

Audio Guide Transcript

NARRATIVE WISDOM AND AFRICAN ARTS

October 19, 2024–February 16, 2025
Ticketed Exhibition Galleries

SAINT LOUIS ART MUSEUM

Stop 1

Taylor Hall

Introduction

Speakers

Min Jung Kim

Barbara B. Taylor Director

Saint Louis Art Museum

Nichole Bridges

Morton D. May Curator of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas

Saint Louis Art Museum

[Min]

Hello, I am Min Jung Kim, Barbara B. Taylor Director of the Saint Louis Art Museum.

I am delighted to welcome you to the audio guide for *Narrative Wisdom and African Arts*. This exhibition is a groundbreaking examination of how visual arts, oral traditions, and memory intersect. Featuring historical arts from across sub-Saharan Africa and contemporary art by artists working in Africa and worldwide, the exhibition demonstrates a wide range of material, political, and philosophical approaches to narrative. To tell you more, I'd like to introduce the exhibition curator, Nichole Bridges, the Museum's curator of African art and Morton D. May Curator of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas.

[Nichole]

Thank you, Min.

This exhibition explores African arts that reinforce narratives rooted in collective and individual knowledge. As you move through these galleries, you will consider how arts support oral traditions and memory, helping to make them more tangible. You will

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encounter a rich array of artistic mediums, including sculptures in wood, clay, metal and ivory, textiles, paintings, drawings, and photographs, and you'll experience multimedia audio and video works. While you explore, I hope you will consider how these arts—made by historical artists across Africa and by contemporary African artists who work around the globe—support or challenge narratives centered around four primary themes: leadership, memory, destiny, and ancestral wisdoms.

This exhibition guide offers commentaries from several individuals. In addition to my voice, you will hear from other scholars, artists, and cultural experts. We encourage you to experience this guide in any order you like. You may follow it in numeric order or pick and choose. Each featured object can be located by following the floorplan on this webpage or by identifying the audio icon on the object's label in the exhibition. Whether you're listening from home or in the Museum's galleries, I hope you enjoy this audio guide and your visit to *Narrative Wisdom and African Arts*.

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Stop 2

Gallery 241

Ties that Bind

Speaker

Emeka Ogboh

Artist

Hello, my name is Emeka Ogboh; my work *Ties That Bind* is part of the *Narrative Wisdom* exhibition.

Ties That Bind is a multichannel audio composition and ambient sound installation that blends a rich collage of electronic music, digitally manipulated soundscapes, spoken words, and traditional African musical instruments, such as the mbira and djembe.

At the heart of the composition is the use of *mbem*, an ancient Igbo oral performance art, narrated by Igbo musician Nwachukwu Uwakwe. Mbem is a unique blend of song and speech, serving both educational and entertainment purposes.

Mbem plays a crucial role in transmitting cultural knowledge and history, and in this piece it narrates the story of the Bantu migration, a significant event in African history.

This historical movement saw Bantu-speaking people disperse across Africa. The Bantu migrations, beginning around 1000 BCE and lasting over two millennia, were a series of massive movements of the Bantu people from the Niger-Congo region across much of sub-Saharan Africa. These migrations led to the widespread dissemination of Bantu languages and cultures, significantly influencing the linguistic, cultural, and demographic landscape of Africa. The composition skillfully merges traditional and modern musical elements, with the mbira playing a pivotal role. This instrument, prevalent in numerous African cultures, emerged as a common thread in my exploration

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of regional musical similarities.

Notably, the Igbo culture features a similar instrument: the *ubo aka*, also a plucked idiophone. This parallel highlights the interconnectedness of musical traditions across different cultures, suggesting historical links, perhaps tied to the Bantu migrations.

Throughout the piece, the mbira serves as a unifying element, encapsulating the rich musical heritage of the African continent.

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Stop 3

Gallery 242

Queen of Sheba's Visit to King Solomon

Speaker

Tekle Nigru

Scholar

This is Tekle from Addis [Ababa], Ethiopia.

The Queen of Sheba, an Ethiopian queen: It's a long, long history that goes back 3,000 years. And she has been hearing the stories of the wisdom of King Solomon, and it's a search for wisdom. So, this has been archived in Ethiopian literature and in Ethiopian art, especially the medieval Ethiopian epic known as the *Kebrā Nagast*, or the Glory of the Kings, preserving the memorial of the Queen of Sheba and her pilgrimage to visit the biblical figure King Solomon, and was praised by the New Testament for the search of wisdom. The imaginary, it's the story of Sheba and her gift giving and gift receiving. And also from that comes the Solomonic dynasty that ends in 1974 with the last monarch, Emperor Haile Selassie I. So it archives a long memory of Ethiopian history and also in connection with her journey and return back. Maybe I will quote what this embodiment means from the *Kebrā Nagast*. It says, "The honoring of wisdom is the honoring of the wise man, and the loving of wisdom is the loving of the wise man. Love the wise man and withdraw not thyself from him, and by the sight of him thou shalt become wise."

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Stop 4

Gallery 243

Parasol

Speaker

Martine de Souza

Tour Guide and Vodun Priestess

Benin, West Africa

My name is Martine de Souza. I am a tour guide in Benin. I am also a vodun priestess.

This parasol represents a high chief of thunder, Hevioso. So all the symbols around it [are] symbols of Hevioso. So this may belong to somebody, a high priest of Hevioso. We have the musicians. Then we have the dancer, and then the one on top of it represents the *ashé* of Shango or Hevioso. That's the attribute of power. And you can see, that is like a head of a lamb spitting fire from its mouth. So then this is the thunder spitting fire.

We have the white one, which is the moon, and the red one can symbolize the main fruit of the deities. This is particular from Abomey. The work of appliqué originated from Abomey. And if we see this with that today, it's a temple created there by kings of Abomey. There are many temples in Ouidah from 1727, when the King Agaja from Abomey conquered Ouidah. So he sent some vodun priests to take care of his business in Ouidah. That's how vodun came in Ouidah.

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Stop 5

Gallery 244

Commemorative Altar (asẽn)

Speaker

Martine de Souza

Tour Guide and Vodun Priestess

Benin, West Africa

The *asẽn* is very important in Republic of Benin, especially in the southern part of Benin. The *asẽn* represent our ancestors, those who died, who are no more among us. Now to give you a short history: In the old days, you know, our kings, who were very powerful. And one of the kings of Abomey had a friend of him. They were very special to each other. And one day, the king of Abomey asked his friend, "Hey, my friend. One day, when you die, how can you let me know?" The friend told him that he will come to him, but without his head. The king said, "Oh, I will do the same." They gave that promise to each other, and with the time going, this friend appeared to the king, really without his head.

"Hey, my friend, where are you from?"

"I am from the dead country."

"Oh, by the way, what do you eat there?"

The friend answered that they ate the food that we throw on the floor. Then the king said, "No way. I don't want my ancestor to eat on the floor. I will make them their own table, a portable altar where I can feed them." So that's how the cult of *asẽn* started.

Spirits of ancestors are very, very important for us. We want to stay in contact with them so that any time that we have [a] problem, we can go to them. Going to them, it means that we will go to the room of the *asẽn*. Because the *asẽn*, they are placed in a special room called *asẽn* hall, the room of the *asẽn*. And there's always a woman, the oldest woman of the family, who is in charge of the *asẽn*. She is the one who has the key, who

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can go inside and pour libation, and ask from them blessing or anything that—any request that we have. She is the one to represent the family.

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Stop 6

Gallery 244

Relative

Speaker

Sokari Douglas Camp

Artist

London, England

Hello, my name is Sokari Douglas Camp. I'm a sculptor. I live in London, and my heritage is Nigerian British. My people are called Kalabari people, and we live in the Niger Delta in Nigeria.

I have made a sculpture called *Relative Pelican*, and it depicts two figures in Kalabari attire, which is wrapper and top and head tie. And the man is wearing a shirt called Etibo and a bowler hat. These are traditional clothing that Kalabari people might wear to an important occasion. They are holding a framed picture of a pelican between them, just because we have a tradition as part of our funeral ceremonies that we might hold a picture of a beloved relative in our hands, a large A3-sized framed picture. And sometimes, you get relatives that look alike, and one might be male; one might be female. But you can see the family features are the same. And they parade through the town with pride to show whom they've lost and who they are. I thought that it was very important to show that we are members of the human race that should be acknowledged. But, we have a bird between us, the pelican who suffered very much in 2010 when there was an oil spill off the coast of Florida. And there were pictures of pelicans on newspapers all over the world, front pages of pelicans who had been covered in oil on the Florida coast. Fishing has been disrupted by this oil spill at this time, and the oil spill was created by BP. And Obama, the President of America at the time, made a campaign to get BP to compensate and clear up the mess they had made.

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I felt very struck by this because people in the Niger Delta have been suffering from oil spills for over 30 years if not 40 years, and we've never had front page news to say how much we're suffering. We haven't really been compensated, and our communities have been disrupted, polluted. We've had to emigrate from our homes, and we haven't been given the service that the pelicans got in 2010. And this isn't really a memory; it's a record of how some members of the human race are treated.

Relative Pelican is a—would it be called a whimsical piece? A whimsical but very, very serious piece of work. Just saying, “I’m your relative; take notice of me,” and the Kalabari people, and how our land and coast has been decimated by oil spills for the last 50 years almost. And we want to be noticed as much as these birds were in 2010.

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Stop 7**Gallery 244***Carved Tusk***Speaker****Nichole Bridges**

**Morton D. May Curator of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas
Saint Louis Art Museum**

Thank you for taking a look at this exceptional carved tusk with me. Here, the artist has achieved tremendous sculptural volume that maximizes the relief-carved technique. This highlights the artist's distinctive style and the richness of elephant ivory as a medium. This sculptor was possibly named Boange, based on comparison with a related example into which the artist carved that name. As evident here, ivory sculptures created by this artist are recognizable for their high degree of naturalism and the great expressiveness of their figures.

With great detail, this artist captures themes of violence, industry, and social dynamics of the Loango Coast in the mid-19th century. For nearly three centuries, European and North and South American commercial interests competed there for economic advantage, bringing enterprising foreigners to the region to conduct trade—including the trade in captive Africans for the international slave trade. The images begin at the bottom of the tusk, where a figure lying on the ground has been captured by figures pulling a tether around his neck. Next, two figures, one dressed in European clothing, stand over a table where a monkey hides beneath. Next, a figure climbs a palm tree to tap palm wine. Beyond, a series of figures carries assorted bundles and boxes of trade goods and ivory tusks overhead. Some of the captives bound by yokes and chains demonstrate their distress. Scenes such as those showing a figure wearing European clothing who lights a cigarette with the assistance of a child, and other figures wearing a mix of clothing in European and local styles capture the Loango Coast's nature as a site of cross-cultural encounter.

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Boange and other carvers of Loango Coast ivories were experts at appealing to the foreign clients who bought carved tusks, such as this one, as souvenirs of their time in Africa. Pictured in a late 19th century postcard, a group of carvers demonstrates their familiarity with foreign fashions. Although the scenes do not represent a continuous narrative, they progress like a series of postcard images. Artists like Boange and others developed a novel format for their clients to preserve memories of life on the Loango Coast.

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Stop 8

Gallery 244

Amadou Bamba Praying on the Waters

Speaker

Amsatou Mbacke

Student

Washington University, St. Louis

Hello, I'm Amsatou Mbacke, a student from Washington University in St. Louis and a member of the community advisory board for the *Narrative Wisdom and African Arts* exhibition.

Today, I have the honor of sharing with you two remarkable pieces by Senegalese artist Gora Mbengue, depicting my ancestor Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba Mbacke, a revered spiritual leader and the founder of the Mouride Brotherhood in Senegal.

The painting, *Amadou Bamba Praying on the Waters*, created in 1998, captures Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba in a moment of profound spiritual devotion. Clad in white robes, symbolizing purity and peace, he is seen in deep prayer, holding prayer beads. This image encapsulates his unwavering commitment to God and the spiritual tranquility he radiated. Surrounding him are figures representing followers, one kneeling in respect and the other flying. To me, this symbolizes the spiritual elevation and guidance Bamba provided to his disciples. The teapot and sandals at his side suggest humility and simplicity, essential values in his teachings.

The painting, *Amadou Bamba and Kneeling Devotees*, from the early 1970s, presents Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba standing tall, with a book in one hand and prayer beads in the other, emphasizing his dual role as both a spiritual guide and an educator. Behind him, followers bow in prayer, illustrating the profound respect and influence he commanded. The fence in the background could signify the protective and guiding role Bamba played

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in his community's spiritual journey.

Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba's legacy is deeply embedded in Senegalese culture, celebrated for his spiritual leadership, resilience, and nonviolent resistance against French colonial rule. His teachings of hard work, humility, and devotion to God guide the Mouride Brotherhood. For me, these paintings are a profound connection to my heritage; both my great-grandfathers were his children. I think carrying his last name is an immense honor, reminding me of his values. Being part of the Mouride community allows me to live these principles daily, fostering a deep spiritual connection and belonging. These artworks capture his enduring legacy and are a visual representation of my roots and life principles. They are a testament to the destiny shaped by Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba's teachings and the healing his legacy continues to provide.

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Stop 9

Gallery 246

Drum (nkan)

Speaker

Kwasi Ampene

Professor

Tufts University

Hello, my name is Kwasi Ampene. I'm a professor of ethnomusicology at Tufts University.

This particular drum is a Fante Asafo *twene*. And by Asafo twene, what we mean is one of those drums that are used in warrior organizations. Before the colonial times, in the days of interethnic warfare, these groups were very important to the military campaign. And the Akan people, they have all kinds of military setup. In fact, they had advanced military setup even before Europeans set foot in the gulf of what was then called the Gulf of Guinea. The Fante, the coastal Fante people in present day Ghana, they've kept the tradition and, you know, vital part of the political setup in every Fante community. So, the Asafo group is where you will find these type of drums.

Most times there will be the leading drum, and then there will be other supporting drums. This particular drum, the way I see it, because of the size, I'm thinking is one of those supporting drums. Because the leading drums in Asafo tend to be slightly bigger than this, and they also come with a strap, a shoulder strap. When we talk of the Asafo, the drum is the central focus. At the end of the day, you can look at the drum as a spiritual essence of the Asafo. And there are all kinds of rituals associated with the drums. When they are in action, when they are performing any Asafo, they sing songs, in these days of peaceful times without war, where there will be festivals which are dramatizing history. When the Asafo group shows up—and in one Fante town, there can be as many as 10—and when they show up, they do sing; they do chant. Interestingly, a

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company is singing, but there are instances where the drum itself will call for a certain way. Unless you know what is going on, you know, you might think it's just singing going on, but sometimes the call is given by the drum, the lead drum; it will say something, and the people will respond. So we have the drum language, which is nonverbal, and then there's the verbal, choral response. The communicative aspect the drum will call, if they need to call and assemble, is this Asafo twene that will play, and then the members of that particular group will come from wherever they might be. Asafo twene are unique to Asafo groups; they will never take that drum out and use it in another situation.

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Stop 10

Gallery 247

Fortune Tellers 3: Sign Up to be a Man

Speaker

Lawrence Lemaana

Artist

Johannesburg, South Africa

My name is Lawrence Lemaana. I am a South African artist living and working in Johannesburg.

I am also an art lecturer in the visual arts department at the University of South Africa (UNISA). I teach and work with fellow artist Mary Sibande as founding members of a mentorship program for emerging artists in South Africa, which we called Occupying the Gallery.

Fortune Teller 3 [(sign up to be a man)] is an embroidery and appliqué *khanga* textile, created along with a series of works for a 2008 solo exhibition titled *Fortune Telling in Red, Black and White*.

A *khanga* or *leso* is a rectangular multipurpose cloth, often functioning as a wearable communicative device. This multicolor wearable object often comprises of idioms that are presented on the textile as graphic texts, and these idioms are supplemented by visual illustrations. The text and graphic images are framed by a patterned elaborate border. The combination of image, idiom, and illustration in each *khanga* become expressive metaphors and are coded language. The coded language expresses what cannot be said vocally.

The rectangular shape and design of the *khanga* textiles are reminiscent of ubiquitous red, black, and white newspaper-headline posters that are found in urban settings.

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Beyond announcing, in shorthand, news stories in the newspaper, the headlines are often playfully poetic or seriously idiomatic.

During an infamous rape trial, and under cross-examination in court, the then-deputy president of South Africa, Jacob Zuma, as his defense said that his accuser, Khwezi, was wearing a khanga. Zuma claimed that he interpreted this garment communicated and signified “consent.”

The silhouette of the suited figure in the work was an appropriated image of Jacob Zuma that was lifted from a newspaper article. It was then scanned and transformed into a graphic stencil. The stencil was traced onto textile and embroidered on to the larger khanga.

Through this work, I probe into visual signifiers. Probing African masculinity through processes associated with femininity, acts of appropriation that transition of found objects into conceptual artworks. I explored the use of khanga textiles. Red, black, and white are spiritually charged colors within the South African spiritual cosmology. They also signal transition of phases, for example, are applied to youth who are going through initiation from boyhood to manhood.

In South Africa, khangas are wearable textiles worn by genderless spiritual diviners called *Sangomas* and *Inyangas*. Their spirituality is signified by the red, black, and white color scheme, with each color being associated with ambiguity, spiritual transition, and in-betweenness.

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Stop 11**Gallery 247**

To Revolutionary Type Love: Brazil

Speaker

Elyse Schaeffer

Research Assistant

Saint Louis Art Museum

Hello, my name is Elyse Schaeffer, and I am a research assistant at the Saint Louis Art Museum.

Women on the Swahili coast began wearing *khanga* cloths, like this one, in the late 19th century. At that time, as still today, clothing was chosen to indicate social status and demonstrate personal style. In Zanzibar, a group of islands off the coasts of Tanzania and Kenya, khangas became a popular choice for free women after slavery was abolished in 1897. Enslaved people were not allowed to wear more than one piece of cloth, nor were they permitted to wear head coverings or shoes. Free people in the region began to assert their autonomy through clothing. Purchasing a khanga imported from India required economic independence, while covering one's head with a khanga showed the wearer was an observant Muslim. The khanga also symbolized a woman's status as Swahili, a burgeoning ethnic identity that coalesced primarily around a person's status as formerly enslaved. As "Swahili" expanded to include anyone in the region who speaks Kiswahili and is Muslim, so too did the popularity of khangas expand.

In addition to indicating social status, khangas played a role in interpersonal communication, particularly through creative deployment of the khanga's *jina*, or name. This brief line of text—here translating to "music is my life, and you're my dancing shoes," usually takes the form of a proverb, song lyric, aphorism, or line of poetry. The phrases are often intended to communicate a piece of wisdom, making them popular

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wedding gifts. In Kenya, khangas play a central role in wedding ceremonies to this day.

Traditions like this are not available to all couples, however. Consensual same-sex relationships have been punishable by up to 14 years of imprisonment in Kenya since 2003. This khanga was designed by the late, Nairobi-based artist Kawira Mwirichia in 2017. Her goal was to create a series of khangas representing each country in the world, each with a piece of that nation's queer history. In this way, Mwirichia hoped to include LGBTQIA+ people in love and marriage traditions represented by the khanga even in places where they're marginalized.

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