

The Museum of Modern Art

MoMA ANNOUNCES A MAJOR EXHIBITION OF MODERN ART IN AFRICA DURING DECOLONIZATION AND THE ARTISTS WHO DEPICTED A CONTINENT IN REVOLUTION

***Freedom and Futures: Emancipatory Art in Africa, 1956–1982* brings together approximately 250 objects from collections across the globe, including some 40 works from MoMA’s collection**

NEW YORK, August 27, 2026 — The Museum of Modern Art announces ***Freedom and Futures: Emancipatory Art in Africa, 1956–1982***, an exhibition that presents an artist-centered history of modern art in Africa during the key years of independence. On view from May 2 through August 14, 2027, the exhibition will shed critical light on how artists imagined and framed their roles in the project of nation-building, serving as activists and agents of the cultural, ideological, and political forces that inspired and advanced decolonization. *Freedom and Futures* is anchored by the historic congresses and festivals that took place during this period, arranged by organizers in Zimbabwe, Senegal, Algeria, Nigeria, and South Africa. Selections from these landmark gatherings, together with works from these five countries, will contextualize the parallel yet connected stories of nationalism and transnationalism in African modern art, foregrounding artists as central figures in the broader project of liberation. *Freedom and Futures: Emancipatory Art in Africa, 1956–1982* is organized by Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzewi, The Steven and Lisa Tanenbaum Curator, with Erica DiBenedetto, former Curatorial Associate, Department of Painting and Sculpture.

The exhibition proposes the term “emancipatory art” as a new framework for understanding the political and cultural aspirations of this pivotal moment and the essential role of artists in formulating a new vision of modern art—one that both reflected their changing world and propelled the change they wished to see. Examining the intersection of political sovereignty and cultural liberation, *Freedom and Futures* traces the formal, conceptual, and ideological strategies through which artists gave aesthetic form to the experience of decolonization, a set of practices that can be thought of as “emancipatory modernism.” As the struggle for independence unfolded in asynchronous yet intertwined timelines across the continent, artists responded to the specific social and political conditions in which they lived and worked. Their respective contexts resulted in works that remain visually and conceptually distinctive and rooted in place, while reflecting a broader shared history.

Despite their varied circumstances, artists laid the foundation for Pan-African discourse and exchange—and a greater diasporic community—at two monumental European gatherings before the transition to independence began in earnest: the First Congress of Black Writers and Artists (1956), held in Paris, and the Second Congress of Black Writers and Artists (1959), held in Rome. These two congresses helped establish a Pan-African consciousness that linked artistic practice, cultural production, and political engagement, catalyzing a wave of subsequent gatherings across Africa.

Following the first and second congresses, similar events hosted in Algeria, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, and Zimbabwe continued the tradition and became defining forums for articulating and debating anticolonialism and decolonization, shaping modern art and culture in Africa and beyond. Selections of works initially exhibited at each of five focal festivals—International Congress of African Culture (1962, Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia [present-day Harare, Zimbabwe]), Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres (First World Festival of

Negro Arts) (1966, Dakar, Senegal), Premier Festival Culturel Panafricain (First Pan-African Cultural Festival) (1969, Algiers, Algeria), World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (1977, Lagos, Nigeria), and Culture and Resistance Conference (1982, Gaborone, Botswana)—will be displayed sequentially in the exhibition, organized in six thematic sections spanning many mediums, including painting, sculpture, photography, film, tapestry, and printmaking.

One such section, “Emancipatory Awakening,” includes *Africa Before One (Afrique avant un)* (1963), by Algerian artist Mohammed Khadda, who, in search of a decolonized art, drew on prehistoric frescoes and petroglyphs from the Tassili caves in southeastern Algeria, and on Amazigh and Arabic scripts, to create an abstract symbolic language. Another section, “Resistance and Entanglement,” features Nigerian artist Uche Okeke’s *Women Riot* (1965), a painting that combines emotional intensity and formal rigor in depicting the first act of mass anticolonial defiance by women in Africa, when they revolted against British taxation in 1929 in eastern Nigeria.

Elsewhere in the exhibition, Mozambican artist Valente Malangatana’s powerful *Cry of Freedom (O Grito da Liberdade)* (1973), which was exhibited during the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, invokes his deep knowledge of ancestral mythology to create a surrealistic vision of national self-determination during the struggle for independence in Mozambique. Created during the final years of Portuguese rule in Mozambique, the artwork features soldiers, civilians, field-workers, daggers, dark birds, and reptilian creatures. This composition blends these elements to express the collective anxiety of people affected and scarred by colonial violence.

In the section “New Directions,” Senegalese artist Iba N’Diaye reworks European art history to explore the legacy of colonialism. His painting *Juan de Pareja Menaced by Dogs (Juan de Pareja agressé par les chiens)* (1982), part of his *Cry of a Continent* series, reimagines Diego Velázquez’s 1650 portrait *Juan de Pareja*. N’Diaye turns the original portrait into a symbol of neocolonialism by pairing it with an unsettling image of threatening dogs, suggesting that even after African nations won political independence, colonial control persisted in new forms.

“In charting a narrative of this period, *Freedom and Futures* expands art history’s view of modernism’s various origins, timelines, and geographic scopes,” says Nzewi. “In addition, the exhibition frames decolonization as an ongoing effort rather than a finished event. The plural ‘futures’ in the title reflects this, pointing to the many histories, colonial legacies, and competing political visions that fueled artists’ imaginations during the independence era and continue to shape postcolonial Africa and its diaspora.”

Freedom and Futures is the capstone of a trio of thematic exhibitions about mid-century Africa at MoMA, beginning with *Ideas of Africa: Portraiture and Political Imagination* and following *Architects of Liberation: Modernism in Western Africa*. All three exhibitions focus on the continent during the momentous shift from colonial rule to independence and build on research originated in MoMA’s Contemporary and Modern Art Perspectives (C-MAP) Africa group, led by Nzewi. Founded in 2009, C-MAP is an internal, cross-departmental research program at MoMA that fosters the multiyear study of art histories beyond North America and Western Europe.

In conjunction with the scholarship of the C-MAP Africa group, the research and development of *Freedom and Futures* has led to a series of transformative acquisitions that

significantly expand the Museum's holdings of work by such key figures of African modernism as Khadda, Malangatana, Okeke, Mahjoub Ben Bella, Gavin Jantjes, Gazbia Sirry, and Ibrahim El Salahi, all of which are included in the exhibition. These acquisitions continue an institutional legacy established by the Museum's founding director Alfred H. Barr Jr. In 1960, at Barr's recommendation, MoMA acquired Sam Ntiro's *Men Taking Banana Beer to Bride by Night* (1956), which was one of the first acquisitions by a major Western institution of a modern work by an African-born artist. The acquisition coincided with the so-called "Year of Africa," when 17 African countries gained political independence. Two years later, Nzewi notes, "Barr took part in the First International Congress of African Culture in Southern Rhodesia, after which the Museum began collecting more work by African artists—a chapter that sets MoMA's engagement with this period apart from other reassessments of global modernism happening today."

Freedom and Futures is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue. Edited by Nzewi, the publication features essays by Nzewi, Gemma Rodrigues, Johanna Grabski, Anissa Bouayed, Bukky Gbadegesin, Nomusa Makhubu, and Joshua Cohen, with an illustrated chronology by Pujan Karambeigi with Jane'a Johnson.

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PRESS CONTACTS:

Rebecca Allen, rebecca.allen@moma.org

Press Office, pressoffice@moma.org

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