

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey with an edition of Arts and Africa which moves from the every day world of chairs and tables to the life of the mind. We will be hearing about an exhibition of African handicrafts in America and we'll be talking to the South African novelist, Andre Brink and we have news of a major new book of poetry from Tanzania. But first to America to the Brooklyn Museum in New York, which is currently holding an exhibition of African furniture and Household objects. This is, of course, different from the usual exhibitions about Africa which tend to feature sculpture before all else. This exhibition is the brainchild of Professor Roy Segar of Indiana University in America and is, in fact, a sequel to his earlier exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum on African Textiles and Decorative Art. Sophia Williams who explained that the exhibition consists of every day useful objects from African traditional societies, objects such as calabashes, spoons, cooking vessels, chairs and beds. Some of them are beautiful simply because the function they perform is so honestly related to the natural materials whether wood or clay or whatever from which they are produced whereas others are highly decorated and have a meaning beyond the simple use for which they were intended. Sophia Williams pointed out the significance of some of the objects.

SOPHIA WILLIAMS

Many of these beds, for example, are not just beds they also function in a highly symbolic way. One from the Senufo does play a role in funerary practices and serves as a kind of bier and that's true of most of African art be it utilitarian in focus or sculpture, that is that the same object may function in several different ways depending upon the context. The beds are wood, quite heavy, quite sturdy, quite beautifully decorated with all sorts of motifs that are cherished and used on head dresses, we've seen them there, as well as objects such as this. I'm talking about, for example, the motif of a spider on a bed from the Cameroon. The one thing about wood carving in Africa that we keep reminding everyone who comes to see this exhibition is that the technique, we call it monoxylous, that is to say the object is carved from a single block of wood, it is not joined as we think of our wooden chairs in this country. It is

extremely difficult to do because one has to conceive the entire form in that block before the carver even begins. It's in his mind and he does not use diagrams and sketches before he starts. So when you get a piece such as this with three very complex elements all of which are attached, they're all one part and they move and they collapse, it's truly an exciting creation.

The basketry is one of the most interesting sections of the container part of the exhibition. The techniques are rather complex. One has plaited basketry, one has coiled basketry. These coil baskets from Botswana are almost painterly in their fabrication. One feels that paint has been put on and that's not the case. It's all woven, and very skillfully done in a very spontaneous way. The designs have been created. One also has wicker-work and chequer work done so one begins to understand that if we look at the form the technique has not limited the creation. The technique is there and skillfully carried out but there is a good deal of variation in size, in approach to the materials, natural materials, that has been achieved.

Finally in pottery one has to be aware that sub-Saharan Africa is the last place in the world today in which one can still find hand-built pottery, that is pottery made without the use of a wheel which is an extremely difficult process to carry out. The other thing in this exhibition which I think is interesting is a concept as you walk through of, we call it skewer morphs, that is replicating in a media, an object that is usually found in another media. Let me give an example. A container in calabash form made in ceramic, which is a delightful play on form and a creative reaction to one's surroundings that we here don't often think of in this country. So that's a very interesting aspect of the show as well.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Sophia Williams, one of the Brooklyn Museum's curators talking about the Museum's current exhibition of furniture and household objects.

MUSIC EXTRACT - UYAZ GABISA

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That was Uyaz Gabisa, a traditional wedding song from South Africa birthplace of the novelist Andre Brink who, despite his post as Associate Professor of Africans and Dutch Literature at Rhodes University in Grahamstown, has nevertheless remained outspoken in the cause of human rights. He was recently in Finland where he attended a writers conference which had as its theme, Myths. Donald Fields talked to Andre Brink for Arts and Africa and began by asking him if myths were still common in South Africa.

ANDRE BRINK

Well the whole of South African life is based on the myth of racial superiority but that depends on the definition of myths. Unfortunately, it seems that myth which originally was a very creative and sustaining force in society has turned into its very opposite in the twentieth century and is operating invariably where it still does operate in a very destructive way as is very evident from the South African way of life.

DONALD FIELDS

How concerned have writers here been, most of the writers attending the conference are from Europe, about the myth of racial superiority?

ANDRE BRINK

I must say that that is a theme that has constantly cropped up. Obviously since there are a lot of writers involved the theme of myth as such, the return to the Greek mythology and more or less esoteric aspects of myths in literature, played a major part but a very substantial part of the congress has been devoted to exploring the way in which myth functions in the modern world and specifically the idea of racial superiority. A lot of attention has given us first because of the presence of quite a number of important German writers, Gunter Grass most important among them, to the way in which this method has been expressed in Germany. But then of course South Africa being a very particular mutation of that, a very modern contemporary development of it I don't think anybody else gave very much attention to that, they left it more or less to me to explain something about that.

DONALD FIELDS

What weapons are still available for you to explode the myth of racial superiority in South Africa?

ANDRE BRINK

I think it is a myth that is already beginning to explode by itself. So many interesting and, in some cases, really promising movements have been taking place in the country, such intensive soul-searching among members of the ruling class is taking place. Much of it for the benefit of the world, a great spectacular thrusting of the hand in the South African bosom, much of it with an eye to a very pragmatic survival. But a lot of it is very authentic, very sincere and this whole myth is beginning to totter and to show very important notable cracks and fissures. As a writer, I think what I can do is simply to go on writing and make people aware of what is happening of the fact that this myth is responsible for so much destruction, so much violence, so much misunderstanding.

DONALD FIELDS

You've been involved in a revolt of writers against censorship in South Africa. What's the situation today? Is the censorship being relaxed at all?

ANDRE BRINK

The amazing thing is that it may be temporary only but it does seem as if the writers in South Africa have scored some sort of a victory over censorship. Censorship still operates, it is still there, the law has not been changed but the machinations of the law have been relaxed, and significantly so, not only letting through works by Nadine Gordimer, by myself and by other white authors but also recently by letting through previously banned works by black authors in the country. Now, as I say, one never knows how long this is going to last, how far they are going to be prepared to go but writers, generally, are certainly aware of the fact that this slight increase in leeway exists and we are using it to the full. But the very fact that change, however slight and however meaningless in itself has been instituted means that an historical process has started and is gathering momentum and the government won't be able to stop it. It has to run its course.

DONALD FIELDS

Finally, among the awards you've received has been the Martin Luther King Memorial Prize. What was the significance of that as far as you're concerned?

ANDRE BRINK

Well to me personally this is one of the awards that I've been most grateful about because I have such a tremendous admiration for the late Martin Luther King and the ideals of peaceful change that he stood for and those are exactly the ideals that I would like to push as far as possible within South African society.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

South African novelist Andre Brink talking to Donald Fields in Finland. And now to news of a publication that we announced some weeks ago, the first major book of poetry in English published in Tanzania since Independence. Produced by the Tanzanian Publishing House in Dar-es-Salaam, the collection is entitled "Summons" and has been, as the book puts it, co-ordinated by Richard S. Mabala. The introduction to the book emphasises that it was a co-operative effort and it points out that although ki-Swahili is now the major language in Tanzania there is still a place for writing in English. Most of the poets in the collection are young people brought up under the country's policy of socialism and self reliance and as one might expect many of the poems have a deep political commitment.

there was no better way to present the book to you than let you have a taste of one of the works. "The Awful Dentist" by Jwani Mwaikusa.

POETRY EXTRACT - THE AWFUL DENTIST

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That was "The Awful Dentist" one of the poems in the collection of "Summons" which has just been published by the Tanzanian Publishing House, Dar-es-Salaam. And just to remind you of our own BBC Arts and Africa Poetry Award with prizes totalling £350. The closing date is October 31st and I am happy to say that we have already had a large response but of course we'd like an even bigger one. So if you produce poems in English and would like more details please write to BBC Arts and Africa Poetry Award, Bush House, London. And that's it for Arts and Africa this week and we leave you with a little more music from South Africa a methodist hymn sung in Seto. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

MUSIC EXTRACT - KEDUMETSE