



Decorative Arts, Design History, Material Culture

**SIGHTLINES on PEACE, POWER, AND PRESTIGE: METAL ARTS IN AFRICA
BUILDS A CONVERSATION BETWEEN HISTORIC AND CONTEMPORARY WORKS FROM
AFRICA AND THE AFRICAN DIASPORA TO DECONSTRUCT HOW WE MAKE MEANING AROUND
AFRICAN MATERIAL CULTURE IN A POST-COLONIAL WORLD**

Exhibition Includes Historic African Objects and Works by Living Artists

*Radcliffe Bailey, Sharif Bey, Sammy Baloji, Lubaina Himid, Bronwyn Katz, Kapwani Kiwanga,
Abigail Lucien, Tsedaye Makonnen, Otobong Nkanga, Julia Phillips, Zohra Opoku,
Nari Ward, and Amanda Williams*

*Innovative Exhibition Design by Architecture Firm AD-WO
Fosters New Associations and Catalyzes Dialogue Between Objects*

SIGHTLINES on Peace, Power, and Prestige: Metal Arts in Africa

On view September 29–December 31, 2023

This fall Bard Graduate Center will present *SIGHTLINES on Peace, Power, and Prestige: Metal Arts in Africa*, bringing together African metal arts dating predominantly from the 19th and early 20th centuries with contemporary works by artists from Africa and the African diaspora to catalyze a shift in the interpretation and understanding of African art and material culture. Through its design and curation, *SIGHTLINES* challenges long-held conventions of keeping African historic and contemporary works separate and siloed, and instead puts them in relationship with each other by creating literal and metaphorical ‘sightlines.’

The exhibit features large-scale sculptures, photography, weavings, metal work, and multi-media installations by contemporary makers Radcliffe Bailey, Sharif Bey, Lubaina Himid, Bronwyn Katz, Kapwani Kiwanga, Abigail Lucien, Tsedaye Makonnen, Otobong Nkanga, Julia Phillips, Zohra Opoku, Nari Ward, and Amanda Williams, as well as the US premiere of photographer Sammy Baloji’s documentary film *Of the Moon and Velvet*, about metal extraction in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The more than 140 historic works on view include staffs and figures from the Mande smiths of Mali; regalia of the Edo chiefs of Nigeria; sacred objects of the Tusian, Gan, and Lobi peoples of Burkina Faso; ceremonial swords, gold weights, and personal adornment of the Akan people of Ghana; currencies, ceremonial staffs, and weaponry from Congo, as well as a broad range of other extraordinary works in metal.

The exhibition installation, designed by architecture firm AD-WO, provokes conversations between the past and present with a layout that maps ‘sightlines’ between the historic and contemporary objects, and between makers, users, and viewers. Eschewing traditional display conventions, a series of long walls unites the galleries on each floor. The historic metal works are mounted by theme on platforms of varying height within the walls, which facilitate unexpected associations to form among objects from vastly different cultures, geographies, and time periods. The contemporary works will be installed outside of the walls, enabling visitors to view them both in individually and through the transparent plexiglass of the long walls, creating constantly shifting associations with the historic objects as one moves through the galleries. The work of AD-WO, founded by Emanuel Admassu and Jen Wood, was

exhibited in *Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America* at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 2021 and will be featured at the Venice Biennale Architettura 2023. The firm's practice is committed to design that reimagines the sociopolitical dynamics of space and its contexts.

"With this exhibition we want to destabilize accepted ways of seeing and thinking about these objects, and reveal how they tell continuous, interrupted, and interlacing stories of the issues, ideas, and experiences that communities from Africa and the African Diaspora have lived and are grappling with today," said **Drew Thompson**, associate professor at Bard Graduate Center and curator of *SIGHTLINES on Peace, Power, and Prestige: Metal Arts in Africa*. "The role AD-WO and the living artists play in this exploration is essential to drawing out the nuanced, rich history around these objects and the ways in which they continue to influence and impact our contemporary understanding of identity and the world at large today. We also want to engage with the discussion surrounding reparation and restitution of African art objects, which is not restricted to the current moment but was foundational to the making and use of metal objects on the continent and in the Diaspora across centuries and geographies."

Exhibition Themes

- **Extraction** The exhibition begins by considering the process of procuring metal from the earth. This section explores the removal of resources from the African continent, the mostly unpaid labor involved in extraction, and the various concepts that can be 'extracted' from the finished metal works—such as status, spirituality, and lineage—and how they continue to change over time. The contemporary works in this section include Otobong Nkanga's *Double Plot*, which documents how mining scars both the land and the body, while Lubaina Himid's *Drown Orchard: Secret Boatyard* explores the maritime trade of African objects as it relates to a sense of cultural "otherness."
- **Speculative Architecture** Objects in this area reveal how people physically constructed space on the African continent, as well as how those associations have been lost or misinterpreted over time. This section challenges the notion that we can understand historical objects once they are removed from their original context. Kapwani Kiwanga's *Sisal #3* and *White Gold II* examine the economic and geographical impact of the *Agave sisalana* plant, a crop introduced by German colonizers in the late 19th century; Radcliffe Bailey's *Ebo's Landing* and *Compute* recontextualize the history and trauma of the trans-Atlantic slave trade using memory-making practices like the photo album.
- **Currency** Several metal objects had a trade value ascribed to them, whether they were fashioned into physical currency or regarded as substitutes for exchange. This section prompts visitors to think about both the literal and metaphorical valuation of objects. Amanda Williams' *Semper Augustus Chicagous* serves as a cross-cultural metaphor, comparing the Dutch period of Tulipmania to discriminatory redlining practices in Chicago. Williams' work takes on further significance when seen in relation to the histories and mobility of African metalwork objects.
- **Devotion** The objects showcased in this section are of spiritual significance. While some were likely buried with the dead or used to create memorials, others speak to the influence of Christian missionaries in Ethiopia and elsewhere. Sharif Bey's *Louie Bones* and *Gold Bird #6* draw connections between personal adornment, spiritual and collective power, and natural archaeology; Nari Ward's *Swing Low* articulates the symbolic power of materials, memorializing those killed by lynching with a bronze cast of a tire studded with discarded shoes.

- **Tooling the Body** Focused on corporeality, this section features objects that have some relation to the human body, whether it was for adornment or related to physical labor, specifically in the extraction of metals from Africa. The contemporary works in this section are Juila Philips's *Observer II*, which emphasizes the acts of looking and being seen as bodily phenomena, while Zohra Opoku's *Bob's Cloth* visualizes Kente cloth as a marker of personal and familial identity.
- **Domesticity** Exploring the question of how meaning is constructed outside of the public view, the domestic objects exhibited here all relate to life in the home and private sphere. This section includes Abigail Lucien's *A Slow Burning Incandescence* and *Shadow Substance*, which explore how systems of colonization operate in the environment of the home, and Bronwyn Katz's *kx'orakx'ora (renew)*, an abstract installation relating metal, rust, and twine to notions of lived experience and healing.
- **Protection** This final section of the exhibition presents both functional and ceremonial weapons as well as spiritual totems. Tsedaye Makonnen's *Astral Sea III* and *Senait & Nahom. The Peacemaker & Comforter, 2019* are on view in this section, invoking the powerful symbol of the Ethiopian Coptic cross within monuments to victims of forced migration and state-sanctioned violence.

Additionally, Sammy Baloji's *Untitled* (#17 from the *Mémoire* series) and short film *Of the Moon and Velvet* will be exhibited on the gallery's fourth floor, connecting the colonial past and present of the Democratic Republic of Congo by documenting the impacts of mining and processing metallic ores on humans and nature.

SIGHTLINES builds on BGC's continuing legacy of presenting exhibitions and programs that spark contemporary dialogues with material objects and their histories by finding new ways of viewing and thinking about the world around us.

Exhibition Background

SIGHTLINES on Peace, Power, and Prestige: Metal Arts in Africa is a new expanded presentation of *Peace, Power, and Prestige: Metal Arts in Africa*, a touring exhibition curated by Susan Cooksey, former curator of African Art at the University of Florida's Harn Museum of Art. Support for *SIGHTLINES* is generously provided by the Scully Peretsman Foundation and other generous donors to Bard Graduate Center.

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About Bard Graduate Center

As the leading research institute in the United States dedicated to the study of decorative arts, design history, and material culture, Bard Graduate Center has pioneered the study of objects to better understand the cultural history of the material world. Offering experiences for scholars, students, and the general public alike, Bard Graduate Center is built on multidisciplinary study and the integration of research, graduate teaching, and public exhibitions. Since its founding in 1993, Bard Graduate Center has established a network of more than 400 alumni who work in leading museums, universities, and institutions worldwide to advance new ways of thinking about material culture. For more information, visit bgc.bard.edu.

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