Hello and welcome to WorldCanvass from International Programs at the University of Iowa. I'm Joan Kjaer and we're coming to you from Merge in Iowa City. Our topic tonight is art and the afterlife. The University of Iowa Museum of Art and our School of Art and Art History have been engaged in a rich collaboration this fall on a semester long project during which African artist Eric Adjete Anang has been on campus, creating original sculptures that will remain in the UI collection and teaching UI sculpture students about his techniques and aesthetic philosophies.

We're happy to be joined in this segment by two members of the faculty of the School of Art and Art History, Christopher Roy and Isabel Barbuzza. Thank you for being here. Chris, I think I'll start with you. You're a professor and the Elizabeth M. Stanley faculty fellow of African art history. You have the closest longtime acquaintance with the extensive African art collection here at the University of Iowa, so obviously while we're centering our conversation on this lovely work by Eric and some other contemporary art, I'd like to take a step back and ask you to give us a little bit of understanding about the Stanley collection itself and why it's important to the University of Iowa.

Christopher Roy: Good. I came here in 1978 because Max and Betty Stanley had promised their African art collection to the university, and Sandy Boyd, the president at the time, called the chair of the department, Thomasini, and asked if that would be helpful and Thomasini said it will be totally worthless unless we hire someone to teach African art, and so I came here and have been here now for 40 years and I love it because we have the best collection of African art of any college in America, right up with UCLA and Indiana.

UCLA and Indiana have very good collections and so do we. Other colleges not so much. I'm glad you asked the question now because, of course, Dick and Mary Jo Stanley gave $10 million to go towards the construction of the new art museum which will be called the University of Iowa Stanley Museum of Art and I'm very happy and proud of that. I'm also happy and proud that in the first 10 years of my career here, I worked hand-in-hand with the Stanleys picking out pieces that they were to buy that have come to the museum since.

All of those objects that Cory showed are objects that the Stanleys acquired in the years after 1978. We here at Iowa should be very proud of that collection. Of course the collection being here means that interest by students is enormous here. Our classes are astronomically big and that is important in a state like Iowa. When I came, Iowa was a very white state and happily it is getting much more interesting, ethnically much more diverse, so the interest is increasing as time goes by.

Joan Kjaer: The African art collection that you and the Stanleys worked to amass, it was basically 19th century pieces or early 20th century? Were you looking just for interesting pieces that would make for a great collection or were you looking to hit on certain themes, certain kinds of pieces?
Christopher Roy: Mostly it was looking for good pieces that would make a good collection. Almost everything you see anywhere in the world about Africa with very few exceptions is either 19th or 20th century. I daresay probably the majority of pieces in the art collection here are early 20th century but there are some that are late 19th. You don’t get much older than that simply because of the character, the climate in Africa, and the kinds of materials that the objects are made of.

There are important exceptions though. The [inaudible 00:03:58] bronzes date back to the 13th century and there are a lot of other objects and durable materials in our collection, the Benin bronzes that date back at least to the middle of the 19th century and perhaps earlier than that. Generally speaking, African art in collections outside Africa don’t have quite the age that art from other cultures does.

Joan Kjaer: This major project that Cory, you and others have been working on is called Art and the Afterlife. Of course you spent most of your life thinking about-

Christopher Roy: In the afterlife.

Joan Kjaer: … Africa and the afterlife, doing a lot of work and research in Africa. I wonder if you can tell us a little bit about general conceptions of the afterlife among the societies you studied.

Christopher Roy: I’d love to. It’s important for people to understand that there’s a big difference between burials and funerals, funerals and memorial services, in almost all of Africa with the exception of Ghana and a couple of other countries. When a person dies, they have to be buried immediately otherwise things get extremely nasty. If you’re in rural villages where I worked in Burkina Faso or countries like Mali or Northern Nigeria, the burial is almost instant, certainly before three days have passed and then they hold a funeral and that can be anywhere from a couple of weeks to a couple of months or even sometimes, in rare cases, a couple of years after the person died, which makes it much more like a memorial service than it is like the funerals that we have in our own culture.

When the person is buried, art objects come out to assure the ancestors that the person who’s passed away was a respected member of the community. But then a memorial service is held, where people drink a lot, eat a lot, have a lot of fun, dance a lot, offer prayers to the spirits of the ancestors to ask them to watch over the community and the family. Those are scheduled when people have enough food and drink to celebrate properly.

There was a huge drought in West Africa in 1971-76 and lots and lots of funerals were postponed because they didn’t have the resources to celebrate properly. Nora and I were in the Peace Corps from ’70 to ’72 and then in ’76 we returned. That was the first good crop they had so there were hundreds of funerals all over Burkina Faso that year. I think I must have gone 30 or 40 funerals in villages
within a 20 kilometer radius of the town where we lived just in that winter from '76 to '77.

Joan Kjaer: You wanted to show us a few images, I think.

Christopher Roy: Why not. I just spent 16 weeks explaining Art and the Afterlife to 250 undergraduates so I'll do it for this group in 10 minutes.

Joan Kjaer: Sounds good.

Christopher Roy: This is the kind of funeral, in fact, that is a funeral that I attended and here you can see the masks. You see there are two masks right in the middle with the baobab tree in the background. They're making a circle of the dead man's house. They go around three times because three is the sacred number for men and if it had been a woman, they'd go around four times. This is to free the spirit of the deceased person to leave the community of the living and start its long journey to the land of the ancestors.

These are mostly people in Burkina Faso and they have a very clearly defined idea or understanding of where the land of the ancestors is. It's in a cavern of a village called Pilimpikou which means butterflies which is about halfway between that village and the capital city, Ouagadougou. If you go on the market day, where the ancestor spirits are holding market day, you can listen at the entrance to the cave and hear the drums and the cavalries as the ancestors celebrate market day drinking a lot of [inaudible 00:08:07] beer.

This was a photo ... The history of interest and study of art in Burkina Faso goes way back. This is a photo taken by the great German explorer, Leo Frobenius, in 1907, so you're seeing the very same kinds of masks you saw. On this slide in 1977, you see in this mask, it's actually ... Yes, in 1907 and here in the same village you see two masks performing in front of the house of a dead man. One of the key moments in the funeral is when if it's a man all of his male friends break all of his weapons and bows and arrows and spears and shotguns over the threshold of his door, and destroy them all which breaks the tie between the spirit of the dead and the world of the living so he can begin his journey to the cave, to the land of ancestors.

If a woman has died, they break all of her cooking pots and cooking utensils not because they didn't like her but because that frees the spirit to begin that long journey. In Ghana, in Kumasi, [inaudible 00:09:17] make beautiful coffins like this but other people in Ghana celebrate in other ways. Pretty much everybody in the Akan world uses stools like the one you see here, men and women alike.

The stools are very personal. They belong to just one individual and that individual uses them all of his or her life. When that person dies, the stool is blackened. If that person has been successful, has achieved important things, has contributed to the life of the family and the prosperity of the family, they
blacken the stool with a black pigment mixed with palm oil and place it on a shrine where offerings and prayers can be offered through the stool, to the spirit of the dead person, to maintain the line of communication to the dead person.

This stool is in the national museum of African art in Washington, DC. This is Sir Osei Agyeman Prempeh II who was the Asantehene in Ghana when I was in graduate school. He died in 1971 and his funeral was celebrated. You see him seated on his [inaudible 00:10:24] chair, his throne wearing kente cloth. When he died, his stool was paraded through the community, still in the white condition that it had been in when he was still alive, but it was then taken to the ancestral shrine and blackened and tipped over on its side in the shrine just as you see here.

These are the stools that belong to all of the Asantehene, all of the kings of the Asante going back to at least the beginning of the 18th century probably before that. Each of those stools is a direct line to the spirit of the deceased king and each of the stools has an attendant who is responsible for its upkeep, who stands behind him--and a bowl, jar, or a mug in front in which the Asante and other Akan people, bless their souls, like to pour out large quantities of Dutch gin or snaps called Jenever which is not only found delicious by the ancestors but delicious by the living as well, so that's poured.

However, a tradition that I find particularly fascinating and my students love and which I think we should establish or revive here in the state of Iowa is the use of figures like this by the Wende people who lived at the mount of the Congo river who make these beautiful coffins. That's a coffin right there, made of cloth. What happens when an important man dies--they gather all of his wives together and the wives are seated around the walls of a small building made of thatch and they bring the dead man's body in and put it over a low fire and they smoke it for days, and days, and days until it's very nice and dry just like really good beef jerky.

As the bodily fats drip out of it into the fire, great clouds of smoke below up and the wives pass out, they faint from lack of oxygen and the heat and the stress. People, their sons-in-law and sons and daughters drag them out of the hut and pour a bucket of cold water over their face to revive them and drag them back into the hut so that they can finish up the desiccation of the dead person's body.

Then all of the guests at the funeral come and wrap the body in yards, and yards, and yards, and yards, and miles, and miles, and miles of red cloth until the dried out beef jerky body is wrapped up in a coffin that looks just like the dead man. The head is a portrait of the dead man. An artist is commissioned to fashion the head with all of the indications of status and prestige and all of the marks including on the stomach, you see these white chalk marks which in the Caribbean world and southern of the United States are called [inaudible 00:13:16].
These are symbols in the religious beliefs of the people of the kingdom of the Congo and represent all sorts of ideas about death and the afterlife and the fact that when people die, their spirits go below the surface of the lakes and ponds and rivers which are reflective and so they are represented by mirrors. Here, you see one of these enormous coffins that weighs 4,500 pounds. Here is a smaller one with just some long bones and a skull inside. This is my next goal, actually.

There are a lot of things the Stanleys would not purchase because I made the mistake of telling them what was inside. My goal now is to raise the money, to acquire one of these objects for our collection here at the University of Iowa. This is a large one. This one is 10 feet tall and weighs 400 pounds. Most of these are in museum collections in Sweden because, during the middle 19th to middle 20th century, all the missionaries in the area were Swedish. This is in a collection in Stockholm and here you see one of these great coffins being dragged through the street on its way to the graveyard where it will be buried just like this fish, buried standing upright with its head just below the surface of the ground. I think we should do that here at Iowa.

Joan Kjaer: I think that's a great idea.

Christopher Roy: Can you imagine the students going up to the Pentacrest to attend Professor Roy's funeral up there and there's this huge massive red clay? I mean red cloth, rather. I think that would be a stitch, or Jay Semel.

Joan Kjaer: Thank you. We're going to switch to Isabel Barbuzza who's a professor of sculpture at the University of Iowa and who has been involved in this project working with Eric and with Chris and with Cory throughout this semester. She also has a few pictures of the work that her students were doing this semester. Tell us how this all went.

Isabel Barbuzza: It was an incredible experience and a pleasure to work with Eric. I think when he was talking about how he works and all that, he said he brought the wood and hand tools. He summarizes it all. I mean I think it's interesting that we're here at Merge where technology really drives the future and the present in a way. The way we approach working with Eric, he's wonderful ... through stories, he introduces us to the whole idea of death and the coffins and so forth.

Something that he said--and I mention this because it was part of one of my students' work—that for him it's as important to make the coffin and so forth but also the stories from the families and this idea of having a whole ... Talking to people and talking to the family of the deceased and so forth. We were very interested in that. The assignment was basically to think about transitions, to think about death perhaps everywhere, but this idea of what is a coffin, this idea of what's a vessel, what's carried inside the coffin, because we see the fish... but the inside, Eric has sewn the inside using a beautiful fabric.
We were able to see the entire process in terms of designing what kind of fabric or what's he going to use. It was really an amazing experience. We have here the image. He basically ... I think it's very, very important and what a wonderful moment for our students to see what you can accomplish with hand tools and with really thinking about ... We have been talking about this alone with the three dimensional intelligence, rather than relying on an AutoCAD or file, it's like you imagine in space what a piece is going to look like.

I think Eric, it's amazing that I don't know if I have very much. That is probably ... I think that was our first meeting with Eric at the museum. We went to see what he was working on and so the class is there. We were observing--that's Jennifer's piece. Jennifer is here, one of the students. Jennifer is a grad student in the painting program but taking sculpture because we offer students the opportunity to explore other areas aside from their major area.

She wanted to make a boat and before coming to the idea of making a boat, she was already making pieces made out of nylon dipped in wax and they had an incredible texture and she wanted to cover the interior of her vessel with those forms so that's why I'm mentioning the interior of the coffins because the interior is as important as the exterior.

Let's see, here, we go, and this is a perfect example of how to calculate that point. It was purely by just cutting the wood in space and putting it together using hand tools so it was an amazing ... See, here we go. This is in our shop at the School of Art and Art History. We met several times with Eric and I think what we take away from that experience is not only the techniques that we learned but the conversations, his take on being an artist and what does it mean to be an artist in the world, the path you want to take in terms of art, the importance of having a global vision in art, in making.

Here we are putting the pieces together and Jennifer didn't have experience in working sculpture but she completely embraced the making of the boat. That's finished and that's the bottom of the piece and remember she wanted to make a boat and so the idea of that because it was a site specific piece, so meaning that she was responding to the site where this piece was going to be and, if you know the School of Art and Art History, we have a pond.

The idea was to have this piece float in the water. What’s inside, I put a picture ... What's inside ... It's covered by mesh. Inside, she put the pieces that she was working previously. This [inaudible 00:20:32] texture pieces of the fabric dipped in wax, adding different shapes. Then we went to the pond and it floated. It was a beautiful afternoon for all of us because what happens is, you stop thinking about the pieces of art and it's more about the experience that we were all having during that time, the boat going and the light.

It was at 1:30 so the lighting was perfect. Anyway, that was a wonderful successful piece. It's posted on Facebook and Instagram and the School of Art and Art History. I think I just posted some images in rural canvas. Anyway, it's
not only ... I mean the class was not about making a coffin, it was learning from
Eric. I was learning a lot about what a coffin is, what does it mean. All the
amazing work that goes into making something like that because whenever
there's wood and so we were saying, "How do you get that very soft surface?"
Because we saw the ribs, we saw how it was worked and then the painting, and
then the inside, the interior.

I don't have the images here but I have other students who approached the
work in the death of the prairie in terms of Iowa being one of ... They say that
it's more turnaround. Then I had a student who worked with doors, real doors
that she bought and she put all the doors, freestanding, on the little
amphitheater by the IMU so that's another site specific. She was thinking in
terms of passage going from one side to the other. It was a very lovely piece
too. Anyway, it was ... I mean what we take out of our experience with Eric, it's
everything but I mean this idea that you can do things with hand tools.

Joan Kjaer: That's so amazing to me. When you look at this piece we have here in the room
and it's so soft and so smooth, you might imagine that it has a plaster covering
or something underneath but this is all just the wood that you were working
with? Yeah, incredible. Your students were happy with this experience and
what-

Isabel Barbuzza: I think so.

Joan Kjaer: ... came out of it.

Isabel Barbuzza: Yeah. Jen did the boat.

Joan Kjaer: Congratulations on the boat. It's beautiful.

Isabel Barbuzza: Yeah.

Joan Kjaer: Wonderful. I guess I'll just thank you both for being here. This was really, really
interesting and I'm so pleased you could share some of the pieces, Chris.

Christopher Roy: Thank you, Joan, and thanks to International Programs, and to Cory, and the
museum, and everybody else involved for giving us this chance.

Joan Kjaer: You're welcome. I should actually mention that International Programs helped
sponsor Eric's visit here with a Major Project award because it was such a
persuasive application. How could we refuse? Now, to have you all here today is
really great.

Christopher Roy: The Stanley family has been providing huge amounts of money every year for
the last 40 years to study Africa.
Joan Kjaer: Yeah. Christopher Roy and Isabel Barbuzza, thank you so much. I appreciate you being here and everyone else please stay with us. In this next segment, we'll hear from Silvia Forni and once again from Eric Adjetey Anang. Thank you.