

*Frédéric Bruly
Bouabré: World
Unbound*

AUDIO:

Frédéric Bruly Bouabré reciting his Bété syllabary, 2009. Courtesy Charles L. Riley, *Cataloging Africana*

IMAGE:

Frédéric Bruly Bouabré at his chalkboard, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, 1994. Photo by André Magnin. © 2022 Family of Frédéric Bruly Bouabré

WALL LABELS

In 2009 Frédéric Bruly Bouabré met with the linguist Charles L. Riley to record the syllables of a writing system he invented for his native Bété language. The audio captures Bouabré pronouncing those syllables and occasionally explaining the logic of his system. Several sentences in his writing system, which he called the *Alphabet Bété*, can be seen on the chalkboard in the image on the opposite wall.

Inside the exhibition, you will find an artwork version of *Alphabet Bété* wrapping around the first gallery alongside a digital interactive feature that allows you to listen to the individual syllables while looking at the corresponding drawings and scripts.

Vision divine du 11 mars 1948 (Divine Vision from March 11, 1948) 1991

Eight drawings. Ballpoint pen and colored pencil on cardboard

Collection André Magnin, Paris

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On March 11, 1948, a life changing vision interrupted Bouabré on his way to the General Security Directorate in Dakar, Senegal, where he worked as a clerk. "The sky opened to my eyes and the seven colored suns described a circle of beauty around their 'Mother-Sun,'" he recalled. This vibrant set of drawings represents a recurring theme in Bouabré's art and writing: that our perception of the world can be as expansive as the universe. From that day onward, the artist redirected the skills he learned from his clerical job to systematically exploring empirical data and spiritual phenomena alike.

**Mythologie Bété "Génie guié guié guié"
"Génie couvert d'yeux" (Bété Mythology
"Guié Guié Guié Genie" "Genie Covered
with Eyes") c. 1980**

Ballpoint pen on laminated paper on cardboard

Private collection, Paris. Courtesy André Magnin

In this drawing Bouabré portrays a figure in profile with his back turned to the viewer and with his arms and legs astride, implying movement. His entire body is covered in human eyes. The subject is an all-knowing and all-seeing Bété mythological figure that appears in many drawings by the artist. Bouabré made this work around the time he started dedicating more attention to his art. He considered this drawing, one of few not part of a series, to be a self-portrait. It serves as a visual metaphor for his mission as an artist: to observe (and record) the world around him.

Békora stones

Twenty-five staurolite rocks

Collection André Magnin, Paris

In 1952 Bouabré visited Gbékora, a village in west-central Côte d'Ivoire known for its staurolite rocks, commonly called Békora stones. Bouabré believed the geometric stones, which feature in several Bété myths, constituted a form of script, and he began matching their shapes with phonemes from the Bété language. This was the genesis of his Bété syllabary, which had evolved away from the Békora stones by the time it made its public debut in the *Bulletin de l'Institut français d'Afrique noire* (at right) in 1958.

CASE LABELS

“Le livre des lois divines révélés dans l'Ordre des persécutés par le révélateur Cheik-Nadro, fils de Dalo Gbeuly” (The Book of Divine Laws Revealed in the Order of the Persecuted by the Revealer Cheik-Nadro, Son of Dalo Gbeuly) 1945–63

417 pages. Typescript, ink, and colored pencil on paper

Bouabré Family Collection. Courtesy André Magnin

In 1958 Bouabré returned to Zéprégühé to hold an inauguration ceremony for the Order of the Persecuted, a religion he had founded following his cosmic vision a decade earlier. The manuscript at left, which the artist wrote over eighteen years, outlines the tenets of the religious sect, which combined Indigenous spiritual practices with elements of Christianity.

“L'exposé général de notre système expliqué” (General Report of Our System Explained) 1957

Reproduced in Théodore Monod, “Un nouvel alphabet ouest-africain: Le Bété (Côte d'Ivoire),” *Bulletin de l'Institut français d'Afrique noire*, series B, vol. 20, nos. 3–4 (July–October 1958): 442–43.

Collection André Magnin, Paris

Akan peoples, Ghana

FIRST ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT:

Gold weight: Porcupine n.d.

Gold weight: Antelope n.d.

Gold weight: Animal n.d.

Gold weight: Leopard 19th or 20th century

Brass

Brooklyn Museum. Bequest of Laura L. Barnes

SECOND ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT:

Gold weight: Geometric 19th–20th century

Gold weight: Geometric 19th–20th century

Gold weight: Geometric 19th–20th century

Gold weight: Geometric 19th–20th century

Gold weight: Geometric 19th–20th century

Copper alloy

Brooklyn Museum. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Franklin H. Williams

THIRD ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT:

Gold weight: Fish n.d.

Gold weight: Crocodile n.d.

Brass

Brooklyn Museum. Bequest of Laura L. Barnes

Gold weight: Shield frame n.d.

Brass

Brooklyn Museum. The Franklin H. Williams Collection of Ashanti Brass Weights and Accessory Objects for Weighing Gold. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Franklin H. Williams

Gold weight: Warrior late 19th–early 20th century
Bronze

Brooklyn Museum. Gift of Merton D. Simpson to the Jennie Simpson Educational Collection of African Art

FOURTH ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT:

Gold weight: Geometric late 19th–mid 20th century
Copper

Brooklyn Museum. Henry L. Batterman Fund

Gold-dust box lid 19th–20th century
Copper alloy

Brooklyn Museum. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Franklin H. Williams

Gold weight: Geometric 19th century

Gold weight: Geometric 19th century

Rectangular box and lid 19th century

Copper alloy

Brooklyn Museum. Gift of Shirley B. Williams

FIFTH ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT:

Gold weight: Male figure n.d.

Brass

Brooklyn Museum. Charles Stewart Smith Memorial Fund

Gold weight: Geometric 19th–20th century
Brass

Brooklyn Museum. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Franklin H. Williams

Gold weight: Elephant 19th or 20th century
Brass

Brooklyn Museum. Bequest of Laura L. Barnes

Gold weight: Sankofa bird n.d.
Brass

Brooklyn Museum. Carll H. de Silver Fund

As Bouabré developed his Bété writing system, he began studying the gold weights of the Akan peoples, who predominantly live in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana. Bouabré was less interested in the weights' original purpose—they were used to measure gold dust, the currency of the region for centuries—than in their motifs, which he considered to be a form of script. On view here is a selection of weights representative of those Bouabré might have seen while making *Poids akan à peser l'or* (opposite wall) and an earlier manuscript he wrote on the subject (this wall). Called *abrammuo* (singular *mrammuo*), the weights feature geometric designs or come in the shapes of humans, animals, or household items.

Bouabré
Akan labels

Curatorial Asst.
Erica DiBenedetto

Silkscreened

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**Packaging for Darling hair extensions,
with drawings by Frédéric Bruly Bouabré**

Cardboard

Collection André Magnin, Paris

Bouabré turned to the materials abundant in the world around him to make his drawings and writings. This vitrine contains the Darling brand hair packaging that he used as supporting surfaces for his drawings by the 1980s. Gathering hundreds of examples, the artist transformed the plain cardboard on the back sides of the packaging into a uniform format for his series. While the packaging here has been arranged to display the exterior branding, one has been flipped to reveal a 1988 portrait of Philippe Grégoire Yacé, the then president of Côte d'Ivoire's Economic Council.

CASE LABELS

Semence de la vie (Seed of Life) 1977

Twenty-two drawings. Ballpoint pen, colored pencil, and graphite on paper

The Jean Pigozzi Collection of African Art

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Although Bouabré created drawings to illustrate his manuscripts throughout the 1970s, this series of twenty-two drawings is his earliest known independent artwork. Referred to by the artist as *tableaux*, the drawings depict graphic scenes of intercourse between a spiderlike creature and a woman, between humans, between humans and spectral beings, between animals between insects, and between humans and animals. Boldly outlined in pen against graphite or colored pencil backgrounds, the drawings read as narrative sequences about sex and the origins of life, informed by myths, religious beliefs and imagination.

WALL LABELS

Musée du visage africain (Museum of the African Face) 1991–97

162 drawings. Ballpoint pen and colored pencil on cardboard

The Jean Pigozzi Collection of African Art

Based on an earlier manuscript by Bouabré of the same title (on view in a nearby vitrine), *Musée du visage africain* explores West African facial and body scarifications as a system of knowledge. “I define ‘Museum’ as the temple in which we keep the monuments that help us understand history,” Bouabré remarked. “‘Faces’ are figures, races, surfaces, and any external aspects of the body.” He depicts a range of bodily incisions and tattoos that represent ethnic identities and group kinships, creating an inventory of graphic symbols and forms. The series also includes abstract patterns, scenes from nature, built environments, and text panels.

**Relevés des signes observés sur oranges
(Readings from Signs Observed on
Oranges) 1989–2008**

Eighty-six drawings. Ballpoint pen and colored pencil on cardboard, some with graphite

The Jean Pigozzi Collection of African Art

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“I do not work from my imagination. I observe, and what I see delights me. And so I want to imitate,” Bouabré once said. He found extraordinary meaning in mundane things, even orange peels, as evidenced by these brilliantly colored drawings. Studying the patterns and chance markings on the fruit, he divined abstract scripts as well as human, animal, and mythical figures. For the artist, the work of interpreting everyday signs was an ongoing process. He made the drawings in this series over several decades, first between 1989 and 1999 and then between 2005 and 2008.

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CASE LABELS

Bouabré wrote extensively about subjects that he also explored in his drawings, including Bété culture, Ivorian politics post-independence, and systems for organizing knowledge. Penned variously in Bété, French, and English, the manuscripts here range from didactic tools, like a calendar and alphabet manual, to philosophical treatises.

“Le calendrier du monde noir d’origine Bété” (The Calendar of the Black World of Bété Origin) 1982

Sixteen pages. Ballpoint pen and colored pencil on paper

Bouabré Family Collection. Courtesy André Magnin

“Africa: Birth of Science” 1974

140 pages. Ballpoint pen and carbon-paper transfer on paper

Bouabré Family Collection. Courtesy André Magnin

“Discours de Léopold Sédar Senghor à l’Université d’Abidjan” (Speech by Léopold Sédar Senghor at the University of Abidjan) 1972

404 pages. Pencil and ballpoint pen on paper, with found photograph of Senghor published in the Ivorian press

Bouabré Family Collection. Courtesy André Magnin

“Le musée du visage africain (nouvelle version)” (The Museum of the African Face [New Version]) 1975

Forty-eight pages. Typescript, ballpoint pen, and pencil on cardboard glued to paper

Collection Galerie MAGNIN-A, Paris

“West African Alphabet (The Bété)” 1982

122 pages. Felt-tip pen on paper

Collection André Magnin, Paris

“La symbolique Bété imagée (genèse)” (The Pictorial Bété Symbolism [Genesis])

c. 1970

102 pages. Ballpoint pen and pencil on cardboard glued on paper

Collection Galerie MAGNIN-A, Paris

“La science d’observation et le mystère de la vie” (The Science of Observation and the Mystery of Life) 1985

751 pages. Felt-tip pen on paper

Bouabré Family Collection. Courtesy André Magnin

“Un génie noir dans le musée ivoirien” (A Black Genie in the Ivorian Museum) 1972

272 pages. Felt-tip pen and pencil on paper

Bouabré Family Collection. Courtesy André Magnin