



**6** El Anatsui  
*Uwa* (2012)  
 bottle tops and copper wire; 436.9 cm x 195.6  
 cm, diameter of sphere 76.2 cm.  
 PHOTO: SUSAN M. VOGEL

and Arabian tents as objects and architecture. It will be designed by Zaha Hadid and open at the Museum of Islamic Art, Doha in 2014 and at the Brooklyn Museum in early 2015.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Anatsui's raw materials have remained exactly the same since 2007. Starting with just screw tops from liquor bottles linked together with copper wire, Anatsui added two other materials that year. For details and illustrations see Susan Vogel, *El Anatsui: Art and Life*, (Prestel, 2012), pp. 74–75.

<sup>2</sup> "A Fateful Journey: Africa in the Works of El Anatsui," whose lead curator was Yukiya Kawaguchi, opened in Osaka in September 2010, organized by the National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka; The Museum of Modern Art, Kamakura and Hayama; The Museum of Modern Art, Saitama; The Yomiuri Shimbun; and The Japan Association of Art Museums. Since June 2012, it has been touring the US as "Gravity and Grace: Monumental Works by El Anatsui," organized by the Akron Art Museum. "El Anatsui: When I Last Wrote to You about Africa," opened in Toronto in October 2010, organized by the Museum for African Art, New York.

<sup>3</sup> The checklist includes eleven objects and the gallery has two unexhibited ones. Three pieces were probably begun earlier: *Ink Stain* relates to the Takari series from 2007; *Bukpa Layout* to work from 2010; and *They Finally Broke the Pot of Wisdom*, dated 2011, is linked to a series from 2010. The author is writing an article tracing more than a decade of development of Anatsui's bottle top works with the title "Anatsui's Restless Imagination and the Evolution of his Metal Hangings."

<sup>4</sup> The few early exceptions acquire new interest— notably *Seepage* (2006), and the *Takari* series (mainly 2007) in which I would place this exhibition's *Ink Stain* (dated 2012).

<sup>5</sup> *El Anatsui: Art and Life*, p. 122.

## exhibition review

### Grayson Perry: The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsmen British Museum, London October 6, 2011–February 19, 2012

reviewed by Charles Gore

"The Unknown Craftsman" was curated by the celebrated British artist Grayson Perry at the British Museum. While it included a wide spectrum of works from various places and time periods, there were many examples of African art. All of these were selected from the BM's entire collection by Perry and featured in the exhibition in dialogue with his own art works, most of which were specifically made for this exhibition. In this exciting collaboration, the museum artifacts were reconceptualized such that they challenged the disciplinary boundaries of African and other art historical fields in novel and intriguing ways. The exhibition "opened up," as it were, regional, temporal, and artistic connections to objects within and outside of Africa, for example, making this an important contribution to debates on how to intellectually and visually frame, exhibit, and contextualize African art within public spaces. This was achieved by a constant play of juxtaposition between Perry's work and the artworks from the British Museum, sometimes within the same space and at other times in separate but facing and inter-linked spaces. In many ways this exhibition addressed directly Susan Sontag's critique in her seminal essay "Against Interpretation" of the over-determined reading of artworks that diverts from or elides the sensuous engagement with surface in whichever medium including the digital (1964:3–14). This engaged approach with objects (and between objects) was radically realized by the artistic creativity and art-making of the curator-cum-artist.

Grayson Perry is a Turner Prize winner (2003) and has been a thoughtful commentator on the British and international contemporary art scene for the *Times* newspaper and elsewhere, including television. Perry's art, principally in the medium of ceramics, has been highly innovative, and often intriguingly controversial. His use of ceramic forms and surfaces for collaged image making has opened up

innovative thematic and technical possibilities. His work often exploits the tension between the ceramic surface and an inquiring imagery that is often deceptively subversive, even transgressive, in playing with visual expectations, and it is this perceptive acuity that in many ways informed and extended the scope of the exhibition which he conceptualized as "an artwork in itself" (Perry 2011:11).<sup>1</sup>

The key theme of the exhibition, as its title pithily suggested, is that the actual makers of many of these objects are unknown due to European hierarchies of art versus craft whereby the identities of artists in particular media, such as ceramics or textiles, were often unrecorded as if unworthy of attention. These hierarchies and absences were applied to other regions of the world but are especially noteworthy in the history of connoisseurship of African art. In the challenge of organizing this exhibition, Perry was careful not to claim some disciplinary authority over these objects but rather to emphasize the connections and pleasure of engaging with all of these artefacts. As Perry puts it: "Makers of artefacts have been 'responding' to objects made by earlier generations since the beginning of craft ... [hence] images and ideas are changed by passing through the hands of various craftsmen. Filtering them through a series of personal experiences, each idea becomes something new ..." (Perry 2011:11). Thus the artworks produced by Perry and the exhibition itself become a complex meditation on the creative process and the interrelationships between many different traditions of artmaking.

The encounter with artifacts from the British Museum was conceptualized in terms of a pilgrimage ("To the Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman," the title of the exhibition) which offered an overarching metaphor of visiting the past for present day renewal. This heuristic device provided multiple ways to respond to the British Museum as a sacred site, to Perry's own work and creativity, as well as to the processes by which viewers responded to the works (most obviously in being placed in the position of "pilgrims"). Indeed the first artwork encountered by the visitor entering the exhibition was a glazed ceramic by Perry that offered a witty image inscribed on its surface of visitors giving a multiplicity of reasons in speech bubbles, both trivial and more pro-



Grayson Perry  
*The Rosetta Vase* (2011)  
 Glazed ceramic; H: 78.5 cm, D: 40.7 cm  
 Courtesy the Artist and Victoria Miro, London

ALL PHOTOS: © GRAYSON PERRY. PHOTOGRAPHY © STEPHEN WHITE



Grayson Perry  
*I Have Never Been to Africa* (2011)  
 Glazed ceramic; H: 81 cm, D: 45 cm  
 Courtesy the Artist and Victoria Miro, London

and individual experience that inspired some of his artworks in the exhibition was played off against a number of artifacts from differing religious traditions, regions, and cultures. The wealth from these varied cultural sources “borrow and adapt” from each other, thereby making transcultural conversations. Among the African exhibits in this section entitled “Cultural Conversations” is the figure of a leaded brass Portuguese musket man from Benin City (Nigeria) counterpointed by a glazed ceramic by Perry entitled “I Have Never Been to Africa” that reflects on representations of Africa through a dense collage of overlapping imagery, that “quotes” from a plethora of African art styles. Also found in this section was a silk and appliqué Asafo flag from the Fante in Ghana which inspired a computerized embroidery artwork by Grayson Perry entitled “Hold Your Beliefs Lightly” (perhaps a comment on the contemporary upsurge in fundamentalism of whichever religious denomination). On Perry’s flag there is a grand depiction of Alan Measles as the guru of doubt giving advice to adepts of other religions.

The themes of Shrines, Magick, Maps, Sexuality and Gender, Scary Figures, Craftsmanship, Patina, and Texture make up the other sections of the exhibition. Among them feature African artworks such as a magnificent painted Hausa tunic from northern Nigeria as well as a power figures from the Kongo (DRC) and a Bamana *boli* figure (Mali) that for Perry invoke the “shamanistic” powers of the artist to transmute materials into something far more potent and meaningful.<sup>2</sup> However, the key to the exhibition is the last room that presents the final theme, “The Tomb to the

found (and yet all equally important), as to why they are visiting the exhibition. These range from “I had a free ticket” to “I need to have my prejudices confirmed” to “I like to keep up with what’s going on in the arts” and so on. Yet the multiple responses embedded in the artwork immediately flag up questions about the role of art and how to understand it as well as about the visual intentions of the artists as the makers of these things.

Pilgrimage is, of course, a religious journey and Grayson Perry uses this as a space for discussing the wellsprings of his own creativity, which he attributes to Alan Measles, his life-long teddy bear who was an important figure in his childhood world and is still a significant creative muse (2012:31). This very personalized



Grayson Perry  
 Prototype for *Hold Your Beliefs Lightly*  
 Embroidery; framed 40.5 cm x 52.5 cm  
 Courtesy the Artist and Victoria Miro, London



(opposite)  
 Grayson Perry  
*The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman*  
 (2011) and details  
 Cast iron, oil paint, glass, rope, wood flint  
 hand axe; 305 cm x 204 cm x 79 cm  
 Edition of 3 plus 1 AP  
 Courtesy the Artist and Victoria Miro,  
 London

Unknown Craftsmen,” which is the conceptual heart of this art pilgrimage. It is a magnificent sculpture by Perry fusing his own and a range of works from the museum contained within a ship (itself a pun as the craft to carry the unknown craftsman, or rather his or her works, into the afterlife). Its core relic is an African flint axe, and in the catalogue Perry states, “In the central reliquary is an example of the original tool which begat all tools, a flint axe 250,000 years old. A flint axe is not a masterpiece made for some king but a common tool that was used over most of the human world for most of mankind’s history. Holding such a tool in my hand and feeling its fit was my most moving memory of my pilgrimage through the stores of this great institution” (Perry 2012:25).

The British Museum is to be congratulated for such an ambitious, engaged, and entertaining collaboration that highlighted the creativity of artmaking both present and past. In giving Grayson Perry a free rein to use the space and collections to creatively realize his artistic vision, the British Museum has provided one of the most original and compelling exhibitions of the past few years. The only minor quibble to raise is that none of the images of the catalogue show or even suggest the interrelationships between objects that were so central to the exhibition. But this is more than compensated by the profound but playful reflections on the processes of artmaking offered by Grayson Perry.

The catalogue, *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* by Grayson Parry (London: The British Museum Press, 2012; 204 pages, 200 color illustrations) is available for £25 (hardcover).

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#### Notes

1 Perry’s (2011, 11) curation also draws on the pioneering British Museum exhibition of Eduardo Paolozzi “Lost Magic Kingdoms and Six Paper Moons from Nahuatl” which he visited in 1985.

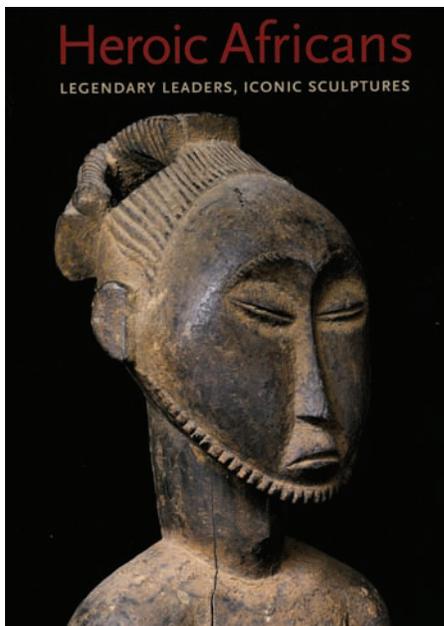
2 “Shamanistic” is used by Perry in the Western modernist avant garde sense by drawing on the practice of Joseph Beuys and other contemporary artists.

#### References cited

Grayson Perry. 2011. *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman*. London: The British Museum Press.

Susan Sontag. 1964. *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, 2nd Printing. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux.

## book review



### Heroic Africans: Legendary Leaders, Iconic Sculptures

by Alisa LaGamma  
New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011. 312 pp., 232 color, 70 b/w illustrations, 6 maps, selected bibliography, index. \$60 cloth

reviewed by Monica Blackmun Visonà

Only a handful of the world’s grand, “universal” art museums give African art objects the same scholarly attention they extend to the art of other continents. The ambitious exhibitions of African art produced by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York thus have a global impact; they are in many ways the public face of Africanist art history. Catalogues of its exhibitions, distributed by Yale University Press, have an enviable entrée into both academia and the literary world. *Heroic Africans: Legendary Leaders, Iconic Sculptures* builds upon the traditions established by several generations of scholars at the Museum. At the same time, it contributes to an ongoing conversation, launched by curator Alisa LaGamma, about the place of Africanist research within the discipline of art history. The catalogue is the latest in a series she has written or edited, beginning in 1998 with *Masterhand: Individuality and Creativity Among Yoruba Sculptors*. That project examined the identity of the artist. Here, LaGamma turns her enquiries to the

patron, investigating the ways African artists have represented leaders of great renown.

As in her 2007 exhibition catalogue *Eternal Ancestors: The Art of the Central African Reliquary*, LaGamma fosters dialogues with other art historians by juxtaposing African artworks with artifacts from other continents; in this case, the comparative examples are drawn from ancient Rome and the Renaissance. Such discussions, including the brief overview of the Greek origin of the words and ideas linked to the concept of “heroism” provide points of reference for readers familiar with European art (p. 7). By emphasizing such similarities, the catalogue boldly addresses lingering prejudices that see African art objects as fundamentally exotic—and thus excluded from art historical discourse. Of particular interest is LaGamma’s discussion of the Paragone (p. 6), the debate contrasting painting and sculpture.

The heroic Africans chosen by LaGamma and her team were assembled from an impressive number of public and private collections. Each of the eight groups of sculpted images forms either a definitive corpus, or a clearly demarcated sample, of a specific genre of portraiture from a single culture. The historical depth of royal images from the kingdom of Benin is emphasized in the introduction (pp. 18–35), and the first chapter features the famous portraits of Ife. Memorial terracottas from several centralized Akan states in Ghana and Côte d’Ivoire are the subject of the next chapter, while the Bangwa *lefem* and figures from the kingdom of Kom are discussed in Chapter 3. The *ndop* of the Bushoong kings of the Kuba are the subject of the next chapter, and Chapter 5 inserts a short segment on Luluwa figures into an exposition of Chokwe male and female archetypes. The concluding chapter presents the effigies of Hembra ancestors. As we might expect, special attention is given to works attributed to artists whose names or pseudonyms are known to us. Although the introduction notes that photography has supplanted wooden sculpture, it offers only the most cursory reference to cement sculpture (p. 117), and makes no mention of the urban monuments erected for twentieth century political leaders; the text is clearly not intended to cover the postcolonial era.

Of concern in this selection of African art objects is the treatment of a single statue from Old Kingdom Egypt. Regardless of the harsh political battles and the dreary institutional realities that have divided scholars in the past, it is surely time to include Egypt in general discussions of art from Africa. In this catalogue, the Egyptian statue (Fig. 13) is placed with portraits from Greece and Italy, and the lack of any serious discussion of this sculpture has two unfortunate consequences. First, it allows the text to assign art from Western and central Africa to a fictitious “sub-Saharan