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Hunting for the woman in the 'African Mona Lisa'

She's been described as "the African Mona Lisa", the subject of a long-lost series of three paintings by the artist considered the father of Nigerian modernism. But like Leonardo da Vinci's most famous portrait, finding out more about the woman in Ben Enwonwu's "Tutu" has so far been elusive, even for her extensive extended family. One of the missing works, which was discovered in a north London flat, goes on sale in the British capital on Wednesday and is expected to fetch 250,000 pounds (\$347,000, 282,000 euros).

Enwonwu was professor of fine arts at the university in Ile-Ife, the cradle of the Yoruba people in southwest Nigeria, when he met Adetutu Ademiluyi and painted her in 1973 and 1974. The painting of the Yoruba princess by an ethnic Igbo artist became a symbol of national reconciliation at a delicate time in Nigeria's history. A brutal civil war had ended just four years earlier between federal forces and Biafran separatists wanting an Igbo homeland in the southeast.



Ben Enwonwu's "Tutu" painting has been compared to Leonardo da Vinci's portrait of Mona Lisa.



A worker at Bonhams auctioneers poses next to Tutu," by Nigeria's best-known modern artist Ben Enwonwu, ahead of its sale, in London, Britain February 7, 2018. — AFP Photos

Royal stock

What is known about "Tutu" is that she was the granddaughter of the traditional ruler, Ademiluyi Ajagun, the Ooni (king) of Ife, who died in 1930. He is said to have married up to 47 times, had many mistresses and, unsurprisingly, many children. Surviving relatives in Ife said they remember an Adetutu in the family. "Adetutu was... one of the daughters of Kabiyesi (king) Ademiluyi," said Olori (queen) Anifowoshe, who added that she was the only surviving wife of the former monarch.

But Anifowoshe, who is said to be more than 100, couldn't recall if Adetutu married or had children and told AFP: "She died many years ago." Cecilia Ayoka is another centenarian and was married to Prince Okero Ademiluyi, a son of the former king.

"I used to know Adetutu in those days but for some years now I haven't heard anything about her," she added. "Not many people knew Adetutu because Ademiluyi is such a large family. "My husband who happened to be one of the direct children was over 120 years before he died and

he had more than 40 wives," she said. "Only three of us are still alive."

I can't believe she's alive

Giles Peppiatt, the head of modern and contemporary African art at Bonhams auction house who found what he describes as "the mythical picture", has been in Nigeria doing his own detective work. Last week, he travelled the 200 kilometers (125 miles) from Lagos to Ife and said the older women in the family may have been referring to an Adetutu of a different generation.

He said family members told him a younger Adetutu was alive, in her late 60s and living in Lagos, which would tally with her being aged in her late teens when she sat for Enwonwu.

"Tutu is one of about 300 (children). That's why it's actually quite difficult to find her," he said. He added: "It's amazing. I can't believe she's alive." Enwonwu-famous for creating a bronze sculpture of Queen Elizabeth II-died in 1994 and appears not to have left any clues about his subject. At his studio in Lagos, the artist's son, Oliver, said he can't recall his father ever discussing it and doesn't know where the remaining two paintings are.

But the 42-year-old, who is president of the Society of Nigerian Artists, said he was pleased about the increasing recognition his father was getting. "It's a thing of joy that several decades after his death my father's works are being appreciated globally," he added. Peppiatt said although he was hopeful of finding the real Tutu after so long, it had no bearing on the painting's worth as art. "I will say, either way, I think it's... just a beguiling picture, it's an amazing portrait and whether we find her or not doesn't really affect the value of the work. "The value of the work is what he painted in 1973, not whether we find the sitter in 2018." — AFP



This handout photo taken on February 22, 2018 in an unknown location and released on February 23, 2018 by the French customs (Douanes Francaises) shows a French custom officer holding a Degas painting stolen from a museum in Marseille nine years ago has been found on a bus near Paris, the French Culture Minister said on February 23. — AFP

Stolen Degas painting found on a bus near Paris

A Degas painting stolen from a museum in Marseille nine years ago has been found on a bus near Paris, the French Culture Minister said Friday. Francoise Nyssen said customs officials found the pastel-thought to be worth around 800,000 euros (\$893,000) — in the luggage compartment of a bus stopped in a motorway layby.

None of the passengers on the bus admitted to owning the painting, she added. Experts from the Musee d'Orsay in the French capital later confirmed that the depiction of a group of opera extras was "Les Choristes"—sometimes called "The Extras"—which was stolen in 2009 from the Musee Cantini in the southern port. — AFP

Row at German art fair over 'Erdogan with banana' painting

A German artist complained Friday after his gallery took down a painting that depicts Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan with a banana in his buttocks. The provocative painting entitled "Turkish dictator" by Thomas Baumgaertel has sparked noisy complaints and protests at the art Karlsruhe fair. The fair organizers tweeted that, amid the row, not they but the gallery owner had "decided to take down the caricature". Gallerist Michael Oess said he took the decision "to avoid trouble."

"I have a certain responsibility toward other visitors," he told national news agency DPA. The artist wrote on Twitter that he had severed ties with his gallery after it had taken the decision "without consulting me". Baumgaertel is a street art pioneer also known as the Banana Sprayer whose trademark motif is an Andy Warhol-style banana.

The uproar started when a Turkish journalist Thursday filmed the picture with a smartphone while reporting online, said Oess. The Turkish newspaper Daily Sabah reported on the painting, saying that to Turks it presented a "racist and vulgar attack" on their president. Oess said the painting, part of the "Despots series—Trump, Kim and Erdogan", had sold for 5,900 euros (\$7,200). Germany is home to a three-million-strong ethnic Turkish community. Erdogan has in the past sued a German TV comic over his satirical "Defamatory Poem". — AFP

Picasso's hidden mistress set to fetch millions at sale

A Pablo Picasso painting depicting his muse Marie-Therese Walter with future lover Dora Maar emerging from the shadows behind is expected to fetch an eye-watering sum at a London sale next week. The 1937 "Femme au Beret et la Robe Quadrillee (Marie-Therese Walter)" is expected to reach \$50 million (40 million euros) at a sale of Impressionist, Surrealist and Modern Art at prestigious London auction house Sotheby's on Wednesday. The identity of its current owner remains a mystery.

"It's an incredibly important museum-quality picture," James Mackie, director of the Impressionist and Modern Art department at Sotheby's, told AFP on Thursday. "It comes from a key era in Picasso's career, 1937, when he makes the great painting 'Guernica,'" he added, referring to the masterpiece which portrayed the horrors of the Nazi bombardment of a Basque city during the Spanish civil war. The painting also has a strong autobiographical appeal, said Mackie. The main subject of the piece, Marie-Therese Walter, was the Spanish painter's "long time lover and muse". But the looming figure of Dora Maar, whom he met in 1936, emerges in the shadows behind Marie-Therese, explained Mackie. Several masterpieces have reached astronomical



Gallery assistants hold an artwork by Spanish artist Pablo Picasso entitled 'Femme au beret et a la robe quadrillee' (Marie-Therese Walter) with an estimate price in the region of 35 million pounds, (50 million dollars), during a photocall at Sotheby's in central London. — AFP

prices at recent auctions, fuelled by the opening of major museums in the Gulf and the purchasing power of collectors from emerging countries.

Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Mohammed bin Salman, acquired Leonardo da Vinci work "Salvator Mundi" for \$450 million in November 2017. "The market for masterpieces is at an unprecedented level, and this picture certainly sits very much in that masterpiece category," said Mackie. Three other Picasso works will be auc-

tioned, including "El Matador", valued at between £14 and £18 million (\$20-\$25 million, 16-20 million euros).

Two Salvador Dali paintings are also up for sale. The two small oil works, "Gradiiva" (1931) and "Maison pour Erotomane" (circa 1932), have been in a private collection in Argentina, having been bought directly from the artist by an Argentinean countess. "They are a rediscovery, which is incredibly exciting," Mackie said of the two works. — AFP

SUGIMOTO GIVES WASHINGTON'S HIRSHHORN A FACELIFT WITH ANCIENT TREE



The redesign of the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum lobby and cafe by Japanese artist Hiroshi Sugimoto is seen at the Museum in Washington, DC. — AFP photos



Members of the media tour Japanese artist Hiroshi Sugimoto's redesign of the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum lobby and cafe at the Museum in Washington.

For years, it sat in the corner of a Tokyo lumberyard, a tangled, muddy mess of roots no one wanted. That was until Hiroshi Sugimoto came along. Now, the Japanese photographer has taken what was once the life support system of a medieval tree to help transform the ground floor of Washington's museum of modern and contemporary art into an airy game of light and space. The 700-year-old roots form the base of twin glass-top semicircle tables that are part of Sugimoto's redesign of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden lobby that opened Friday, echoing the donut shape of the brutalist building conceived by Gordon Bunshaft.

"If people ask me to do this again, it's impossible," said Sugimoto, who has spent the better part of his lifetime documenting the "history of history" in pensive black and white reflections on the passage of time. "Someone cut the tree and then found these roots are even more interesting, and so carefully dug it out, almost excavated. This is definitely one of a kind, nature art." Sugimoto, 70, sliced the root system in half, to dramatic effect. "The cut

piece is so fresh and new. Even though the outer part is very old, it shows the presence of the power of life, of light," he said in an interview.

Soft gray spiral chairs evoking the DNA

helix surround the tables. White vinyl benches sit atop large blocks made of the same type of glass used in camera lenses. Light passing through the prisms forms small rainbows scat-



The redesign of the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum lobby and cafe by Japanese artist Hiroshi Sugimoto is seen at the Museum in Washington.

tered on the ground. A multicolored light play takes place above as well, thanks to a 12-foot (3.7-meter) swirling sculpture hanging from the ceiling by Olafur Eliasson, an Icelandic-Danish artist who has also dabbled in architecture.

By removing an "ugly" dark film that covered the lobby's 3,300-square-foot (307-square-meter) windows, Sugimoto created a more open feel and enhanced the museum's views over the National Mall, the grassy esplanade that runs from the US Capitol to the Washington Monument. A 20-foot brushed brass coffee bar displays a tin diamond pattern inspired by fireproofing techniques used in 1930s Tokyo. Sugimoto even created the menu's font. But the original terrazzo floor, exposed aggregate walls and coffered ceiling remain intact for the museum's first redesign since opening in 1974.

'Patination of aging'

Sugimoto doesn't care about children and other visitors spilling drinks on the tables and bumping into the large, precious roots. In fact, he welcomes it. "I like this patination of aging,"

he said. As it turns out, transforming spaces has become a bit of a habit for Sugimoto, whose practice has long spanned various media, including sculpture, installations, architecture and the performing arts. In recent years, he has lent particular focus to design and architecture, revamping and creating restaurants, private residences and his own Odawara Art Foundation.

The arts and culture complex's Enoura Observatory opened in October, nestled on the outer rim of the volcanic Hakone mountains overlooking Sagami Bay about an hour's drive from Tokyo. Sugimoto also created a two-level indoor garden for the 110th anniversary of the Japan Society in New York last year—his first US architectural design project—complete with pond, bonsai, stone islands, the artist's three-dimensional mathematical objects and a pulsating waterfall.

While not a licensed architect himself, Sugimoto co-founded the Tokyo-based architecture firm New Materials Research Laboratory, with which he collaborates on projects like the Hirshhorn. — AFP