

Jean M. Borgatti

Why Global? Why Now? African art at the Fitchburg Art Museum

Why Global? Why Now? looks at the application and implications of globalism and exhibition practice through the twin lenses of Africa and a community museum. The museum is located in a 19th century New England manufacturing town. Its mission is serving a community with a shifting population base. Once home to European immigrants who came to work in the factories, it now houses Asian, African, and Latino immigrants employed largely in the service industries. How can the museum serve, that is, become relevant to, a community that is diverse ethnically as well as economically, and whose population has neither experience with museums, nor the time and money to spend on museum visits? One approach to serving our community better is to tell our stories in ways that are multi-cultural (celebrating distinctiveness), cross cultural (reaching across boundaries), and intercultural (stressing mutuality, reciprocity, and equality).

Historical accident has provided the museum with a strong foundation in African canonical art. Acquisitions of work by contemporary artists have developed the collection to tell a story about Global Africa, about the movement of people from the African continent to Europe and the Americas, and their changing fates and perspectives. Global Africa is defined as those parts of the world with significant populations of African descent: the continent of Africa, areas in the Western Hemisphere where enslaved peoples were settled, and those European countries that maintained colonies over a long period of time, thus establishing a migration path.

The story emerges through juxtaposing particular art works, exploring their cultural backgrounds along with the intentions of their respective artists, as well as assessing those artists' relationship to, and perspective on, Africa. The artists range from those unidentified creators of canonical works from West and Central Africa to known artists, "traditional" and university or art school trained, local and trans-national, from different parts of Global Africa today—Nigeria, Ghana, Cuba, England, Scotland, and the United States. The relationships between artists and cultures is further complicated by the addition of several Latino artists of African heritage represented in a concurrent exhibition featuring Latino artists from southern New England. The thematic organization of the African galleries will be discussed, and examples drawn the exhibition such as the pairing of Cuban artist Nelson Montenegro's Abakua masquerade costume with its historic antecedent, an Ekpe Society masquerade from Calabar in Nigeria commissioned from Chief Ekpenyong Bassey Nsa in 2013; the contextualizing of American artist Willy Cole's *Work Animal--a bicycle chi wara*, with a selection of carved wooden chi wara headcrests; or surrounding American artist Ifé Franklin's Indigo Project – based on a slave cabin – with African-made indigo dyed cloth and a range of objects in metal and wood that suggest the diverse cultures of the many Africans transported

to the Americas during the era of the slave trade.

**Jean M. Borgatti**, PhD, is Professor at the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Benin Nigeria, and Consulting Curator - African and Oceanic Art, Fitchburg Art Museum. Recently she is a Research Fellow at the Boston University and Clark University.

Jean Borgatti has been carrying out research among the communities north of Benin City in southern Nigeria since 1971 – reconstructing the history of masquerade festivals, doing survey research on aesthetic preference, and currently, assessing change.

She received her B.A. in Art History (Modern Art) from Wellesley College in 1966 and her M.A. and PhD in Art History (Non-Western Art) from UCLA in 1971 and 1976 respectively. She taught at Clark University from 1984-2004, and retains faculty status there. She served as a Fulbright Scholar in Nigeria from 2002-2004, and was awarded a second Fulbright to return to Nigeria in 2014-15.

She has taught extensively, published widely, and curated a number of exhibitions, the most recent being *GLOBAL AFRICA: Creativity, Continuity in African Art* at the Fitchburg Art Museum where she is Consulting Curator of African and Oceanic Art. She is the e-review editor for H-AfrArts, a listserv focused on African Expressive Culture, and a past President of the Arts Council of the African Studies Association (ACASA). Current writing projects include two book length manuscripts and two books for which she is an editor.