

MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS ST. PETE

Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg Presents *New African Masquerades*, a Major Exhibition Exploring the Living Art of West African Masquerade

*Featuring full-body ensembles, multimedia installations, and four celebrated artists
working in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone,
New African Masquerades offers a close look at contemporary West African masking practices.*



ST. PETERSBURG, FL (July 28, 2026) – The Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg (MFA) is proud to present *New African Masquerades: Artistic Innovations and Collaborations*, on view from **August 15, 2026, through January 3, 2027**. Bringing together thirteen intricate, full-body masquerade ensembles alongside photography, video, and immersive multimedia experiences, the exhibition offers a rare introduction to contemporary masquerade traditions and artistic conversations across West Africa. *New Masquerades: Artistic Innovations and Collaborations* is organized by the New Orleans Museum of Art, in partnership with the Musée des Civilisations noires in Dakar, Senegal, and received generous support from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

New African Masquerades centers on the work of four internationally recognized artists: **Chief Ekpenyong Bassey Nsa** (Nigeria), **Sheku “Goldenfinger” Fofanah** (Sierra Leone), **David Sanou** (Burkina Faso), and **Hervé Youmbi** (Cameroon). Together, their works illuminate the diversity, creativity, and evolving nature of masquerade practices today.

Across many West African cultures, masquerade encompasses a broad range of artistic, social, spiritual, and civic traditions. Encompassing sculpture, textiles, performance, music, movement, and community participation, these performance traditions continuously adapt to contemporary life. Through richly detailed ensembles crafted from wood, raffia, fabric, feathers, sequins, beads, gourds, and cowry shells, *New African Masquerades* examines how living artists and their communities sustain, reinvent, and globalize these sacred and civic customs in the twenty-first century.

“We are honored to bring this transformative exhibition to Tampa Bay,” said Klaudio Rodriguez, Executive Director and CEO of the MFA. “*New African Masquerades* invites our visitors to experience African art not as static objects behind glass, but as vibrant, collaborative, and evolving expressions of living culture.”

Unlike conventional museum displays of isolated masks or costumes, this exhibition presents masquerade as a dynamic, movement-based art form. The exhibition explores how artists work with performers, patrons, societies, and communities to create ensembles that come to life through movement, ceremony, and public engagement. Organized around themes of collaboration, economics, innovation, and mobility, the exhibition highlights how artists respond to changing cultural, political, and global landscapes while remaining deeply rooted in local traditions.

Featured highlights include:

- **Chief Ekpenyong Bassey Nsa's** elaborate ensembles created within the Ekpe Society of southeastern Nigeria
- **Sheku “Goldenfinger” Fofanah's** intricately embellished masquerades associated with Sierra Leone's Jollay and Ordehlay traditions
- **David Sanou's** innovative sculptural headpieces developed in Burkina Faso
- **Hervé Youmbi's** hybrid masks that bridge ceremonial practice and contemporary art while questioning longstanding assumptions about African masks in museum collections

“*New African Masquerades* gloriously dispels any preconceptions that African masking traditions are static and unchanging, by highlighting the work of named, living artists who are driving a rich, international dialogue,” said Dr. Stanton Thomas, William and Hazel Hough Chief Curator. “Their splendid ensembles are meant for the world stage.”

In addition to the ensembles themselves, **the exhibition features documentary photography, recorded interviews, and immersive video installations** that allow visitors to experience masquerades in motion and within their original cultural settings. Created in close collaboration with artists, masquerade

societies, and local communities, these materials provide uncommon access to performances, workshops, and ceremonies that are rarely documented for museum audiences.

New African Masquerades also offers a broader examination of how museums can work collaboratively across continents to present living cultural traditions. Developed through partnerships among artists, scholars, and institutions in Africa and North America, the exhibition reflects ongoing conversations about cultural stewardship, artistic agency, and ethical exhibition-making.

Exhibition Catalogue and Public Programming

New African Masquerades is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue featuring essays by scholars and collaborators involved in the project, including discussions of masquerade traditions, contemporary artistic practice, and the exhibition's innovative curatorial model.

The MFA will host a robust schedule of educational and public programming throughout the exhibition's run, including lectures by leading international scholars, artist talks, hands-on youth workshops, and celebratory public events. All program details and ticket information will be updated regularly at mfastpete.org.

Art After Dark: Preview Party

Be the first to experience the MFA's captivating new exhibition, *New African Masquerades: Artistic Innovations and Collaborations*, before it officially opens to the public on August 15. This exclusive preview includes an elevated evening of vibrant African beats during Café Clementine's *L'Apéro* hours, complemented by organic wines, local Green Bench beer, and a curated selection of savory and sweet delights. Part of the MFA's Art After Dark.

\$10 for MFA members, \$25 for not-yet-members

Thursday, August 13, 5 pm – 8 pm

Curator Tour | *New African Masquerades*

In this intimate gallery tour, Dr. Amanda M. Maples, Françoise Billion Richardson Curator of African Art at the New Orleans Museum of Art and Director of the *New African Masquerades* project, will guide audiences through *New African Masquerades: Artistic Innovations & Collaborations* before it opens to the public. Offering a rare opportunity to explore the exhibition alongside its organizing curator, Dr. Maples will share insider insights into the project's planning, the contemporary artists involved, and the living traditions and rich cultural histories represented in these extraordinary works.

\$25 for MFA members; \$35 for not-yet-members

Saturday, August 15, 9 am

In Conversation | Dr. Stanton Thomas & Dr. Amanda M. Maples on *New African Masquerades*

Go beyond the gallery walls in this engaging conversation between Dr. Stanton Thomas, William & Hazel Hough Chief Curator at the MFA, and Dr. Amanda M. Maples, Françoise Billion Richardson Curator of African Art at the New Orleans Museum of Art and Director of the *New African Masquerades* project. Together, they will explore the ideas, collaborations, and cultural traditions that shaped the special

exhibition *New African Masquerades: Artistic Innovations & Collaborations*, offering insight into the exhibition's development, the artists featured, and the evolving role of contemporary masquerade practices across West Africa.

Free with museum admission

Saturday, August 15, 11 am

Media Assets

High-resolution press images, artwork credits, and promotional video clips are available for media [download here](#).

Featured Artist Biographies

Chief Ekpenyong Bassey Nsa (*b. 1973, Creek Town, Nigeria*)

A third-generation Efik artist, Chief Bassey Nsa specializes in the creation of masquerade ensembles, beadwork, chieftaincy attire, cultural knowledge, and funeral shrines. He learned his craft from his father, who is credited with modernizing masquerade ensembles for the Ekpe secret society central to Efik culture as well as throughout southeast Nigeria and west Cameroon. Bassey Nsa's artistry is deeply tied to the Ekpe society and his father's legacy. Initiated into Ekpe at a young age, he was conferred with the Ekpe chieftaincy title, *Obong Murua Okpoho*, in 2009. His art is intertwined with family and tradition, with every work beginning with a libation to his father, seeking guidance through dreams and prayer. His commissions extend throughout the Cross River region as well as to international institutions.

Sheku "Goldenfinger" Fofanah (*b. 1976, Freetown, Sierra Leone*)

Sheku "Goldenfinger" Fofanah is known for his intricate and innovative designs. Based in the Fourah Bay community, he is the resident *kotu* (builder/artist) for the Gladiators Power Ordehlay Society (co-founded by his father) and contributes to other societies such as Tourist Ojeh and Omo Jessah Hunting. Fofanah's work spans various masquerade genres, including Jollay, Ordehlay, and Hunting, and his designs are sought after in Sierra Leone, The Gambia, and internationally in Australia, Canada, and the UK, illustrating how masquerades serve not only as performative art forms but also as symbols of identity and connectivity in a rapidly changing world. Fofanah's designs are part of prestigious collections, including the Sierra Leone National Museum. His work has been displayed for national celebrations, such as the British Museum's commission for Sierra Leone's golden independence anniversary.

David Sanou (*b. 1969, Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso*)

David Sanou is a third-generation master sculptor based in Bobo-Dioulasso. He assumed artistic control over his father's studio in 2009 and has continued to innovate within existing practices, while simultaneously creating new masquerade forms such as *Compromise Kimi* headpieces, "emblematic portraits" of recently deceased community members that are danced in annual funeral celebrations. David Sanou's artworks are featured in both secular and ceremonial occasions. His clientele includes chiefs and affluent patrons of masquerades in the region as well as museums abroad. Sanou has gained a reputation for quality and creativity, adhering to the standards of regional mask genres, while innovating new forms and types.

Hervé Youmbi (b. 1973, Bangui, Central African Republic; raised in Douala, Cameroon)

An internationally celebrated contemporary artist, Hervé Youmbi is deeply influenced by Africa's complex history. Youmbi's work explores issues of identity, power, and the legacy of colonialism through portraiture and hybrid masks bridging the gap between traditional African rituals and global contemporary art, questioning what is considered "traditional" or "contemporary." Youmbi has been featured in, among others, the 2017 Münster Skulptur Project, Germany, the Into Nature Biennial, Holland (2018) exhibits at the Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, France (2022), the Uchiboso Art Festival, Ichihara City, Japan (2024), and the Louvre Museum, Abu Dhabi, UAE (2025). His work is included in multiple global collections, including the Smithsonian's National Museum of African Art and the Menil Collection.

About the Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg

As the first art museum in St. Petersburg, the Museum of Fine Arts serves as the cultural anchor of a vibrant arts city, uniting a diverse community of artists, residents, and international visitors. The museum's global collection, spanning nearly 5,000 years, acts as a catalyst for connection and conversation. By bridging historical perspectives with contemporary discourse, the museum broadens the artistic canon while elevating the voices and stories of historically marginalized artists. Within the museum's holdings are exemplary works by Georgia O'Keeffe, Claude Monet, Berthe Morisot, Auguste Rodin, Kehinde Wiley, and Élisabeth Vigée-LeBrun. The museum also houses one of the largest and most well-respected photography collections in the Southeast, featuring iconic visionaries such as Ansel Adams, Edward Steichen, Julia Margaret Cameron, Carrie Mae Weems, James Van Der Zee, and Aaron Siskind. Through dynamic exhibitions and inclusive programming, the museum engages with more than 100,000 people annually, including thousands of students through a dedicated partnership with Pinellas County Schools. Committed to fearless creativity, the museum fosters a welcoming environment where all are empowered to explore untold stories and challenge conventions.

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Images:

Sheku "Goldenfinger" Fofanah with Dezo Sesay, tailor. *Jollay Society "Fairy" Masquerade Ensemble*, 2023. Commissioned for Fitchburg Art Museum. Image courtesy of the New Orleans Museum of Art. Photo: Sesthasak Boonchai

Hervé Youmbi. *Tso Scream Mask, Visages de masques (IX) series* (detail), 2015–23. Wood, pigment, fiber, beads, textile, glue, velvet and cotton fabric, silk embroidery, and horsehair. Collection of the New Orleans Museum of Art, museum purchase, Robert P. Gordy Fund, 2023.38.1- .7. Image courtesy of the New Orleans Museum of Art. Photo: Hervé Youmbi

David Sanou (headpiece carved in the studio of André Sanou); the maker of the body requests anonymity. *Kimi Masquerade Ensemble in Honor of André Sanou's "Qui Dit Mieux?"*, 2022. Wood, fibers,

glue, synthetic dyes, and paints; dimensions variable. Commissioned for Fitchburg Art Museum in 2022.
Image courtesy of the New Orleans Museum of Art. Photo: Sesthasak Boonchai

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