

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello and welcome to Arts and Africa. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey - stay with me for the next quarter of an hour - we're going to talk about two people who take a special interest in other people's creative achievements. In the case of Jean Pruitt it's the appreciation of contemporary Tanzanian art which has been a driving force in her life. Ten years ago she established the House of Art, or Nyumba Ya Sanaa as it is in Swahili, with a group of Tanzanians in Dar-es-Salaam. Since then it has grown into a co-operative of 20 artists and craftspeople, working and exhibiting.

Mike Fuller knows Jean Pruitt, he's visited the House of Art, and he's with me now in the studio. Welcome to Arts and Africa, Mike. Can I ask you first who Jean Pruitt is?

MIKE FULLER

She is an American, she went to Africa about 13 years ago, she's the Mary Knowle order of Sisters in America. She has had some experience in art before, in fact she is a sculptor, I should say. She went to Tanzania and found that many of the younger people in Dar-es-Salaam in particular were unemployed. Many of them who were interested in art had no outlet for their works and so she decided to start this co-operative at about this time with a small group of Tanzanians. It started off in a very small way. She managed to find a building in the back streets of Dar-es-Salaam, a rather run-down premises. She began to make candles I think was the first thing. She then brought in a number of Makonde artists. Now the Makonde tribe in Southern Tanzania, they live on the border of Tanzania and Mozambique. The Makondes are probably the finest carvers in the East African area. Jean encouraged them to carve a number of different types of pieces and she tried to arrange marketing for those pieces. She then gradually expanded the operation to include people who were interested in many different types of art, things that had not been tried by Tanzanians before. For example etching, wood cuts, carvings of calabash for example, and the standard of the artistic material that is coming out is very, very fine indeed. There is

MIKE FULLER

some excellent works coming up to the extent that they have held exhibitions in both the United States and in Europe and they have been very well received indeed.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

It's a house, a focal centre for Tanzanian culture would you say or is it just one of many other places of interest?

MIKE FULLER

Before the establishment of Nyumba Ya Sanaa there was nothing in the way of a focus for Tanzanian art at all.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now when is this House going to be opened formally?

MIKE FULLER

Well as I mentioned earlier the organisation has been going for ten years. It has existed in the back streets of Dar-es-Salaam and as it has grown it has become increasingly unwieldy but now the new building which is due to open on 17th October, the whole organisation will be under the one roof, it will be opened by President Nyerere and I think that we should see the whole organisation begin to take off from there.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Thank you Mike Fuller. Jean Pruitt's House of Art is concerned with contemporary artistic achievement - Peter Atanga's hobby is the past.

Imagine a dark, long room with small windows, crammed with glass display cases, there are store rooms leading off to the side piled high with allsorts of bric-a-brac from paperbacks to platform shoes, there's an old gramophone, carvings, money in its earliest form - cowrie shells, and the money of the independence and stamps. That's what Florence Akst found when she visited Peter Atanga's museum in Bamenda, Cameroon. A self-taught collector and historian, Peter Atanga explained to Florence that his own daughter's curiosity provided the impetus for the establishment of his museum.

PETER ATANGA

It happened that in 1974 my daughter, she asked me before the razor blade, what did our parents use in shaving? So I made a sketch on a piece of paper, sent it to a blacksmith who produced one.

FLORENCE AKST

And this was a traditional razor?

PETER ATANGA

A traditional razor of which I can show you one.

FLORENCE AKST

Yes.

PETER ATANGA

This is what has brought about the museum.

FLORENCE AKST

I see. Oh just those two little bits of metal and that's shaped almost like a triangle and the bottom part, I think, is very sharp.

PETER ATANGA

This side you use for removing jiggers and this side for shaving.

FLORENCE AKST

Oh I see so the pointed end is for getting out the jiggers, so it's dual purpose.

PETER ATANGA

Yes. My parents used this in shaving me. And now to sharpen it, they use the palm.

FLORENCE AKST

Up and down on the flat of the hand?

PETER ATANGA

Yes. Or on their lap. You know after some centuries you tell a child that this is how our parents lived and they won't accept it because of the changes. And after a century you tell a child this is how our parents looked, they will laugh.

FLORENCE AKST

. So what is the earliest thing here?

PETER ATANGA

The earliest thing here is the cowries.

FLORENCE AKST

And that goes back to long before colonialisation?

PETER ATANGA

Before the Germans came to the Cameroon.

FLORENCE AKST

And the German money is the first paper money in Cameroon?

PETER ATANGA

The first kind of paper money in Cameroon.

FLORENCE AKST

And what's after that?

PETER ATANGA

You've got the French money paper and coins. Then the English. After the English you get the Nigerian coins and paper money. When Nigeria achieved independence, then we were part of Nigeria. Those plates are tax tickets from 1921.

FLORENCE AKST

So it was a sort of receipt you got when you had paid your tax?

PETER ATANGA

Yes, people used to wear them round their neck or round their waist to prove they have paid their taxes.

FLORENCE AKST

So you really have a history of modern Cameroon because you start with the cowrie shells and you end with the money of independence.

PETER ATANGA

Yes. When we achieved our independence we started using this. We started using coins. You get 50 franc, you get 100 franc which you can see here. This is the first money.

FLORENCE AKST

Now we're looking into a very big glass case standing way, way above our heads and there are a lot of figures in it. Some of them are about 3 foot 6 inches and some are just a couple of feet. Please tell me about the most important ones.

PETER ATANGA

You know in those days when a prominent Fon died, he was not buried alone. He was buried with two slaves alive. So it happened that a Fon died, as you see him sitting there. What they did was to select healthy slaves and allow them to wrestle.

FLORENCE AKST

Oh I see those two men are wrestling.

PETER ATANGA

Yes, they're wrestling. From there they will know that they will select the healthiest ones who will be buried with the Fon alive.

FLORENCE AKST

Well if I was a slave I don't think I'd wrestle very hard.

PETER ATANGA

Well the condition will force you to do it.

FLORENCE AKST

And so these would become his helpers in the afterlife, is that the idea?

PETER ATANGA

Yes, but they believed that the Fon doesn't die, but that he just disappears.

FLORENCE AKST

And in those days, where did they keep these statues?

PETER ATANGA

The statues, well in those days nobody could see them.

FLORENCE AKST

Ah so they were hidden in a sanctuary?

PETER ATANGA

Hidden, nobody could see except members of that society.

FLORENCE AKST

But the fact they were carved, showed that the rites had been performed?

PETER ATANGA

Yes.

FLORENCE AKST

But the ones on the next shelf are much, much bigger.

PETER ATANGA

Yes.

FLORENCE AKST

And they're a bit eaten away.

PETER ATANGA

This indicated a Fon and his wife who were so wicked.

FLORENCE AKST

How did you know they were wicked?

PETER ATANGA

After their death this symbolised the Fon and his wife. So that indicates that they were wicked, you see how it has decayed.

FLORENCE AKST

Is that termites that's eaten it?

PETER ATANGA

No it's not termites. It's proving that because of their wickedness, you find them decayed. And you can see the son standing beside them.

FLORENCE AKST

Oh the smaller figure, that's the son?

PETER ATANGA

Yes. He's so proud with the cup, standing proudly.

FLORENCE AKST

So you can measure after people have died, whether they were good or bad by how their replica in a statue, survives.

PETER ATANGA

Yes, according to people in those days they make these to represent somebody who has been alive. So this man was a wicked ruler together with the wife. It happened that they started to decay proving that they were wicked.

FLORENCE AKST

But I think the wife was worse than her husband here. I mean she looks more eaten away.

PETER ATANGA

You know in some families women do control their husbands. Even today and they tell the husband to do something which is not nice.

FLORENCE AKST

And that's what her role was because there's not much of her left (Laughs). And what about these two people with the chains.

PETER ATANGA

Well it's a weddinglock. That's the man and this is the wife.

FLORENCE AKST

Yes and when is that carved? At the time of the wedding?

PETER ATANGA

It's about four years old now.

FLORENCE AKST

And was it carved for a particular wedding?

PETER ATANGA

Well it's a creative art.

FLORENCE AKST

So it represents the idea of wedding.

PETER ATANGA

Yes the idea of wedding.

FLORENCE AKST

But it shows two people shackled together. Is that the local idea of what marriage is about, being a prisoner?

PETER ATANGA

No. The thing is that according to appearance you see that this is a man with a bare chest and this is a woman with breasts.

FLORENCE AKST

Yes.

PETER ATANGA

To me it's a creative art, it's not natural.

FLORENCE AKST

And so you collect a lot of things that are history, most of your things are history, but not only history, you also collect the fine work that's being done locally? This is very much a local collection, it's not for the whole of Cameroon?

PETER ATANGA

It's a world collection because you can find imported objects and local objects in here. For instance in the other room you find a torchlight, you find a printing machine.

FLORENCE AKST

Is that an old printing machine?

PETER ATANGA

Yes, it was made in 1905. The first printing machine in the Cameroon.

FLORENCE AKST

Really!

PETER ATANGA

It's in the other room.

FLORENCE AKST

And how did you manage to get that for your museum?

PETER ATANGA

It was presented to me, although I wanted to buy it.

FLORENCE AKST

So that was a compliment in recognition of what you'd done?

PETER ATANGA

, Yes. .

FLORENCE AKST

And you also have, I saw some records. Are these also quite old?

PETER ATANGA

I can play it for you.

FLORENCE AKST

Oh yes please.

PETER ATANGA

I'm going to play you the music on the gramophone which is now considered as antique.

FLORENCE ASKT

Well it is quite an old one.

PETER ATANGA

The musician was killed by his colleagues in Nigeria around 1947.

FLORENCE AKST

Was killed by whom?

PETER ATANGA

By his colleagues in Nigeria.

FLORENCE AKST

Really!

PETER ATANGA

Because he was a very good musician and they killed him so to cut his tongue out in the hope that they were going to transmit his tongue to their own tongue.

FLORENCE AKST

They were envious?

PETER ATANGA

They were envious and so killed him. Let me play the record. The name of the musician is Nzamanze.

FLORENE AKST

And he came from here originally? Or was he Nigerian?

PETER ATANGA

He was Nigerian.

FLORENCE AKST

Yes please play it.

TAPE

MUSIC - Nzamanze.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

The sound of Peter Atanga's old gramophone, part of a world preserved for future generations.

And we end today's programme with a blend of old and new. Mbango Muam, the latest album of Cameroonian composer, Ben Decca takes traditional themes and melodies and gives them a thoroughly modern feel. With it I leave you for now. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

GRAMS

"Mbango Muam" - Ben Decca.