

# Brooklyn Museum

## Teaching Resource: Special Exhibition

*Gravity and Grace: Monumental Works by El Anatsui*

February 8–August 4, 2013





# Gravity and Grace:

## Monumental Works by El Anatsui



### About the Artist

El Anatsui was born in a small town in Ghana in 1944 and raised by his uncle, a Presbyterian minister. After graduating from an art school where he was trained in the same tradition as many generations of European artists, he moved to Nsukka, Nigeria, to teach art at a university where the faculty encouraged students to combine the European styles that had been taught there for years with African ideas and materials.

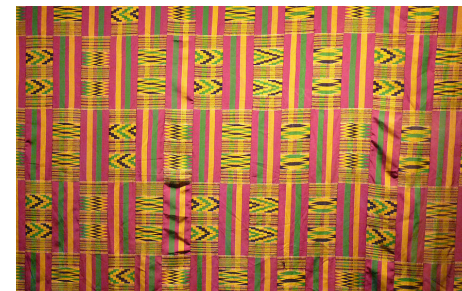
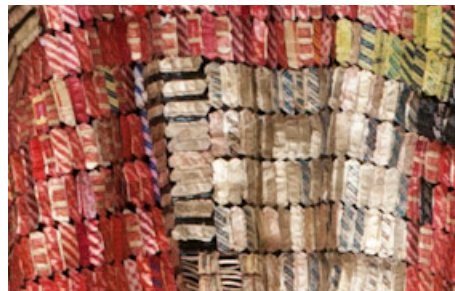
Anatsui has experimented with many materials and techniques and lived as an artist-in-residence all over the world. This wide variety of experience influences his artwork, which he makes in Nsukka with a team of studio assistants and exhibits internationally.

### About the Exhibition

*Gravity and Grace*, Anatsui's first solo exhibition in a New York museum, features more than thirty works made of metal or wood found objects.

While metaphorically exploring the many historical connections between Africa, Europe, and the Americas, Anatsui responds to a long history of innovations in abstract art and performance. Deconstructing and reassembling appropriated materials, he creates radically new forms that straddle the boundary between sculpture and painting and take on a widely varying look with each new installation.

Included in the exhibition are twelve recent wall and floor sculptures generally considered the apex of the artist's career. Created with bottle caps from a distillery in Nsukka, these monumental hangings are pieced together in a dazzling array of colors, forms, and textures.



### About the Artwork

Anatsui's work is full of international references. The artist himself sees the screw-top bottle caps he uses, which come from liquor bottles, as a reference to the former transatlantic trade between Africa, Europe, and the Americas in which enslaved Africans and alcohol were exchanged. There are links between his imagery and everything from the striped patterns of West African *kente* cloth (see right-hand photo above) to the designs of European mosaics. Nigerian markets that trade in a variety of commercial supplies provide raw material for his art, while his studio, where he works with assistants to turn that raw material into a finished piece, is reminiscent of an artist's workshop of the European Renaissance.

Anatsui places great value on the experimental, adventurous qualities of his art. He prefers not to identify his work as purely "sculpture," "installation," or any of the art world's standard labels. He never makes preliminary sketches. Instead, his assistants fold and join the bottle caps into blocks of color that he then moves

around on the floor of his studio to create a composition. When it comes to installing these works in museums and galleries, he does not dictate how they should hang but encourages each venue's team to decide how the piece will be shown: horizontally, vertically, flat along the wall, draped in folds like cloth. He enjoys having many people come in contact with his work over the course of its creation and installation and considers change an exciting and integral part of art.

## Description of the Artwork

*Earth's Skin* is an immense metal work that hangs on the wall in draping folds like a textile. It measures approximately fifteen by thirty-three feet, the size of an average New York studio apartment. The piece is made of thousands of aluminum screw-top bottle caps that have been flattened, folded, and joined together by copper wire (see center photo on page two). The joined elements form patterns and textures that shift and change across the surface of the composition—sometimes in repeating straight lines or concentric circles, other times in fields of uniform color or of many different colors.

## Questions for Viewing

Look carefully at *Earth's Skin*. What do you observe?

Like many artworks, Anatsui's pieces appear differently depending upon the viewer's distance from them. Step back and take in *Earth's Skin* as a whole. How would you describe it? Now look at it from close range (or look at a detail image of it). How does your description change?

This piece was made with the cooperation of many people and is made up of many individual parts. Try to reconstruct the process of making this artwork, starting from gathering the raw materials and ending with its installation in the Museum.

Anatsui's assistants assemble blocks of bottle caps that are folded and matched to show one color or pattern. Let your eyes lead you around the whole artwork, and see how many different colors and patterns you can find.

Anatsui's artwork includes symbols and patterns that refer to different cultures' traditions, such as *kente* cloth from West Africa. What other types of imagery do you see in this work? What do some different sections remind you of? What about the piece as a whole?

While there are some meanings that many people commonly find in his work, Anatsui does not have one strict interpretation that he considers to be the right answer. What does this piece say to you? How does the title *Earth's Skin* affect your answer?

## Activities

### Art-Making

Anatsui's metal sheets are made of screw-top bottle caps that Anatsui buys from a business near his studio. He and his assistants fold the caps into specific shapes (see detail image at the end of this packet) and join thousands of them together to make enormous artworks. Use your own locally acquired material—such as paper from your recycling bin—to make a communal class artwork. Cut the paper into strips and imitate some of Anatsui's folding techniques (listed here) or invent your own. Play with patterns and repetition to create chains or sections. Join your folded strips together with a hole punch and twist ties, then join your work together with your classmates' to create one large artwork.

#### Shape 1: Plain

Punch holes in both ends of a paper strip. You can join multiple “plain” strips together side-by-side or end-to-end.

#### Shape 2: Crumpled

Hold the ends of one strip and gently twist in opposite directions. Press down to flatten. Punch a hole at either end.

#### Shape 3: Chain

To create this shape, you need two strips of paper. Fold each strip in half at an angle to create a wide V. Place the two strips together so the ends meet and the middle space looks like a diamond. Fold over any excess paper at the ends. Punch through the overlap at each end and secure with twist ties.

### English Language Arts

Anatsui's artworks are patched together out of many smaller blocks of bottle caps. You can make a class poem by patching together words in the same way. Start out in small groups and brainstorm words that describe *Earth's Skin*. When your group has a collection of descriptive words, make sentences that use as many of the words as you can. (Hint: it may help to start your sentences all the same way. For example, “I see...”) Combine each group's favorite sentence to create a poem from the whole class. For older students, each group may generate words of a different part of speech. Swap words among the groups so that each group has a selection of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, then create complete sentences using those words.

## Social Studies

Anatsui draws inspiration for his art from many different international sources. For example, he sometimes uses West African *adinkra* symbols representing ideas and proverbs; other times he employs areas of solid color the way some twentieth-century American artists did in order to encourage viewers to focus on color itself as a subject of art. Choose and research two traditions you know of that come from different sources. Create a visual representation that combines both.

## Resources

[www.art21.org/artists/el-anatsui](http://www.art21.org/artists/el-anatsui)

Anatsui's page at Art21's website (a source of information about contemporary artists), including text, images, and videos of his work.

<http://creativity.denverartmuseum.org/?lesson-plan=all-that-surrounds-you>

A suggested lesson plan for grades 6–12 using Anatsui's work for inspiration.

[www.thehighline.org/about/public-art/anatsui](http://www.thehighline.org/about/public-art/anatsui)

A description and image of Anatsui's piece *Broken Bridge II*, installed near New York City's High Line.

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=5I7XZL9KjFQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5I7XZL9KjFQ)

A short video interview with Anatsui about the exhibition *Gravity and Grace*, made when he visited the Akron Art Museum for the exhibition's installation.

<http://youtu.be/bwV9FsetUEI>

Time lapse videos of installation of Anatsui's works.

Vogel, Susan Mullin. *El Anatsui: Art and Life* (Munich, London, New York: Prestel, 2012)

The most recent book about Anatsui's life and career.

**Cover, page 2 (center), and page 5: El Anatsui (Ghanaian, born 1944). *Earth's Skin*, 2007. Aluminum and copper wire, 177 x 394 in. (449.6 x 1,000.8 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. Photograph by Joe Levack, courtesy of the Akron Art Museum**

**Page 2 (left): El Anatsui. Photo by Lynn Ischay, 2012, *Cleveland Plain Dealer***

**Page 2 (right): Ashanti. *Loincloth*, circa 1900–1920. *Kente* cloth, 122 x 76 in. (310.0 x 193.0 cm). Musée du quai Branly. Creative Commons BY-SA**

**Page 6: El Anatsui (Ghanaian, born 1944). *Gli (Wall)* (detail), 2010. Aluminum and copper wire, installation at the Akron Art Museum, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. Photograph by Andrew McAllister, courtesy of the Akron Art Museum**

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