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For Immediate Use

A Saint in the City: Sufi Arts of Urban Senegal
Opens at the UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History Feb. 9, 2003

On the crowded streets of Senegal's capital, Dakar, the image of one man can be found nearly everywhere: on the sides of vehicles, gracing the walls of businesses and homes, sanctifying places of prayer, and overlooking the toil of workers. He is saint, poet and mystic Sheikh Amadou Bamba (1853–1927), the spiritual leader of 4 million Muslims in Senegal and thousands more around the globe.

Bamba was a Sufi, or Muslim mystic, who resisted French colonial oppression through pacifism. An influential Senegalese Sufi movement called the Mouride Way is grounded in his teachings about the dignity and sanctity of work. Mouridism is one of four Sufi movements in Senegal, and is one of the most distinctive aspects of contemporary Senegalese social life. Sufism is thought of as the mystical core of Islam, and the abundant images of Bamba convey the saint's blessings to his followers.

'A Saint in the City' — on view at the UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History from Feb. 9 until July 27, 2003 — is the first major U.S. exhibition dedicated to Senegal, and the first to introduce audiences to the striking range of 20th-century Mouride arts. These include numerous portraits of Bamba in many media: large-scale popular murals and signs, intricate glass paintings, healing verses inscribed in stunning calligraphic styles, colorful textiles and paintings by internationally recognized contemporary artists.

Though little known in the United States, Mouridism is a pervasive, positive influence in Senegal (practiced by, among many, Senegalese president Abdoulaye Wade) that contributes to the country's striking stability. The dynamic works of art in "A Saint in the City," coupled with insights into Mouridism from the artists — whose words are written on the walls and heard on videos playing throughout the galleries — attest to the vibrancy of this artistic movement in Senegal and the devotion of those who create and appreciate these works.

The exhibition opens with images of lively murals by graffitiist Papisto, a leading figure in the late 1980's youth movement known as Set-Setal. Inspired by a song about dignity, propriety and cleanliness of the soul by famed Senegalese world musician Youssou N'Dour, thousands of youths took to the streets to protest lack of jobs. This dramatic demonstration was not a riot, but instead an effort to beautify public spaces by collecting trash and painting walls with icons of popular culture and

Sufi saints. Street names were changed, colonial monuments replaced and soon Dakar was pulsating with wall murals like those on display.

A gallery introduces visitors to the heritage of Islam in Africa dating to the eighth century, a mere 100 years after the death of Muhammad. Here glass paintings by Mouride artists depict the shared stories of Adam and Eve, Noah's Ark, and the sacrifice of Abraham, while objects such as talismans, articles of dress and adornment, and shrine pieces show the harmonious ways that Islamic precepts are interwoven with local forms and customs elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa.

Arched doorways lead to an area where visitors can explore depictions of the life and words of Bamba, his descendants and his followers. Though only a single photograph of the saint exists (taken in 1913 while he was under house arrest by colonial authorities), it has been the catalyst for a remarkable proliferation of portraiture and other imagery in Senegal over the past 20 years.

A wall displays images of the saint in every imaginable medium: lithographs, posters, silk-screened banners, plaster plaques, photocopies, sand paintings and even an inked image on cuttlefish bone. A small room to the side recreates the devotional sanctum of a holy man whose home in Dakar is laden with sacred imagery.

'A Saint in the City' also includes a gallery that recreates a typical Senegalese urban street scene, brimming with signs and stands and featuring a pair of seven-foot doors painted with Bamba's image that were donated to the exhibition by a restaurant in Dakar. The mystical potency for Sufis of letters, words and writings is examined via objects such as prayer boards, papers and clothing, while another area is devoted to the striking patchwork garments worn by some Mourides.

Visits conclude in a gallery that showcases the works of internationally exhibited contemporary artists inspired by Mouride precepts. Moussa Tine's assemblages evoke solidarity and the uplifting joys of faith. Chalys Leye's deep brown canvases are inscribed with codes and mystical devices evocative of the healing practices of Mouride mystics. Viye Diba's canvases in the earthtones of arid Africa and his sculpture "Musical Materiality" elegantly suggest the weight of responsibility.

The outstanding musical contributions of Mourides infuse the galleries with sound, including songs by Senegalese world musicians Youssou N'Dour and Cheikh Lo in the introductory gallery, zikrs (songs of remembrance) in the devotional sanctum, women's devotional singing based on lyrics by well-known Mouride female vocalist Fatou Guewel and Orchestre Baobab in the last section of the exhibition.

'A Saint in the City' celebrates the power of images in the everyday lives of Senegalese people, and demonstrates how these images are reshaping urban environments to express the vitality of contemporary African life. The Mouride arts on display invite visitors to explore one of the many faces of Islam through a culture of peace, hard work and steadfast devotion.

This exhibition is curated by Mary Nooter Roberts, deputy director and chief curator of the Fowler Museum, and Allen F. Roberts, director of the James S. Coleman African Studies Center and professor in the Department of World Arts and Cultures at UCLA. "A Saint in the City: Sufi Arts of Urban Senegal," a related book by the curators, with a preface by Mamadou Diouf, will be published in February 2003.

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Media sponsorship is provided by Rolling Out Urban Style Weekly.

'A Saint in the City' will be on view Wednesdays through Sundays, noon to 5 p.m.; and on Thursdays, 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 \$7 in Lot 4. For more information, the public may call (310) 825-4361.

Related Events:

12–5 p.m., Feb. 9, 2003

Opening Day

12–3 p.m. Reverse Glass Painting!

Visitors can explore the art of reverse glass painting in a workshop led by visiting Senegalese artists. Program is free; space is limited. Reservations required: (310) 825-8655.

2 p.m. Slide Lecture: "Art and Spirituality in Contemporary Senegal and the Diaspora"

Exhibition co-curators Allen and Polly Roberts will present an overview of "A Saint in the City," followed by a roundtable with Senegalese artists whose works and voices are featured in the exhibition. The panel will address the interface of art and peace, spirituality, urban life and globalization. Made possible by the Yvonne Lenart Public Programs Fund.

3–4:30 p.m. A Saint in Our City Community Mural Project

Visitors can contribute to an ongoing mural celebrating Los Angeles and our local and international heroes. Free; no reservations required. Also on Mar. 2 and Apr. 12.

9 a.m.-5 p.m., April 12, 2003

Symposium: "Global Saints, Local Lives: Images and Icons in Urban Space" Speakers will consider how images of saints and heroes influence daily urban existence, through crosscultural case studies ranging from Senegal to Mexico, India to the United States. Free. Program made possible by the Yvonne Lenart Public Programs Fund, the UCLA Center for the Study of Religion and the James S. Coleman African Studies Center.

12–5 p.m., June 1, 2003 Family Festival: Senegal!

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