



NEW AFRICAN MASQUERADES

Artistic Innovations and Collaborations

Jordan A. Fenton, Lisa Homann, Amanda M. Maples, and Hervé Youmbi

Edited by Amanda M. Maples, with Jordan A. Fenton and Lisa Homann

With contributions by Kevin D. Dumouchelle, Ndubuisi C. Ezeluomba, Ishmeal A. Kamara, and Aimé Kantoussan

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INTRODUCTION

Jordan A. Fenton, Lisa Homann, and Amanda M. Maples

Masquerade is among the most vibrant, dynamic, and long-standing art forms today, not only in Africa, but also in its many diasporas. However, despite the persistence and vitality of this iconic expressive genre, masquerade artists are excluded from the African and broader art historical “canons.” Nor are these artists understood or positioned as contemporary artists. Even further, masquerade artists often have not had agency over their own work when displayed in institutional settings. From the many years of our collaboration with such artists, we saw a need and a desire from them to have their work shown in their own way and as contemporary. While they understand its value in local contexts, they also recognize the importance of global museum contexts and consider sharing their point of view as a culturally and artistically valuable and potentially lucrative tool for their practice.

In response, *New African Masquerades: Artistic Innovations and Collaborations* showcases such artworks and prioritizes the voices of their creators to offer a fresh take on masquerade arts, making clear that creativity in African masquerade is fundamentally contemporary, highly collaborative and innovative in nature, and innately connected to global markets. In critically examining the processes and implications of researching, commissioning works from, and representing living artists, the project seeks to be transparent, offering more ethical ways to work with, pay, and express artist voices for audiences to fully comprehend their agency as creative individuals active in the global market, while still honoring African interpretations and reception of masquerade. An overarching goal was thus to cultivate more ethical methodologies for humanities scholars working with underrepresented groups, foregrounding issues relating to collecting and ownership, as well as fostering transparency in curatorial practice.

This publication is a companion to a traveling exhibition that is part of a much broader project that includes digital and immersive content, educational tools, programming, and a website to maximize its global accessibility (particularly on mobile devices and in multiple languages). While we may mention the physical exhibition at times, the broader project, its relationships, and the greater

methodologies we propose are intended to live beyond the exhibition itself. Further, while the title indicates the contemporaneity of the masquerades, the “new” betrays far more than the newness of the masquerade ensembles. As we argue, it suggests new museologies, considerations of African creativity, and ways of imagining, displaying, understanding, and researching masquerades and the underrepresented artists and communities that create them.

FRAMING NEW AFRICAN MASQUERADES

New African Masquerades challenges the widely held assumptions of the “anonymous African artist” and the flawed notion that masquerade is a static art form solely rooted in the distant past or merely connected to “tradition,” “myth,” or “ritual.” As a corrective, *New African Masquerades* shares the stories of four living contemporary masquerade artists: Hervé Youmbi (Cameroon), Chief Ekpenyong Bassey Nsa (Nigeria), David Sanou (Burkina Faso), and Sheku “Goldenfinger” Fofanah (Sierra Leone). Though the overall project is organized by each artist through their creations and voices (see Figs. 1–4), each sets the stage to address a number of themes that overlap and intersect. These include:

1. Masquerade artists collaborate with others—to create, perform, and circulate their works (Hervé Youmbi)
2. Masquerade is a business for professional, full-time artists, who must respond to shifting markets to create innovations for profit and sustainability (Chief Ekpenyong Bassey Nsa)
3. Masquerade artists adapt and innovate to show audiences something they have never seen before—sometimes to the point of creating entirely new genres (David Sanou)
4. Masquerade is mobile: artists use social media and other means to circulate their creations locally and globally (Sheku Fofanah)

Fig. 1
Portrait of Hervé Youmbi with his installation
Celestial Thrones at the Menil Collection, 2023.
Photo: Sarah Hobson.



Grounded in these ideas that thread throughout the project, an overarching theme emerges: working with living masquerade artists, particularly those previously marginalized from art history, requires ethical methodologies and thus offers new precedents for museum and scholarly praxis.

In advocating for an ethical and collaborative methodology to work with living artists, a “core team” of researchers, curators/museum practitioners, and an artist was assembled, which when fully constituted included Amanda M. Maples, Jordan A. Fenton, Lisa Homann, Hervé Youmbi, and Aimé Kantoussan. Given their established relationships with the featured artists, Maples, Fenton, and Homann initially conceived of *New African Masquerades* as a collaboration with them. The artists’ involvement in the curatorial and publication processes was dictated primarily by their interest, willingness, and comfort levels. Due

to the nature of his artistic practice, Youmbi was already intimately familiar with North American and Western European modes of curation, and quickly agreed to join the team. He offered insightful opinions as the group developed the initial underpinnings of the exhibition and continued as a core team member throughout the organization of the exhibition and publication. In contrast, when asked if they wanted to participate in the exhibition’s development, Chief Bassey Nsa, Sanou, and Fofanah declined to join as full members of the core team—electing to engage with curators and research collaborators rather than themselves taking on a curatorial role. Finally, once the Musée des Civilisations Noires became a collaborating partner on the project, Kantoussan joined and contributed to the intellectual growth, as well as the design and didactic development of the exhibition, from 2021 onwards.

Fig. 2
Chief Ekpenyong Bassey Nsa with
late Chief Efiom Ekpenyong, Creek
Town, Nigeria, December 31, 2009.
Photo: Jordan A. Fenton.



Fig. 3
David Sanou sanding a *Kimi* masquerade headpiece
in the studio of André Sanou, Bobo-Dioulasso,
Burkina Faso, May 11, 2024. Photo: Lisa Homann.



Throughout the project’s development, the researchers consulted with each artist on his representation: from highlighted quotations, to label text, color, pattern, video choices and the gestures of the full ensembles in the galleries, to reviewing this publication’s texts. Chief Bassey Nsa, Sanou, and Fofanah were consistently interested and willing to weigh in when their research colleagues asked

questions or for their input. This was accomplished through periodic WhatsApp messages (this global texting app is especially popular throughout the continent) and video calls, as well as return research trips in 2024 to engage in detailed conversations with and solicit targeted feedback from each artist. Although this arrangement was not an equal collaboration among researchers and artists, it respected each artist’s wishes while intentionally offering space for their insights, whether it be acceptance, rejection, critical evaluation, questions, suggestions, observations, or other feedback.

In consultation with the artists, and in light of ongoing debates around the restitution of African art and cultural heritage—an issue addressed in Ndubuisi C. Ezeoluomba’s essay in this volume—*New African Masquerades*’ team commissioned and documented full-bodied masquerade ensembles (rather than purchasing existing ones), securing a clear provenance for the works. In embracing such an ethical framework, the artists had the option to consent that their creations be displayed in museums and held in those collections, and the opportunity to co-author knowledge about the works and their dissemination. Rigorous documentation revealed the precise tactics each of us took in our research collaborations; this companion publication offers summaries and recommendations from this work, as well as artist-authored content, building to new ethical models for future scholarship. Highlighting the “hows” and “whys” of the featured artists’ approaches, styles, goals, and rationales, we wish to convey the complexity of contemporary masquerade practice among artists across West Africa. When viewed as active, multisensory, living forms created by renowned artists, the masquerade arts are rendered as ultimately contemporary and the artists in West Africa as relatable—revealing connections to daily life in communities worldwide.

REVIEW

METHOD AND TRANSPARENCY

New African Masquerades focuses on living artists from underrepresented and formerly colonized regions of Africa with whom the curators and researchers forged long-term, trusting relationships. Coupled with the commissioning and transactional aspect of this research, the project addresses a fundamental question that cuts across both the arts and the humanities: What are the ethics involved in such a project? As work was carried out in Cameroon, Senegal, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and Sierra Leone, the team quickly realized that developing a universal approach was impossible. Each area, individual artist, and cultural custodian with which we collaborated required a nuanced approach. This is especially true when white, Western researchers work with individual artists in historically underrepresented areas. Youmbi, as an indigene, offers yet another example as to the nuanced nature of this research in working with fellow Cameroonians, which, of course, poses a different set of challenges and circumstances than those faced by foreign researchers.

Ethical and transparent fieldwork should look different from country to country and individual to individual. Such a realization poses problems for academic discourse with its effort to seek out broadly applicable, nearly universal methodologies. There are no such universalities when endeavoring to work ethically and transparently. Even further, some inherent paranoia is likely to emerge as the researcher considers how they will be inevitably critiqued by broader academia, given how neglected and misinformed transactional exchanges are between researcher and artist or cultural custodian, even despite—in different forms and manners—this happening throughout anyone’s fieldwork. All researchers, after all, are economic agents to a certain degree, and even more so are those who have commissioned work directly from artists. Academia in this way is nonsensically paradoxical: mentions of money or exchange of anything monetarily is usually looked upon negatively, even though everyone does it. Another issue is that while many researchers have obtained, purchased and/or commissioned works from artists, few have

transparently written about it and the logistical processes that surround such exchange.

An intervention of this volume is that authors and the contributing artists spell out their methodologies, particularly in commissioning masquerade ensembles. While such discourse is seldom published, scholars rightly discuss their overarching research methods in longer texts such as dissertations and books—but very few have highlighted the process of collecting and commissioning masquerade objects, much less revealed their destinations, which often include Western collections. Early explorers, missionaries, ethnographers, traders, administrators, and other collectors sometimes jotted down invaluable notes about works they acquired, why, for what sum (or any negotiations), from whom, where, when, and why the object was made, and what its provenance was. However, more often than not such remarks inconsistently addressed these topics, resulting in fragmentary records.¹⁰

For the purposes of this project and its related intent, two earlier publications have been invaluable. Hans Himmelheber's ([1972] 2016) groundbreaking investigation of portraiture in masquerade is an exception in its approach and detail of how he commissioned four different carvers in Côte d'Ivoire—Dye Abou Coulibaly, Ase Kouakou, Tano Ndri, and Jean Don Gba—to each create a masquerade headpiece using the researcher himself as a model (he then acquired the works). Himmelheber was newly acquainted with all of the sculptors at the time of the commissions. While his treatise concentrates on the process of making, some artist commentary, and the author's analysis of the objects, he does not systematically or thoroughly address his negotiations or relationships with the artists, their motivations, or for what collection(s) their creations were intended.¹¹ Later, Borgatti (1979) offered commentary by the artist Lawrence Ajanaku on his background, motivations, and masquerade ensembles. Borgatti described the artist's process and business agreements with patrons, and offered some details about how the works she commissioned were executed as well as the artist's desires for the outcome—rare access for readers abroad. She did not, however, detail her own methodology in gaining the commissions (criteria, negotiations, etc.).¹²

Despite the seminal nature of this work, few have followed Himmelheber and Borgatti in their example and effort. The lack of methodological focus between artist and researcher led to John Picton's call for more transparency in how fieldwork is carried out, a statement that was highlighted in an edited volume that investigated research on individual Yorùbá artists (1994).¹³ Beyond these three important contributions in the field of African expressive culture, the only other published account is offered by Jordan A. Fenton as the first and only attempt to transparently discuss one's methodology and ethics in working with living artists through a commission-based model (2017). In that piece, he advocated for an exchange based on trust and reciprocity between artist and researcher, arguing for a model that enabled a sustainable future between the two. Fenton's experiences and original method are revisited and updated within the methodology section of this present volume.

In building from this previous literature and on the ethics and transparency offered by Fenton with more diverse and nuanced models, the core team sought to establish a broader standard for research, acquisition, and representation of the artists in the exhibition, leaving room in our framework to account for the inevitable nuance we would encounter (and duly did). Key to this was that the success of our approaches hinged on long-term relationships with the artists, which proved to be an invaluable aspect of our methods. The curators/researchers have continued, and will continue, to seek each artist's informed consent on the objects acquired, their display and interpretation, and how each artist would like to be represented in the exhibition (Figs. 5–8).

The Ethics and Methodology section of this volume transparently delineates the challenges and success each faced in our effort to forge ethical relations and transactions between artist and researcher, or in Youmbi's instance, as an artist/researcher.

IMPLICATIONS AND TENSIONS

This ambitious project has resulted in a variety of implications—dare we say, productive tensions—and deeper conversations surrounding museums, art history, and the humanities and the roles they play in North American as well as African lives (gender, differential economies, terminologies, etc.). In addressing these tensions, this project continues to open up space and momentum for institutional and art historical (i.e., canonical) change. In short, this project has broader applicability.

For example, the essays in this publication can be useful in preparing younger generations of scholars entering the 'field,' asking them to think about budgets, time, and relationships and reciprocity. We hope this volume offers cases of troubleshooting the difficulties of forging long-term relationships in fieldwork, as well as the difficulties of fieldwork in general. An example comes from Fenton's experiences where he has had the fortunate opportunity of initiation, deep participation, in-depth knowledge of ritual and ceremonial procedures, as well as training in how to dress, trim, and prepare ensembles per Chief Bassey Nsa's specifications. Such examples show how difficult yet rewarding long-term fieldwork can be, which of course led to opportunities for commissions, and is also apparent in Homann's case since such enterprises are not (normally) permitted. These commissions, as we came to understand them, could only happen through sustained relationships with the artists, cultural custodians, and broader societies. Such facts of this project are important to point out, otherwise we risk that collectors or interested parties might think this process is easy, which of course is very far from the truth.

Being transparent about the strategies employed, and the real costs involved that are generative but also recurring, is not something typically taught in schools or graduate programs. There are also assumptions about the amount of money associated with a project, or about how much money scholars, museum curators, or graduate students have simply in their being physically present, which carries the expectation that it can or

should be shared with host communities. If and when available, non-profit or university funding is limited at best and, for graduate students and researchers alike, often comes with great personal financial assistance and/or debt. In other federal or state contexts, budgets and resources are closely monitored and allocated, making gifts, "dashes" or "small kola," meals or photography payments nearly impossible to code, let alone track with receipts in cash economies. Such expenses usually come from the researcher's own pocket, as has been the case with completing some commissions for this project. The economic facets of field research demand their own volume to contend with the topic (and we do relate them here when relevant to the experiences shared in the methodology section of this book).

These issues/complications indicate another tension crucial to consider in fieldwork, and in art historical and market contexts: masquerade ensembles and the artists work in different economies of scale—by which we mean that the works can dramatically differ in price based on the artist's visibility and proximity to the global art market, as well as fluctuating costs of materials and labor. Each of the artists featured functions within an already established economy and, to varying degrees, a more global one. To put it more directly, three of the featured artists do not have gallery representation and operate outside of art market circles that currently accept masquerade in forms other than what they produce. Thus far, Youmbi has achieved the most success on the global art market with his masquerade installations; and there are other artists including Nick Cave, Nandipha Mntambo, Phyllis Galembo, Sokari Douglas Camp, and Zina Saro-Wiwa who use the medium of masquerade (often in photography) to make compelling statements about environment, activism, racial violence, and performativities. What sets Youmbi as well as Chief Bassey Nsa, Sanou, and Fofanah apart is that they all work directly with regional communities to a level that is fundamental to the artworks and their practice, regardless of the economy of scale they function within externally. Chief Bassey Nsa may be somewhere in between, as he already had five ensembles commissioned for permanent collections of Western museums before the start of this project. A goal of *New African*

Fig. 8
Tso Scream Mask, “Field” photograph,
2022. Photo: Hervé Youmbi.

Masquerades is for underrepresented artists to achieve a similar level of success globally, and it was thus part of the artists’ incentive for participating in such a group exhibition.

This point leads to another tension surrounding the terminologies and meanings that persist and require mindful/careful unpacking: “contemporary,” “contemporary artist,” and “traditional,” or “tradition-based.” Curator and scholar Chika Okeke-Agulu has noted that a “contemporary artist” is someone who, amongst other things, “can talk back” within the discursive spaces of curators.¹⁴ It can be argued that Chief Bassey Nsa, Sanou, and Fofanah do not yet fall into that camp, and may or may not choose to be categorized as a “contemporary artist” in the sense that it is commonly understood in the Global North. Okeke-Agulu’s assertion carries a number of implications for the term “contemporary,” which in theory operates as a catch-all but in reality is exclusionary and specific to Western art historical “fictions of authenticity” which take the validity of the object as its priority, a particular African identity as homogeneous or standard, and the individual genius as valid and valorized.¹⁵ These perceptions operate on self-perpetuating constructs that have kept artists like Chief Bassey Nsa, Sanou, and Fofanah at arm’s length—they simply defy these categorical possibilities. Even worse, perhaps, they may be relegated to the other end of oppositional structures which prevail in art history. Rather than “contemporary” (of the moment, being created now for present concerns), they are labeled as “traditional” or “tradition-based.” The latter implies objects or artworks that are unchanging and created for local (usually assumed to be rural), utilitarian or religious use. In this framing, functionality is more important than innovation, change, and visual expressiveness. This exclusion may be in part because buying or commissioning directly from artists on the African continent is not always easy when it pertains to esoteric knowledge or ensembles/artworks subject to protected knowledge, secrecy, or membership-based and mutual aid associations.

And yet, we (as curators, scholars, art historians) strive to add artists to the broader discussion of what defines a contemporary artist, pushing directly back against Euro-American definitions of such terms. As curator Ugochukwu-Smooth Nzewi notes:

[C]ontemporary African art is not limited to works made by artists who are based in the West or those who live in Africa and participate in the international art world. Ultimately, the discourse of contemporary African art should not restrict what is included or excluded. Instead, it should aim for a deeper understanding of how artists think about, represent, and address the contemporary. The discourse should be about aesthetics in terms of how artistic vocabularies and creative integrity can provide discerning lenses for comprehending artistic contemporaneity in Africa.¹⁶

While further exploration/contextualization of art historical binaries and assumptions about art and the falsehoods of “authenticity” is not possible here,¹⁷ we must still define our use of “contemporary” and “contemporary artist” within these pages. For the purposes of this project, when the term “contemporary” is used, we mean it in the broadest of senses: that is, “new” (made within the last decade) and “now” (endowed with a temporality that allows the object to continually respond to the present as well as the past)—its contemporaneity. We see this as in keeping with what a contemporary global artist does: rework and respond to the present and the past in order to offer something new and fresh. After all, this is the very “tradition” of modern and contemporary art. For us, “contemporary” when coupled with the term “masquerade” also implies continuous change and innovation as fundamental to its contemporariness, as well as a technological savvy and an understanding of global discursive systems that comes from someone creating in the contemporary. When coupled with the term “artist,” we also suggest wiggle room in how one defines an artist working in the contemporary moment, taking into consideration that the term “artist” is not always what would be used by the artists themselves, or in their local masquerading contexts. However, given that one of the primary aims of this exhibition and publication is to provide a deeper understanding of masquerade arts in West Africa and to share these creatives and their work with North American (museum-going) audiences, we employ



terminology with which most Americans would be familiar: we use “artist,” as well as “art” and “artwork,” to mean a person creating tangible visual and often performative expressions that carry a whole host of complex intangible meanings and uses. The nuances of local context for terms like “artist” are unpacked in subsequent essays, but suffice it to say that all of the practitioners included in this project are well aware of the implications of being called “contemporary” and of being named an “artist” in a museum exhibition, even if their local clients or communities would recognize them with a different honorific (*kotu* in Sierra Leone, for example, which essentially means a designer or builder but carries much more heft and respect).

Yet another tension rising to the surface in the following pages is the issue of gender in masquerade arts. All four artists are male. As touched on briefly above, a number of contemporary female artists have intervened in masquerade practices on their own terms—so why were none of them included in *New African Masquerades*? This question might in part be answered in that this project is predicated on long-term relationships with researchers and commissioning artists (Youmbi), and a fitting match was not known to us—at least in the context of contemporary practice. Additionally, as explored further in essays throughout this volume, many esoteric masquerade or mutual aid societies operate on a spectrum ranging from the most spiritual and secret, to the most open-form membership useful primarily for entertainment, unity, and camaraderie. Regardless, most of these are age- and gender-specific in membership, and roles within the organization or society are typically organized around these demographics. For women, these roles are typically behind the scenes and almost never in the creation or performance of masquerade ensembles—though beaders and wigmakers are known to exist, as in the case of Marie Kouam Moctomo and Nadine Chewo in Cameroon, who have collaborated with *New African Masquerades* artist and contributor Hervé Youmbi.¹⁸

In some cases, women do have their own masquerade societies that produce and perform masquerade arts in public and private contexts, in particular in Sierra Leone/Liberia (Sande and Yassi Societies).¹⁹ Regardless, the most visible

manifestation of masquerade arts is its performance in public arenas in full head-to-toe ensembles that take highly trained professionals weeks or months to produce. To date, and in most genres of masquerade in regions of West Africa, this happens to be produced almost entirely by men. Our team felt that these artists represented the most prolific, profound, and successful artists in their country or region. A welcome addition to this project would be one that focuses on female artists who work on and with the medium of masquerades.

READER’S ROAD MAP

This book is broken up into four conceptual parts—the first introduces the artists included in the *New African Masquerades* project which traveled in Africa and North America. Each biographical essay is artist-authored or authored collaboratively, and each artist approved of the text included herein, as in the rest of the book. The second set of essays explores the relationships of the core team to the artists with whom they collaborated through an examination of the methodologies employed during the commissioning process, and each makes recommendations for future research strategies and ethical museum stewardship. The third collection of chapters follows the thematic organization of the exhibition, examining the commissioned artworks, as well as a small number of other associated artworks included in *New African Masquerades*. The final section includes essays by our institutional and external partners and contemplates the implications and potential ramifications of the project.²⁰

In order to forefront artists, the short artist biographies directly follow this introductory essay, beginning with Youmbi, whose work brings together all four of the major themes explored in the exhibition and this catalogue. This is followed by the biographies of Chief Bassey Nsa, Sanou, and finally Fofanah, whose biography was written with the input of the artist and Freetown-based research assistant, Alpha Kanu. All artists selected the photographs and narratives they wished to feature, many of which honored their fathers with whom they apprenticed and whom they credit for their training, Chief Bassey Nsa and Sanou in particular.