

Heroes: Principles of African Greatness
curated by Kevin Dumouchelle
National Museum of African Art,
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, DC
(November 16, 2019—ongoing)

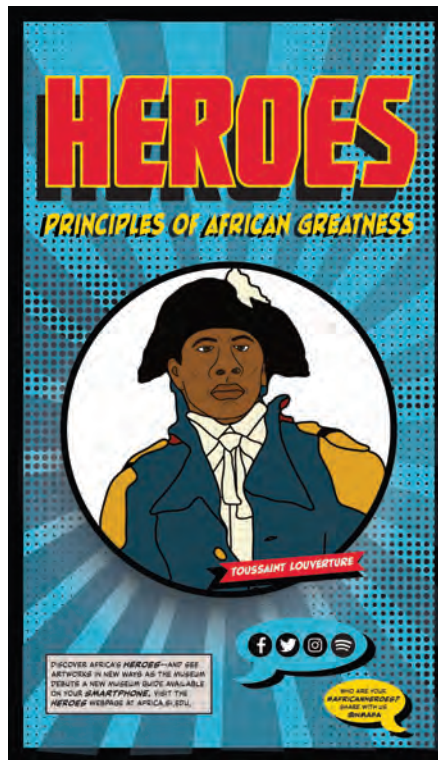
reviewed by Ian Bourland

A longstanding challenge of curating African art is connecting traditional objects with audiences more attuned to the spectacle of the contemporary. To that African art historians must add an additional challenge: The vast territorial and historical scope of the continent and the colonial legacies of many collections further complicate the presentation of such material in the staid context of the museum. This latter problem, of course, was at the heart of Frederick Lamp's *See the Music, Hear the Dance: Rethinking African Art at the Baltimore Museum of Art* over fifteen years ago, which sought to resituate sculptural and decorative art in the rich haptic and sonic contexts in which it was conceived (Lamp 2004). The ongoing exhibition *Heroes: Principles of African Greatness* does a similar kind of work, adding new layers of interpretation and context to art from the past two centuries (Fig. 1).

Heroes, curated by Kevin Dumouchelle, opened at the National Museum of African Art on November 16, 2019. It features work by forty artists from fifteen countries and uses an array of multimedia strategies to connect with a broad audience. The show's aim is to remind viewers of African excellence in its myriad forms—in this case, ideals and the leaders who embody them.

As the exhibition's press release notes, "it invites viewers to consider the core values of leadership—justice, integrity, generosity, and empathy—embodied in the art. [Each work] ... is paired with a historic African person, a 'hero in history,' who embodies the thematic value shown in the artwork" (NMAfA 2019: 1).

In so doing, Dumouchelle, who joined the NMAfA in 2016, has installed works from the museum's collection in a dazzling, provocative way. Pairing the classical with the contemporary, he and the Smithsonian team engage audiences with an interactive digital app, a lively playlist piped in to the museum's atrium (available on Spotify), and splashy fonts and bold graphics for the wall text. Taken together, such strategies yield an immersive and playful experience that draws



1 *Heroes: Principles of African Greatness*, exhibition promotional image.
Photo: courtesy National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution

2 Nelson Mandela
Limestone Quarry (2002)
Pastel on paper
Photo: Brad Simpson, courtesy National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution



audiences of all ages into a dense survey of aesthetic and political history.

Curatorially, *Heroes* seems to be looking in a few directions. One reference, at least implicitly, is toward recent writing and installations by critic Hilton Als, who has brought mid-century figures such as Alice Neel and James Baldwin to the fore by elaborating their creative interlocutors both past and present. Als's criticism seeks out "Black excellence" at a time when African and diasporic peoples are again the focus of xenophobic rhetoric and, often, brutal policies (see, for example, Kraft 2019; Als 2017). Dumouchelle's exhibition, too, emphasizes modes of excellence, and its story is told through the lens of the "heroes"—both artistic and political—who exemplify, for instance, beauty, collectivity, empowerment, style, victory, and, indeed, wokeness. Importantly, women figure prominently in what could have easily been a rehash of a "great men" version of recent history. The heroes here range from leaders of the independence era to, for instance, Liberian activist Leymah Gbowee, whose photograph appears as a small badge next to a mid-twentieth century Dan ceremonial spoon (artist unknown).

Other leaders evoked in *Heroes* are more predictable, from Black nationalist leader Malcolm X to Ghanaian luminary Kwame Nkrumah. Indeed, the exhibition is, in many respects, a roll call of mid-twentieth century icons who came to prominence during a time of explicit anticolonial struggle and nascent nation-statism. This is fitting, as a search of the hashtag associated with promotional material (#africanheroes), yields encomia to figures such as Amílcar Cabral and Patrice Lumumba. In this sense, a second curatorial precedent for *Heroes* is the late Okwui



3 Paa Joe
Fort William-Anomabu (2004–2005)
 Wood, enamel paint
 Photo: Brad Simpson, courtesy National
 Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution

4 Ghada Amer
The Blue Bra Girls (2012)
 Cast and polished stainless steel
 Photo: Brad Simpson, courtesy National
 Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution

Enwezor's 2001 exhibition in Munich, *The Short Century*, a project that used installation and catalogue in unison to suggest a layered postcolonial landscape (Enwezor et al. 2001). That landscape, for Enwezor, was forged by the interplay of culture and politics; image and text; art, music, and literature. In this telling, modern Africa and its arts are heterogeneous in the extreme, but inextricable from the formation of lived and imagined African identities.

In *Heroes*, Dumouchelle builds on this armature, using the densely hung gallery to tell far-reaching stories that carom around the continent, alighting on its visionaries and, in the case of apartheid architect Hendrik Verwoerd, its villains. Verwoerd's visage appears alongside an installation by South African sculptor Willie Bester titled *Apartheid Laboratory* (1995)—an unsettling assemblage of found materials such as IV bags, barbed wire, a clipboard, and a wash basin. It envisions the workstation of the eugenicist and social engineer, down to its taxonomic descriptions of “races” from Cape Coloured,

to Griqua, to Indian, and so on. *Apartheid Laboratory* is potent work and a highlight of the NMAfA contemporary collection. Bester's piece is made all the more stirring as it rests on the same wall as a 2002 pastel drawing by ANC leader Nelson Mandela, a retrospective illustration of the titular *Limestone Quarry* on Robben Island, where he and his fellow political prisoners were remanded to Sisyphean hard labor (Fig. 2).

The cardinal strength of *Heroes* is its use of eye-catching design to draw together truly sweeping range of media and artistic intention. For instance, on entering through left side of the gallery, one is confronted

immediately with a large-scale architectural model of Fort William-Anomabo, unmistakably a rendering of an eighteenth-century coastal fort in Ghana once used in the transatlantic slave trade (Fig. 3). This model was made in 2004 as part of a larger series of such painted wood castles by decorative coffin-maker Paa Joe, who came to prominence through the 1989 *Magiciens de la Terre* show at the Centre Pompidou.

A quick pivot to the facing wall reveals a multimedia painting on wood from seventeenth-century Ethiopia, a diptych icon illustrating scenes from the Bible. This quintessential work, by an unknown artist, exemplifies the principle “Pious,” and the accompanying text connects the transmission of Christianity to Eastern Africa as a contribution of “immigrants and refugees,” plainly suggesting corollaries with contemporary politics. Another religious icon hangs nearby, Gora Mbengue's depiction of Senegalese mystic and saint Sheikh Amadou Bamba, a figure typically featured on the walls and storefronts in many cities in Senegal (“Resistance”). Among these overtly sanctified objects are a gamut of recent works: the cast steel *Blue Bra Girls* (2012) by Egyptian artist Ghada Amer (“Empowered”) (Fig. 4); Sokari Douglas Camp's *Small Iriabo (Clapping Girl)* (1987; “Feminist”), a motorized wood and steel figuration of the type for which she is so widely known (Fig. 5); and Ousmane Sow's towering figure of Haitian revolutionary Toussaint Louverture from 1989, anchoring the center of the gallery and touted here as the museum's own “Statue of Liberty.”

Between these wide-ranging works and the associated “hero in history” emblems, wall text, and supplementary multimedia program,





5 Sokari Douglas Camp
Small Iriabo (Clapping Girl) (1987)
 Multimedia sculpture
 Photo: Brad Simpson, courtesy National
 Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution

there is a great deal to take in, and the scope of *Heroes* is truly sweeping. Like *The Short Century* before it, the exhibition might be best absorbed over the course of multiple visits for more in-depth engagement with smaller sections of the installation. This is, in fact, a virtue of *Heroes*: It demonstrates the vast and intricately woven cultural and political histories of the Africa as a geographical zone and ever-shifting set of ideals. Moreover, *Heroes* is, above all accessible. There are literally and conceptually multiple points of entry into the show, and elementary school groups and scholars alike find different vantages from which to connect with the objects, all concisely situated both in history and, anew, in their connection to the show's titular "principles of African greatness."

Nonetheless, in bridging classical and more recent works in the same space, *Heroes* does, if inadvertently, bring into sharp relief some of the conventions of medium and display that tend to bifurcate African art history. Specifically, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century works are scattered in vitrines in the interior of the gallery space, while (with some exceptions), objects that line the walls of the space are those typically described as modern or contemporary. This is, perhaps unavoidable, but the ingrained pattern of looking towards wall texts when working through an

exhibition in a linear fashion skews *Heroes* toward more recent art, and a heavily South African vision of such art at that.

The solution employed by Dumouchelle and his team is the leveling gesture of the "principle" (e.g., beauty, resistance, style, and so on): Any one object in *Heroes* can be approached on its own terms, but also fits into a larger matrix by dint of the exhibition's innovative design, which uses captions and graphics to link object, hero, and idea. Some scholars might raise questions of precision on this score, especially with respect to the classical works on display. For instance, there are clear connections between, say, Mandela's pastel or the Edo Oba Ewuakpe I and an eighteenth-century Benin alloy *odudua*. But what of pairing Gabonese independence leader Jean-Hilaire Aubame with an *eyema bieri* reliquary from the previous century, or Angolan model (and Miss Universe) Leila Lopes with a Chokwe *pwo* mask? Certainly, the concepts that they illustrate—intergenerational continuity and beauty, respectively—are broad enough to find points of inflection. At the same time, precolonial forms have been so carefully repurposed or ramified over the years in the context of national styles and nationalist projects and more individualistic modes of contemporary practice that some of the connections in *Heroes* seem tenuous.

The exhibition's curator, Dumouchelle, is straightforward about such questions. He notes that,

The intention is typically not to be directly didactic in the association, unless specific hero/ heroes is directly referenced in a given work. As a narrowing/limiting factor, I also tried my best to align the hero in question culturally with the associated work (though, in some cases, like "Dignity": Ben Enwonwu MBE—Miriam Makeba, the point was instead to make a deliberately pan-African association, given both the artist and hero's international trajectories).¹

Indeed, with this in mind, *Heroes* is refreshing in its willingness to make new interpretive leaps and to draw connections that might not always be materially obvious, but open pathways for contemplation in the realms of the psychic and the speculative.

In this sense, *Heroes* is an important and timely exhibition. A celebratory quality suffuses the atmosphere, and the project uses tropes of the comic book and the superhero genre to lend vitality and accessibility to the NMAfA collection—an ambition certainly in line with the public cast of the museum and with wider calls for institutions to meet their constituencies in innovative ways. For instance, in lieu of a typical brochure, the audience is invited to take a foldout booklet featuring photos, captions, and the show's principles (in bold type). It is sandwiched in heavier paper stock, evoking the scale and texture of a pack of trading cards. The cover

image here is an animation-style rendering of Louverture—a callout to the Sow sculpture, and a logo for the exhibition as a whole. Of course, there are implicit call-outs here, too—pop stylings as diasporic intervention beyond the frame of *Heroes*—in the graphic quality of Cheri Samba's paintings or Kerry James Marshall's Yoruban-inspired comic series *Rhythm Mastr*.

It is worth noting, too, that one of the most successful films in recent years was the 2018 adaptation of the *Black Panther* comic. There, the continent and its politics are framed through the speculative and aesthetically charged lens of Afrofuturism and a central character, Killmonger, enters the fray in the context of a composite British Museum and its collection of traditional African arts. Citing the colonial expropriation of the works on display, he announces his intent to "steal" back a piece, to put it to new and productive uses. While Killmonger is a controversial figure in the film, the scene sparked a larger conversation about provenance and display practices (see, for example, Cascone 2018). Similarly, in creating new visionary associations (many with works from the museum's pieces from the Walt Disney-Tishman Collection), *Heroes* begins the work of creating a new pantheon during a time of political turbulence, and takes seriously a host of ongoing debates about the arts of Africa in national collections.

IAN BOURLAND is Assistant Professor of Global Contemporary Art History at Georgetown University. He is the author of *Bloodflowers: Rotimi Fani-Kayode, Photography, and the 1980s* (Duke University Press, 2019). wib@georgetown.edu

Notes

1 Kevin Dumouchelle, correspondence with author, December 16, 2019.

References cited

- Als, Hilton. 2017. "Now's the Time." *New Yorker*, (6 November 6). <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/11/06/the-black-excellence-of-kahlil-joseph>.
- Cascone, Sarah. 2018. "The Museum Heist Scene in 'Black Panther' Adds Fuel to the Debate About African Art Restitution." *Artnet*, March 5. <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/black-panther-museum-heist-restitution-1233278>.
- Enwezor, Okwui, et al. (eds.). 2001. *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945–1994*. New York: Prestel.
- Kraft, Coralie. 2019. "Hilton Als on Giving James Baldwin Back His Body" [Interview]. *New Yorker*, January 16. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/hilton-als-on-giving-james-baldwin-back-his-body>
- Lamp, Frederick. 2004. *See the Music, Hear the Dance: Rethinking African Art at the Baltimore Museum of Art*. New York: Prestel.
- NMAfA. 2019. "'Heroes: Principles of African Greatness' Open at the National Museum of African Art Nov. 16" [Press release]. October 7.