

COSMOGONY

Zinsou, an African Art Collection



07.10.22 – 08.01.23

Emo de Medeiros, *Surturenture #4 (... and the Dreams of Thunder Permeate the String of Inflections)*, 2015, Zinsou Collection, courtesy of the artist c/o Pictoright 2022

English

COBRA
MUSEUM
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ART



Foreword

Zinsou, an African Art Collection, is the kick off to the 2023 Cobra jubilee year.

We are celebrating that 75 years ago, on November 8, 1948, the pan-European Cobra art movement was born. Freedom, experimentation, spontaneity, cross-pollination between different art forms, and the principle that in every person lives an artist were the core values of the manifesto presented and signed in Paris by the Dutch, Belgian, and Danish artists who comprised the movement. The Cobra movement paid attention to art that fell outside of European and academic art, a focus that became a focal point of the movement's philosophy.

The Cobra artists, alongside other artists in the 20th century, were fascinated by African art. Ancestral statues, masks and decorated utensils had ended up in European collections and museums through the imperialist colonisation process. The Cobra artists often collected African art themselves. A Eurocentric perspective and appreciation of art from Africa.

One huge difference between that time and now is that throughout the modern 54 African countries, individual art scenes and infrastructures supporting that art have emerged. The Zinsou Foundation collection founded in 2005 by the Zinsou family from Benin, is an example of this. Since the opening of their first museum in Cotonou in 2005 and later in Ouidah (both in Benin), the collection has grown to more than 1,000 works by 90 plus artists from 34 countries. While on one hand the collection provides a vision of contemporary African art for an African audience, the foundation also wants to be a springboard for the spread and recognition of contemporary African art in a broader context. That is the most important reason this exhibition has been brought to the Netherlands. And at the same time it is an opportunity to discover and enjoy the spontaneity, liveliness, imagination, and creativity of the works in this exhibition.

We are immensely grateful to our partners in this project for their support: Marie-Cécile Zinsou and her team from the Zinsou Foundation; the team of Montpellier Contemporain (MO.CO.) in France where the exhibition first appeared in 2021; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Dutch embassy in Benin; Le Grand Cru with the dance group Walô from Benin; De Balie in Amsterdam; the Afrovibes festival; Black Achievement Month; Cinema Amstelveen; Pop Podium P60; Amstelland Library and the bookstore Libris Venstra; Art and Culture STIP.

Thanks to the support of the municipality of Amstelveen, the VriendenLoterij, our own Cobra Founders and Cobra Business Club, with a special thanks to Business Club member KEIM for sponsoring the beautiful paint for the exhibition, and our Cobra Friends and Donors. They all enable us to offer exhibitions and programs close to home. And last, but not least, without the commitment of my colleagues, the realization of these projects would be unimaginable. Thank you.

Stefan van Raay, Director, Cobra Museum of Modern Art, Amstelveen



Cosmogony

Zinsou, an African Art Collection

In the words of founder Marie-Cécile Zinsou, the Zinsou art collection, originating from Benin, was developed to “have African countries actively involved in the creation of their own art and to exhibit it for a local audience.” The rapid development of this initiative has ensured that African artists, and the contemporary art they create, gain more and more visibility on the world stage. This recognition has expanded opportunities and room for a new generation of artists who find innovative ways to synthesis tradition and globalization in contemporary context to create their work.

In 2021, Montpellier Contemporain (MO.CO.) hosted *Cosmogonies. Zinsou, une collection africaine*. The exhibition ran in parallel with the Africa2020 Season, organized by the Institut Français, which boasted a rich and varied program in the fields of arts, science, and entrepreneurship. For the first time in Europe, a selection of more than 130 works of art (including sculptures, photographs, paintings, and installations) from the art collection of the Zinsou family were on display. The collection, which began in 2005 when the first museum opened in Cotonou, Benin now consists of more than 1,000 works of art by about 90 artists, from 34 countries.

The title ‘Cosmogony’ refers to the study of the creation of the cosmos. This concept leads to several themes in this exhibition: ‘Alphabet and Codes’, ‘Identity and Memory’, ‘Life as it Comes’, ‘Pose and Staging’, ‘Critical Reflection’, ‘Mythology and Symbols’ and ‘Metamorphoses’. The work of Cyprien Tokoudogba is a fine example of these themes in practice. His paintings link history, tradition, mythology, and customs in formal minimalism. In addition to established names such as Frédéric Bruly Bouabré, Romuald Hazoumè, and Chéri Samba, there is also attention in the exhibition for young artists, creating a complete picture of the modern influences that shape contemporary art.

Building on the French exhibition, the Cobra Museum of Modern Art welcomes this treasure chest of contemporary African art to give the Dutch public an opportunity to find inspiration in the creativity of the African continent. We proudly follow the example of Cobra artists in their fascination with African cultures, and hope to create further awareness in the Netherlands of Africa’s vibrant, contemporary art scene.



Alphabet and Codes

1 Frédéric Bruly Bouabré (Ivory Coast, 1923 - 2014)

This work of Frédéric Bruly Bouabré is a thought experiment that calls to mind a catalogue of both real and spiritual worlds. He made hundreds of drawings, equal in size, using coloured pencils and ballpoint pens. To order and name his drawings, he invented a unique alphabet of over 440 monosyllabic icons to represent linguistic sounds. These symbols were inspired by the geometric figures found on stones in a village of the Bété, an ethnic people of the Ivory Coast. Bouabré uses this writing system to reproduce stories, texts, and poems from their tradition.

2 Esther Mahlangu (South-Africa, 1935)

Esther Mahlangu's artistic journey begins with references to the Ndebele traditions. Women of the Ndebele ritually paint the exteriors of their homes with bright, abstract motifs based on geometric shapes from their people's rich history. The murals are believed to protect the Ndebele people from evil spirits, but also distinguishes the woman from each other by highlighting their skills and knowledge. This painting ritual act is a rite of passage for Ndebele women and initiates them into the clan. The art of the Ndebele also appeared as a form of resistance in the wake of the Boer War of 1883, a time in which the Boer enslaved Ndebele people and stole their land.

3, 4 Emo de Medeiro (Benin, 1979)

The *Surturentures* series uses the *appliqué fabric* technique, a craft that's been practiced since the 18th century in the Kingdom of Dahomey court, a kingdom (1610 - 1894) in the south of today's West African Republic of Benin. The artist makes drawings which include icons from the Internet, and symbols from the world of video games. These drawings are arranged in numerical composition and scanned. Beninese artists then craft colourful fabrics from the patterns in the tradition of the royal cloths of Abomey (former capital of Dahomey).

5 Kwesi Owusu-Ankomah (Ghana, 1956)

The painted signs and symbols found in this work are a combination of Adinkras (visual symbols of the Akan and Baoulé people from Ghana that represent concepts or sayings) and pictorial signs from China and other countries. Bodies stand out as though they're about to merge into the framework. The body here adopts the semiotics of classicism, but it is elongated, viewed from behind and above, as though it were a study. This also creates a kind of body grammar in which the blending of body and symbol creates a universal vision that is simultaneously coded and clear, going beyond the peculiarities of a single culture.



Identity and Memory

6 – 9 Malick Sidibé (Mali, 1936 – 2016)

Malick Sidibé began as an assistant to a French photographer before opening *Studio Malick* in 1962, in the Bagadadji neighbourhood of Mali's capital, Bamako. As the souvenir photo market grew, he attended parties and soirées to take photos that he then hung from his shop window to get the subjects to buy prints of themselves. The Malian youth at this time were discovering Western music and fashion, and *Studio Malick* became an essential part of this community as it built its identity.

10 – 19 Ishola Akpo (Ivory Coast, 1983)

Ishola Akpo's *AGBARA Women* project was created during his residency at the Zinsou Foundation, and for the subsequent exhibition in 2020. The project consists of three forms: *AGBARA women* (photography), *Traces of a Queen* (collage), and *Manifesto* (tapestry). For this work, the artist did extensive research on the queens of Dahomey, Senegal, Angola, Ghana, Nigeria, Ivory Coast, and Europe. He sees these women as “warriors who have fought for (their) survival”. From photomontage and studio photography to embroidery, he strives to restore these women's queenly status from historical erasure, or erasure they may be experienced in their day-to-day life. The dark draperies of *Manifesto* are embroidered with black thread, revealing words from traditional African languages such as Asanté, Swahili, Yoruba, and Zulu, to trumpet the resistance of these warrior queens.

20, 21 Pauline Guerrier (France, 1990)

During her residency at the Zinsou Foundation in 2018, Pauline Guerrier created a series of sculptures entitled *Ivory Fleece*. Fascinated by the photos of J.D. 'Okhai Ojeikere, she began to see how the hairstyles, when viewed from behind, became almost sculptural in appearance. To create her own sculptural 'embroidery' works inspired by this perception, Guerrier used hairdressing materials to reveal the complexity of braids on a large scale. In doing so, the artist also highlights the significance of different hairstyles, such as those worn for coming-of-age events, or to highlight one's ethnicity.

22, 23 Seydou Keïta (Mali, 1921 – 2001)

Seydou Keïta is considered the founder of Malian photography. He got his first camera at the age of fourteen and went on to work as a professional photographer from the Malian Independence in 1962 to 1977. His portraits, mostly shot in natural light, were assignments, but which the artist was able to choose accessories and poses along with the model. In addition to the intimate and documentarian testimonies he made of the of Malian society in the 1950s, Seydou Keïta is known for his highly technical style, in which he implements a simple softness and his own stamp of identity in each photo.

24 – 27 J. D. 'Okhai Ojeikere (Nigeria, 1930 – 2014)

J.D. 'Okhai Ojeikere began his career in photography at the age of nineteen. He worked for the Nigerian Ministry of Information, as well as in television, before opening *Foto Ojeikere*, his own studio. From 1968 to 1999, he dedicated his camera's focus on African hairstyles. This led to an oeuvre of over 1000 photographs, capturing his models from behind and sometimes in profile, giving an sculptural dimension to their hair that can only be described as a sort of storytelling. Ojeikere chose his subject for its representations of beauty, the transience of style, and to capture Nigerian culture.

28 Joël Andrianomearisoa (Madagascar, 1977)

This compelling installation by Joel Andrianomearisoa recounts the emotional back-and-forth caused by an encounter and its subsequent dissolution. From these experiences, only memories and echoes remain. The objects in the installation were bought in Sé, a village in southwestern Benin known for its traditional pottery. The artist stayed there while preparing his exhibition in Ouidah in 2017. *The poem of the beloved (Le poème du bien-aimé)*, is a reference to *The Song of the Unloved (Chanson du mal-aimé)* by French-speaking writer and poet Guillaume Apollinaire. This is a melancholic installation teetering between light and darkness; a work from which the pottery of Sè is elevated, and in which the voices of French actress Jeanne Moreau and Brazilian singer Maria Bethânia resound.



Joël Andrianomearisoa, *Le Poème du bien-aimé (The poem of the beloved)*, 2017, Photo: © Yannick Folly

Ouidah
Always begins
With a breath
With a song
That crosses
the world
A beat
of the heart
To infinity



Malick Sidibé, *Les 3 Apprentis Fumeurs (The 3 Apprentice Smokers)*, 1974, Zinsou collection, courtesy Galerie MAGNIN-A, Paris © Malick Sidibé

As Life Comes By

29 - 38 Kifouli Dossou (Benin, 1978)

Gèlèdé masks, inspired by the Yorùbá tradition, are characterized by a face with incised cheeks, surrounded by a headdress that depicts scenes from life, fables, or stories. For the presidential elections in Benin, the Zinsou Foundation asked the artist to make masks that illustrate the concerns of the Benin population. The ten masks presented here are the result. They paint a portrait of contemporary society in an ironical and naive way. The masks of Kifouli Dossou become, in their embrace of tradition and modernity, a vessel for the transference of history and rituals.

41 Adama Kouyaté (Mali, 1928 – 2020)

With Mali's liberation from French colonial rule as a background, Adama Kouyaté captures the pride and authenticity of his models while shooting in his studio. The photos take place somewhere between spontaneity and staging, with his models illuminated by a careful selection of props which refer to modern life, but also looks towards the future. The compositions of his photographs express the zeitgeist — Mali's rise as an independent country, and the optimism this created for the population.

42 - 48 Malick Sidibé (Mali, 1936 – 2016)

Even more in this series of portraits, the photos of Malick Sidibé evoke a time in which the atmosphere is full of the possibilities: emancipation, play, and celebration. It is also a representation of the country's readiness to embrace modernity. Motorcycles and mopeds are the central subjects around which the models pose.

49, 50 Sanlé Sory (Burkina Faso, 1943)

With the creation of his *Volta Photo studio*, Sanlé Sory wanted to create photography in the spirit of the Bobo-Dioulasso (Burkina Faso) who in the era after independence on 5 August 1960, was experiencing regained freedom and optimism. He has made numerous albums covers, including that for the Volta Jazz Band. For that shoot, a community was created in the studio, one of spontaneity and improvisation.

"I told them how to stand and what positions to take, but some of them wanted to do what they wanted, with their own pose and posture." Sanlé Sory

52 Jean Depara
(Angola, 1928 – Democratic Republic of Congo, 1997)

Jean Depara, a great photographer of the nights in Kinshasa, captures here the vitality of a newly emancipated youth in the bustle and warmth of the capital's bar dances. In this photo, the visage of General Charles de Gaulle can be seen woven into the fabric of the bench on which the dancers sit. The colonial past has become a motif, a setting on which the youth now sit.

53 In the early 1950s, young people in the townships of Kinshasa fell in love with the cowboy character — Western movies were the mainstay of Catholic missionaries in the film industry. Calling themselves "Bills" (a nod to their eponymous hero, Buffalo Bill), they formed gangs and adopted the nicknames, swagger, idioms, and language of the cowboys of the American West.

In an interview with *Revue Noire*, a magazine devoted to African contemporary art, Jean Loup Pivin and Pascal Martin Saint Leon (Jean Depara) created a description for another kind of cowboy envisioned in their work:

"Some free women who want to distance themselves from tradition, and wish to oppose the colonial establishment, want to go further in expressing their resistance and independence and become full-fledged 'Bills'. They are called the 'Billesses'. Although largely outnumbered by the "Bills," they participate in their same misdeeds and often act for them as swindlers in Kinshasa or Brazzaville. About ten 'Billesses' have been identified. Like men, they dress in cowboy outfits, their breasts pressed together to assert masculinity in this man's world."

54, 55 Cyprien Tokoudagba (Benin, 1939 – 2012)

Cyprien Tokoudagba devoted himself to transmitting the history and culture of his country through his art: mainly using the kings of Abomey and the Vodun religion as his cipher. Using established norms, he chooses and isolates his figures and motifs to recall the traditions, rites, and symbols that are interwoven into his country's rich history. In this series, he evokes the magnificence of the court by representing characters who accompany the king's every move. A procession is always opened by a herald of the king, the 'kpanlingan', who sounds the double gong (of the same name) to announce his arrival. Then come the 'wédoutô', the male and female dancers, which Cyprien Tokoudagba has depicted here.

56 - 59 Moké
(Democratic Republic of Congo, 1950 – 2001)

Moké ended up in Kinshasa, Congo, at the age of ten. There, he painted scenes on cardboard. His painting in 1965 of General Mobutu greeting the crowd on Independence Day gained him notoriety and led him being considered one of the founders of the 'popular Zairean painting'. Above all, Moké is an example of the 'painter-reporter', closely observing the daily life of Kinshasa and reporting back the events in his recognizable style of figures framed in black, precise compositions, and a playful approach to perspective. A visual chronicle of an era, Moké's figurative painting feature bar scenes, night-time parties, neighbourhood quarrels, and political events.



Posture and Staging

60 – 63 Samuel Fosso (Cameroon, 1962)

When he opened his own photography studio at the age of thirteen, Samuel Fosso, in addition to his commercial work, made self-portraits he originally intended to only share with his relatives. Gradually, this practice becomes the pretext for a more personal reflection on identity and stereotypes. Created for the 50th anniversary of a French clothing retailer, the *Tati* series marks his transition to colour photography and imagines, in self-portrait, some of the possible social types that the photographer embodies. These portraits, the ambiguity of which is reinforced by the fact that they are self-portraits, question the validity of our standards — the glasses that make the businessman and a golfer can also represent a gentleman farmer, while the liberated American woman poses as a movie star, and the bourgeoisie is disguised as a femme fatale.

64, 65 Omar Victor Diop (Senegal, 1980)

Omar Victor Diop is deeply involved in the contemporary African artistic scene and exhibits a vibrant mix of fashion, design, music, and lifestyle in his work. He creates portraits that tell the story of a multicultural and dynamic Senegalese youth, now integrated into a global movement. Each portrait is made in collaboration with the subject, who help the artist create a sense of identity through elements of decoration and clothing.

“I paint the portrait of a generation that positions the African city as a melting pot of contemporary creation, a place of exchange and production.”
Omar Victor Diop

66 Cyprien Tokoudagba (Benin, 1939 – 2012)

The kings and princes of the kingdom of Abomey act as inspiration for many paintings by Cyprien Tokoudagba. These royal figures tell a story which Tokoudagba is well familiar with, but here transformed. In this work, the prince is depicted as a man with one leg, which is how Tokoudagba has always seen him. The prince holds the moon and sun in his hands as symbols of the omnipotence of King Guezo, the King of Dahomey, which is today's Republic of Benin, from 1818 to 1859. The small gourds he wears on his arm, leg, and in his mouth represent the trappings of his occult power that make him invulnerable.

67 This painting shows a princess, the daughter of King Guezo. She is dressed in 41 loincloths and decorated with royal jewels. She wears two small silver horns on her head, the same worn by the Amazons as a symbol of their power and rank in the Dahomean army. The princess was only allowed to marry an officer from her father's army and lived in the palace with her children until her twentieth birthday.

68 **Pierre Bodo** (Democratic Republic of Congo, 1953 – 2015)

Pierre Bodo, along with Chéri Samba and Moké, is one of the leading figures of popular Zairean painting. The scenes in his paintings are populated by hybrid creatures. Sape is part of a series entitled *Sapeurs*, which is a reference to the *Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnalités Élégantes* (SAPE), an association of mood makers and elegant people who are a leading influencer in Congolese fashion. Pierre Bodo depicts the dandies of SAPE with bird heads and fantasy shoes in the shape of animals.

69 **Chéri Samba** (Democratic Republic of Congo, 1956)

Chéri Samba started out as an advertising painter like other members of the Kinshasa School. His paintings are distinguished by the almost systematic addition of texts, and the recurring appearance of the painter himself in his canvases. Chéri Samba offers a candid and militant view of the social problems he faces. In many paintings, he responds to the place of African art on the world stage and to the stereotypes that determine whether one belongs to a caste defined by Western standards.





Critical Distance

70 - 76 Romuald Hazoumè (Benin, 1962)

Romuald Hazoumè is an artist known for the diversity of his works. In his installations and sculptures, he often implements petrol cans used in the black market where petrol is imported from Nigeria (the *Kpayo*). The art of Hazoumè bears witness to traditions and customs and denounces the injustice done to the African continent, where the raw materials derived from the land do not benefit the population.

“How is it possible that we have such rich lands, and yet we are still so poor? How can we explain that outsiders who don’t have a quarter of our raw materials are the ones to come and help us? We have knowledge that goes back centuries—in all areas—and yet we imitate the whites and reproduce the models of others.” Romuald Hazoumè

77 - 80 Chéri Samba (Democratic Republic of Congo, 1956)

By immortalizing *The Fight of the Century*, the legendary boxing match between Mohamed Ali and George Foreman in 1974, Chéri Samba does much more than capture a sporting event. Nicknamed the “Rumble in the Jungle”, the sporting event took place in a tense political climate and serves as a manifesto during a time when Zaire finds itself under President Mobutu’s (reign between 1965 – 1997) politics of “Authenticité”. Before the match, Mohamed Ali became a representation of Pan-Africanism, while Foreman was turned into a villain. Seeing an opportunity, Mobutu offered the two boxers 5 million dollars to organize the match in Zaire. The event was watched by 80,000 spectators at the stadium, and 50 million live on television. Mohamed Ali won the match, and the Zairean people took to the streets to celebrate their confident, Pan-African champion.

84 Chéri Chérin (Democratic Republic of Congo, 1955)

Chéri Chérin is one of the most important representatives of Congolese popular painting. After creating commercial posters and murals, he devoted himself to figurative, narrative painting. His works present an image that is both critical and amused with a society in which excesses and abuses are excused by humour. Chéri Chérin, involved in the Sapeurs movement, (*Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnalités Élégantes*), Chéri Chérin defines himself as “Creative Highly Expressive Remarkable Incomparable Nonpareil” (C.H.E.R.I.N.)



85 Samuel Fosso (Cameroon, 1962)

The Chief (Who Sold Africa to the Settlers) alludes to the leaders and African tyrants who declared themselves legitimate. Using accessories such as animal skins and sunglasses, Samuel Fosso mocks power figures. Here, the image of Mobutu, former president of the Democratic Republic of Congo, is essential. Fosso also uses cultural and historical references to portray the role of African leaders and denounce the pre-colonial slave trade.

86 Ibrahim Mahama (Ghana, 1987)

Jute symbolizes the trade markets in Ghana where Ibrahim Mahama lives. Jute bags are used for the cocoa bean trade from Asia. The artist tears, sews and reassembles the fabric, thus forming a mark of identity. Both jute and specialty fabrics carry a history of exploitation and can symbolize the trade transactions and appropriations of the 18th and 19th centuries. Inspired by Africa, English and Dutch manufacturers have created original textile designs using a technique derived from Indonesian Batik. These were sold to the Ashanti, an ethnic group in southern Ghana. Many of these designs have become cultural treasures, given special names and meanings by the merchants of Central and West Africa. Through the transformation of materials, Mahama draws attention to the mechanisms related to a global economy and in particular to their socio-political dimension.

87 Sammy Baloji (Democratic Republic of Congo, 1978)

The *Secret Societies* installation highlights the links between exploitation and colonization by emphasizing their still visible traces. The letter on display was written by a Congolese agent of the Belgian secret service who testified to the existence of 'secret societies' that stand up against the occupation. The letter is accompanied by a photo of scarification (decorating human skin using a sharp object) proving the continuation of a practice banned by the settlers at the time. The medals reward the so-called "evolved" who give up their ancestral customs in favour of the settlers' way of life. The scarification is hammered into the copper plates, symbolizing the economic wealth of the Democratic Republic of Congo and the struggle for its exploitation.

88, 89 Gérard Quenum (Benin, 1971)

In an atmosphere of fear, Gérard Quenum takes a critical look at society and the political situation of the times with his paintings. In *The State of the World*, Quenum strives to represent international debates on peace and war, which he perceives as sterile and hypocritical, and where everyone defends their own interests. Self-taught and nurtured by the art he discovered in his own research (notably, Basquiat was an influence), Gérard Quenum's work is both thoughtful and instinctive, with a political awareness that strives for universal sensitivity.

90 Aston (Benin, 1964)

Aston recycles waste to create their versatile work, breathing new life into what we throw away to better address environmental catastrophe. The work *Catastrophe* consists of 2000 lighters, pliers, pens, pencils, reels, and pipes. These objects were recycled by the artist to take the form of small characters who seem to fight and rush towards the centre of the work, trying to reach the top (symbolized by an ear of corn). This allegory of Benin in 2050 is put in the spotlight by the artist who, with this expressive work, depicts the prophetic catastrophe of a rural exodus. He denounces the excesses of a system that starves the population, who are simply victims of a demographic explosion.



Mythologies and Symbols

91 Emo de Medeiros (Benin, 1979)

"The helmets of the Vodunaut series were born out of a fascination with shells, space travel, the future, and a question: what if the futurology of the future was based on Fâ divination? In the Vodun religion in Benin, shells are associated with the symbolism of travel (since they come from the Indian Ocean). They offer protection, good luck, and fertility, as well as wealth, and in some places they were used until the early 20th century as a means of payment. The Vodunaut contains video footage from four continents (Africa, America, Asia and Europe)." Emo de Medeiros

92 Cyprien Tokoudagba (Benin, 1939 – 2012)

"In the Vodun religion, the God Gou personifies justice, cosmic harmony, and absolute law. He controls the evolution and destiny of all creation. Gou represents duality: positive and negative, good and evil, life and death. He ensures transformation from one extreme to the other. Gou is the master of the alchemy necessary for the preparation of the philosopher's stone, the God of the arts, and especially of the blacksmiths. The name 'gou' (phallus, iron) symbolizes combativeness, virility, power, and sovereignty. The sword, an instrument of sovereign power and thus of justice, of creativity, which causes the transformation of nature, the conversion of forces, can become an object of violence, passion, and anger, hence the polarity of this god." Marc Monsia, in Vodoun, Introduction au panthéon vodoun, Cahiers de la Fondation Zinsou, 2007

93, 94 Lines and circles are two ways to represent the element of Water. The four elements – Water, Earth, Fire and Air – are found in many religions and myths. They refer to the four basic principles that serve creation and nourish and govern its evolution. They represent the four primordial aspects of God, known in the Fon (Benin language) by the term Yêhwe, or as the Tetragrammaton Y – E – W – H (each part of the divine name corresponds to the name of an element).

95 Lyndi Sales (South-Africa, 1973)

When Lyndi Sales placed a South African Airways boarding passes in her studio, she saw how some of the inscriptions faded and how unstable the paper became under the glare of the sun. These documents, symbols of a suspended journey, seem imbued with the energy of a passenger. The artist sees in it the transition from life to death, from the physical to the spiritual realm, and what the mind goes through between these destinations. This is undoubtedly an autobiographical reference—the artist's father tragically disappeared in a 1987 plane crash in Helderberg, South Africa—but also of universal significance. *Scattered* could eventually fade completely, symbolizing everyone's transition into the invisible.

96 Jérémy Demester (France, 1988)

In 2015, Jérémy Demester went to Ouidah and immersed himself in the Vodun universe. This spawned a series of works in which he reused the textile from Beninese merchants' parasols, diverting them from their primary function in order to transcend it. Unfolded, they evoke the shape of a sun, in reference to Amun, the Egyptian sun god, symbol of life on Earth, in the sky and beyond, and of fertility. Houeda refers to the town of Ouidah, a Beninese town considered the cradle of the traditional Vodun religion.

97, 98 Romuald Hazoumè (Benin, 1962)

These paintings, which are among the Zinsou family's first purchases, refer to the prophetic art form Fâ. The paintings contain characters made with mineral, vegetable, or animal elements (such as kaolin or indigo). These symbols reflect the Yorùbá cosmos. The Yorùbá are one of the largest ethnic groups in West Africa.

"It was Fâ who showed me myself," said Romuald. *"It is a complex art that translates the Yorùbá way of thinking around the world, the way they affirm their presence in the cosmos. I come from this culture, and the fact that I understand its essence, through contact with this universe, changed my view of art and creation."* Romuald Hazoumè

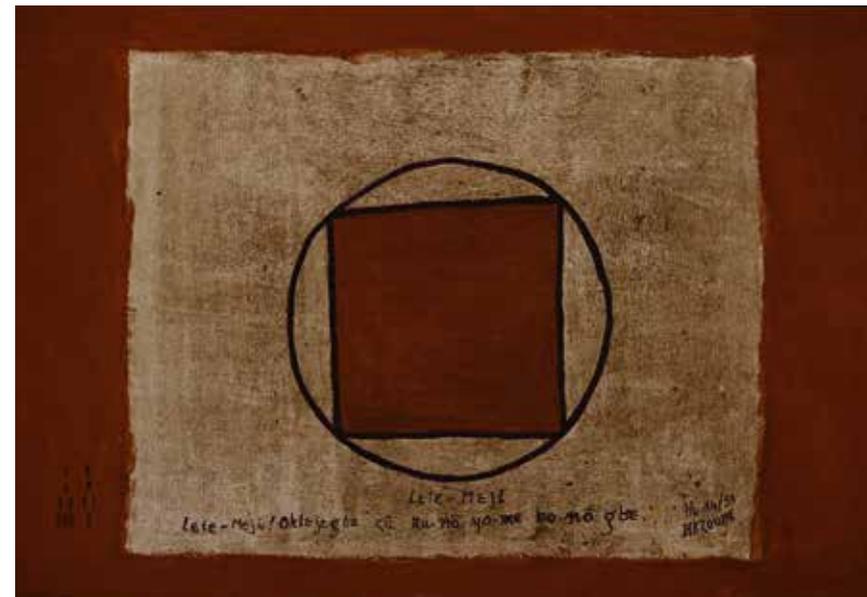
99 - 108 George Lilanga (Tanzania, 1934 – 2005)

The painter, sculptor, and engraver George Lilanga takes inspiration from the legends and beliefs of Makondé mythology and integrates them into a personal cosmogony populated by exuberant creatures. These sculptures and drawings depict mythological Shetani figures; evil and good-natured spirits, imbued with playfulness. The brightly coloured characters, liberated from their story into a kind of immediacy, can be compared to the work of artists such as Keith Haring. For example, the Shetani move in a colourful half-spiritual, half-human world that seems to mimic everyday life.

109 Sadek Rahim (Algerije, 1971)

For Sadek Rahim, the carpet is both the most common domestic element in Algerian interiors, but also the bearer of a legend — the flying carpet. He associates this with the departure for Europe, an Eldorado that turns out to be just a mirage, as improbable as a flying carpet. In *Missed*, Sadek Rahim has carved floral motifs into the carpet. For the artist, this tapestry is a metaphor for a country that is losing its way, abandoned by its youth in search of a more promising place elsewhere. The roses have perished and only the outlines remain to mark their absence.

Romuald Hazoumè, *Lete-meji*, 1993, Zinsou Collection, c/o Pictoright 2022





Metamorphoses

110 - 114 Seyni Awa Camara (Senegal, 1945)

Seyni Awa Camara, an enigmatic personality, is said to have disappeared into the forest with her brothers as a child and, according to legend, was led by the ghosts she met there. Today, the famous 'potter of Casamance' still lives in her village in Senegal. She never stops sculpting, creating thousands of characters, letting her imagination run wild. These sculptures of non-human beings with human characteristics are imbued with a certain mystique, and evoke both motherhood and the Senegalese animistic tradition, where souls or spirits exist not only in humans and animals, but also plants, stones or natural phenomena like thunder.

115 - 116 Zanele Muholi (South-Africa, 1972)

In her series *Somnyama Ngonyama* (meaning 'Praised be the Black Lioness' in Zulu), Zanele Muholi creates contrasting self-portraits, with eyes full of subdued and silent emotions, yielding powerful, sober characters. The make-up and some insignificant, sometimes unusual accessories, transform a self-portrait into a universal one — dramatic, with characters from different exploited cultures. The blackness of Zanele Muholi's skin expresses a personal reappraisal of black identity, in contrast to the wide-spread stereotypes.

117 - 119 Gérard Quenum (Benin, 1971)

In the *The Shadows* series, Quenum's highly expressive silhouettes reflect the artist's emotions as he paints them. Here, Quenum's colour palette is reduced to just black. His figures grow and unfold against a blank background. The mysterious black shape evokes the anonymous presence of what eludes us—a religious belief or a forgotten mind, confirming this missing something's irrational power.

120 Cyprien Tokoudagba (Benin, 1939 – 2012)

For this painting, Tokoudagba was inspired by the works of Abomey artisans: the motifs surrounding the king's spirit are fabric motifs. The throne and the pipe are royal attributes. The ghost holds an owl in his hand, an important animal within 'witchcraft'. The owl sometimes announces death because he is the 'vehicle' of wizards. The artist chose to put the owl in the ghost's hand to emphasize that King Guezo belongs to the occult hierarchy.

121 According to oral tradition, Princess Aligbonon, lost in the forest, entered an alliance with a male panther named Agassou. The male child that emerged from this encounter is the mythical ancestor still venerated in Abomey. King Guezo, who reigned from 1818 to 1858, kept the royal emblem of the ancestors and made it a protected spirit. King Guezo is considered a great leader and is said to be the creator of the pierced jar emblem, which symbolizes a call to unity. It is one of the official emblems of the Republic of Benin.

122 *Aziza* is a forest spirit. When he wants to reveal himself, he presents himself with human qualities but with certain idiosyncrasies. In this painting, Cyprien Tokoudagba has depicted Aziza with the body of a man and a tree for its head. In this case, he is dressed in a raffia skirt. According to Tokoudagba, all of Aziza's 'hairs' are both living and dying. The 'hair' is sold at a high price because it is used in some traditional medicines, but to pull them out you must fight with the spirit and defeat him.

123 Béhanzin also bears a second strong name: 'axosu gbowele' which means 'the shark king'. His anger will stir the waves and keep the French ships from docking at Cotonou. It shows that he is determined to vigorously defend Dahomey, like his ancestors, and to ensure that the laws are followed.

124 This painting depicts an emblem of King Tégbéssou (reign 1740 to 1774): the buffalo, dressed in a tunic and leaning on a walking stick called a 'kpoguè'. This walking stick was a royal attribute decorated with princely bracelets called 'maholé'. One of Tégbéssou's mottos is, "Nothing can force the clothed buffalo to take off his tunic". On the day of his accession to the throne, according to tradition, the new king had to put on his father's tunic, the symbol of the transferred power. In legend, Tégbéssou's rivals lined the tunic with 'kpahozo' (nettles) to force him to take it off, but he did not take it off. In doing so, he proved to his enemies that he had come to power despite their efforts and that he intended to keep it.

125 This work represents a motto of King Béhanzin, who reigned from 1889 to 1894. The tree symbolizes the king. As the tree stands upright and continues to grow, despite its gnarled and leafless appearance, so the king, the target of countless attacks, victim of conspiracies, and threatened by the French, resist again and again. He still stands, invincible.

126 The name of this deity is derived from English: *mamy* for mother, and *wata* for water. *Mamiwata* means 'the mother of waters'. She lives in the depths of the sea and commands countless water nymphs. She has many riches (silver, jewels, and gold) that are coveted by the people she gives them to, but only under the conditions laid down in a pact. She surrounds herself with snakes that she wraps around herself. Her cult is quite widespread. As a ghost, she can take any form she pleases—in this case a male character with three heads.

127 King Béhanzin (or Gbehanzin) began his reign in 1890, the same year that Dahomey became a French protectorate. The French won an important victory in 1892, after which the king had to flee. The king is said to have received magical support during his two-year flight. Betrayed by his half-brother, he was eventually deported to Martinique and then to Algeria, where he died in 1906. One of the king's mottos was "The world has the egg the earth desires". The coming of the king is therefore an event that can only bear fruit if the earth, nature, is favourable to him.

128 - 130 Rotimi Fani-Kayode (Nigeria, 1955 – Verenigd Koninkrijk, 1989)

Between the erotic and the mysterious, the black bodies in Fani-Kayode's 'paintings' transcends cultural and sexual taboos. Raised and educated on three continents, the artist enriches his work with his own experiences and confronts icons of religious Western art with traditional Yorùbá culture, questioning a post-colonial world. Thus, the black body, the main subject of his photographs, frees itself from Western imagination and conventional perceptions and takes on the role of a figure of desire.

131 - 134 Léonce Raphaël Agbodjelou (Benin, 1965)

The *Demoiselles de Porto-Novo* series imposes a strangely intimate atmosphere on its subjects, a timelessness characterized by an ambiguous nostalgia, enhanced by the title, which refers to Pablo Picasso's famous painting, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)*, 1907. Although this series evokes cultural appropriation, the main subject remains the artist's personal relationship with his country, culture, and traditions. This photo series, made in his parental home, records the naked bodies of these masked women in a colonial history.

The exhibition *Cosmogony. Zinsou, an African Art Collection* is supported by:



Collaborating partners:



Opening *Cosmogony. Zinsou, an African Art Collection*

06.10.2022

Talkshow De Balie x Cobra
from 17:00h – 18:00h

De Balie organises a table discussion led by moderator Rokhaya Seck with (inter)national guests: Marie-Cécile Zinsou, Rachele Agbossou, Joël Andrianomearisoa, Alex Dounsa, John Leerdam and Stefan van Raay engage with the audience deeper into the exhibition and the creation of the Zinsou collection.

Dance party
from 20.00h – 23.00h

DJ collective Afrolosjes is coming to Amstelveen. On the exclusive opening night of the exhibition *Cosmogony*, this collective will provide a Afrobeat night at the museum.

Who's curating who? Debate at De Balie

08.10.2022 om 17:00h

The Eurocentric view is dominant in the contemporary art world. Who decides what is art and what is not? And what criteria do European curators apply to select art from the African continent? During the Black Achievement Month, artists, curators and critics discuss the representation of contemporary African art in Europe.

Dance performance Bénin Vibrations

14.10.2022 & 15.10.2022

19:30h – 20:30h exhibition visit
20:30h – 21:45h dance performance

In honour of the exhibition *Cosmogony* and Black Achievement Month, Compagnie Walô visits the Cobra Museum. This Benin dance company is led by Rachele Agbossou, a dance pioneer in Benin who uses dance to empower girls and women and raise awareness about human rights in a broader sense. In three choreographies, collectively titled *Bénin Vibrations*, the modernity diversity and authenticity of the company is showcased. The performance is created in collaboration with Le Grand Cru, which is known for the training and performances it creates with collectives from non-western cultures.

Cobra Pakt Uit!

21 t/m 23.10.2022 | 25 t/m 27.11.2022
16 t/m 18.12.2022

Every month from Friday to Sunday an edition of *Cobra Pakt Uit!* takes place at the museum, with many activities like; guided tours; lectures; performances; workshops - all linked to our exhibitions.

Camping Cobra

22.10.2022 – start 19:00h
23.10.2022 – end 09:00h

Spending a night at the Cobra Museum and sleeping among the art? Who wouldn't want that! It is possible again during *Camping Cobra 2022*. Parents are welcome accompanied by at least 1 child (4+).

Agenda

Experimental painting workshop for adults

26.11.2022 from 13:00h – 15:30h

Get to know Cobra artists such as Karel Appel and Corneille and be inspired by the artworks from our own collection on display in the Cobra Museum. The artists of the Cobra movement were guided by the material they worked with, by its spontaneity and unpredictability. This is how we will work in this workshop. What story or theme does a particular work of art tell you? Either way, the final result will be a personal work of art!

Atelier CoBra

Every Sunday from 11:00h – 14:00h
Every Wednesday from 13:00h – 16:00h

Children - and their (grand)parents - can be creative in Atelier CoBra. Enthusiastic volunteers guide the children and challenge them in their creativity. Atelier CoBra is free for all our museum visitors and located on the first floor. Reservations are not required; you can drop in spontaneously during a museum visit.

For current activities and programming, check our website www.cobra-museum.nl

Upcoming



Henry Heerup, Krig & Fred, 1945, Private Collection, courtesy of Carl-Henning Pedersen & Else Alffelt's Museum, Photo: Palf T. Søndergaard

27.01.2023 - 14.05.2023

WE KISS THE EARTH

Danish Modern Art 1934-1948

The anniversary year of *Cobra 75* kicks off with a triptych of Danish modern art. The Danish artists who founded Cobra in 1948 had a great influence on the Dutch and Belgian Cobra members. Sexual freedom, surrealism, provocation, experimentation

and spontaneity were central to their work. This is the first retrospective outside Denmark that presents an overview of Danish modern art with around 100 works by more than 25 artists showing all these influences.

Cobra Museum for Modern Art
www.cobra-museum.nl
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The Netherlands
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Acces

Bike – it's a half an hour bike ride from the centre of Amsterdam

Car - navigation address is: Stadsplein 101, Amstelveen

Parking - It is paid parking around the museum. Parking garage Stadsplein is next to the museum (Monday – Thursday – first 90 min. free parking). Parking garage P1, this garage is cheaper per hour and is about a 5-minute walk from the Cobra Museum (right through the Stadshart shopping mall)

Public transport - The bus station is next to the Cobra Museum where many Connexion buses stop. Tram line 5 stops at an 8-minute walk from the museum. For up-to-date information, please check www.9292ov.nl

Tekst

MO.CO. curators Pauline Faure and Rahmouna Boutayeb, in collaboration with Marie-Cécile Zinsou and Sophie Douay-Zinsou

Editorial contributions

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Final editing

Marieke van Zuilichem
Esther van den Berg

Practical information

Hours

Tuesday till Sunday 10:00 am till 5:00 pm
The museum is closed on Mondays, Christmas Day, New Year's Day and King's Day.

Admission

€ 15,00 – Adults
€ 9,50 – 6 – 18 year old
€ 9,50 – CJP/Studentpass till 27 year old

Please note: For the *Cosmogony* exhibition, a surcharge of € 2.50 applies on top of the regular ticket price. For additional information see: cobra-museum.nl/visit

Free (excluding surcharge) for: Museumkaart; Stadspas Amsterdam; Iamsterdam City Card; Rembrandtkaart

Free: Vriend Cobra Museum; Cobra Business Club; Cobra Founders; VriendenLoterij VIP-kaart; Stadspas Amstelveen; ICOM; Children up to 5 years old; Scholen voucher; Combi-ticket Museum JAN; Supervisors of people with disabilities

Colofon

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Graphic design

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Catalogue

The catalogue of the exhibition *Cosmogony* is available in the Cobra Museum shop.

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MUSEUM
OF MODERN
ART

Karel Appel, *De val*, 1981, Collection Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, Photographer: Studio Tromp, c/o Picoright 2022



Upcoming

Anniversary programme 2023

For more information go to www.cobra-museum.nl