

AFRICAN ART COMES TO THE NORTH DAKOTA MUSEUM OF ART

Sanny (Suzanne) Ryan was a founding Trustee of the North Dakota Museum of Art and the Museums Foundation. In her honor, the Museum has recently acquired a remarkable African Terracotta Collection. This exhibition opens in conjunction with “Barton’s Place,” recreation of Barton Beneš’s New York studio apartment, which contains fine African masks and sculpture, textiles and memorabilia.

The Museum’s pot collection came into being through the extraordinary help and financial assistance of the African dealer and collector Thomas McNemar who spent years in Africa seeking treasures for the market back in the States. When asked about his experience collecting pots, he replied, “My years in West Africa were roughly mid-1950s to the mid-1970s. I collected not a single pot. With the advent of bubble wrap and air freight it became possible by the mid-1980s to ship pots through but with large damage. All of my pots were acquired in the States from itinerant African merchants who supplied all of the dealers and museums. Pots began to drift my way in the mid-1980s when I became computerized and discovered Douglas Dawson’s listings on the web. I stopped buying anything from the Africans three years ago because it became a depressing waste of time and pots were beginning to be manufactured for the American market.”

Museum Director Laurel Reuter met Tom McNemar in the early 1990s through Barton Beneš who traded most of his African collection with McNemar for his own work. Years later, he worked with Reuter cataloging and appraising Barton’s African art. Therefore, it seems fitting that the African pots be unveiled in conjunction with the opening of “Barton’s Place.”

African terracotta vessels, which make up the Museum’s new collection, look overwhelming homemade—and they are. The makers don’t use the potter’s wheel but build the pots by hand from nearby clay deposits. Therefore, the term “terracotta” is most often used for functional storage and cooking vessels as well as ceremonial pots. Objects such as figurines made on the wheel from the same material, and possibly even by the same person, are referred to as “pottery.” It was only in the last thirty years that seemingly “primitive” African pots became accepted in the Western art world as works of art. Douglas Dawson, an ethnographic dealer based in Chicago, was instrumental in bringing African terracotta pots into the eye of the collecting public, including museums and dealers such as Thomas McNemar.

Examples of prized African terracotta pots found in the twenty-five piece North Dakota collection include a Lobi lidded pot with bird head from Burkina Faso, a large and elaborate Bamileke beer or water pot from Cameroun, a Matakam beer or water pot with tilted neck from Nigeria, and a spectacular Bangba twelve-sectioned beer pot from the Mandara Mountains in Cameroun. It would accommodate twelve people sitting around it while drinking beer from straws (hollow reeds) from the same vessel. Laurel Reuter, Director of the North Dakota Museum of Art, selected the pots from Tom McNemar’s cache in his Virginia home. The prices he quoted turned out to be far below market value.

From Nigeria comes a Yungur pot with a human head. A Tabwa clay female figure from Cameroun was selected by Guillermo (Memo) Guardia, the Museum’s Artist-in-Residence who drove the collection back to North Dakota. Before leaving, Mr. McNemar invited him and his traveling companion, Danielle (Danni) Masters, the Museum’s Collection Care Specialist, to each choose a work to add to the collection—again gifts from Mr. McNemar. Memo chose a Tabwa clay female figure from Cameroun, which reminded him of his own Pre-Columbian Mochica culture of ancient Peru. Danni selected a Chamba three-legged hunter’s pot from Nigeria.

Among the works intended for spiritual or ritual purposes are Mambila male and female spirit pots from Cameroun and a Mangbetu wedding pot with two facing figures from the Sudan region of the Congo. Joining them is a clay, human male figure from the Fon people of West Africa. The figure was tied to their practice of the indigenous Voodun religion in the African Kingdom of Dahomey, the present-day Republic of Benin, which lasted from 1600 until 1900.

Other works come from the Jen, Bamana, Dogon, and Sonomo cultures of Mali, the Makonde of Tanzania/Mozambique region, the Pende and the Songe cultures of the Congo.

Sanny Ryan, with the encouragement of her husband Jerry, began supporting the Museum in the late 1980s. After his death, the Museum became her special place. She made her own mark on the Museum’s collection when she purchased Apache artist Allan Houser’s bronze sculpture of a Navajo shepherdess, *Raindrops*. It stands in the Museum garden east of the front entrance. The Museum’s east gallery is dedicated to her. And while Chair of the Board of Trustees she established an annuity which paid \$1.2 million into staff salaries over the fourteen years until her death in 2012. An endowment was established in her name with the smaller residual from the annuity.

When shown the pots, Mrs. Ryan’s grandson Peter—who took his degree in art from the University of Minnesota—responded, “It looks like a beautiful acquisition. I love African ceramics and I am sure Granny Sanny would have loved them as well. They are some of the most expressive, imaginative yet utilitarian objects—something Granny Sanny would appreciate. Thank you for keeping the memory of Granny Sanny alive with this beautiful collection.”

Ryan continued, “I wish we could be there for the opening of Barton’s apartment. I know it will be a touching show. His apartment is still one of my most spectacular places to have visited in New York City. I hope it moves ‘The Plains’ in the same way.”

Now living in his hometown, Lexington, Virginia, Thomas McNemar opened both his sculpture and terracotta treasure chests to Museum Director Laurel Reuter, expanding Sanny’s memorial gifts more than ten fold. When asked how the Museum could thank him, he said, put “Pilfered from the Collection of Thomas McNemar” on the labels. Sanny Ryan, with her quick sense of humor and eye for a good deal for the Museum, would have been delighted.