iAfrica: Connecting with Sub-Saharan Art
October 3, 2009—April 4, 2010

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The Minneapolis Institute of Arts (Mia) presents an innovative exhibition that explores nontraditional methods of displaying, engaging with, and understanding African art—the first part of a long-term plan to reinstall all of the museum’s African art galleries. “iAfrica: Connecting with Sub-Saharan Art,” on view October 3, 2009, through April 4, 2010, shows 28 objects from the MIA’s collection, in a variety of different, experimental settings that challenge the viewer to see the works from various perspectives. Central to this approach is soliciting feedback from visitors, to help inform the broader African art reinstallation initiative.

In “iAfrica” objects are organized into five perspectives, each identified by a question and coded by color. The visitor is invited to view the objects from these five perspectives, which address issues of aesthetics (“What makes it beautiful?”), ethnography (“How was it used?”), sensoriality (“How does it feel, sound, smell?”), history (“How old is it?”), and provenance (“How did it get here?”).

Africa’s extensive cultural diversity has produced many standards of beauty. From the aesthetics perspective, African ideals of visual artistry are contrasted with those of Europe and America. In general, African artists have designed both their ritual and everyday objects to be pleasing to the eye. Like artists anywhere, they succeed by choosing valuable materials, displaying technical knowledge and skill, and inventing powerful forms to engage the viewer.
In fine art museums, African objects traditionally have been displayed as examples of visual styles, regardless of their use and context. This separation of form from function reinforces a common belief that art objects essentially possess little or no significance beyond their artistic value. From the ethnographic perspective, “IAfrica” provides information on the cultural background of each object, contributing to its overall appreciation.

In the 1700s, museum visitors were often encouraged to hold historical artifacts, allowing them to acquire knowledge through touch. Such an approach is unlikely in most museums today; yet, without multisensory input, visitors lose important sources of rich information. “IAfrica” intends to restore that sensory quality. The sensoriality perspective offers the visitor a small taste of non-visual sensory experiences. For instance, the extensive use of curdled milk gives two East African household objects a characteristic aroma, which can be smelled through holes in their display case. Acoustic domes help convey the music made by musical instruments from two Central African nations.

The historical perspective illuminates the long tradition of art-making in Africa and tracks major changes throughout contemporary Africa. Existing African art objects are seldom older than 100 years. The main reason is that wood, its base material, does not survive long under tropical conditions. Generally, the oldest sub-Saharan objects recovered from archaeological sites were made of clay.

Over time, African art has undergone major changes. Most objects were made for local ritual or political use. For centuries, however, African artists also produced art objects for Western consumers, including souvenirs and so-called tourist art. In addition, high market prices in recent decades have prompted a rise in sophisticated counterfeits. Beginning in the 20th century, African artists adopted new forms of expression, such as paintings, and African art has entered the global market for contemporary art.

The provenance perspective calls attention to the importance of ethical art-collecting practices and explores origins and ownership. Museum exhibitions seldom call attention to the importance of collecting practices. Increasingly, museums are concerned with how objects were originally obtained. In recent decades, as prices for African art have gone up, theft and illicit trade have dramatically intensified. Objects at risk of being stolen include grave posts, archaeological findings, sections of buildings, and fragments of rock art. A few of the pieces on display in “IAfrica” illustrate these issues.
“iAfrica: Connecting with Sub-Saharan Art” is part of a larger project to re-install the MIA’s African galleries. The MIA is taking the unusual step of letting its visitors be assistant curators, asking them to consider the same questions that curators do: How do you help these objects best tell their stories? How do visitors engage with these objects? What role does new media have in telling these objects’ stories? Each visitor who walks through the exhibition will be invited to answer a survey on the gallery’s computer or their home computer. The MIA will also conduct focus groups with MIA visitors, asking them a range of questions about their experience and how what they think are the most effective interpretative methods. “iAfrica” is organized by Jan-Lodewijk Grootaers, the MIA’s curator of African art, and its interactive media approach was funded in part by a grant from The Wallace Foundation. Grootaers will incorporate the insights from the focus group and survey as he plans the galleries’ reinstallation.

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ABOUT THE MINNEAPOLIS INSTITUTE OF ARTS

The Minneapolis Institute of Arts (MIA), home to one of the finest encyclopedic art collections in the country, houses more than 80,000 works of art representing 5,000 years of world history. Highlights of the permanent collection include European masterworks by Rembrandt, Poussin, and van Gogh; modern and contemporary painting and sculpture by Picasso, Matisse, Mondrian, Stella, and Close; as well as internationally significant collections of prints and drawings, decorative arts, Modernist design, photographs, textiles, and Asian, African, and Native American art. General admission is always free. Some special exhibitions have a nominal admission fee. Museum hours: Sunday, 11 A.M.–5 P.M.; Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday, 10 A.M.–5 P.M.; Thursday, 10 A.M.–9 P.M.; Monday closed. For more information, call (612) 870-3000 or visit www.artsmia.org.