

HARN MUSEUM DIRECTOR, CURATOR, UF FACULTY AND ALUMNI AT THE ACASA 17TH TRIENNIAL SYMPOSIUM IN GHANA

SUSAN COOKSEY

In August 2017, Rebecca Nagy (director, Harn Museum of Art) and Susan Cooksey (curator of African Art) participated in the spectacularly successful 17th Triennial Symposium of the Art Council of the African Studies Association at the University of Ghana, Legon. The Center for African Studies generously supported their travel to Ghana for the week-long conference. The conference made history as ACASA's first to be held in Africa. With a record number of African and European participants for the largely American organization, a rich offering of panels over four days beginning with Museum Day at the National Museum of Ghana, brilliant events including museum and gallery receptions, artist studio tours and guided tours to Cape Coast and Elmina, all capped by the eclectic *Chale Wote* art festival in the old Jamestown neighborhood of Accra. The symposium afforded a wealth of opportunities for engagement with artists, scholars and museum professionals as it immersed conferees in Ghana's dynamic art scene. Nagy and Cooksey chaired a roundtable organized with the help of Alissa Jordan (UF PhD, 2017) who served as the discussant. Titled "Creative Coalescing: Artists of KNUST and Ghana's Contemporary Art Revolution" it focused on the impact of KNUST's new art curriculum and innovative teaching methods on contemporary art in Ghana. Participants included several art faculty, alumni and graduate students of Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology. Several other UF Africanist faculty and alumni attended the conference as well, including Brenda Chalfin (director, CAS), Carlee Forbes (UF MA, 2013), Christopher Richards (UF PhD, 2014), Courtney Micots (UF PhD, 2010), Ndubuisi Ezeloumba (UF PhD, 2017), Jordan Fenton (UF PhD, 2012), and Prita Meier (UF BA, 1997).



Forbes organized the panel "Localizing the Foreign" that featured her paper based on research on Congolese colonial era art "Foreign Tastes, Local Styles: Situating Voania Muba within the Colonial Context." Richards presented a paper based on his research on South African fashion, "Knitting Histories: The Cultural Significance of Ma Xhosa by Laduma's Fashions." Micots organized a stimulating panel "Sustainability and Art in Africa" and curated a stunning exhibition on Ghanaian Fancy Dress masquerades for the premier contemporary art gallery in Ghana, Gallery 1957 in Accra. The reception for the exhibition was one of the highlights of the conference's social events. Ndubuisi Ezeloumba presented the paper "Power behind the Throne, Images of the Queen Mother Iyoba in Benin Art." As ACASA's Treasurer, Jordan Fenton organized the finances of the conference and participated in the roundtable "Futures Directions of the Field." He also presented a paper, "Individual Agency in Traditional-Based Arts: Masquerade as an Artistic Transformation" for the panel he chaired, "New Perspectives on Performance in Africa." Prita Meier's paper was based on her research on Swahili Coast arts, "Mobilities of Ivory Oliphants: Shared Object Cultures in Central Africa and the Swahili Coast."

When not presenting, curating or administering, UF's alumni spent time together

traversing the city of Accra. As an expert on Ghanaian fashion and textiles, Christopher Richards took his colleagues to the top fashion brands and introduced them to Accra's best batik artists. Rebecca Nagy and Susan Cooksey facilitated visits to various galleries and artists' studios. It was an intellectually rejuvenating experience and a reminder that UF's cohort of African art historians are active, engaged, and an important part of the international African art community. As one eminent scholar quipped: "here comes the UF mafia."

Jokes aside, the ACASA conference demonstrated the lasting strength of UF's African art history department; graduates from the program are recognized as innovators in the field and as important and collaborative contributors. As the alumni continue to engage in important and groundbreaking research, the legacy of UF's African art history department will grow. It only seems appropriate to conclude with a Ghanaian proverb, one which all of UF's graduates and current/former faculty seem to inherently follow: *wamma wo yonko anntwa anko a, wonntwa nnuru* (If you don't let your neighbor reach his destination, you will not reach yours).

Susan Cooksey is Curator of African Art at the Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art.