the outer edges of the piece were created using a blunt edge and hammer. While made by a man, the anklet would have been worn by an Ethiopian woman, likely for weddings and other ceremonial occasions.

Historically, Ethiopia has been populated by pastoralist communities such as the Amhara, Tigray, and Afar. While they relied primarily on their own livestock to survive, they also engaged in trade with other cultural groups. Arts of the body, such as jewelry, are the primary forms of aesthetic expression among pastoralist societies and were also highly portable trade goods, leading to cross-cultural borrowings of technique and styles in the production of jewelry. In addition to the Spencer's collection of brass jewelry attributed to the Amhara and Tigray, the Musée de Quai Branly in Paris has similar examples in its collection made by the Afar of northeastern Ethiopia.

Written by Molly Johnson

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unrecorded Zulu artist

active South Africa, Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Mozambique

beer pot, 1925–1990

from South Africa

ceramic

Anonymous gift, PG2008.001

This pot from South Africa was made by a Zulu artist to hold beer made from sorghum. Sorghum beer is considered to be a food of the ancestors, and its creation and consumption were governed by gendered social norms; historically, beer was brewed and served by women but enjoyed by all members of the family regardless of gender. The treatment and manufacture of beer pots was likewise guided by gendered practices. Pottery was typically a woman's vocation in Africa because of its association with cooking. In some regions, men are forbidden to touch unfired clay. There were also social restrictions in place in the Msinga region of South Africa, where a woman could not begin to make pottery until after she had children. When potters married, a diffusion of style occurred as they learned new techniques and styles from a different region.

There are four main types of beer pots: the *imbiza*, used for brewing; the *ukhamba*, used for serving; the *uphiso*, which has an elongated neck and is used for transportation; and the *umancishana*, which is usually undecorated and is also used for serving. Based on its form and size, this coil-built pot was most likely an *ukhamba*. The v-shaped band of raised bumps falls into a broad category of embellishments known as *amasumpa*. Zulu potters used multiple methods to create *amasumpa*: adhering smooth slabs of clay to the body of the vessel and carving designs, applying individual conical bumps, or pushing out raised dots from the inside. Regardless of method, raised *amasumpa* designs were originally used to keep the pot from slipping out of one's hands.

Written by Eva Philpot

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unrecorded Tuareg artist

active Niger, Mali, Algeria, Libya, Burkina Faso, and Nigeria

tent post, 1925–1990

from Burkina Faso

wood, carving

Anonymous gift, PG2008.101

tent post, 1925–1990

from Burkina Faso

wood, carving

Anonymous gift, PG2008.102

tent post, 1925–1990

from Burkina Faso

wood, carving

Anonymous gift, PG2008.103

The Tuareg, the southernmost Amazigh (Berber) people, have historically been seminomadic pastoralists who live in the Saharan and Sahelian regions of Northwestern Africa (southern Algeria, western Libya, eastern Mali, northern Niger, and northeastern Burkina Faso). Today they are also settled agriculturists and city dwellers. The Tuareg achieved independence from French colonial rule in the 1950s and 1960s after two decades of resistance, using their mastery of the desert to support national independence movements. In addition, some groups fought for Tuareg independence from autonomous nation-states.

Well-established caravan routes throughout Northwest Africa facilitated the spread of Islam from the seventh century. Tuareg worldviews incorporated and shaped Islam, which became integral to the conceptual content of Tuareg art objects.

The tent, also known as *ehen*, was historically an essential part of material life. It was given to a woman on her wedding day by her family, along with other domestic items. The tent's assembly formed an important part of a wedding ceremony. The elaborately decorated tent poles, such as those displayed here, were both functional and conceptual: They held up the tent wall mats and served to hang leather bags and clothing while also demarcating important spatial boundaries. First, the long, minimally ornamented tent post to the left of the door would have separated the domestic space of the tent from the outside realm of uncontrolled spirits. Second, the elaborately carved posts to the right of the door would have divided the tent's inner space into gendered areas with different degrees of privacy.

Tuareg society, while matrilineal, is highly stratified into socioeconomic classes and endogamous groups, meaning that artistic production was historically held within families whose special status was tied to their ability to manipulate materials. The members of the artisan group, the *Inaaden*, may have carved these wooden tent poles and decorated them with geometric patterns. In addition, the production and use of art objects was highly gendered. The carving of tent poles was most likely done by men, while women sewed the tent cover from goat skin as a communal female activity. Geometric patterns on the pole and the division of domestic space may reflect Tuareg cosmology and its intersections with wider Islamic practices.

Written by Nazanin Amiri

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unrecorded Oyo artist

active Nigeria

egungun mask, late 1950s

probably from South Oyo, Nigeria

cloth, wood, paint, leather, metal, yarn, cowrie shells, velvet, staining, carving, weaving, dyeing, embroidering, embossing

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. H. Kenneth Palmer, 2007.3167

The vast-reaching Yoruba culture stretches across Nigeria and the African Diaspora and includes Muslims, Christians, followers of traditional Yoruba religion, and those who practice elements of multiple religions. The Yoruba word *Egúngún* holds two meanings: generally, it is the name of an annual masquerade; more specifically, it refers to the ancestors in the spirit realm, or the *ará òrun* 'kìnkìn' (inhabitants of heaven). In the Yoruba religion, the spiritual and physical realms intersect. By living a morally good life and surviving into old age, one can become an ancestor upon death. These ancestors remain involved in family and community affairs, especially through the *Egúngún* festival.

The *Egúngún* festival, held annually between June and December, lasts one or two weeks, with each town holding its festival at different times according to local tradition. During the masquerade, the *Egúngún* emerge from the family compounds and walk the streets, often accompanied by drummers. Upon donning the mask for the festival, the male wearer becomes the incarnation of the ancestors who return to restore order and balance to the community. The wearer must not reveal his identity, either through his voice or by removing the mask in public. While men make and wear the costume, women participate in the festival by singing songs praising the ancestral lineage and responding to the masked spirit.

Each *Egúngún* mask is unique. Textiles play an important role in Yoruba culture, as they represent wealth and social status. These status markers extend to the ancestors via the *Egúngún* mask. The male members of a family group create the mask, either with a specific ancestor in mind, or ancestors in general. If evocative of a specific individual, the designs will incorporate textiles and motifs representing that particular ancestor. For example, in this *Egúngún* mask, the makers incorporated an Islamic prayer mat. Perhaps the ancestor they sought to invoke was a Muslim (especially because the Oyo region is historically linked to Islam) or practiced religious pluralism, meaning that the ancestor followed both Islam and Yoruba traditional religion.

Written by Jennifer Wegmann Gabb

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unrecorded Hausa-Fulani artist

active Nigeria

embroidered hat, 1980

from Kano, Nigeria

cotton, silk, embroidering

Gift of Professor Beverly Mack, 2011.0232

In northern Nigeria in 1980, a male tailor constructed this Hausa-Fulani cap with white cloth and embroidered it with golden thread. The intricate embroidery covers the hat in diamond and circle motifs that incorporate a series of six-point stars. These stars offer protective power to Muslims, while the cap itself reveals the wearer's piety and prestige as a Muslim man.

The Islamic faith is an integral part of Hausa-Fulani culture. The Hausa-Fulani people comprise one of the largest cultural groups in West Africa and have lived in the northern part of Nigeria since the founding of the Sokoto Caliphate in 1804. This Islamic empire led to widespread conversion to Islam, transforming many people's ways of life, including their dress. Long associated with Islamic scholars in West Africa, embroidered clothing became an important marker of social status among Muslim men.

Hausa-Fulani men wear caps as part of their daily dress to decorate the head and protect the mind. In their book *Crowning Achievements: African Arts of Dressing the Head*, authors Mary Jo Arnoldi and Christine Mullen Kreamer write that "the head, high and center, is an ideal site for the aesthetic and symbolic elaboration of the body" (1995: 9). Men's caps are one of the most visible forms of dress, displaying the wearer's masculinity and piety, and complementing a man's voluminous, embroidered strip-woven gown, or *riga*, and tailored pants.

The embroidered designs on caps also have religious efficacy. The six-point stars reinforce this cap's symbolic power. In her book *Cloth in West African History*, Colleen E. Kriger writes that "six-pointed stars were known in Islamic iconography by the name 'Solomon's seal,' and they were thought to endow their owners or wearers with power over terrestrial and supernatural beings" (2006: 102–103). This cap would have protected the wearer from evil spirits and supernatural powers and decorated his head in a stylish and comfortable manner.

Written by Alex Cateforis

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Pierre Boucherle (1894–1988)
born Tunis, Tunisia; died Six-Fours-les-Plages, France
active Tunisia, France, Algeria, Italy, Spain
Sidi Bou Saïd, mid-1900s
postage stamp, issued 2001
On loan from Dr. Jessica Gerschultz

Ammar Farhat (1911–1988)
born Béja, Tunisia; died Tunis, Tunisia
active Tunisia, France, Italy, Sweden
Arts populaires (Popular Art), 1966
postage stamp
from the *Tribute to Great Painters in Tunisia* series, emission no. 12/2002- 28/12/2002, issued 1999
On loan from Dr. Jessica Gerschultz

La Poterie (Pottery), circa 1970
postage stamp, issued 1999
On loan from Dr. Jessica Gerschultz

La Fileuse (The Spinner), 1976
postage stamp, issued in 1997
On loan from Dr. Jessica Gerschultz

Safia Farhat (1924–2004)
born and died Radès, Tunisia
active Tunisia, France
Costume de mariage: Houmt-Souk (Wedding Costume: Houmt-Souk), circa 1970s
postage stamp, issued 1986
On loan from Dr. Jessica Gerschultz

Yahia Turki (1901-1903–1969)
born Istanbul, Turkey; died Tunis, Tunisia
active Tunisia, France
Vendeur des dates et du lait (Date and Milk Vendor), mid-1900s
postage stamp, issued 2000
On loan from Dr. Jessica Gerschultz

Vendeur d'ombrelles et d'éventails (Sunshade and Fan Vendor), mid-1900s
postage stamp, issued 1999
On loan from Dr. Jessica Gerschultz

The *École de Tunis* (Tunis School), an elite group of painters, was formed in the mid-1900s and headed by Pierre Boucherle. While many members of this group taught a new generation of Tunisian artists at the *École des Beaux Arts* (School of Fine Arts) in Tunis, Boucherle used his political office to award commissions for murals and other monumental arts to fellow members and emerging artists. The breadth of their work is diverse in style, but thematically the artists were concerned with creating a new body of modern art linked to the Tunisian experience.

Artists of the *École de Tunis* often created scenes of artisans at work as they questioned French colonial representations of Tunisian art as “craft.” Scenes of artistic production not only stimulated the discourse on the relation between Tunisian “craft” and modernism, but also promoted tourism to Tunis. The subjects of these stamps vary from the white and cerulean cityscape of Sidi Bou Saïd (the seaside suburb favored by modernists such as Boucherle and Jellal Ben Abdallah), conversing

musicians, a bride awash in the vivid colors of her traditional wedding garment, a date merchant with a jasmine bud tucked behind his ear, and a fan vendor. Other examples portray women artisans in the fields of ceramics and spinning.

While these stamps served to illustrate the rich cultural heritage of the region, the artists documented the gendered craft roles present within Tunisian society. Ammar Farhat's painting *La Fileuse (The Spinner)* depicts a Tunisian woman at work spinning thread for production into trade goods. A similar spindle from Morocco is displayed in the gallery in a nearby case. Historically, Tunisian women worked in the home, often interacting with people through kinship or marriage, and the practice of weaving and other ancillary handiwork was seen as an extension of the female experience. These fiber skills were generally passed down from mother to daughter. This facet of female Tunisian life, once crucial to the traditional modes of household production, was integrated into the formal economy and the growing tourism industry.

Written by Sergio Toledo

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Safia Farhat (1924–2004)

born and died Radès, Tunisia

active Tunisia, France

Mariage à Monastir (Wedding in Monastir), c. 1960

postcard

On loan from Dr. Jessica Gerschultz

This early 1960s postcard depicts a painting titled *Mariage à Monastir* by Safia Farhat. The postcard was mailed from Tunisia to Bulgaria around 1964. During this period, many Tunisian modernists such as Farhat contributed graphics and mural designs to Tunisia's growing hotel and tourism industry. Postcards circulated images of cultural patrimony abroad.

Farhat was a renowned Tunisian artist and professor. She was a member of the *École de Tunis* (Tunis School) and the first female and first Tunisian director of the acclaimed *École des Beaux-Arts* (School of Fine Arts), where she advanced women's access to art education. Her work coincided with state-supported decorative arts programs and postcolonial state feminism of the 1950s–1960s. Farhat's artistic and professional endeavors cultivated the representation of gender in the Tunisian art scene.

This artwork portrays a Tunisian wedding ceremony, though the location of the original painting is unknown. The bride stands, hands raised, on her platform as a presentation of her transition from girl to wife, receiving admiration and gifts from her community. Older women gaze upon the bride with approval, one with her hand to her mouth, perhaps ululating in celebration. The man wearing a red *chechia* hat, perhaps the father of the bride, sits in the presence of his daughter before she leaves for the home of her groom.

The henna used to mark the bride's hands and face bring blessing and purification as she enters her new life. The henna plant is known as the Prophet Muhammad's (*pbuh*) favorite plant, and is used in many ceremonies in Muslim life, including weddings and circumcisions. The bride is dressed in an embroidered gold dress, similar to the example in Ali Bellagha's collection (see the red embroidered textile in the nearby case). She also wears wedding clogs and *kholkhal*, a pair of heavy wedding anklets. The bride's hair remains loose, symbolizing her unencumbered love and fertility.

The fish, represented on the back wall, is a common Tunisian good luck talisman used to ward off bad spirits and the evil eye. It was also historically used as a fertility symbol: a bride stepped over a fish before entering into her new home.

Written by Sonya Merwin Bailey

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