

FRIENDS OF ART NEWSLETTER *Winter 2009*



Left: Gallery owner Douglas Dawson discusses the iconography of a rare tunic once owned by a Yorba king. The tunic bears many Islamic symbols even though the culture that produced it was animist. "I think he was covering all his bases," Dawson said, "by appropriating all the power symbols in his domain." When asked how he would price such an object, Dawson said, "A lot depends on what we paid for it, the condition, the beauty, and the likelihood that I would ever find one again." In this case, the tunic would likely be sold for upwards of \$40,000 to a museum. Such objects come on the market as the rituals and cultures that employed them succumb to the inroads of modern Christian and Islamic fundamentalism.

Below: Bill Itter and Doug Dawson



Collectors Group Workshop

William Itter and Douglas Dawson discuss the making of an important collection of African objects

On Sunday, November 8, William Itter illuminated a new dimension of his life as a collector of African objects by welcoming his longtime friend and dealer, Douglas Dawson to the IU Art Museum conference room in the company of the Friends of Art Collectors Group. The pair brought an array of impressive African textiles and basketry and passed around several examples to share the elements of surface and touch in these most tactile media.

Doug Dawson said that he learned some of the ways of collecting from his father who scoured the fields of their mid-western farm for any Native American arrowheads or tools. After his father's death, Dawson rescued the collection on its way to the dump by persuading an uncle to put it in a storage shed instead. In subsequent years, he became fascinated by poring over the objects. He started his own "museum" in high school that he named Smithsonian, Junior. He stocked it with the amazing antiques that people discarded in pursuit

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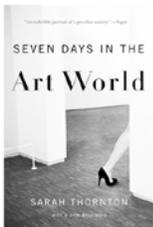
COLLECT RAINDROPS by **Nikki McClure** celebrates the important things: the change of seasons, slowing down the world for a moment so we can actually taste it, looking up at the stars to dream. Artist Nikki McClure's delicate images exude an optimism that revolves around community, sustenance, parenting, and appreciating both the urban and rural landscape through a visual language that is uniquely her own. Armed with an X-acto knife, McClure painstakingly cuts out her images from a single sheet of black paper, creating a bold language that translates the complex poetry of motherhood, nature, and activism into a simple and endearing picture.

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SEVEN DAYS IN THE ART WORLD by **Sarah Thornton** will change the way you look at contemporary culture. In a series of beautifully paced narratives, Thornton investigates the drama and eccentricities of the contemporary art world from the inside. Chosen as the first book for the Friends of Art Reading Group, Seven Days is already proving to be an entertaining and enlightening read!

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THE MAP AS ART by **Katherine Harmon**: Maps can be simple tools, comfortable in their familiar form. Or they can lead to different destinations: places turned upside down or inside out, territories riddled with marks understood only by their maker, realms connected more to the interior mind than to the exterior world.

These are the places of artists' maps, that happy combination of information and illusion that flourishes in basement studios and downtown galleries alike. It is little surprise that, in an era of globalized politics, culture, and ecology, contemporary artists are drawn to maps to express their visions.

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FOA Travel

Indianapolis: Sacred Spain: Art & Belief in the Spanish World

Friday, November 20, 2009

only \$25 per person, includes:

- Round trip bus transport to and from Indianapolis
- Admission to Sacred Spain exhibit at the Indianapolis Museum of Art
- Docent guided tour to the exhibit
- Tour of the IMA gardens, decorated for the holidays

This fall, the Friends of Art will partner with Meadowood to visit an important new show at the Indianapolis Museum of Art. The bus will depart from the Meadowood community building at 9:30 am on Friday, November 20 and depart from the IMA at 3 pm to return to Bloomington before 4:30 pm. There will also be an opportunity to take a guided tour of the gardens, decorated in full Christmas finery, at 2 pm for those interested.



Francisco de Zurbarán, *Fuente de Cantos – Agnus Dei*, 1636-40, oil on canvas, San Diego Museum of Art (Gift of Anne R. and Amy Putnam), 1947.36.

The first exhibition to examine the religious visual culture of 17th-century Spain and Latin America, *Sacred Spain: Art and Belief in the Spanish World*, brings to life the challenges faced by visual artists such as El Greco, Francisco Zurbarán, Alonso Cano, Francisco Ribalta, Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, Juan de Valdes Leal, Juan Correa, Cristobal Villalpando and others, who were

charged with the creative task of making religious imagery that was useful, truthful and moving. The exhibition features 70 works—including paintings, polychrome sculpture, metalwork and books, many of which have never before been seen in the United States—that not only illustrate religious iconography and allegory, but also bring to light the significant role of the artist in 17th-century Spain.

The total cost will be \$25 per person (\$30 for non-members). The trip is near capacity! Please reply by November 18. Fees are non-refundable after this date. Please confirm soon! Call Friends of Art office at 855-5300 or e-mail foart@indiana.edu

Holiday Art Auction

Friday, December 11, 2009

The SoFA Gallery and the Friends of Art are once again joining forces to present a gallery full of interesting and eclectic artworks to be sold for the benefit of the SoFA Gallery. The works in the Holiday Art Auction will be on preview Thursday and Friday, December 10 and 11, for view or purchase.

The auction and reception are immediately preceded at 5:30 pm by the Fine Arts Student Awards Ceremony in the Fine Arts auditorium.

Until the reception on Friday, works may be purchased immediately for the posted “Buy It Now” price. The event will conclude with the reception for the Holiday Art Awards on Friday evening, when all works will be sold based on bidding in a silent auction format. (The “Buy It Now” price will remain in effect throughout the silent auction.)

The SoFA Gallery has had a great response to requests for donated art from faculty, staff and students. Special jewelry works created by students and faculty in the metalsmithing and jewelry program will also be featured.

We are happy to receive donations from members who wish to contribute original artworks that are in good condition for sale. Please contact Tom Rhea in the Friends of Art office at 855-5300 and arrangements can be made for pick-up.

Come and find your treasure at the Holiday Art Sale and Auction.





William Itter spreads out a colorful Ewe cloth for examination. He commented on the rich optical vibrations produced by the use of complementary colors that blend through optical mixing. "Were the weavers familiar with the Impressionists? I don't know," Itter said. To his right, Diane Pehrine folds over a corner to show a plain muslin sleeve stitched to the top (white stripe) that provides a secure method for hanging. Pehrine offered a set of handouts covering many aspects of care and treatment for fragile objects. See more photos at www.fa.indiana.edu/foart.

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of new, modern trends, tossed out as old-fashioned and out of date. In college, Dawson attended Antioch without first ascertaining whether they had a museum program (they didn't). He chose ceramics instead and won a grant to apprentice with a master potter in Japan. He later conducted research among highland Guatemalan weavers, studying the persistence of Mayan techniques in their craft. Eventually he opened a gallery in Chicago that specialized in ethnographic objects where he has worked for the last twenty years.

Dawson described the fascinating journey that African objects must undergo to reach the ports of America. Many of the most valuable and desirable objects were made by animists in cultures that are slowly vanishing in Africa, under pressure from the twin fundamentalisms of Christianity and Islam. Young Muslim men, Dawson called them "runners," assemble the objects from the villages, with an indifference bordering on disdain. Objects then depart Africa in massive shipping containers and are divided equally in America among other Muslim runners in the network, who fan out to buyers across the country. These dealers cover a wide range of experience, knowledge and honesty. Dawson said, "The young dealers tell you what they think you want to hear. The older dealers tell you

what they know." Eventually, the runners will buy small electronics and bales of used clothing from Goodwill, ship them back to Africa in the same containers, and start the cycle over again.

The collecting of African masks and figures, the male crafts, began in late 19th century and accelerated with the interest of the European avant-garde. Indeed, the trade in masks and figures tracked closely with any perceived likeness to Western art, like Picasso or Modigliani. In the postwar era and into the Sixties, modern tastes were more austere and industrial. The uptick in interest in ethnographic textiles of the late 70's into the 80's probably fol-

lowed reconfigured fashions in interior decorating. More ominous developments, however, enabled the flood of African objects in the 90's. The overall religious trends in Africa, hostile to the local crafts and cultures, led to the wholesale shedding of massive amounts of these traditional cultural products. Dawson said, "The newly converted villagers feel these objects are embarrassing, primitive, or profane and so get rid of them."

Itter recalled the years when the pioneering African art historian Roy Sieber was able to attract a steady stream of dealers in African art, who would set up makeshift shops in the local Motel 6, for instance. "Roy would call me up and say, 'A dealer is coming to town.' I'd say, 'When?' and he'd say, 'Right now!'" Itter talked about the ways in which the visual and tactile dimensions of African weavings have fired his imagination and fueled his own paintings. The arduous complexities built into every Ewe cloth are challenging to comprehend for the viewer. Many of the objects remain mysterious as to maker, function or form and are not yet fully appreciated as art objects. Still, this under-appreciation has facilitated Itter's collecting. Dawson said that with the onset of the economic crisis, many dealers have few buyers for a wealth of African cloth that was only recently in vogue, making it a great time for buyers to find bargains.





William Itter prepares to pass around an example of a Kuba textile panel from the Congo. The cloth has a velvety surface as a result of a razor-trimmed end stitching.

The onset of a new, much stricter regime of international regulations governing the export of ethnographic objects has nearly killed off the trade as it once existed. Dawson described his purchase of an extremely rare Yorba tunic that once belonged to a king. “The object is so valuable that it will only be purchased by a museum, and museum regulations are the strictest. We got the proper export documents, signed by the seller and certified by the national government. But while the rules are made with the best of liberal intentions, and I fully agree with that intent, the reality is that the Nigerian government operates on bribes at every level.”

Workshop attendees were invited to handle many of the objects presented, to appreciate the incredible lightness of silk textiles, the intricacies of miniature lidded Tutsi baskets, and even the fragrance of wood smoke from a hat made of nutshells. The last object had all the signs of authenticity that a collector looks for, until Itter noticed that the buttons that formed the chin straps were imprinted “Reaction/Kenneth Cole.” Still, because so little is known about these objects, a free space exists where the imagination can roam. As Doug Dawson said, “I don’t want my own experience reflected in objects I collect. That mystery adds another layer of depth in the objects around me.”

Friends of Art Special New Book Club

to Debut in 2010

The Friends of Art will introduce a new benefit for members this spring: a book discussion group. Our first title will be Sarah Thornton’s *Seven Days in the Art World*, which has been described as “a fly-on-the-wall account of the sophisticated subcultures that makes, trade, curate, collect, and promote contemporary art.” The author provides an insider’s account of a Christie’s auction, an international art fair, the competition for an important art prize, and other venues that are sure to interest anyone who appreciates art of any genre.

As an added bonus, the FOA Bookshop will offer paperback copies of the book at a special 25% discount to FOA members; participants can e-mail foabooks@indiana.edu to reserve a copy.

Please check the January issue of this newsletter, or the FOA website (www.fa.indiana.edu/foart), for the book discussion date and location. If you have suggestions for future book discussion group titles, please e-mail foart@indiana.edu.

Library Benefit Dinner 2010

featuring a lecture by Asst. Prof. Dawna Schuld

Assistant Professor in the History of Art Dawna Schuld will keynote the 2010 Fine Arts Library Benefit Dinner with a lecture titled “Light, Space, & Eric Orr: the Primordial Minimal.” According to Prof. Schuld, “Eric Orr is one of the more intriguing and problematic figures in California light and space art. Although his work shares many formal qualities with that of better-known figures such as Robert Irwin and James Turrell, Orr pressed at the critically-prescribed literalist bounds of minimal art perhaps more than any other light and space artist. His ‘Proto-materialist’ framework for artistic exploration is a tour de force of analogical thought, using ancient Greek thought, Cabalistic mysticism, Buddhism, ancient Egyptian mythology, and quantum physics to explore the combinatory potential of a situational art. In particular, his fascination with the void contravenes the sun and surf image of the 1960s Los Angeles art world.”

Professor Schuld completed her Ph.D. in 2009 from the University of Chicago. Her lecture will begin at 5 pm in the Fine Arts auditorium on Saturday, January 30, 2010. Drinks and hors d’oeuvres will be served at 6 pm in the library foyer with dinner in the library beginning at 6:30 pm.



IU Art Museum

Form and Surface: African Ceramics, Baskets, and Textiles from the William Itter Collection

continues through December 13, 2009

Currently on display in the Special Exhibitions Gallery at the IU Art Museum, "Form and Surface: African Ceramics, Baskets, and Textiles from the William Itter Collection" represents "one of the largest and finest collections of African ceramics in the country," according to Diane Pelrine, curator of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. The exhibition brings together more than a hundred objects and will be accompanied by an illustrated catalog on the ceramic portion of the show.

In 1966, William Itter took his first teaching position in Pittsburgh, and began haunting thrift shops to furnish his 4th floor apartment overlooking the city. He found an abundance of cheap, Mission furniture, Pennsylvania Dutch quilts, a Bentwood rocker, and soon, collecting only fine, hand-made pieces for household items became a point of pride. Connecting with friends over his new enthusiasms soon led to a shared passion for Navajo textiles and oriental rugs.

In the early 1990's, when certain types of high-quality African objects became more available regionally at reasonable prices, Itter found himself drawn less to the showy, pricey masks and ritual objects made by men, and more to the humble storage and cooking vessels, baskets and pots, made by women. The appeal of these pieces is much more subtle on a formal level than the appeal of masks, exhibiting regional conventions in shape but terrific variety in surface. A great number of Itter's pieces share

the dark patina formed by years of proximity to a smoke fire, and seem to him all the more beautiful for that.

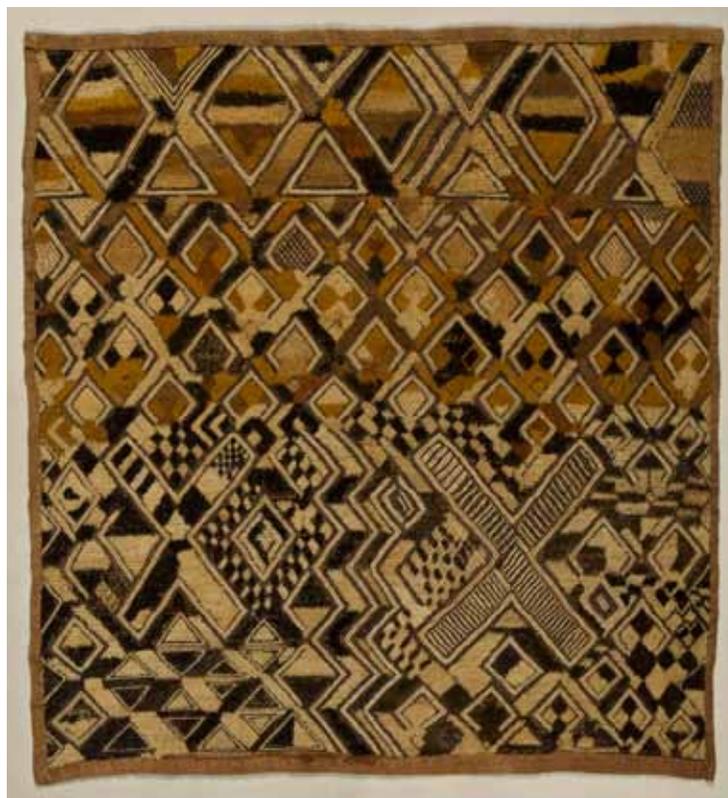
Diane Pelrine states in her preface to the show, "Visitors to the exhibition will quickly see what drew Itter to African ceramics ... Inventive forms and their imaginative surface embellishments create visually exciting objects that display technical mastery of a medium as well as sophisticated understanding of the interrelationship of formal elements – those building blocks used by artists working in all media throughout the world." While not a specialist in African art, Itter was close friends with African art historian and pioneer Roy Sieber. Itter's wife Diane was a noted textile artist who deepened his appreciation for fiber techniques and design from many cultures.

Itter's collection of African objects ranges across many media, but the catalog produced in conjunction with the exhibit is limited to ceramics. Ceramics represents the bulk of Itter's collection (with over 400 ceramic pieces), and many more

scholarly treatments have been devoted to African textiles and even baskets than to ceramics. In addition, the best examples of Itter's Kente cloths were presented in spring of 2003, in *Something Extraordinary: Asante and Ewe Cloth from West Africa*, at the IUAM.

The ceramics in the show have been roughly grouped by area. Approximately sixty pieces of Nupe pottery form the bulk of the collection. Curator Diane Pelrine said her grouping, while simple, attempts "to give people a sense of how a collector becomes enthralled with a piece." An individual object becomes

"much more interesting if you find another object that is somewhat similar, but has key differences." Interplay of forms across media is explored in a small group of skeuomorph pairs, that is, a form in one medium that is reproduced in another medium. So we see a typical calabash gourd wrapped in a basket stand that is closely imitated in a ceramic



Kuba peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Textile panel, Raffia fiber



vessel. Scored lines in the clay mimic the strands of basketry. A ceramic milk vessel from the Berbers of Morocco is made to simulate the animal skin bags used to churn butter, with a taut, bulbous shape and faux stitching across the surface. A whole category of ceramic vessels roughly resembles gourd shapes, while the gourds themselves are banded while growing to coax them into desirable shapes.

This cross-media mimicry hints at a fascinating feature of African art: the way design is embedded many layers deep into the life and culture of its people. For instance, the form of the “stitching” mentioned above is also a protective sign used in body decoration. The red pigment rubbed into the slats of a Cameroon basket is a camwood powder associated with spirit power and used as a cosmetic in face painting. Eligible young men who have a festival of competitive display as part of their marriage preliminaries wear the richly embroidered Wodaabe tunics. The vibrant color designs that seem almost iridescent against a rich black background would be continued in white powder along the young men’s faces. Personal power becomes invested into objects, and the power of beautiful objects enhances ceremonial events in a reciprocal way.

The kente weavings here are spectacular: a typical cloth is 12 by 6 feet. A kente pattern features blocks of vertical (warp) stripes alternated with tightly packed horizontal (weft) stripes. Because the long strips are hand-sewn, the cloths must be hung from the long dimension to reduce stress on the weaker stitching. However, when worn, the long dimension is wrapped around the body horizontally. Viewed this way, the charming little figures of birds, humans, stools and other objects become recognizable. While the Asante peoples produced more strictly abstract patterns, most of Itter’s kente cloths came from the Ewe peoples who employed figurative motifs, so lightly woven as to be transparent.

The features of the African cloths that have always been dear to Itter are the anomalies of design. One small golden square bearing the image of a stool is the only figurative element in the entire weaving which graces the entrance to the show. Entirely more idiosyncratic are the textile panels from the Kuba peoples of the Congo. Using the finest raffia threads and a cut pile technique produces a plush surface sometimes known as Kasai velvet. This weaving tradition prizes creativity of design above all, a resistance to symmetry or regularity that borders on the eccentric.

In rich earth tones, a progressive diamond pattern forms along a grid, apparently regular but

actually undergoing constant and subtle changes. An apparent transparency and overlap vanishes into solid, closed shapes. Interwoven knot patterns abruptly stop short and flatten. These progressive changes that promote and belie an appearance of regularity form the heart of Itter’s own studio practice. Indeed, his aggressive complex, large-scale paintings have a similar gallery presence to the large kente cloths: one overall feeling at a distance, and an enthralled fascination of detail up close. (This dialogue of design and surface may be pursued further by visiting *William Itter: A Retrospective – Paintings and Drawings 1969 – 2009* on view until November 20 in the SoFA Gallery.)

Coming Events

Friends of Art Calendar.

- **November 20, 2009** Friends of Art, in partnership with Meadowood, bus trip to Indianapolis Museum of Art to view *Sacred Spain: Art and Belief in the Spanish World*.
- **December 1 – 5, 2009** The SoFA Gallery presents a BFA group painting show. Reception Friday, December 4 from 7 – 9 pm.
- **December 11, 2009** Fine Arts Student Awards Ceremony in the Fine Arts auditorium at 5:30 pm. Holiday Art Sale & Auction follows in the SoFA Gallery 7 – 9 pm. Preview runs Thursday and Friday.
- **January 13, 2010** Betsy Stirratt hosts talk on collecting student and faculty artwork at SoFA Gallery
- **January 30, 2010** The Fine Arts Library Benefit Dinner begins with slide lecture by Assistant Professor in History of Art, Dawna Schuld at 5 pm. in FA 015. Dinner begins at 6:30 pm in Library. Her topic will be “Light, Space, & Eric Orr: the Primordial Minimal.”
- **January 2010** Fine Arts Faculty Show opens in the Special Exhibitions Gallery of the IU Art Museum.
- **Saturday, March 6, 2010** Friends of Art will tour four faculty studios, including Paul Brown and Althea Murphy-Price. The tour will run from 10 am to 2 pm and will be followed by a box lunch.
- **April – May 2010** Friends of Art bus trip to Chicago to view “Matisse: Radical Invention, 1913–1917” which runs March 20 – June 6, 2010. Gallery walks, a Frank Lloyd Wright tour, or other collecting activities (such as SoFA show) may be scheduled.



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