

Biography El Anatsui

GHANA

El Anatsui was born in 1944 in the small town of Anyako in what was then the British Gold Coast (it would become part of the Republic of Ghana in 1960). As his mother had died while he was still young, Anatsui was raised by his maternal uncle in the nearby town of Anloga.

Art and culture were an integral part of life in the Anatsui household. Several of his brothers were talented musicians and poets, while El himself sung in the local choir in Keta and would later play the trumpet in a jazz and highlife band at university.

He also developed a passion for visual art and design from an early age; he won several distinguished prizes for visual art while in secondary school, which in turn encouraged him to enrol in 1964, and major in sculpture, in the Fine Arts Department, the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Kumasi.

In art school, Anatsui began examining different graphic forms stamped on Akan fabrics (adinkra), and went on numerous research trips with his fellow classmates to the regions surrounding Kumasi to further his understanding of the local landscapes and traditions.

To deepen his understanding of local and regional practice, Anatsui devoted a great deal of time watching carvers, textile artists, drummers and musicians at work at the National Cultural Centre of Ghana in Kumasi.

Anatsui received an "honourable mention" at the First Ghana National Art Competition, held in Accra in 1968, as well as the "Best Student of the Year" when he graduated with a Bachelor's degree in sculpture. In 1969, he earned a postgraduate degree in art education from Nkrumah University in 1969.

Immediately upon graduation, Anatsui took up a position as a lecturer in art education at the Special Training College in the port town of Winneba. It was here that, during one of his many walks through the open markets, he first came across the wooden trays that would form the basis of his first major series of works.

NIGERIA

In 1973, Anatsui was informed by a former teacher, Gerd von Stokar, of a teaching position at the University of Nigeria in Nsukka, whose staff von Stokar had just joined. He was appointed to the post in 1975.

During this period, Nigeria was still reeling from the Biafran War of Secession, and evidence of the physical and psychological devastation was everywhere to be seen within Nsukka whose majority-Igbo population had fought on the side of Biafra. Nevertheless, the conclusion of hostilities also saw exiled Igbo writers and artists return to the city, with several taking up posts at the university. In 1971, Uche Okeke, a leading contemporary artist, who had been appointed to the teaching staff of the Department of Fine and Applied Art in 1971 set about redesigning the curriculum. As the leader of the so-called "natural synthesis" movement in the early 1960s – the synthesis here being that of indigenous and foreign styles – at Nsukka, Okeke emphasized research into traditional Igbo and Nigerian art, folklore, ethnography, and modern African literature.

In the early 1980s, the imposition of IMF and World Bank Structural Adjustment Program caused the Nigerian economy to collapse, leading to the departure of many of the expatriate faculty. In addition to Okeke, Anatsui also developed a close friendship with the painter and poet Obiora Udechukwu, the painter Chike Aniakor, and the author Chinua Achebe and other faculty in the university's music, dramatic arts, history and linguistics programs; the intellectual environment fostered by leading humanists at Nsukka would have an indelible mark on Anatsui's practice.

One year after his arrival in Nigeria, Anatsui held his first solo exhibition *Wooden Wall Plaques* at Asele Art Gallery in Nsukka. The well-received show introduced the public to several of Anatsui's iconic "trays"; the Institute of African Studies at the University purchased several of the works, as did a number of his colleagues. Despite the successful exhibition of the "tray" works, Anatsui soon switched focus to pottery as well as research into diverse African designs and writing traditions.

Anatsui's first exhibition of ceramic works, *Broken Pots: Sculpture by El Anatsui*, took place at

the British Council in Enugu 1979, travelling to the Institute of African Studies at the University of Nigeria in Nsukka. The exhibition was opened by Chinua Achebe and, much like the previous exhibition of trays, these new works continued to build upon Anatsui's already-significant reputation within the country.

INTERNATIONAL RESIDENCIES AND EXHIBITIONS

Anatsui's first travel outside the African continent was 1979, when he was invited to participate in a conference in Toronto. This experience was important to his practice, as he had the opportunity to visit numerous galleries and museums, and see the work of Western contemporary artists, such as Louise Nevelson. Overseas travel also allowed him to meet and exchange ideas with artists from all over the world. To this end, the early 1980s saw him undertake several overseas trips and residencies; resulting in both his first US solo exhibition (*Wood Carvings*) at Cummington Community of Arts, Massachusetts in 1980), followed by his first group exhibition in the UK (*Drawing on the World*, which opened at the Billingham Art Gallery, and travelling to the Middlesborough Art Gallery and the House of Commons Gallery in London across 1981). It was during his Artist-in-Residence programme in Cummington that Anatsui first began working with a chainsaw and blow torch on wood.

This period also saw Anatsui create his first significant public works, a commission of two sculptures – *Ambivalent Hold and Toward the Upliftment of Man* (1983) – in front of the newly completed Physical Sciences Building of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

The following year, Anatsui also staged his first public performance *Offering the Weather* during a residency at Cuxhaven in West Germany. For this performance the artist created a raised earthen mound upon which he performed with an oversized pot – a return to the ceramic works which he had to abandon in Nsukka. Anatsui's sustained focus on wood reliefs began in 1985 when he presented them in the well-received inaugural AKA Circle of Exhibiting Artists exhibition in Enugu and Lagos. Subsequent exhibitions of these works in the UK, Europe, North America and Japan ushered in the artist's first period of fame outside of Nigeria. Anatsui's newfound status as one of the most important living artists on the African continent was reinforced with substantial discussion of his work in Kojo Fosu's *20th-Century Art of Africa* (1986), an unprecedented survey of modern and contemporary African artists.

THE 1990S

The 1990s represented a significant turning point in Anatsui's career; he emerged on the global art scene. Although still framed within the context of contemporary African art the next wave of exhibitions of his work travelled to art museums and contemporary art events in major cities in Asia, Europe and the Americas, attracting the attention of collectors, gallerists, critics and curators. The signal event was his inclusion in the 1990 exhibition *Contemporary African Artists: Changing Tradition* curated by Kinshasa Conwill and Grace Stanislaus at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York. Of the nine artists in the show, Anatsui's work was one of three to receive special attention, which in turn led to his subsequent participation in a smaller version of this exhibition that was shown at the Venice Biennale that same year. This exhibition, the first by sub-Saharan African artists in the Biennale's one hundred-year history, received an "honourable mention." During his 1990s international visits and residencies Anatsui produced some of his most striking and memorable work. For example, an artists' workshop in Manaus and Rio de Janeiro in Brazil in 1992 resulted in the monumental *Erosion* later acquired for permanent collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art.

METAL SCULPTURES

At the turn of the millennium, several chance discoveries and significant public commissions changed the direction and scale of Anatsui's practice. The first of these discoveries occurred around 1997, when the artist began to develop an interest in the formal possibilities of the discarded metal cassava graters. Anatsui's first cassava graters work: *Toflokowo (Empty Barrels)* (1998), which he exhibited at the 9th Osaka Triennial won the Bronze Prize.

Almost concurrent with this discovery was Anatsui's first experiments with used printing plates; whose fading colors and semi-legible messages imbuing these materials with a connection to specific personal or cultural histories.

1998 was also the year Anatsui made two remarkable discoveries. The first was a pile of discarded milk can lids in the bushes. He promptly began transforming these into expansive sheets, shaping each of them into a series of free-standing sculptural forms that could be adapted and scaled according to their space of display.

The second discovery was of a discarded bag of liqueur bottle tops. After several months he decided to stitch them together to form a sheet, the colors of which reminded him of traditional kente cloths.

Anatsui first presented the bottle top works in the exhibition *El Anatsui: Recent Works*, at London's October Gallery in November 2002. The exhibition of this new series of works proved to be an undisputed success. The British Museum acquired *Woman's Cloth* (2001), his first "bottle cap" work and *Man's Cloth* (2001) – as well as one of his wooden reliefs *Kente Rhapsody* (2001). It was the first acquisition of his work by a major European institution.

ON THE WORLD STAGE

Although he had spent almost a quarter of a decade undertaking various artist residencies and commissions in different countries, during the early 2000s Anatsui's work truly garnered global attention. The touring exhibition *Gawu*, his first major international solo show, signalled this. Organised by Martin Barlow, Director of the Oriol Mostyn Gallery, in Llandudno, Wales, where it opened in November 2003, it travelled to ten venues in Europe and the United States before closing at the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art in Washington DC in September 2008.

In addition to several museum exhibitions worldwide, Anatsui's work was also increasingly appearing at major international biennials and triennials; including the 2003 Biennale di Ceramica in Albissola, Italy; the 2004 Gwangju Biennial in South Korea, and the 2000 and 2006 Dak'Art Biennial in Senegal. At Dak'Art 2006, Anatsui's work caught the attention of the American curator Robert Storr, who as director of the 2007 Venice Biennale, invited him to participate in the biennial's international section.

2007 is thus commonly regarded as the moment Anatsui's art achieved worldwide recognition. In addition to having two of his major works prominently displayed within the Arsenale, another bottle cap-work graced the gothic facade of the Palazzo Fortuny as part of Axel Vervoordt's exhibition *Artempo*.

RETROSPECTIVE AND RECOGNITION

In the decade after his success in Venice, Anatsui's work has continued to feature in major exhibitions and commissions throughout the world.

In 2015, for example, *Gravity and Grace, Monumental Works*, a solo exhibition organized by the Akron Art Museum in Ohio, was touring to four other venues in the United States. *Gravity and Grace* focused on Anatsui's monumental metal works; major examples of the exhibition's large-scale works entered the collection of major US museums, including the Bass Museum of Art, the Brooklyn Museum, and New York's MoMA.

Concurrent with these major exhibitions, Anatsui's site-specific works grew in scale and complexity.

In 2015, after fifty years of continuous practice and experimentation across a range of media, Anatsui was awarded the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at the 56th Venice Biennale. This was promptly followed by the Praemium Imperiale Award for Sculpture, by the Japan Art Association in 2016.

In the same year Anatsui received honorary doctorates from Harvard University (2016), from the University of Cape Town (2016) and from the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (2017). In 2019 his work – together with those by other artists – was exhibited prominently in Ghana's first pavilion at the Venice Biennale.