



Brooklyn Museum

Teacher Resource Packet

Yinka Shonibare MBE

June 26–September 20, 2009





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Yinka Shonibare MBE. Photo © Andreas Sterzing 2009, www.sterzing.co.uk

About the Artist

Yinka Shonibare was born in the United Kingdom in 1962 to Nigerian parents. The family returned to Lagos when Shonibare was three. At seventeen he relocated to London, where he currently lives and works. He studied at Goldsmiths College, University of London, and Byam Shaw School of Art at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design, University of the Arts, London. While in art school Shonibare was asked why his work was not African in theme, a question that eventually led him to address issues of stereotypes and authenticity in his work.

In 2005 Shonibare was awarded an MBE (Member of the Order of the British Empire), a distinction he uses despite and because of its irony.

Description of *Scramble for Africa*, 2003

Scramble for Africa features a group of fourteen headless mannequins seated around a rectangular table. A faint image of the African continent, divided into colored regions, appears in the middle of the wood table. The figures are seated in chairs with dark brown wood frames and patterned fabric cushions.

Each of the seated figures wears a long jacket, shirt, vest, tie, and pants. While the cut of the clothing is consistent, the pattern and coloring of the fabrics used for each outfit is unique. All of the figures are seated, but their arms, hands, and torsos are arranged in a variety of positions. A figure at one end presses his palms against the table as he half-rises. A neighbor reaches out to restrain him, while another leans forward and points across the table.

Background Information

In *Scramble for Africa*, the artist references a moment in nineteenth-century expansionism when leaders from Europe and Asia staked claims to Africa on a large map at the Berlin Conference of 1884–85. The patterned fabrics (called Dutch wax prints) featured in the scene are closely associated with Africa, although they were actually made in Holland for the West African market. The cut of the garments brings to mind Victorian designs worn by many Europeans at the time. The fabric selection and application challenge viewers to reconsider assumptions regarding identity, authenticity, and class. Reflecting on his own cultural background, Shonibare recalls, “My father would go to work in a suit, but when he got back home, he would change into African robes.”¹

1. L. D. Porter, “Yinka Shonibare Brings Textile Art to SBMA,” *Santa Barbara Independent*, March 12, 2009.

Questions for Viewing

Spend at least two minutes looking quietly before engaging in discussion or writing. The following questions can be posed in large- or small-group conversation or used as entry points for written work.

What is included in this environment?

What do the objects and materials remind you of?

What do the figures have in common?

Zoom in on two figures. What makes each figure unique?

Why do you think this group came together? What clues in the image support your answer?

How would you feel if you were in this scene? What pose or facial expression could you use to convey this feeling?

Why do you think the artist chose to use fabric produced in Holland instead of textiles produced in Nigeria or other African countries?

Activities

Art and Language

Select a scene from a motion picture with multiple characters. Watch a one- or two-minute excerpt with the volume turned off. Share your impressions of what happened in the scene with a partner. Watch the same clip again, noting visual evidence related to each character's facial expression, pose, and movement. Reflect on your notes and assess any new information or ideas. Compare and contrast your ideas with a partner. Turn the volume up and watch the scene a third time. What new information did you gather? In what ways did this information support or challenge your ideas?

Working with a partner or small group, create a list of words to describe a range of emotions. Take turns expressing the emotions from your list through facial expression, pose, and movement. Next take turns observing and sharing physical expressions that communicate contrasting emotions. For example, if your partner acts out hope, you might respond by expressing despair.

Look closely at the installation *Scramble for Africa*. Apply your understanding of body language to identify two people in the installation who appear to agree. What clues tell you they agree? Find two people in the installation who appear to disagree with each other. What clues tell you they may disagree? What might these figures say if sound was added to the piece? What body language can we use to foster peace, compromise, and respect?

Social Studies (for older students)

In *Scramble for Africa* Yinka Shonibare references the moment when world leaders from across the globe met at the Berlin Conference of 1884–85. Research the conference to identify the topic of the meeting, the countries represented, and the individual and collective goals and outcomes. For whom did the conference have a positive outcome, and for whom a negative one? How does this event, which took place more than a hundred years ago, continue to have an impact on modern life in Africa and abroad? How do you think the artist feels about this event?

Teachers supporting units of study featuring Native American life, New Netherlands, Westward Expansion, and Immigration can use the following questions to compare and contrast experiences in North America and Africa:

What is the difference between colonialism and immigration? What circumstances or events may prompt a community to leave its homeland?

What attracted communities to move to North America in _____ (refer to time period you are studying)?

What draws people to North America today? How are these factors similar or different from those reflected in the colonization of Africa?

How has colonization affected the _____ community in North America (depending on your unit of study, this could include Algonquin, Dutch, Mexican, or French communities in North America)? How did this community resist? How does this legacy still affect us today?

Resources

Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*. New York: Anchor Press, 1994 (originally published in 1958).

This novel written by Chinua Achebe (b. Nigeria, 1930) explores themes of continuity and change as native and foreign-born residents of Nigeria confront one another at the turn of the century as a result of British colonialism.

Kent, Rachel, Robert Hobbs, and Anthony Downey. *Yinka Shonibare MBE*. Exh. cat., Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia. Munich, London, and New York: Prestel, 2008.

This image-rich catalogue includes an in-depth interview with Yinka Shonibare and essays by the exhibition curators.

Spring, Christopher. *Angaza Afrika: African Art Now*. London: Laurence King Publishers, 2008.

This book, written by the curator of African galleries at the British Museum, explores the work of more than sixty contemporary African artists working on the continent and abroad.

Yinka Shonibare MBE is organized and toured by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia. The exhibition is curated by Rachel Kent.



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Cover (detail) and p. 2: Yinka Shonibare MBE (b. United Kingdom, 1962). *Scramble for Africa*, 2003. Fourteen fiberglass mannequins, fourteen chairs, table, Dutch wax printed cotton, overall 52 x 192 x 110 in. (132 x 488 x 280 cm). The Pinnell Collection, Dallas. Image courtesy of the artist, Stephen Friedman Gallery, London, and James Cohan Gallery, New York. © the artist. Photo: Stephen White

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