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**Workshop: They Never Covered This in Library School: African Art
Contemporary African Art Bibliography**

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I have been closely observing the field of contemporary African art for more than 20 years. The groundswell of interest has been slow in coming, but, let me tell you, it has arrived. The past decade alone has witnessed many more exhibitions at prominent venues featuring African artists, many more American art museums now collecting contemporary African art, more courses in contemporary African art being taught at colleges and universities, more PhDs are being written in this area. And art libraries are scrambling to keep up.

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In 1989 at the Triennial Symposium on African Art, I presented a paper on documenting contemporary African art arguing, indeed pleading, that librarians and bibliographers move ahead in collecting and documenting printed materials on contemporary African art because this was going to be the next big thing. Back then the art historians and curators were not yet focused on the subject.

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Now eighteen years later, the landscape of contemporary African art has changed dramatically. Contemporary African art has taken over the discipline of African art history if one is to judge by the exhibitions, newly-minted PhDs, recruitments for college teachers and curators, and conference presentations. At the recent Triennial Symposium on African Art held last month, more than half the panels and papers dealt with contemporary African art, a radical shift since 1989. This is clearly where the action is. Are libraries ready?

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1989 was the year of the "Magiciens de la terre" exhibition at the Pompidou Centre, which was the starting point for the current florescence of contemporary African art. Before then, contemporary African art was way below the radar. Following "Magiciens" were several landmark shows with landmark catalogs: "Africa explores: 20th century African art," "Seven stories

about modern art in Africa," "The short century: independence and liberation movements in Africa, 1945-1994," "Africa remix," and a host of other shows.

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Where to begin getting a handle on all of this? As a bibliographical starting point, I recommend an online bibliography [Modern African art: a basic reading list](#), which we have been compiling since 1995. This provides a fully annotated "best books" list for starting your collection development and as a basic reference source for your patrons in the field of contemporary African art. With more than 500 entries, it covers all of Africa as well as African artists abroad. It includes surveys, texts, exhibition catalogs and is easily searchable by region and country. The selection is based on new titles in the Warren M. Robbins Library at the National Museum of African Art; it is updated continuously. If you don't take anything else away from this presentation, remember this bibliography and you will be off to a good start.

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Beyond the "best books" compilation of [Modern African Art: A Basic Reading List](#), let me describe a more comprehensive bibliographical enterprise available to all of you. Since 1981 we at the Warren M. Robbins Library at the National Museum of African Art have been selectively indexing the literature of African art, with strong emphasis on contemporary African art. Today, this database of more than 45,000 records (not all contemporary African art) is available through [WorldCat](#) and is integrated into the Smithsonian Institution Libraries online catalog, SIRIS (www.siris.si.edu). Here you will find not only monographs, but journal articles, essays, sections in exhibitions catalogs on individual artists, and even some art ephemera.

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In 2006 Iolanda Pensa, a young Italian art historian and critic, launched a site on Wikipedia (the Italian version) for an interactive [documentation of contemporary African art](#). It offers all the benefits and disadvantages of Wiki enterprises – democratic, inclusive, free-wheeling, messy. It is more than a bibliography. Arranged by country (both on the continent and off) it covers biennials, museums, galleries, associations, research institutes. There is also a chronological list of international contemporary African art exhibitions from 1962. Pensa also edited a special issue of [Africa e Mediterraneo](#) (Milan, 2006) on documenting contemporary African art.

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The best portal to Africana web sites is the one created and well maintained at Stanford University, called [African South of the Sahara](#), which includes a substantial section on Art.

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We should also point you to the homepage of the [Warren M. Robbins Library](#) where you will find links to a selection of very carefully vetted high-quality,

authoritative African art web sites. We have intentionally kept this set of links lean, clean and uncluttered.

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We are building a repository of African artists' files, which we call the [Archive of African Artists](#). It now numbers almost 3,000 files and is actively growing. The complete list of artists is online (not the contents of the files) through the Smithsonian Institution Libraries' web site. Even a simple Google search for a particular artist will lead one to this resource. This is especially helpful for finding information on emerging and less well-known artists. We receive inquiries from around the world because of this now visible, formerly hidden collection.

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There are only a few journals devoted to contemporary African art, but you should be aware of them: *Nka: journal of contemporary African art* (started by Okwui Enwezor); *African arts* (available on JSTOR and WilsonWeb); [Art South Africa](#) (This is the one you must have to keep abreast of the lively South African art scene); and ...

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... the award-winning fully online [artthrob](#) also from South Africa.

There is a brand new periodical on the horizon, *Critical interventions: journal of African art, history and visual culture*, which should appear later in 2007. As with many art sub-disciplines, journals come and go quickly. So it is with African art, but these that I have mentioned appear to have staying power.

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Mainstream art bibliographies and databases, such as Art Bibliographies Modern, WilsonWeb, and Art Net, now provide more coverage of African artists than ever before. And this is an encouraging development.

But there is a big caveat. This coverage is generally limited to those artists who are living and working outside of Africa, in North America and Europe. It misses the majority of African artists who fall outside this bibliographical net. It overlooks the majority of African artists who live and work on the continent. To some extent, we at the Smithsonian try to fill that gap by concentrating on acquiring publications and catalogs published in Africa and indexing them. You have access to these citations via WorldCat, as mentioned above.

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Obviously we know more about some artists than about others. Many African artists working today we have never heard of. There are stages of visibility for artists: (1) at the "pre-documentary" level are artists about whom nothing has been written or recorded or who have not exhibited; (2) next is the level of ephemeral documentation, where the only available and

collectible material is ephemera; and (3) finally, there are the recognized artists, schools, workshops, about whom substantial collectible material exists.

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The collective body of material about African artists includes much that is ephemeral. This is not unique to Africa. Any "new art" goes through a sifting process. We don't know today who will become important in the future. Museums have more at stake in this process of selecting and exhibiting, hence "validating" modern art and are consequently more cautious. Libraries and archives, however, can take the neutral high road with a less restrictive, more ecumenical approach. They are limited only by what is available and what can be acquired.

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Currency is the key in collection development: collecting items when they are current and readily available and relatively inexpensive. The failure to do so will probably mean material is later unobtainable or at least scarce, difficult to find, and expensive.

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Although outside the scope of this presentation, perhaps this question deserves future discussion: Who is an African artist? Should artists who were born in Africa, but who live and work in the West be considered African artists? Given today's global art world, what difference does place of birth make? What about content of art? Should Clinton Fein, a South African-born artist who lives in California, who satirizes American political figures, be considered an African artist?

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Bibliographic coverage on the African continent is not well developed. First, there are not large numbers of what you would regard as art books published in Africa. Many publications from Africa are poorly produced. Distribution networks are weak.

South Africa is an exception in many ways: an established art infrastructure, long tradition of publishing, and an apparatus of documentation.

One of the best book stores for southern African art books is [Clarke's Bookshop](#) in Cape Town (shown here). They offer comprehensive coverage of art books, catalogs and journals and will search for titles on request. Their easy-to-use web site is kept up-to-date with new titles. They are highly efficient and experienced in handling international book orders. We have also successfully used Clarke's to acquire gallery ephemera from South Africa.

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Where to begin? For those of you who are in art museum libraries, start by collecting materials relating to African artists who are represented in your

museum's collections or whose work has been exhibited by your museum. For those of you who are in academic institutions, your mandate should be a bit broader. You may need to be more expansive in your collection building, since your patrons will also be interested in the issues of the production and reception of contemporary African art, identity, gender, authenticity, globalization, and so forth.

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As for images of contemporary African art, the National Museum of African Art has a small but growing collection of contemporary artworks, around 300 objects. About one sixth of these are illustrated online through the museum's web site. [The Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives](#) at the National Museum of African Art also has a small, expanding collection of images of contemporary African art, including works in the Museum's permanent collection along with others as well.

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The Harmon Foundation promoted artists from Africa and sponsored exhibitions in the United States as early as the 1950s. In 1961 and again in 1966, the Foundation compiled directories of African artists. The archival files generated by these compilations and exhibitions are now in the Library of Congress; other records, including images, of the now-defunct [Harmon Foundation](#) are in the National Archives in Washington, DC, and available through this web site.

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There are a smattering of images of works by African artists from the established online photo archives, such as ArtSource, Art Resource, Art Image Links, and Bridgeman Art Library, relating to contemporary African art. Not surprisingly, these are works by the high-profile artists, such as William Kentridge, Julie Mehretu, and El Anatsui. Presumably these repositories will grow.

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Video-recordings on contemporary African art are in great demand for classroom use and public programming. This, too, is a genuine growth area. At the Robbins Library we are building an annotated list of videos on African art (traditional and contemporary), which is available on request. We plan to put it on the web.

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The African continent is host to several biennials, including Dakar's [Dak'Art](#); the Cairo Biennial; the New African Photography Encounters, in Bamako, Mali; Cape: Contemporary African Culture, in Cape Town; and the Luanda Triennial in Angola. There are also several active art centers and workshops across the continent, which generate a few publications.

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Apart from South Africa, one finds very few artists books being made by African artists. And even in South Africa, it remains a niche genre. But there is an excellent new web site that is [documenting South African artists' books](#) (shown here). This site includes the full text of a dissertation by David Murray Paton on the subject of South African artists' books.

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A miniscule number of auction catalogs exist for contemporary African art. You can count them on one hand. Although there is a growing interest in the monetary value of works by African artists, there are precious few places to turn for this information. Art Net and Art Price do pick up a few African artists, and of course commercial gallery web sites can be helpful sources for price information. There are also very few qualified appraisers of contemporary African art.

A painting by Gerard Sekoto recently sold at auction in London for more than \$200,000. Marlene Dumas has sold a work for more than \$3 million. But these are very much the exceptions rather than the rule.

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More and more African artists names are being established in the Library of Congress Name Authority File. At my Library as part of the indexing enterprise, we are busy doing name authority work to establish new names or revise already established ones. We occasionally go right to the artists for clarification of names and birth years.

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Connecting with artists is the ultimate referral. Our most useful strategy in gathering information on African artists is to go right to the source: the artists themselves. If we can track down the artist, it is often the most efficient and expeditious way to help or refer a patron. It is also an extremely useful way to develop our Archive of African Artists, as most artists are quite willing to help keep their files up to date.

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I should say a passing word about design, popular arts and crafts. Even though I have not focused on these areas of visual arts in this presentation, they represent very important areas for research and collection development, especially for academic art libraries. And here again I would point you to the Smithsonian Institution Libraries online catalog where there is a wealth of bibliographical information on African popular arts and crafts.

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Biographical information on the better known African artists can be found in Grove art online as well as in WorldCat (our Library's analytics).

We have also just mounted on the web another ongoing annotated bibliography of Monographs on African Artists, which compiles biographical texts and major exhibition catalog of single artists.

In 1993 we published *Nigerian artists: a bio-bibliography*, which actually launched our Archive of African Artists project.

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Lest we forget the old print bibliographies, I should mention L. J. P. Gaskin's *A bibliography of African art* (London: International African Institute, 1965). Though primarily a bibliography of traditional African art, there are listings in each country section on "African art today." So for pre-1965 bibliography on 20th-century African art, this is quite useful.

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In the Thames & Hudson World of art series, Sidney Littlefield Kasfir's *Contemporary African art* (London, 1999) is a quite serviceable text. Another book project is now underway to write a classroom survey text for contemporary African art under the auspices of the Arts Council of the African Studies Association (ACASA).

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Let me conclude by saying that contemporary African art is an exciting new field for art librarians. There is still time for you to get in on the ground floor. And we at the National Museum of African Art Library are there to assist or collaborate in any way we can.