

METROPOLITAN



Obo Addy and Candice Goucher at the opening of African Art from Portland Collections at Portland State. (Photo: Richard J. Brown)

African art at PSU depicts rich heritage

by Nathaniel Scott

"Between Realms: African Art From Portland Collectors," opened with a thump. Ah thumper, thump, thump. The thumper, thump, thump drumming of Master Drummer Obo Addy brought the feeling of the African continent to the 200 or so people who gathered at Portland State University's (PSU's) opening ceremonies for the school's major art exhibit for the 1984-85 academic year. Thump.

Ceremoniously, Dr. Candice Goucher, Black Studies assistant professor and the guest curator of the exhibit, with the help of Master Drummer Obo Addy, poured a libation and poetically asked our African ancestors to bless the art exhibit.

Addy, speaking in his native African language, and Goucher, reading the traditional poem in English, said: "Departed ancestors, this drink is for you/Mother Earth, receive this drink/As custom requires we pour this drink for you/We call on you this Friday evening/We have gathered to celebrate the African continent/Let our meeting be truthful and good/Let it be a blessing for the study of Africa at PSU/Come and drink, all those departed and between realms/Let our energy combined be directed toward easing the suffering of African peoples/Long life to (African studies at PSU)/Long life to all who have gathered here/Let us succeed in all our undertakings/Let this work be crowned with success." And then the doors were flung open to the beauty of African art.

Black sculptured figures aged time's healing hand of beauty; masks commanding places that streamed long ago into the here and now; knives, arrows, coins and crosses speaking the diversity of Black craftsmen; showcasing the long and tedious hours visions of reality entailed, and the beauty of African resounded with ah thumper, thump, thump.

To enter the Littman Gallery where the art objects breathe the beauty of time, is to step into, not back to, Africa. One can almost hear chants of fertility rites; the asking of the gods for the abundance of rain; and the pleads with "departed" ancestors to light the way into the nether world: to hold in abeyance "Between Realms."

The oldest piece in the exhibit, The Standing Figure, comes from Dogon, Mali in West Africa. The petrified wood work of art, "easily is 400 to 500 years old." And bedazzlement is the only way to explain the feathered headdress from the Cameroons in West Africa; whose splendid colors denote the status and the position of the wearer. Most likely, Goucher said, the one who wore it

would have been of political importance and the circle (how the feathers fan out) represents the circle of the person's followers.

The suggestiveness of the many objects; how they flow toward natural rhythms and actions; and the continuation of hues blending tones of elegance, are spellbinding.

The art is suggestive of a people whose visions were visions of reality. They represent the beauty of decoration and the importance of functionality. The artists' natural adherence to completeness, stirs the envy of the poet. And the history of Africa that has gotten waylaid in the shuffle of European indoctrination blooms like lilies of the field.

State Representative Margaret Carter, who rushed in from Salem to view the delightful art gifts from the motherland, remarked that: "I came down for the reception because I think it's very important. I think (too) many of we Black people have lost our identity." Thumper, thump.

"Between Realms: African Art From Portland Collectors," runs through June 14. The art objects can be viewed in the Littman Gallery on the second floor in Smith Memorial Center. And in addition to the art objects, there are some stunning black and white photographs by Paul Gebauer, in both the White and Silver Galleries, which are also on the second floor.

Gebauer's photographs capture the realism of man's struggle with nature. Anguish, joy, sorrow and the determination to be blazed black as midnight's beauty: And the tenderness of the artist's skill lives in the essence of his work. Truly, it's a sight to behold.

A footnote to "Between Realms" is "Caribbean Culture: The African Presence," which is a three week summer study abroad program offered in Jamaica and Santo Domingo.

The Caribbean summer program is a six-credit course and it will be led and directed by PSU's Black Studies Chairman, Dr. Darrell Millner. Participants will depart from Portland July 13 and return August 4. Additional information may be obtained by calling the American Heritage Association, 635-3702, or PSU's Black Studies Department, 229-3472.

PSU's art exhibit should be a must on school curriculums and community organizations looking for things to interest children; to teach children; to provide children with the incentive to become inquisitive. Those who want to inspire children to understand the birthright of mankind, should look no farther than "Between Realms: African Art From Portland Collections."

Dodds awarded grant

Although several authors have touched on the subject in incidental fashion, none to date have concentrated their writing in Portland's civil rights movement during its critical formative years from 1941 to 1953, according to Dr. Gordon B. Dodds, professor of history at Portland State University.

Dr. Dodds will launch a research project this summer to explain how Portland (and to some extent the state as a whole) changed during this comparatively short period of time from what he calls "... a very bigoted community to one in which almost all legal and informal barriers to freedom were removed."

In late March, the Oregon Committee for the Humanities awarded Dodds a \$2,000 summer fellowship to help support his professional inquiry. As part of the funding agreement, the PSU historian has agreed to submit a scholarly article to a professional journal for publication, and to deliver public presentations on results of his work in at least two Oregon communities.

"This is a period in local history that many Oregonians have regarded like the weather, to some degree. We've talked about it, but we really haven't done much about chronicling

it," said Dodds. "With good fortune, perhaps this new research will begin filling in the historical blanks," he concluded.

The period in question begins in 1941 with the arrival of a large number of Black war workers in Portland — the first substantial contingent of Blacks in Oregon's history — and closes with the passage of the state's public accommodations law in 1953.

Dr. Dodds identifies the local civil rights movement as led by perhaps 30 men and women who worked through grass-roots organizations which addressed neighborhood concerns, the admission of Black students to local beauty schools, difficulties of Blacks in securing homes in "white" neighborhoods, employment in sales positions in department stores and supermarkets, equitable insurance rates, and discrimination in public accommodations. These Portlanders accomplished much locally through education and persuasion.

Many of them also were instrumental in securing a state fair employment practices law in 1949 and a state public accommodations law in 1953, both of which were among the first in the nation, according to Dodds.



Children from Yunnan province in China performed native dances for Portland audiences last weekend. (Photo: Richard J. Brown)

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