

ANTHONY ALAN SHELTON

Director's Preface

UNDER DIFFERENT MOONS: *African Art in Conversation* profiles the UBC Museum of Anthropology's previously unpublished and largely unknown African collections. Our title alludes to *The Moon is the Eye of the Sky*, a canvas by the Nigerian artist Osi Audu, and is used here to refer to the marked historical disjunction between the southern and northern hemispheres in their approach to African art and visual culture and to our desire to instigate a conversation between thinkers, makers and collectors from both sides of the equator. Together with its namesake exhibition, this volume aims to promote dialogue on the collection's histories and interpretations and encourage its wider use as a teaching and community resource. Our aspiration is guided by the acclaimed Canadian writer Lawrence Hill's observation that "to gaze into another person's face is to do two things; to recognize their humanity, and to assert your own."¹ So, too, when gazing into different art worlds.

The book and exhibition provide two apertures through which to glimpse the museum's collections, juxtaposed with contemporary art from Nigeria and diasporic African communities in Canada. The first part of this book, "Writing from Images," aims to contextualize MOA's collection through an expansive ethnographic literature that links it to seven themes that reoccur in a number of societies across the African continent and in areas of Brazil and the Caribbean. In the second part, "Rituals in Contemporary Nigerian and Diaspora Arts," Titilope Salami

focuses on contemporary Nigerian and Nigerian-born Canadian artists to argue that the purposes behind their current practices are not dissimilar to those found in the continent's earlier religious arts. Finally, in the third part, "African Collections in Times of Restitution," Nuno Porto examines specific items in MOA's collection to reveal the social and historical networks in which they once circulated and the changing significances ascribed them. These essays, their accompanying images and the exhibition itself are part of a wider attempt to bring to public attention, especially that of African and diasporic Canadian communities, parts of an important cultural legacy, safeguarded in museums across the country, that can help empower new sectors and generations of citizens and widen the breadth and understanding of Canada's multi- and intercultural character.

Ours is not a collection of African masterworks and until recently, when we appointed its first specialist curator, Nuno Porto, neither was it systematically developed or researched as an ethnographic or historical asset. Many of the works shown in this book and exhibition are fragments of much wider assemblages that escaped the interest or logistical capabilities of collectors. As with most museums, much of MOA's collection consists of masks without costumes, figurative sculptures divorced from shrines, body ornaments separated from clothing and ceramics extracted from compounds, hearths and altars. Therefore, the collections give no more

than glimpses—albeit memorable and brilliant glimpses—into the complex societies from which they came.

Formed over the past ninety-four years from many usually small, coincidental but fortuitous donations and purchases from scholars, curators, physicians and travellers, the collection contains several closely interconnected sets of artifacts. These include a nearly complete series of Kpele, Kpan, Goli Glen and crested human face masks from the Baule of Côte d’Ivoire, used in their popular Goli ceremonies; a gift from UBC’s provost’s office of all three major types of masks and crests used in four of the seven initiation grades performed by the Bijogo of Guinea-Bissau; extensive holdings of Dogon, Bwa and related masks; and three Bamana/Bozo puppet sets with floats, cloth awnings and related animal masks from Mali and Burkina Faso. The collection also includes excellent examples of earthenware from across the continent.

Africa has been described as a “land of universalism and religious pluralism,”² and its intellectual, visual and material cultures are as diverse and internationally connected as its peoples.³ African visual cultures and material objects, therefore, were seldom static or culturally specific and not always intended solely for domestic use. In the 16th century, African markets began to expand to accommodate European and North American interests—as attested by the three 19th-century North African artifacts collected by Frank Burnett and acquired for the Museum in 1927—and continue to do so today. MOA’s collections document the market’s expansion by including works intended for external consumption, such as the Kuba masks and Kamba and Baule colonial figures illustrated in this volume, as well as Benin panels and castings, Makonde sculpture and Yoruba thorn carvings that await their public debut.

Thanks to the work of its curator and volunteer associate researchers Kamshi Kanavathy, Dimakatso Tlhoale and Clifford Pereira, MOA’s African collections are becoming better documented and therefore more useful for researchers, artists and communities. *Under Different Moons* (2021) is an important addition to the recent steady stream of African-related exhibitions at MOA: *The Village is Tilting: Dancing AIDS in Malawi* (2007), *Man Ray, African Art and the Modernist Lens* (2010-11), *Without Masks: Contemporary Afro-Cuban Art* (2014) and *Pigapicha! One Hundred Years of Studio Photography in Nairobi* (2014-15). Through exhibitions, collaborative partnerships and, we might expect, future field-based curatorial research, it is hoped MOA will become a significant Canadian centre for the understanding and appreciation of African visual cultures and a worthy and generous community partner committed to empowering and providing a platform for future generations of the continent’s artists.

As this monograph approaches its press date, I have taken the decision to ask the exhibition’s curatorial team, Titilope Salami, Nya Williams and Nuno Porto, to rethink our original concept in order to affirm solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement and our institutional values and commitment to social justice and the defence of human rights. This book provides an introduction to MOA’s collection and a deeper context for the Nigerian works that will be included in the exhibition. However, this is not a teaching but a listening moment, one that requires us to rethink our exhibition concept and provide a platform for more Nigerian and local artists, curators and activists to share their stories and aspirations with the wider community. The exhibition and monograph are complementary sides of the same project, but no longer are they mirror images of one another.