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AFRICAN AFFAIR

New Gifts to be Unveiled at the North Dakota Museum of Art

February 15, 2015, the North Dakota Museum of Art will unveil the exhibition "African Affair", a splendid gift of over 150 works of African art of cultural significance have been given to the people of North Dakota through NDMOA, the official State Art Museum.

December 2012, thirty earthenware pots and a few clay and wood sculptures arrived at the Museum, a gift from Thomas McNemar who spent twenty years in West Africa amassing an extensive collection of African art. He became a dealer whose clients ranged from major European and Stateside museums to private collectors across two continents. He returned to America and opened a gallery in New York, followed by a stint in San Francisco before settling in Lexington, Virginia, where he grew up.

Tom McNemar discovered African art while working on his PhD at the British Museum. He was writing about Sir James Barrie, Scottish novelist, playwright, and creator of children's stories such as Peter Pan and Wendy. "However it was in the Reading Room of the British Museum where I was researching Barrie that I met the man who would change my life, William Fagg." Earlier, guards had reported to the administration that a young man was haunting the African section." Fagg was in charge of the ethnic arts and upon meeting me he greatly encouraged my nascent interest. That led to an open invitation into their collection storage and an official letter of introduction to see other European museums, especially their Africana collections."

In 1966 McNemar decided to go to Africa to see the art in situ for himself, ultimately settling in the Ivory Coast in a modest house built by a Frenchman. By the time he left, he had added a railroad wing with five bedrooms, a 45 x 45 foot living room that evolved into a packing room, and a porch that wrapped around the entire house.

Tom took hundreds of books to Africa and only brought the art history books back—“How could I take them away from this country without books?” He loved it when the Peace Corp workers came with their trunks of books. Tom would read his way through them. “Boy you have a lot of reading time on your hands in Africa”, he commented.

He packed Sunset books on gardening and packets of seeds. “The Ivory Coast has a twelve month rainy seasons—every day—so my basil grew 10-feet tall. The leaves of the marigolds were magnificent, the plants spread like crazy.” All types of annual seeds flourished wildly all over the place,” mused this life-long gardener.

He continued, “I’ve always been a great walker. And if you are white in Africa you aren’t suppose to do anything. I did what I pleased and walked everywhere.”

A cook, McNemar observed that “women create their own hot spices. Stick the hot peppers in an earthenware pot with some water and just let the sauce age. Dipper goes in and hot spice lands in the food. All the cultures use lots of hot peppers.”

“Initially my reason to go to Africa was to see how much effect Christianity, as opposed to Islam, had had on the people. I quickly realized that everyone was lying to everyone about their real beliefs and rituals which were still tied up in Paganisms so I shifted my attention to the art from the Pagan point of view.”

The late Barton Benes introduced Mr. McNemar to the North Dakota Museum of Art. Barton’s own collections, including over fifty African masks plus significant sculptures, now reside on the top floor of the Museum in *Barton’s Place*, a recreation of his art-filled New York apartment. Over the years Benes, McNemar, and Museum Director Laurel Reuter became friends. Benes had swapped his own art for McNemar’s “African stuff” so it seemed fitting that it all comes back together in North Dakota. McNemar explained, “If I give my collection to the Smithsonian Museum it will go forever into storage. If I give it to the North Dakota Museum of Art people will see it.”

When Founding NDMOA Trustee Sanny Ryan died, the Museum decided to acquire two or three African pots in her memory, “something she could understand” without having to know about African Art—a request she made twenty years before when she purchased an Allan Houser sculpture for the Museum garden. The three earthenware vessels bloomed into thirty, purchased with \$10,000 in memorial funds and \$90,000 in gifts from Mr. McNemar.

Historically African women had for centuries made earthenware pots from local clay for ordinary purposes such as storage pots for grain, water and beer, or for cooking. Lidded and elaborately decorated, they might be reliquaries for sacred or precious objects. Created for the altar, they were charged with easing the relationship between the mortal

world and immortal world. If a Dakakari (Nigeria) woman's husband made an important kill of an elephant, she would make a spectacular ceremonial pot to accompany a whole village feast to celebrate him.

Collectors paid little attention to African earthenware pots before the early 1990s when Douglas Dawson introduced them through his Chicago gallery as coveted works of art by anonymous women. McNemar speculates that within a few generations utilitarian pots won't be made at all, having been replaced by cheap made-in-China plastic and enamel containers of all types. As cultures shed their historic belief systems, art is stripped of all social information. NDMOA's small collection is among the best, according to Director Laure Reuter who has seen a lot of African pots.

December 2013, another gift turned up, again from Mr. McNemar. Over 120 sculptures include carved storage boxes, chief's chairs, lidded wooden bowls, fertility objects, an oversized, society house heddle pulley, fetishes, shrine figures from a house of the ancestors, and masks and more masks. A Kwele (Gabon) hanged man figure used to remind a culture not to commit adultery and an emaciated figure to ward off AIDS join society house statues, reliquary objects, and textiles. The cultural and geographic roots are as varied as the objects themselves. The Museum's collection comes from fifty cultures found in seventeen West and Central African countries.

The public is welcome to view this treasure trove at the NDMOA opening on Sunday, February 15, 2015 at 2 pm. The Museum, located on the UND campus, is open from 9 – 5 weekdays and 1 – 5 on Saturday and Sunday. No admission charge. Call 701 777-4195 or www.ndmao.com for more information.