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ART REVIEW

Nigeria in the Middle of Newark

Some of Simon Ottenberg's Gifts in 'The Art of Translation'

Simon Ottenberg Collection, Newark Museum
Tayo Adenaike's "Alhaji Takes the Floor" (1980).

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NEWARK — I often encounter Manhattan art professionals who consider themselves savvy, seasoned internationalists but who have never been across the Hudson River to the Newark Museum. This is ridiculous.

The museum is an American classic, a turn-of-the-century encyclopedic institution with all the features of much larger counterparts, but with a collection of distinctive strengths. Its holdings in American modernism are very different from those at the Whitney or the Museum of Modern Art, with, among other things, a concentration of work by African-Americans.

Newark has one of the country's oldest collections of art from Africa. And it has the greatest collection of Tibetan art in the world, complete with an altar dedicated by the Dalai Lama.

Little wonder that when Simon Ottenberg, an emeritus professor of anthropology at the University of Washington in Seattle, was considering where to place his lifetime collection of 20th-century African work, Newark, so welcoming of the not-obvious, was his choice. Last year he donated 145 pieces, mostly works on paper. Two-dozen of these make up "The Art of Translation: The Simon Ottenberg Gift of Modern and Contemporary Nigerian Art," a show modest in size but heavy with history, a history that no New York museum tells.

It's a story about the development of one version of modern art in a single West African country, a process that had its own timetable, its own priorities and its own range of contributing influences, of which Western art was just one. In the show — organized by Perrin Lathrop, a curatorial associate at the museum — the story starts with a watercolor by the largely self-taught painter Akinola Lasekan (1916-1972). It dates from around 1944, when Nigeria was still a British

colony, and depicts, in a realist style, a famous Yoruba king, Ajaka of Owo, descending from heaven, just as the god Obatala did when he created the Yoruba people.

Along with being a painter, Lasekan was a political cartoonist for Nigerian newspapers. His anti-colonialist drawings were so cuttingly accurate that he was popularly known as "Lash." In the Newark painting he makes a critical point covertly, by using Western realism to depict an African ruler who had the powers of a god, and a world-conquering god at that.

With the coming of independence in 1960, new art flourished in different places in different but related ways. At Oshogbo, in southwestern Nigeria, three Europeans — Ulli Beier; his first wife, Susanne Wenger; and his second wife, Georgina Beier — opened experimental workshops for local artists, who were encouraged to take imagery from Yoruba myths and folk tales.

Two other artists in the Newark show, Jacob Afolabi andPrince Twins Seven-Seven, were in the first workshops in the early 1960s. The prints they produced, of half-human, half-animal figures, demonic and comical, exemplify the Oshogbo look: graphically sophisticated, but with a folkish veneer that spelled "African" to Western eyes.

Elsewhere, other kinds of art were under way. At the Nigerian College of Art, Science and Technology (nowAhmadu Bello University) in the northern city of Zaria, a group of students, led by Uche Okeke and Bruce Onobrakpeya, selectively rebelled against their British training. Calling themselves the Zaria Art Society, they rejected European-style naturalism and took indigenous forms as their subjects, but retained the use of Western media and techniques.

With the onset of the brutal Nigerian-Biafran civil war in 1967, members of the group moved on. Mr. Onobrakpeya, always independent, went his own way, creating, among many other things, a series of extraordinary high-relief etchings; they look as if made from liquid copper. There are two ravishing examples at Newark.

After a few years Mr. Okeke began teaching at the University of Nigeria, in Nsukka, in the southeast. He introduced the Zaria aesthetic there, but added something specific to it. He shaped his teaching, and his own art, around a local graphic tradition called uli, a type of sinuous, linear drawing found in bodypainting and wall painting by women.

A handful of Mr. Okeke's small, exuberant ink drawings in the show serve as a template for the style, elaborated on and personalized by artists who studied with him. In a 1980 watercolor Tayo Adenaike exploits the uli stress on dark and light contrast in an image of a white-robed figure defined by a few black lines. Obiora Udechukwu reverses the tonal equations in an etching of an all-black animal, a hybrid of chameleon and vulture with a constellation of stars in its belly.

As otherworldly as they look, both pieces are topically loaded. The white-robed figure represents an alhaji, slang for a corrupt Muslim businessman; the chameleon-vulture hybrid symbolizes a predatory soldier. Both artists were survivors of the civil war and witnesses to a country crushed and terrorized by a powerful elite. Other art is responding to this too. A 1990 watercolor by Olu Oguibe incorporates pictographic symbols of greed and repression. A 1982 print by E. Okechukwu Odita, a Zaria Art Society member, refers to the civil war, but with a note of hope. It shows two men from ethnic groups that were on opposite sides in the war, but with their figures overlapped and merged, made one.

Both Mr. Odita and Mr. Oguibe now live in the United States, where Mr. Oguibe has forged a multipronged career as an artist, teacher, curator and writer. He is one of the most astute and trenchant commentators on the status of new African art in an international context. He is also a poet, and not the only one here.

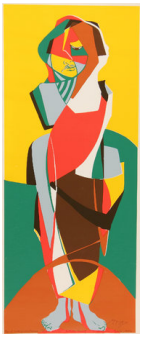
Ada Udechukwu initially explored uli style as a way to illustrate her poetry. The 1990 wash drawing "In the Temple of My Familiar" is both a tribute to the American writer Alice Walker and

a reminder that uli was, and is, a female tradition. The artist Chinwe Uwatse, born, like Ms. Udechukwu, in 1960, makes that claim outright in drawings that feel diaristic. Ms. Uwatse still lives in Nigeria. Most of the other artists of her generation in the exhibition do not. In 1996 Ms. Udechukwu and her husband, Obiora Udechukwu, were arrested in Nigeria during a protest against government interference in education. They subsequently left the country and moved to America, which is now home to two other, younger artists, Chika Okeke-Agulu and Marcia Kure, also husband and wife.

Through them, the Nsukka spirit, or manner, or whatever, has been transplanted. It was evident, retooled and updated in Ms. Kure's excellent solo show in Chelsea this season. And it's there in a Newark painting by Mr. Okeke-Agulu, who, in the multitasking mode of so many of his compatriots, is both a superb artist and a leading historian — he teaches at Princeton — of modern and contemporary African art. In that history he has great subject: deep, vivacious, volatile and happening, here and in Africa, and around the world, right now.

You would barely get a hint of that from our big New York museums. So it comes down to this: to see the world, really see it, you have to travel. The Newark Museum is about a half-hour from Midtown by the PATH train, then a short cab ride or walk. Just go.

"The Art of Translation: The Simon Ottenberg Gift of Modern and Contemporary Nigerian Art" runs through Nov. 3 at the Newark Museum, 49 Washington Street; (973) 596-6550, newarkmuseum.org.



Simon Ottenberg Collection, Newark Museum

E. Okechukwu Odita's "Panel 4 Njikoka Series" (1982).

Simon Ottenberg Collection, Newark Museum

Akinola Lasekan's "Ajaka of Owo or Ajaka Owa" (1944).

Simon Ottenberg Collection, Newark Museum

Bruce Onobrakpeya's "Íle lefe (Ant Hill)" (1965).