

Box 951549, Los Angeles, California 90095-1549  
phone 310/825.4288  
fax 310/206.7007  
[www.fowler.ucla.edu](http://www.fowler.ucla.edu)

Department of Marketing and Communications

**Stacey Ravel Abarbanel**  
[staceyra@arts.ucla.edu](mailto:staceyra@arts.ucla.edu)  
310/825.4288

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For Immediate Use

### *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art* Opens Oct. 14 at the Fowler Museum at UCLA

Writing systems have flourished in Africa for thousands of years and have contributed significantly to the global history of writing, yet they have received little attention outside the continent. Now for the first time, this new exhibition presents artworks from a range of periods, regions, genres and peoples that testify to the richness and diversity of African scripts and graphic forms of communication. *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art*—on display at the Fowler Museum from Oct. 14, 2007–Feb. 17, 2008—features more than one hundred important and visually compelling works of art and explores the ways they creatively incorporate script and graphic symbols to communicate multiple messages and intentions.

Explains Polly Nooter Roberts, co-curator of the exhibition and deputy director and chief curator of the Fowler Museum, “the intellectual complexity, artistic beauty, and historical uses of African scripts demand a wider, more inclusive definition of writing. Writing has, for the most part, been limited to phonetic alphabets, despite the great diversity and cultural richness of inscription systems worldwide.”

An introductory section of *Inscribing Meaning* focuses on the history of particular African scripts, including ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, Vai and Mende from Liberia and Sierra Leone, Tifinagh, an ancient script of the Tuareg people, nsibidi from Nigeria, the liturgical Ge’ez script from Ethiopia, and others. Africa’s use of imported writing systems, such as Arabic and Roman scripts, are also addressed here, and selected works show how contemporary African artists engage with script or invent their own. The exhibition next contemplates the themes of body inscription, sacred writing, power and politics, artists’ books, and words in art.

#### **Inscribing the Body**

From early Egyptian works to the most contemporary art forms, African artists have used the body as a primary “canvas” for inscriptions—such as scarification or tattooing—or as a site for displaying graphically rich materials found on clothing or jewelry. The first section of ‘*Inscribing Meaning*’ explores such body decoration with amuletic jewelry, textiles used as garments, and representations of the inscribed body. An intricate wooden headrest carved by the Luba peoples of the Democratic Republic of the Congo depicts female figures and reflects many Luba conventions of beauty, including the graphic language of scarification.

Contemporary works by Berni Searle, Ghada Amer, and Iké Udé explore the subject in a variety of ways: South African artist Searle works with henna dyes to consider the complex notion of the word “stain,” Amer addresses text and the body through embroidered body suits, and Udé’s elegant photographs recalls the practice of uli body and wall motifs of his Igbo heritage while simultaneously referencing high fashion.

### **Sacred Scripts**

In religious traditions the world over, writing and graphic inscription are endowed with sacred attributes, for they are considered both the embodiment of the divine and a powerful means for conveying religious teachings. In Africa, specialized forms of writing and graphic inscription are usually the domain of highly trained (and often religious) practitioners, from scribes and poets to priests, monks and healers.

This section of the exhibition explores a wide range of religious objects that incorporate script, including an Egyptian inner coffin lid, a monumental talismanic healing cloth inscribed with Muslim prayers and magic squares, an Ethiopian Orthodox prayer scroll, and several contemporary works, including a painted board from Nigerian artist Victor Ekpuk’s “Manuscript” series that combines the form of a Qur’anic tablet with nsibidi signs from his Nigerian heritage.

### **Inscribing Power**

In different African social, political and cultural contexts, works of art often incorporate scripts as one way to express how power is accrued through the acquisition of specialized knowledge and skills, such as healing with herbal medicines, communicating with the spirit world, and writing. In creating works of art that serve those who guard and exercise power, such as warriors, leaders and members of religious or political associations, artists rely on the symbolic significance of specific materials, images, and, at times, inscriptions to imbue objects with greater efficacy and visual potency.

In this section of Inscribing Meaning, an Asafo flag from Ghana is displayed to show how it challenges rivals through imagery relating to proverbs and appliqué inscriptions, while symbolic weapons inscribed with pseudo-Arabic demonstrate how they bolster the aura and power of their owners. Masks and textiles worn in Nigeria by members of a men’s association are embellished with nsibidi signs and are presented along with numerous examples of how words and images unite in African art to convey information and communicate power.

### **Writing Politics**

Artists often use inscription to detail the discrepancies and ironies of colonial narratives of conquest and to explore how writing has dictated the telling of Africa’s histories. South African artist Kim Berman, for example, incorporates texts from newspaper and television accounts of current events in her suite of eighteen prints titled *Playing Cards of the Truth Commission, an Incomplete Deck* (1999), recognizing the media’s power to mold public opinion during the Commission’s deliberations.

Other works in this section, such as those by Durant Sihlali, evoke the practice of graffiti as a way to bring ideas into the public sphere. Among the most compelling examples of the use of word and image for political ends are several Congolese popular paintings, which incorporate French, Lingala, Swahili, and other languages into captions to support the artworks’ visual narratives.

### **Words Unbound and Word Play**

While contemporary art is interspersed throughout this exhibition, the two final sections are devoted exclusively to the works of contemporary artists. “Words Unbound” features ten contemporary artists’ books, including examples by South African artist Sue Williamson and Senegal’s Moussa Tine. The final section of “Inscribing Meaning” highlights the fascination with scripts and words manifested in the work of several internationally recognized contemporary African artists, including Rachid Koraïchi (Algeria), Victor Ekpuk (Nigeria), and Wosene Worke Kosrof (Ethiopia).

### **Additional Information**

Inscribing Meaning is a collaboration between the Fowler Museum and the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African Art. The curatorial team includes Mary (Polly) Nooter Roberts, Christine Mullen Kreamer of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African Art, Elizabeth Harney of the University of Toronto and independent scholar and curator Allyson Purpura. An accompanying catalog—authored and edited by the co-curators—includes essays by leading scholars of art history, history and linguistics and by African artists represented in the exhibition (5 Continents Editions, ISBN-10: 8874393776; ISBN-13: 978-8874393770).

The Fowler is open Wednesdays through Sundays, from noon to 5 p.m.; and on Thursdays, from noon until 8 p.m. The museum is closed Mondays and Tuesdays. The Fowler Museum, part of UCLA’s School of the Arts and Architecture, is located in the north part of the UCLA campus. Admission is free. Parking is available for a maximum of \$8 in Lot 4. For more information, the public may call (310) 825-4361 or visit [fowler.ucla.edu](http://fowler.ucla.edu).

### **Related Programs**

Sunday, Oct. 14, 2007 12–5 pm Opening Day

2–4:30 pm

Fowler OutSpoken: Word into Art: Conversations on Inscribing Meaning

Curators Polly Roberts and Christine Kreamer engage three artists featured in the exhibition, Wosene Kosrof, Victor Ekpuk, and Sue Williamson, in conversations exploring their work and the thematic underpinnings of this groundbreaking exhibition.

Sunday, October 28, 2007 2–4 pm

Fowler OutSpoken Panel: The Inscribed Environment: Public Space and Identity in Los Angeles

The people and voices of a neighborhood can be found on the walls of its buildings, streets, and other public spaces. A dialogue led by UCLA World Arts and Cultures lecturer Patrick Polk, and including noted muralist and activist Judy Baca, photographer and author Steve Grody, and graffiti artist Toons, examines urban public spaces in Los Angeles as contested arenas for the articulation of power and identity, and how muralists, graffiti artists, and street artists play a role in this phenomenon.

Sunday, November 18, 2007 1–4 pm

Kids in the Courtyard: A Play on Words

At this drop-in workshop, explore the art of Islamic calligrams, poems for which the form is just as important as the words. Play with writing words in artful ways that mimics their meaning.

Two Days Dedicated to Artists’ Books:

Friday, December 7, 2007 2–5 pm

Study Program: Words Unbound: Exploring Artists’ Books

Noted scholar and book artist Johanna Drucker has argued, “the artists’ book is the quintessential 20th century artform.” Examples abound from every major art and literature movement, but the medium

has also developed as a separate field from mainstream art. UCLA librarians Cristina Favretto and Robert Gore explore breathtaking examples of artist's books from the special collections and arts libraries, in a discussion and object study session highlighting collecting practices and historical development of this unique genre. Selections from the biomedical library collections will further enhance this study program. \$10 for members; \$15 for non-members.

Saturday, December 8, 2007 1–4 pm

World of Art Workshop: Artists' Books

Guest artists Karen Chu and Kim Lindley present an introduction to the world of handmade books. Participants will become acquainted with the artistry of bookbinding during this hands-on session, as the artists model a variety of different book structures and expand conventional understanding of what makes a book a book. \$15 for members; \$20 for non-members.

Reservations required for both programs: 310/825-8655. Register for both programs and receive a discount! \$20 members; \$30 non-members.

Sunday, December 9, 2007 2 pm

Fowler OutSpoken Lecture: The History of Writing Systems in Africa

Konrad Tuchscherer, associate professor from St. John's University and a leading scholar of graphic and writing systems, recounts the development of African scripts and symbols. From Egyptian hieroglyphics and the discovery of the Rosetta stone, through Saharan rock art, the alphabets of the Tuareg and Ethiopians, and the more recent scripts of Vai and Bamum, Tuchscherer demonstrates Africa's long engagement with the global history of writing and literacy.

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