

Bété World

Committed to preserving the history and knowledge of his native Bété culture, Bouabré embarked on an ambitious project in the 1950s: the invention of a Bété syllabary.

He developed a writing system in which he matched spoken syllables in the Bété language with pictograms—glyph-like renderings of things from real life. The artist believed that this system could be applied not only to Bété but to other languages as well.

Bouabré created an artwork version of his syllabary, *Alphabet Bété*, in the early 1990s. The series consists of 449 drawings, all of which are on view in this gallery. They depict scenes of human activity and items such as fruit, domestic utensils, farming tools, body parts, tadpoles, and musical instruments. Complementing *Alphabet Bété* are works that explore Bété folktales and history or offer a survey of Bété material culture.

Knowledge of the World

Following his retirement in 1981 from the Ivorian civil service, where he worked for decades as an informant, translator, and researcher for scholars and ethnographers, Bouabré devoted more time to his art. He began to extensively catalogue and interpret items and forms found in nature and to record everyday scenes in his urban environment of Abidjan and elsewhere. Bouabré termed these surveys “connaissance du monde,” or “knowledge of the world,” a phrase that could also be used to describe the overall aim of his artistic endeavors.

This gallery is anchored by an artwork of the same title, *Connaissance du monde* (1987–2008), a grouping of thirty drawings that encompass everything from the natural markings on the surfaces of fruits to meditations on beauty and human diversity. It is joined by *Semence de la vie* (Seed of Life, 1977), *Relevés des signes observés sur oranges* (Readings from Signs Observed on Oranges, 1989–2008), and *Musée du visage africain* (Museum of the African Face, 1991–97), which together demonstrate Bouabré’s wide-ranging interests.

A World of Relations

Bouabré's vision of the world was not constrained by time or place or culture. Beginning with his own Bété culture, he expanded his gaze outward to encompass the entirety of the human story, sharing his unique understanding of our common bond. The two series on view in this gallery, both created toward the end of Bouabré's career, reveal his skill in bridging personal and collective experience and in tackling social concerns that remain resonant.

In *La démocratie c'est la science de l'égalité* (Democracy Is the Science of Equality), made during the presidential election crisis in Côte d'Ivoire in 2010–11, the artist reflects on democracy as a universal value. Its 182 drawings depict hands of many colors casting ballots in boxes bearing the national flags of various countries. *Hommage aux femmes du monde* (Homage to the Women of the World, 2007), a series of two hundred drawings of women draped in different national flags, celebrates women's rights, beauty, and role as pillars of nation building.