

# Arts and Africa

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ARTS AND AFRICA

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## ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey and welcome to another edition of 'Arts and Africa', and this week we cast our net wide as we look at the creative life of Africa and Africans wherever they may be. We start with Seyni Diagne Diop, one of Senegal's foremost painters who has been selected this year to represent Senegal at the International Painters' Colony in Yugoslavia. He has been interested in drawing the world around him since he was old enough to hold a pencil, but only began to paint seriously about 6 years ago. As Diop only speaks French Anne Bolsover spoke to him through Denzil Dunnett, former British Ambassador in Senegal, at the opening of Seyni Diagne Siop's one-man show at The Africa Centre in London. Anne Bolsover asked him about the early days.

## DENZIL DUNNETT

The artist says he has been doing drawings since ever he could remember; he has only been doing proper pictures for about six years, but he's always been doing drawings.

## ANNE BOLSOVER

What kind of drawings did he do - did he do them of life around him in Senegal?

## DUNNETT

He began doing drawings of everything round about him - people, objects, furniture and things that came into his head. First it was of the things about him.

## BOLSOVER

Did he copy the work of other African artists at all?

## DUNNETT

When he was young there were hardly any pictures or drawings by African artists. In general African art has not been very prolific in drawing, in painting. It has always been in sculpture. Until he was older he didn't have much opportunity to see any drawings or paintings of other African artists.

BOLSOVER

And now he has another one-man show here in London. What do you think is particularly effective about the paintings that we see here?

DUNNETT

I think he has a marvellous freedom of rhythm and design which never seems to fail. He treats a great variety of African themes which are of considerable emotional importance to him. He always seems to combine expressing the subject matter of what he's trying to put across and harmonise it perfectly with his means of expression.

BOLSOVER

Can we talk about a couple of your favourites?

DUNNETT

Well one of my favourite pictures is a very recent one, called 'African Market Scene'. It has in it a number of very dignified African figures. They are clearly African women, mostly with large bowls or baskets on their heads which they are carrying with marvellous poise. The women are wearing brightly coloured, mostly red robes, and in the background there is greenery; to my mind it puts across marvellously the dignity of the movement and poise of African women and the contrast between the rich colours of the human scene and the cool greens of the landscape around. This picture is also a recent painting, and represents a great hero in Senegal tradition: the chieftain, Latte Diop, who more or less led the resistance against the French round about 1880 and in that period; and here, we see this important Chief seated in a very dignified pose with the staff in his hand showing his position. He is surrounded by his musicians and minstrels who are playing various instruments and singing praises in the traditional way, and you see the leader of the band of minstrels making a very eloquent gesture, pointing at him - which is what the leaders had to do, indicating that all these praises that we are singing, all these wonderful things that we are saying, refer to you - and this gesture seems to me to add a very powerful dramatic note to a picture which in itself has a very rich design.

BOLSOVER

Would you say his paintings are essentially African, or do you think in a way he's adapted them to a more western taste?

DUNNETT

I have a great feeling of Africa coming through his pictures in the way he represents his African figures and in the sense of richness that his pictures convey. I find it hard to see anything but African elements in his pictures.

TETTEH-LARTEY

That was Anne Bolsover talking to Senegalese painter Seyni Diagne Diop. Now African art isn't only found in Africa. We hear a lot these days about the African Diaspora - those people of African descent who live in other countries. Naturally one of the most vibrant of these communities is in the United States of America, and Chicago - the second largest city in America, situated in the north of the country near the border with Canada - is the home of the Du Sable Museum of African American history. Jean Baptiste Du Sable was a pioneer of

African descent who in 1779 established the first permanent settlement in Chicago. The Museum which was founded in 1961 commemorates his name and attempts to bring together in one collection the story of all those people of African descent who now live in the United States. The Museum is undergoing massive reconstruction at the moment and 'Arts and Africa' Producer, David Sweetman, while on a recent trip to the United States visited the building in Chicago's Washington Park and talked to the Museum's Director, Dr. Margaret Burroughs about the work that is going on. Dr. Burroughs is also a lecturer at the nearby University of Chicago but she devotes much of her time to the Museum. David Sweetman asked her how the collection was first started.

DR. MARGARET BURROUGHS

The Du Sable Museum was founded in my living-room. I live in a big old house at 3806 South Michigan Avenue, and a number of people, including myself - several teachers, social workers, people who felt at the time (this was in 1961) that there was very little self-awareness on the part of people of African descent in the schools - we decided to try and start an institution that would help to supply this need; not that we were being critical of the other museums and what they were doing, but they were not emphasising this aspect of our culture. And so we decided that we would supply that need. The idea took hold and pretty soon it all grew; and this building you are sitting in, in beautiful Washington Park, became vacant and we petitioned the Chicago Park District to allow us to use this building to develop it as a museum on the condition that we would have to raise the money. There is almost 20,000 square feet of space here. There's the ground floor level and this level which is identical, and the phase one remodelling includes the ground floor and one end of this level, as you can see.

DAVID SWEETMAN

Do you plan to feature elements of the African origins of your people in the Museum?

BURROUGHS

Yes, we do. We have quite a collection of African art and artefacts. In October we are scheduled to have an opening of an African collection which has been loaned to us by Mrs. Mayer, and all of that material is upstairs in storage because of the fact that when they started remodelling there was so much dust around we had to protect it. The things you see on exhibit now are token things that we've put up to show the children when they come. We have slave papers, documents; we have a library of books. We also collect items that belong to people who have not been dead a long time.

SWEETMAN

Do you have plans to have temporary exhibitions of living black artists and perhaps of African art by living artists ?

BURROUGHS

We will have exhibitions by living black artists only if they relate to an historical theme, and that's because of the fact we have here in Chicago a Southside Community Art Center which has a gallery and exhibits regularly the works of young black artists. So we didn't

want to appear to be in competition with them. We say that where it relates historically we show it, otherwise we encourage artists to go over there and have their show.

SWEETMAN

I can see from the window here you have in the garden an exhibition of one or two works by black sculptors.

BURROUGHS

Yes, that's so. It's a part of a project that was funded by the City - they contributed about 83,000 dollars for it to commission several sculptors to do sculptures that represent the spirit of Chicago and Du Sable, so you see the connection. We have in particular in those pieces that you see out there, we urged artists to make an abstract conception because we do have a bronze bust of Du Sable and we didn't want to have six different versions of what he looked like. And the beautiful marble pedestal that you saw on the porch will bear this head of Du Sable by Robert Jones which we like very much.

SWEETMAN

When do you expect all the work in the Museum to be finished?

BURROUGHS

I hope that Phase One will be completed by the end of October or 1st November. Now the Phase Two work, which is the rest of the end of this building - these offices here will comprise of the gift shop and book store, and all of this whole area will be the library and multi-media center and then another large gallery at the other end - if we have the money it shouldn't take more than six months to complete. But I'm now just starting out to raise that money. The whole job cost one and a half million dollars - that's why we've broken it into phases. We were able to raise 169,000 dollars for the Phase One work; the Phase Two work will cost 311,000 dollars, but it's probably escalated a bit because of inflation. And then Phase Three work, 227,000 dollars - but that will be the outside grounds, and we're pretty certain that the Park District will help us considerably in fixing that up.

SWEETMAN

Well I hope that I can come and see it when it's finished. Dr. Margaret Burroughs, thank you very much.

BURROUGHS

I hope you can - I'm very glad that you came - and pass the good word on and tell people who are coming here to come and visit us.

TETTEH-LARTEY

That was David Sweetman talking to Dr. Margaret Burroughs, Director of the Du Sable Museum of African American History in Chicago, U.S.A.; and that's it from this rather far-flung edition of 'Arts and Africa', and from me Alex Tetteh-Lartey it's goodbye.