

ART

Africa and Its Spheres of Influence

By JUDITH H. DOBRZYNSKI

It was late September, and Lowery Stokes Sims, a curator at the Museum of Arts and Design, was on the phone in her small white office, working out the shipping details for a piece in "The Global Africa Project," which opened on Nov. 17. Through her window, the giant silver globe in Columbus Circle glistened.

How apt. As she conceived the exhibition, Ms. Sims wanted to stress the "global" far more than the "Africa." Yes, she and her co-organizer, Leslie King-kammond, director of the Center for Race and Culture at the Maryland Institute College of Art, chose artists who are African or of African descent, no matter where they were born. "Africa exists wherever these people are," Ms. Sims said.

But they also picked artists like Janet Goldner, an American sculptor of Eastern European descent who draws on her frequent travels to Africa, and the jewelry maker Ruth Omabegho, a native New Yorker who has lived in Lagos since the 1970s with her Nigerian husband, Billy, a sculptor whose works are

also in the exhibition.

And they selected artists who've reached across the ocean for partners, like Algernon Miller. Based in Harlem, Mr. Miller strung about 110,000 paper beads, made by a women's cooperative in Uganda, into a wall tapestry. He's never met the 40 women who made the beads; his contact has been over the phone and the Internet.

Most of the exhibition — more than 250 works made by 107 artists and collectives — is devoted to jewelry, textiles, furniture, architecture, fashion, ceramics and basketry. But as Ms. Sims was organizing the show, she decided to include a sprinkling of photography, painting, sculpture and installation work too, in the belief that the line separating design and art is increasingly blurry.

The resulting visual farrago, a combination of traditional crafts, sophisticated urban design, fine art and much in between, is meant to make a point: African influence, itself infused with the cultures of colonial powers, has affected the world of art and design internationally, in ways both obvious and subtle.

Here is a look at five artists in the exhibition.

Danièle Tamagni

Danièle Tamagni was a freelance photographer, on assignment for the Italian magazine *Africa*, when in 2007 he discovered a group of Congolese men, members of the Society for the Advancement of People of Elegance, dressed to the nines in tailored, brightly hued suits. They mixed a hot pink suit with a red bowler hat, say, or a snow-white suit with a brilliant turquoise shirt. Given the contrast with the poverty around them, Mr. Tamagni said, "I was surprised to see these looks. I come from Milan, and I was interested in fashion, fascinated by their style."

He decided to approach one of them, who introduced him to others

in the group. They allowed Mr. Tamagni to take their pictures. In 2008 he returned to Congo, taking more photographs. He has published a book of the images, "Gentlemen of Bacongo," and has had exhibitions of the photographs.

What Mr. Tamagni uncovered along the way was a subculture. "Some people think they are jokers, not serious people," he said. "But some appreciate the fact that they succeeded at this. They are popular because they are like actors. They are invited to parties because they give an elegant look to them. They are paid to go, like special guests, for weddings, funerals and birthday parties."

