



Untitled, Ritual of Oppression Series

This striking sculpture by John T. Scott is part of his exceptional *Ritual of Oppression* series of the late 1960s and 1970s. Like much of Scott's work, this series addressed the racial injustices occurring at the time, particularly in Rhodesia (later Zimbabwe) and South Africa. In this series, Scott cast ordinary objects like apples, eating utensils and his daughter's discarded doll parts to express a sense of hopelessness that crossed national and cultural boundaries. Scott stated that, when confronted with the wrongs that were happening, he had two choices in how to respond; he chose art as the more positive, appropriate course. Scott was inspired throughout his career by the art forms of the African continent. How does this sculpture reflect that?

Comprised of plate metal rising from a wooden base as twisted lengths of metal rod cling to them, this sculpture is a study in contrasts. The plate has been welded as both a method of assembly and destruction, with sections appearing torn, while the twisted lengths have been cast to look like they have been knotted by hand. The composition of the different elements is balanced and cohesive, yet slowly reveals its idiosyncrasies. The base is not quite level, and juts out to accommodate one of the tower-like structures, suggesting unsteadiness and unpredictability.

The plate metal elements are not quite stable, and the ties, or chains, are composed of simple knots that could easily be undone. Although intensely abstract, this piece is emotionally evocative. There is a sense of deterioration and destruction, as the metal crumples, and the knotted elements are not connected, to themselves or to anything else. What has broken down? What has broken open? Are there the beginnings of something new in the making? "I felt," Scott recalled some 20 years later, "... anytime you put a human being in a box, whether it's economic, political, social, etc., ... you put them in the ghetto, and no human being should have their spirituality confined." This piece suggests that something has escaped.

Circa 1976

Cast and welded bronze and wood

Unsigned

16" w x 18" d x 16 1/2" h

JOHN T. SCOTT

American

#1982

LET'S LOOK

What are the similarities between the materials? What are the differences?

What textures are present? Where are the areas of contrast?

In what ways have the materials been manipulated?

What gives this piece a sense of balance? Imbalance?

About the Artist

"I'm an artist who works out of his history to hopefully bring my patch/voice to the quilt of mankind. That's all I want to do. It will not be until we recognize the value of each of those patches that we will have a culture that is intact." – John T. Scott

One of the art world's true renaissance men, John Scott led the Xavier University Art Department for 40 years, until his death in 2007. Winner of a prestigious "Genius Grant" from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation in 1992, Scott was born and raised in New Orleans in the Lower Ninth Ward, and graduated from Xavier and Michigan State University, where he studied under Charles Pollock, brother of Jackson Pollock. As a native of New Orleans, Scott was adept at channeling the spirit of the city into his artwork, and many of his pieces inhabit local outdoor spaces in a truly organic manner. He mastered a number of artistic techniques, including woodcut and collagraph prints, kinetic sculptures inspired by musical instruments and traditional African dance, and even cooking. Praised for filtering the spirit of the African diaspora through a modernist spirit, according to the New York Times, Scott left a legacy that lives on through his former students, colleagues and collaborators, such as Ron Bechet, Martin Payton and Steve Prince. Scott guided his students with the mantra "Each one teach one," instilling a practice of giving and mentorship alongside the development of artistic skill.

Art was in Scott's blood and future from early on, and he was encouraged to attend Xavier University while a student at Booker T. Washington High School. While at Xavier, he was mentored professors Numa Roussève and Sister Mary Lurana Neely, two members of the university's progressive art faculty who later encouraged him to find his voice, exhibit in national and regional art projects as part of Xavier's Art Guild, and eventually to teach at his alma mater. His return after completing his master of arts degree in 1965 marked the beginning of an era. He developed both as an artist and as a teacher, drawing upon his life in New Orleans and his Roman Catholic faith as inspiration.

In 1983, Scott received a grant to study in New York under the internationally acclaimed sculptor George Rickey. Though apprehensive about creating kinetic sculpture, fearing it be labeled derivative, Scott created some of his most fascinating work while working in this medium with Rickey's encouragement, most particularly with his *Diddlie Bow* series in the early 1980s. Inspired by a West African tale about the diddlie bow, which was created by West African hunters to pay homage to the animal, from the weapon used to kill it, Scott explained in an interview in 2002, "The ritual of using a weapon of war to create a libation of spiritual peace is commonplace. Wherever [Africans] went in the diaspora, the instrument came with us. That instrument came into the Mississippi Delta and it was called the diddlie bow. The musician's name Bo Diddley came from that instrument." The idea of weapons being used for peace, like swords being beaten into plowshares, also informed Scott's work based on the Crucifixion. One of his larger works features firearms literally composing the body of Christ and the cross.

Kinetic sculpture forms a large basis of Scott's larger work, as well. Many of his pieces can be found around the New Orleans area and farther afield, including *Ancestral Legacy*, located on the Xavier campus, and *Ocean Song*, which is housed in the city's Woldenberg Park. Scott was able to create these

pieces, as well as others like *Spirit House* in Gentilly, and *Spirit Gates* (1994), commissioned for the New Orleans Museum of Art (NOMA) as an entryway into the Museum, thanks to the MacArthur grant. This allowed him to acquire a larger studio, which facilitated collaboration with such artists as celebrated Expressionist Frederick Brown, who created a 98-foot high canvas to be installed in the Xavier University Library Resource Center.

Like a jazz musician, Scott was an innovator in whatever form of art he worked in. An avid calligrapher, he was known for dumping out waste bins and crafting pens from whatever he found there. He was also known for his exceptional printing techniques, in particular, the method known as collagraphy. This form of relief or intaglio printing involves building up the print plate with other objects to create an image. For Scott, creating collagraphs was very much like his sculpture, assembled from what he found in his environment.

Civil and human rights formed the backbone of Scott's work. As a student at Xavier, he would have been keenly aware of the University's mission to serve Black and Native American students, and may have had a front seat to the arrival of Freedom Riders on Xavier's campus in 1961, welcomed by Dr. Norman C. Francis, the university's president. Concerned not only with the state of affairs in the United States, but conflicts all across the African continent, Scott channeled his impressions into his work, whether focusing on historical figures like Robeson or Marcus Garvey, biblical and mythological figures like Jonah and Icarus, or the lives of Black children, such as in *Desire Street Fountain*.

Scott's work is featured in some of the most prestigious collections in the country, including the Louisiana Humanities Center of the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities, the New Orleans Museum of Art, the Ogden Museum of Southern Art in New Orleans, the Louisiana State University Museum of Art in the Shaw Center for the Arts in Baton Rouge, the Amistad Research Center Collection in New Orleans, the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C., the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, Georgia, and Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee.

African Blacksmiths

Metal working has shaped cultures on the African continent for about 2,500 years. Archeological evidence has revealed iron smelting and forging technologies throughout West Africa, in modern-day Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo and Zimbabwe. In fact, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline places these technologies among the Nok culture of Nigeria as early as the sixth century B.C. Practices such as "bloomery smelting", wherein iron-bearing minerals are heated in a furnace until the iron particles separate, or "bloom", from the rest of the minerals, and the development of more efficient bellows technologies preceded European development by 300 to 400 years, according to blacksmith Tom Joyce, the lead curator of the exhibit "Striking Iron: The Art of African Blacksmiths," which opened in 2019 at the National Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C..

The iron that was extracted using these technologies was then placed into the hands of some of the world's best blacksmiths. These workers created truly exceptional tools, including weapons, currency, jewelry, musical instruments and especially agricultural tools, which were even tailored to suit the variety of climates, terrains, soil types and crops found on the continent, yielding a wide diversity of

forms. This contributed, in the 15th through 17th centuries, to the emergence and growth of centralized cities in places like western Sudan and the Guinea coast, as they allowed for systemized agriculture, efficient hunting and successful warfare. These objects were so exceptional that that they were exported for trade as early as the 11th century.

Their importance to the maintenance of the culture meant that these tools often became ritual objects representing abundance, elevating the blacksmith to a position of extreme importance in the society. The items they created were not limited to practical function; they also forged wholly ritualistic pieces and made the forge a spiritual as well as a communal center. Smiths forged special rods that would be used in calling the rains or begetting an abundant crop. They also made musical instruments, from clapperless bells to thumb pianos, because, according to Marla Berns, co-curator of “Striking Iron” and director of the Fowler Museum at UCLA, “sound is central to its activation and calling of the spirits.” It is believed that the iron itself had power that accumulated in these objects. Once that object was worn down, the iron would be melted down and forged again to maintain its power. Even figures that weren’t made of iron had bits of iron attached to them. Again, this gave blacksmiths considerable authority with these cultures, and they were even associated with kings, as with the Luba people of the Congo. The forge was associated with the color red, linking it to both fire and blood, and the rhythm of the hammer strikes was an echo to the sound of a heartbeat. Tools of divination and healing were forged at the anvil, which itself became a place of solemn oaths and initiation. Thus, the art of blacksmithing became almost a superpower. This skill has been passed down exclusively within families, and these families in turn became endogamous, with strict rules about who they could marry. This was, as with the iron itself, to retain the power, as blacksmiths in Africa have been tasked with not only creating the tools to build society, but with the ability to heal its ills.

Let’s Look Again

As with all art, perspective is one of the most important aspects to consider. Perspective can be particularly difficult to discern in abstract work, where the subject is less obvious than in figurative or representational work. This piece has many different angles from which it can be viewed, and each of those views can give a totally different impression. What shapes are revealed when looking at one side versus another, or from the top? This piece also conjures the solid and fluid properties of metal, as well as both the organic and static properties of wood. Is there a sense of change, transition and renewal in this piece?

Writing Activities

Much like music and poetry, abstract art allows both the artist and the viewer to access emotional intelligence and reactions without necessarily creating an identifiable object. Write a paragraph about a work such as this to which you have a strong emotional reaction.

Scott created this work as a reaction to current events. Find an element of this piece and write about how it speaks about topic of today.

Hands-On Activity

Metalwork in Africa has both practical and spiritual applications. Create an object that that would fulfill these functions for you.

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