

# The Museum of Modern Art

## MoMA PRESENTS THE FIRST U.S. MUSEUM SURVEY OF THE IVORIAN ARTIST FRÉDÉRIC BRULY BOUABRÉ

### ***Frédéric Bruly Bouabré: World Unbound* Unites More Than 1,000 Drawings by the Artist from Public and Private Collections**

#### ***Frédéric Bruly Bouabré: World Unbound***

March 13, 2022–August 13, 2022

Floor 3, 3 South, The Edward Steichen Galleries

**NEW YORK, January 7, 2022**—The Museum of Modern Art presents ***Frédéric Bruly Bouabré: World Unbound***, the first in-depth study in the United States of the Ivorian artist who used drawing as a critical tool to invent a writing system. On view from March 13 through August 13, 2022, the exhibition explores the breadth of Bouabré’s decades-long career, featuring 11 series of drawings totaling more than 1,000 individual works, including his two best-known bodies of work, *Alphabet Bété* (1990–91) and *Connaissance du monde* (1987–2008). *World Unbound* is organized into two sections and connected with a chronology of the artist’s life and career that will include photographic images and archival materials. Although his work has been featured in major international exhibitions, *World Unbound* is the first substantial monographic museum presentation in the US to celebrate Bouabré’s commitment to collecting, preserving, and sharing knowledge as a way of understanding the world around us. *Frédéric Bruly Bouabré: World Unbound* is organized by Smooth Nzewi, The Steven and Lisa Tananbaum Curator, with Erica DiBenedetto, Curatorial Assistant, and with the support of Damasia Lacroze, Department Assistant, Department of Painting and Sculpture, MoMA.

“Frédéric Bruly Bouabré’s first museum survey in North America offers an exciting opportunity to introduce our audience to his drawings and their combination of indigenous knowledge and universal wisdom,” says Smooth Nzewi. “His obsessive cataloging and sharing of information through his art are complemented by an urgency to reflect the diversity and commonalities that bind our world.”

Born in Zéprégühé, Côte d’Ivoire, Frédéric Bruly Bouabré (1923–2014) started his career as a government clerk, but was inspired to make art after having a prophetic revelation in 1948. His artistic projects first explored and codified subjects including the folktales and philosophy of his native Bété people. By the 1970s, he had dedicated himself fully to his drawing practice, which had become a vast exploration of ideas and subjects ranging from poetry to cosmology and secular humanism. Over the course of his lifetime, Bouabré produced more than a thousand works on paper.

Tracing the arc of Bouabré’s body of work, *World Unbound* begins with the early days of his artistic career, when it revolved around recording and transmitting the history and knowledge of the Bété people. Bouabré set out to invent a pictographic alphabet, creating the first writing system for the Bété language, which he accomplished with his *Alphabet Bété* (1990–91). On view in the exhibition’s first gallery, *Alphabet Bété* is the artist’s largest series, comprising 449 ballpoint pen and colored pencil drawings based on everyday Bété life. Perfected over several decades, each image correlates to a monosyllabic Bété word.

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The center of the gallery presents an interactive installation that allows visitors to digitally experience Bouabré's original Bété script system. In addition to the digital activation, the first part of the exhibition also includes works portraying Bété folktales and mythologies, such as *Mythologie Bété "Génie Guié Guié Guié" "Genie couvert d'yeux"* (c. 1980), a single drawing that portrays a fabled genie covered in human eyes. For the artist, the written language was the ultimate tool for preserving cultural memory and conserving oral history.

*World Unbound* highlights the significant milestones in Bouabré's life by connecting the two sections of the exhibition through a comprehensive chronology, with photographic images displayed alongside drawing materials, sources of inspiration, and ten manuscripts of almost 2,500 pages of drawings and writing by the artist. Throughout his career, Bouabré continued to make work that honored his West African traditions as much as his all-inclusive pursuit of knowledge. One example of this is the centerpiece of the second gallery, *Connaissance du monde* (1987–2008), an open-ended series of drawings that encompasses various subjects and disciplines and offers a multiplicity of meanings. This series, as well as others in the gallery, show the development of Bouabré's art from his close observations of daily life in Côte d'Ivoire to encyclopedic interests in history, cosmology, religion, philosophy, and current affairs. Works like *Hommage aux femmes du monde* (2007) and *La démocratie c'est la science de l'égalité* (2010–11) exemplify Bouabré's sophisticated marriage of images and texts. *World Unbound* honors Bouabré's commitment to social and humanist concerns that still resonate today.

*Special thanks to Jean Pigozzi and The Jean Pigozzi Collection of African Art.*

**SPONSORSHIP:**

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**PUBLICATION:**

Published to accompany the first museum survey of Bouabré's work in North America, the accompanying catalogue offers a vivid account of the artist's long and multifaceted career, including a detailed chronology of his life and reproductions of more than six hundred of his

drawings. An essay by curator Ugochukwu- Smooth C. Nzewi introduces Bouabré to a new audience, illuminating his significance as both an important African creator and one of the most intriguing artists of the twentieth century. 96 pages, 645 color illustrations. Hardcover, \$29.95. ISBN: 978-1-63345-130-8. Published by The Museum of Modern Art, New York, and available at MoMA stores and online at [store.moma.org](https://store.moma.org). Distributed to the trade by ARTBOOK|D.A.P. in the United States and Canada, and by Thames & Hudson in the rest of the world.

**PUBLIC PROGRAM:**

**A Conversation on Frédéric Bruly Bouabré with Edwige-Renée Dro, Meleko Mokgosi, Wayétu Moore, and Uzodinma Iweala**

**Tuesday, April 12, 6:30–7:30 p.m.**

Join writer Edwige-Renée Dro and Wayétu Moore and artist Meleko Mokgosi as they discuss the intersections of image, language, and knowledge production in Africa and its diaspora. This conversation, moderated by Uzodinma Iweala, CEO of the Africa Center, will take as its starting point the work of Ivorian artist Frédéric Bruly Bouabré, who sought out and transmitted knowledge through his visual art and writings, drawing on sources from folklore to philosophy, popular culture, and daily life. The program will probe the role of the artist in traversing cultures and fields of learning, and ask how systems of language reinforce or resist forces of colonization.

This program is presented in partnership with The Africa Center and in conjunction with the exhibition *Frédéric Bruly Bouabré: World Unbound*. The discussion will be moderated by Uzodinma Iweala, with an introduction from MoMA curator and exhibition organizer Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi.

This event is free, open to all, and takes place over Zoom. More information can be found at [moma.org/calendar/events/7663](https://moma.org/calendar/events/7663). Registration is required and can be submitted online at [events.moma.org/africanartistsandwritersfbb](https://events.moma.org/africanartistsandwritersfbb).



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