



“WHEN I SAW THE FIRST ARTIST’S BOOK **HOOKED**”
JACK GINSBERG



Smithsonian
National Museum of African Art

MISSION STATEMENT

To inspire conversations about the beauty, power, and diversity of African arts and cultures worldwide.

LOCATION/CONTACT US

950 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20560
202-633-4600
nmafaweb@si.edu
africa.si.edu

HOURS

10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. daily *except December 25.*

ADMISSION

Admission is free.

ARRIVING AND PARKING

Vehicles displaying the international symbol of accessibility may park in the designated parking spaces on Jefferson Drive. Metered parking is also available on Independence Avenue. The main entrance to the museum, located on Independence Avenue.

REQUESTS FOR SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETERS

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SEPTEMBER 16, 2015

**ARTISTS’
BOOKS
AND
AFRICA**

UNIQUE VISION



Smithsonian
National Museum of African Art

Skodelapperheuwel, Skodelappervrou (Butterfly Hill, Butterfly Woman) Wilma Stockenström and Judith Mason

ARTISTS' BOOKS AND AFRICA

UNIQUE VISION

UNIQUE VISIONS: THE EXHIBITION

Since artists' books are not normally associated with African art, our goal in this exhibition is to introduce the genre and survey its "African" manifestations. The featured books are from the Smithsonian Libraries' Warren M. Robbins Library at the National Museum of African Art and the National Museum of African Art collection. They offer the full span from illustrated nineteenth-century atlas folios to livres d'artistes to twentieth-first century artists' books.

In accord with the Smithsonian's mission of "valuing the world cultures," this exhibition presents Africa in books of artistry and imagination. The forms and structures of these artists' books blend with a stunning range of African themes explored by both African and international artists.



No Be Today Story O! Otobong Edet Nkanga Amsterdam: Lumen Travo Gallery, 2010

WHAT ARE ARTISTS' BOOKS?

To avoid getting tangled up in definitions, let's just invoke the tautology that an artist's book is a book made by an artist that the artist calls an artist's book. Artists' books build on the traditional codex form of sequential bound pages, but they expand and push those boundaries in limitless creative ways. There may be texts and words, or not. Most importantly, they are intended as a visual art work. Artists' books may be limited editions produced by fine art presses or may be inexpensive "democratic multiples," often with a political or social message, distributed cheaply or freely.

HOW DO WE READ ARTISTS' BOOKS?

Ideally, an artist's book invites an intimate experience between reader and the book. How is the artist's imagination reflected in the book? With an artist's book, the experience is heightened because of its great artistry, its tactile qualities, and its sheer unexpectedness. The multiple formats of artists' books challenge the reader to engage with the object in hand. What is it made of? How is it constructed? How is it bound or enclosed? How does one move through the book? And what will the next page reveal? Artists' books play with the codex format in a variety of fanciful ways. They may offer several pathways to explore. That is their charm or whimsy or beauty.

HISTORY OF ARTISTS' BOOKS: THE PRECURSORS

Artists' illustrated books (*livres d'artistes*) are book works with art or art and text produced by a press or publisher. Often these are limited fine art editions and may be initiated by the publisher or author, not the artist. They are conventional in format—the traditional codex or portfolio—and in binding. Artists' books are essentially a twentieth-century art form, which have been around since the 1960s. American Ed Ruscha and German-Swiss Dieter Roth are often credited with launching this genre. One of the reasons that artists' books are difficult to pin down is that they intersect with other twentieth-century art movements, such as conceptual art, pop art, Futurism, or Fluxus.

ARTISTS' BOOKS IN AFRICA & AFRICA IN ARTISTS' BOOKS

Contemporary artists' books have found a foothold in South Africa, but not really elsewhere on the continent. One explanation is that art schools in Africa do not include books arts in the teaching program. Excluding South Africa, the African artists who have taken up artists' books are those who study or work overseas where they are exposed to this genre. Most of the African artists in this exhibition are experimenters with artists' books. It is not their primary medium. In South Africa book arts flourish.

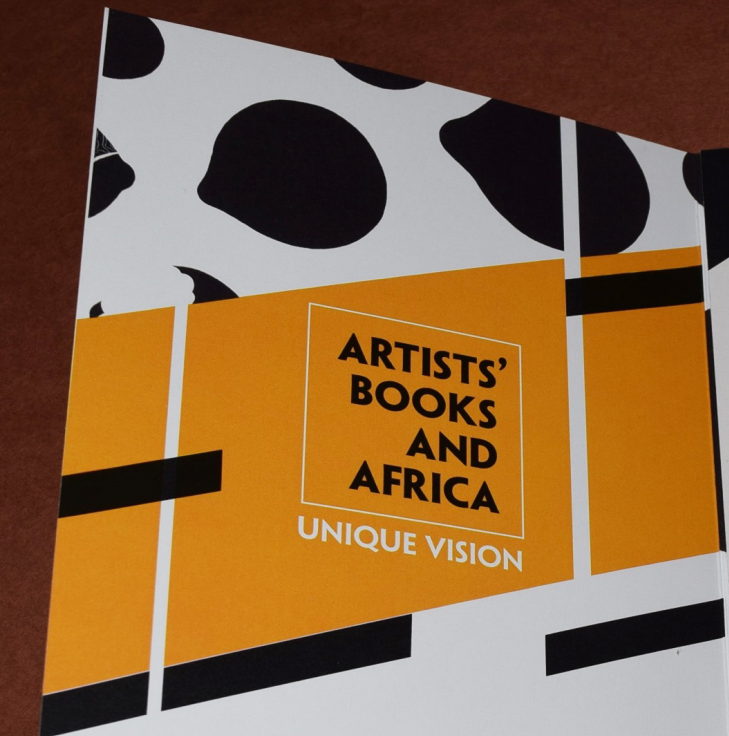
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Art by Zeddy Story © Oshong Eder Nkanga Amsterdam: Lumen Travo Gallery, 2010

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