93rd Annual Conference
March 29-30, 2024
Garden Grove, California

“Transcending Boundaries”

CALL FOR PAPERS
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SWAA CONFERENCE 2024
CALL FOR PAPERS

“Transcending Boundaries”

What separates us as humans? What brings us together or connects us? For this year’s conference we seek papers that address the themes of barriers, borders, limits, edges, and boundaries—and just as important, how divisions are crossed, contested, mediated, overcome, and transcended. Borders, transitions, and boundaries occur in all aspects of human life, and can be identified throughout our evolutionary, archaeological, and cultural history. In our current era, our diverse cultures are filled with boundaries—actual physical boundaries, as well as perceived and even imagined boundaries. Examples of potential topics include—but are not limited to:

- Literal barriers, such as border walls and immigration policies
- Language, social class, and educational barriers
- Racial and ethnic boundaries or barriers
- Gender and perceptions of gender
- Marginalized individuals and populations; refugees; human rights issues
- Political and economic barriers; access to health care or other resources
- Larger boundaries being crossed, such as global temperature, climate change, population, food supply
- Applied anthropology and how it addresses any of these challenges
- Evolutionary and historical boundaries
- Crossing new boundaries of technology and imagination

As always, papers presented at the conference are not required to speak to the theme—all anthropological scholarship is welcomed.

Plenary Speaker Dr. Lilith Mahmud

Lilith Mahmud is Associate Professor of Anthropology at UC Irvine. She received her PhD in anthropology from Harvard University, and she specializes in critical European studies and feminist anthropology with particular expertise in the study of secrecy, transparency, migration, nationalism, race, liberalism, and the Right.

Her first book, *The Brotherhood of Freemason Sisters: Gender, Secrecy, and Fraternity in Italian Masonic Lodges* (University of Chicago Press, 2014), was awarded the William A. Douglass Prize for best ethnography in Europeanist anthropology. Prof. Mahmud’s second book project is a study of Italy’s institutional responses to the intertwined crises of labor and migration focused on Italian cooperatives as the main socio-economic organizations handling the business of solidarity at the margins of Europe.

Prof. Mahmud has also published about liberalism and contemporary neofascism. She currently serves on the editorial board of *American Ethnologist* and she was previously the Book Review Editor for *American Anthropologist* and an Executive Board Member of the Society for the Anthropology of Europe.
Book your hotel room now!

SWAA discount available on days ranging from March 27 – March 31, 2024.

- $159 per night [single or double]
- $184 per night [triple room]
- $209 per night [quadruple room]

Parking:
- $15 per car/night for SWAA registrants who are hotel guests.
- $7 per car/day for SWAA registrants not staying at the hotel. There will be a validation machine at the conference and parking is valid until 11:59PM on the same day.

Hyatt Regency
11999 Harbor Blvd.
Garden Grove, CA 92840

Happy December!

I know that many of you may have just returned from the AAA conference this fall in Toronto—I hope it was enjoyable and worthwhile. As we wind down for this semester—or quarter—I hope you will now think about attending the **SWAA conference in March**, and perhaps presenting a paper or poster. We are delighted to have **Dr. Lilith Mahmud** as our plenary speaker—in a future newsletter we’ll have the title of her talk as well as more information about her research.

Please feel free to contact me directly at beerickson@fullerton.edu if you have any questions about the conference. If I can’t answer them myself I will put you in contact with the right person.

Please welcome our **newest Board Members, Dolores Duran and Sarah Queneau**. Dolores was previously one of our graduate student members, and she is now our new secretary. Sarah Queneau is our newest graduate student member. I want to also encourage YOU to think about a position on the SWAA Board—more information on the positions open will be in the next newsletter. We will also have this on the agenda of our Members Meeting at the conference.

I wish all of you a happy and peaceful holiday season.

Barbra Erickson
SWAA President, 2023-2024

Dolores Duran [CSU Long Beach]  
Sarah Queneau [CSU Fullerton]
It was a moment of truth-telling.
It was a moment of moral and historical reckoning.
I am a family medicine physician who works to improve health in our Indigenous communities. As a white person, I do this work knowing that my role is to be an ally, to lift up the voices of others, to open doors for people who would otherwise not be invited into the room.

We were presenting on the Abya Yala mural project at the film festival of the Southwestern Anthropology Association’s annual conference in 2022 [in Albuquerque NM].

Abya Yala is a beautiful piece that was envisioned by Leah Lewis and Votan Henriquez. With input from youth and a community effort to paint the wall under Leah and Votan’s direction, it became a part of our city’s landscape this time last year. The term Abya Yala comes from the Kuna language of the Guna people (current day Colombia and Panama) and refers to the land that stretches from the southern tip of South America to the northern tip of North America. It is used by Indigenous resistance movements and reminds of the connection between all Indigenous peoples of this land mass.

Votan, proudly an Angeleno (from Los Angeles) starting talking to anthropology students from California and began to teach. Here is how I heard it:

“We were told to assimilate. We were told to talk White, act White, pray White. This was the only way to survive in a White society that didn’t recognize us as human and wanted us wiped off the face of this land. Then they brought some of you all into the Los Angeles, anthropologists working with the U.S. Government. You found us talking White, acting White, praying White and determined that we did not meet your criteria for being Indigenous people. That meant we had no right to the land. Anthropologists essentially said that my people didn’t exist.”

I listened and saw the conversation that ensued, the students absorbing what they were hearing, asking questions. Votan had become their professor and his lecture was called “Speaking Truth.” He wasn’t looking for an apology, but wanted these budding academics to see the power that their work has not only for knowledge-building but for harm.

I was the student as well – no longer University professor, I was being schooled. Ivory tower institutions and our academic disciplines have so much to learn from the activists, artists, and knowledge keepers that exist beyond our campuses. Votan was an agitator who spoke a needed truth, unconcerned with academic speak, unconcerned with who might feel uncomfortable in the room.

It was a moment of truth-telling.
It was a moment of moral and historical reckoning.
It was a moment that offered healing.

**Abya Yala: A Borderless Continent - YouTube**
*(Native Health Initiative, 4.21 min.)*
*[after opening the link, click on Browse YouTube to open the video]*

**Anthony Fleg** is a family medicine physician at UNM, and works at the intersection between art/culture and healing, community and academia.
Museums and Exhibits

Art from the “Periphery” that Challenges Western Concepts of Traditional and Modern Art: Examples from Uzbekistan and South Africa

By Hilarie Kelly (University of La Verne)

Art of one sort or another appears to be a human universal, based on the breadth of data collected by anthropologists, including ethnographers, archaeologists, and even human paleontologists. Art historians and participants in the commercial “art world” have come to appreciate and even embrace human artistic diversity. Still, we struggle, sometimes awkwardly, with attempts to categorize the great variety of human art forms. Oppositional tropes like art versus “artifact” (or “handicraft” or “airport art”), and “traditional” versus “modern” have persisted, Picasso’s celebration and borrowing of African abstract art motifs notwithstanding. Such distinctions have influenced when, where, and how arts have been exhibited, valued, and sold. This is a direct reflection of several centuries of colonialism and empire that favored cultures of “the West” over the rest (the “other”).

The category of “fine art” has often been reserved for elite, urban European styles of art, with some exceptions made for elite art of the ancient circum-Mediterranean and arts of the great empires of Asia. Until well into the 20th century, cultural art forms that represented less powerful polities and rural peoples of the world were more commonly relegated to “natural history” museums or specialized ethnographic and historical museums and to smaller public and private collections. Even the non-elite and agrarian-based “folk arts” of European and American (USA) derivation were more commonly exhibited in venues separate from “fine art” institutions. So-called “world’s fairs” or world exhibitions were another venue where one might encounter such art. In the globalized world of the 21st Century, however, these older conventions make less and less sense.

An aside: Former SWAA President, Kim Martin, was an avid and accomplished quilter and regular attendee at the Road to California Quilters Conference and Showcase in Ontario, California, where quilters compete to show their aesthetically finest and most technically adept work. She ardently insisted that quilting is as much a “fine art” as painting or sculpture.

In this column, two quite different examples of museum exhibits are briefly described that demonstrate how conventional, ethnocentric, and even politicized categories of “art” might be called into question by the actual context of art production and display itself. We start with the Savitsky Art Museum in Uzbekistan, Central Asia. It has become famous as the “Louvre of the Steppe” and is an increasingly popular destination for tour groups journeying into “The Stans” – Central Asian countries that became independent in 1991 with the dissolution of the former Soviet Union.

The Museum of Forbidden Art: Hiding the Art of Resistance in Plain Sight

I recently returned from my first trip to Uzbekistan, a country in Central Asia best known for being a major historical site along the fabled Silk Road. My itinerary included the three famous cities of Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva, places known for impressive architectural monuments, political and scientific accomplishments, and highly engaging bazaar experiences. [Note: The word bazaar is derived from Persian, a language and culture rooted in Uzbekistan since ancient times. The Uzbek equivalent word for a marketplace is chorsu, based on Turkic languages.] The tour I took included an additional city, Nukus, in the far west of the country along the border with Turkmenistan, just so that I could visit an unusual and moderately famous museum. The official name of this museum is The State Museum of the Arts of the Republic of Karakalpakstan named after I.V. Savitsky. It is more simply referred to as “The Savitsky Museum.” It is more simply referred to as “The Savitsky Museum.” It is located in a Russian-built industrial town in the autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan – a state within a state – formed prior to independence.

Far left: Exhibition Hall of the Savitsky Museum, Uzbekistan

Left: Two flags flying above the Savitsky Museum: Karakalpakstan Republic (left) and Uzbekistan (right).
Tsarist Russia colonized much of Central Asia in the mid-nineteenth century, occasionally clashing with Great Britain’s imperial aims in a quest for strategic advantage known as “The Great Game.” Russia also clashed with the political rulers of some of the important regional trade centers in Central Asia. Much of the land is dry steppe and desert, parts are mountainous, and some fortunate areas along rivers and lakes consist of productive farmland. Depending on geography, the people may be herding, farming, fishing, hunting, or trading. As Russia expanded and slowly began to industrialize, they invested in fishing in the Aral Sea, then the fourth largest lake in the world. The Russian Revolution of 1917 greatly intensified industrialization, particularly in irrigated cotton production, diverting the waters of two major rivers feeding the Aral Sea. This eventually led to the disastrous drying up of the Aral Sea, and to degradation of farmlands with salinity and toxic chemical use. Sovietization of Central Asia, especially in what was to become Uzbekistan, led to an inflow of people from Russia and Eastern Europe as well as other parts of Asia. The people in what became western Uzbekistan were predominantly ethnic Karakalpak, “people of the black hats.” The nomadic yurt is one of their cultural icons, as are the still very popular black hats.

In Lenin’s time there was official encouragement of the arts in Russia and throughout the nascent Soviet Union. This was the time of growth in Modern Art experimentation in Europe, and Russian artists initially were allowed to embrace the new genres. Russian archaeology and ethnography also began to flourish. Uzbekistan’s sunnier climate, intense color palette, Silk Road Islamic architecture and vibrant material culture were viewed favorably by many Russians in the arts and sciences who spent time there. When Lenin died and Stalin took over in 1924, however, the official state attitude towards Modern Art production and display within Russia abruptly changed. Under Stalin, art censors rigidly insisted on conformity to standards of Socialist Realism, which many critics felt was a stifling, poster art naturalism that demanded workers, peasants, and agents of the Soviet state be shown only as happy and heroic. Modern Art was scorned as decadent and dissident. Artists who disobeyed might be forbidden to display their art in public, face confiscation of their paintings or, at worst, be imprisoned or sent to mental hospitals.

Faced with this restrictive situation, frustrated Russian painter Igor Savitsky joined a major archaeological and ethnographic expedition to Karakalpakstan (“the land of the Karakalpaks”) and threw himself into collecting and documenting material culture from that region. After amassing a sizable amount of materials, he convinced officials to house them in a museum to be built in Nukus, rather than ship them back to Moscow. He then proceeded to use the ethnographic and archaeological collection as cover for spiriting disapproved modernist paintings out of Russia and into his new museum. This project consumed Savitsky for the rest of his life. (He died in 1984, before the fall of the Soviet Union and before Uzbekistan became independent.) His actions are now regarded as mythically heroic, though it must be said that he could only have accomplished his goal with the help and complicity of many others within Central Asia, the Soviet Union and even within Russia itself. During that time, several Russian modern artists continued to migrate to Uzbekistan, where they refined a distinctive branch of the Russian Avant Garde genre and also mentored several Uzbekistan Avant Garde artists. Savitsky included many of their respective works in his museum in Nukus.
At present, one entire building in the three-building complex is a warehouse for thousands of art pieces, while a newer building contains the current exhibitions I saw. The original building is undergoing badly-needed renovation following a controversial change in leadership that occurred in 2015 when Savitsky’s chosen successor, Marinika Babanazarova was summarily replaced by a new director, under state authority. The tour I traveled with featured a talk by Babanazarova in Tashkent, the capital city, in which she expressed her continued concerns about preserving the collection properly and preventing its covert dispersal, deterioration, or even destruction. Indeed, fears were voiced internationally that Babanazarova’s removal might presage improper handling of the now-famous collection, but there does not seem to be any clear indication that has happened. Instead, the new director appears to be shifting the focus of the exhibitions on display to feature more non-Russian representatives of the Avant Garde school of painting and other arts. He says he plans to display more of the Karakalpak archaeological and ethnographic collection, and to make the museum more appealing to the younger generation of locals. (As with the Bowers Museum in Santa Ana, the grounds of the Savitsky Museum are a popular venue for wedding parties and photos.) These seem like wise steps to take to keep the museum relevant and popular to both foreign visitors and Uzbekistan’s own, relatively youthful population, especially in Karakalpakstan itself. This is a challenge that museums world-wide face in retaining public support for their existence, and I have seen a similar refocusing process take place in the Kenya National Museums system. One interesting example of contemporizing at the Savitsky is that among the current displays are paintings and other information documenting the disastrous drying of the Aral Sea, now widely regarded as a full-fledged environmental catastrophe and harbinger of man-made global warming. It is an admirable exercise in honest disclosure regarding an important situation of both national and global concern. Environmental accountability is a cause that Babanazarova also supports.

Ahmed, our youthful guide when we visited the museum, is a relatively new hire and exemplifies the current attempt to enhance outreach to a wide audience by providing personable and informative guidance. Portions of the museum included generous signage of the history of the collection, but not every painting or object was accompanied by sufficient contextual information about its relevance and back story. Ahmed did an excellent job, providing lively and engaging lectures on each section and many individual items, answering all questions asked, and adding his perspectives as a young local. A magical collaborative moment occurred when he showed us a woman’s dress on display that had decorative appliques on it in Arabic script. A fellow tour member who is an Iranian-American Kurd began to read the script out loud and translate for us, as it turned out to be a Persian poem. Excited, Ahmed pulled out his smart phone to record this recitation because, he explained, no one had yet provided a reading or translation and now this information could be added to the collection. It was a reminder to me that museum exhibitions can be ethnographic experiences of a sort and interactive rather than passive.
Paintings in the museum, which still seem to be the major focus of what is on display and what is publicized, include impressionist, abstract expressionist, and cubist pieces by Russian artists produced in Russia, as well as paintings produced in Uzbekistan by national artists. The collection is widely regarded as being so important, and many of the artists and works are so well known, that the Savitsky Museum challenges whether Uzbekistan should even be considered to be at the geographical “periphery” of the art world. Another question raised by the Savitsky collection is how “modern” these paintings really are. After all, many of them were painted from about a century ago up to the time of Stalin’s death in 1953. Art that is “avant garde” is still considered “modern art” even if that has become largely an historical reference. More to the point, dissident art is still very much with us. In Uzbekistan particularly, the challenges of independence from Soviet rule together with the persistence of centralized governmental control in the two regimes that followed independence could mean that the allure of “avant garde” art will continue to have relevance in that country. I had a sense of that on my first day in Tashkent, having lunch in a bar and grill named “John Dillinger’s” where the décor was explicitly American “OG.” This is in a country where at least ninety percent of the population is Muslim. It is also a country where sixty percent of the population is age thirty or under. It might come as a surprise to learn that the majority of cars on the road are Chevies, ever since Chevrolet made an agreement to open a manufacturing plant there. It seems that innovation and mixing cultures and ideas along the Silk Road are still characteristics of Uzbekistan.

A few of the eye-catching paintings currently on display are included in this article, showing varied styles, uses of color, and inclusion of themes specific to Uzbekistan.
Top row from left: “Harvest Time” by artist Ural Tansiqboyev, who is an ethnic Kazakh; “Two Girls by the Pond: by Uzbek artist N.G. Karakhan (Historic town sites often feature public water pond systems and blue-tile decorated madrassas, or schools. The lack of female head or face coverings references the lack of strict modesty and seclusion codes in most local communities and the common presence of women in public places); “Artists” by N.P. Tarasov (died 1929) (A naked painter on the ground is confronted by censors damning his work and confiscating his painting and brushes).

Middle from left: “Rock and Roll” by K.N. Suryaev (Humorous depiction of an underground nightclub. The color scheme and fashion suggests the location is Moscow, not Uzbekistan); “Kapital 1931” by M.I. Kurzin (Painting critical of ruling class wealth accumulation was cut in half by censors to hide implied critique of Soviet elites, as shown in black-and-white photo of the original; on display together); “Rainy Day” by M. Kudaybergenov.

Bottom from left: “Road Construction” by Uzbek artist N.G. Karakhan 1934 (Road construction workers are identifiable as Uzbekistan nationals of various ethnicities, based on the distinctive hat design of each. Recognizes the major labor contributions of people of Uzbekistan under Soviet rule without the Socialist Realism heroics); “Hunter” by Russian artist N.M. Nedbaylo 1971 (The “hunter” - Soviet police state - is killing the Russian “bear” - people and environment. In Henri Rousseau’s style of painting).
At the Bowers Museum in Santa Ana: A New-Old Art Form and Women’s Empowerment

During the waning days of summer, the author (Hilarie Kelly) and Past President of SWAA Jayne Howell visited an exhibition of “Ubuhle Women: Beadwork and the Art of Independence” at the Bowers Museum in Santa Ana, California. This very popular exhibition has been traveling around the United States and is really quite extraordinary. It is a good example of the diminished relevance of categories of “traditional” and “modern” art, as well as “folk art” and “fine art.” The word ubuhle means “beauty” and these large, colorful textiles are stunning. Made to be hung on the wall, they bedazzle the eye with their brilliant and glittering intricacy. These are essentially textured “paintings” made with beads sewn onto cloth. The artists work from designs in their heads. There is a deep history of bead-making and sewing beads onto leather among the Zulu and Xhosa communities of South Africa to which these artists belong, but these works, called ndwango, are a contemporary leap well beyond those traditions. The works are the product of a small collective of women, some related to each other, who came together in 1999 under the direction of a master beader who was taught the basic skills by her mother. They needed an income-generating project to help support themselves and their families, and also a means to express themselves and work through the grief of serious difficulty and loss in their lives. The tone of the works is celebratory and affirming, not mournful, however. Some pieces depict flowers, trees, gardens, and other features of the natural world. There is even a huge, standing altar, titled “African Crucifixion” made by a team of these bead- ers, for the Anglican Cathedral in Pietermaritzburg.

For a fairly small exhibit, this had a wonderfully rich complement of text signage and video on loop to educate viewers on the background and meanings of this “new” art form. A sign on the wall explained that, “For both Zulu and Xhosa peoples, beadwork historically has defined the place of women in society.” There was also a generous amount of bead jewelry made by these very artists for sale in the gift store, giving visitors an opportunity to both support the women artists and personally celebrate their creativity with a bit of very attractive “bling.” Several docents were on hand all three of the times I visited, explaining the collective’s story and providing small samples of the beadwork to examine both front and back and to satisfy a near-irresistible urge to touch and stroke the swirling patterns. The best day was the last, when the collective’s leader was present and demonstrated how their pieces are made, and the ambiance was festive and party-like.
To illustrate this new art form here, I will concentrate on the works that depict either a cow or – more commonly – a bull as a key symbol (to use Sherry Ortner’s term) of power and goodness. The women artists who created these works are from once-powerful pastoral cultural communities, but they themselves are not living that lifestyle. The communal traumas they have experienced at least since their young adulthood in South Africa disrupted the kinds of lives that their parents, grandparents and great grandparents may have lived: apartheid, a long and sometimes violent struggle for freedom, post-independence social and economic inequalities, gender inequalities, and AIDS have all taken a toll. Nonetheless, when memorializing fathers and mothers who have passed away, or when just imagining “the good life” of order, prosperity, and happier days, they chose the image of a cow or bull. In this context, I am reminded from my own field research with pastoralists in East Africa that cattle are also symbols of beauty, regeneration and hope. The women’s visual inspiration was enhanced by observing and photographing high-grade cattle of commercial breeds imported by Whites from East Africa. Each artist chose an individual animal as the model (and metaphor) for their fondest memories. They sought solace for their losses and the will power to go forward in the simple beauty of a cow or bull.

ANKOLE BULL, by Thande Ntobela.
“I chose to do the Ankole, the ones with the enormous white horns. The Ankole are strong and powerful; they remind me of my mother…She has endured much suffering with strength and courage…The dark colors like red and green remind me of my father…These triangular patterns represent my children because they like to play.”

DRESSED FOR THE DANCE, by Zondile Zondo.
(“This ndwango is inspired by the Matric Dance that precedes graduation of South African girls from high school…Here the cow’s horns are beautifully dressed as dynamic focal points to the work. They represent a time of joy, excitement, and happiness, but also the strength of a young girl ready to find her place in the world.”)

JAMLUDI THE RED COW, by Zondile Zondo.
(Also titled “I am ill, I still see the color and beauty.”) “The cow reminds me of my father. My father loved cultural and traditional things…He loved to sing praise songs, and this is what he used to say: I am Jamludi the red cow, the one that has survived the war.”

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Summary and Comparison of the Two Museum Exhibits

I used the term “periphery” in the title of this column to signal from whence these two challenges to conventional Western art tropes of traditional versus modern have come. It is not at all intended to be disrespectful, but rather to reference and revisit Immanuel Wallerstein’s World Systems Theory in a postcolonial context. The historical and colonial era “core” metropoles (centers of power) that once controlled Uzbekistan (i.e., St. Petersburg and then Moscow) and the nations of Zulu and Xhosa (London, then Pretoria) no longer have direct or exclusive control over what transpires in the former colonies. In the nineteenth and twentieth Centuries, the power of those colonial regimes and their metropoles was certainly authoritarian (backed up with military might) but it was not effectively monolithic. Those colonial structures eventually ended because they proved to be quite costly. Colonial power balances changed over time in response to national and global forces. The colonized peoples of these two different areas survived and exercised agency, retained and modified many elements of their own cultures throughout the process, and continue today to express themselves through their celebration of art forms they find satisfying and relevant. Market forces certainly do come into play. In global economic terms, the formerly colonized people are still somewhat at the periphery. Politically, they must now contend with the impact of global superpower rivalries between the United States of America, Russia, and China, as well as powerplays emanating from the larger Islamic world. In adaptation to being at the periphery, both Uzbekistan and South Africa have generated their own global diasporas, while internally they have welcomed global tourism as an important income-generating opportunity. Arjun Appadurai’s concepts of global flows and transnational scapes could be more relevant to understanding their engagement with art and culture than the old binary of “traditional” and “modern.” In fact, people in these communities seem to robustly imagine themselves to be both.

I present three examples of art pieces from these two museum exhibits as a way of comparing and contrasting the two. The first one is from the Savitsky Museum. Titled “The Bull,” it is also called “Fascism Advancing.” It was painted in the 1920s or 1930s by Belarusian painter, Vladimir Yevgeny Lysenko. It depicts a snorting bull, squarely facing the viewer with its legs akimbo, looking for all the world as if it is about to charge. The bull’s staring eyes are black and hollow-looking, like the barrels of two guns. The curved spine and tail of the alarmed bull rises towards the sky, possibly electrified by the glaring yellow-orange ball of burning sun above. The bull’s broad and sharp horns stretch across the canvas. On the bull’s right, his horn is covered with colored and angular shapes, like national flags. Our guide suggested this could have been a reference to the rise of fascism on Europe during that time, but it might also represent the tightening of Stalin’s power after he took over in 1924. On the bull’s left, the horn appears to be sliced in two places, perhaps symbolizing violent dismemberment. In 1935, Lysenko was sent by Soviet authorities to a mental institution for his defiance of Stalin’s socialist realism imperative. Savitsky later retrieved the painting of “The Bull” and it is now one of the most prominently featured images in the museum’s promotional materials.

There are a few other dramatic depictions of cattle in the works on display at the Savitsky, undoubtedly because cattle were, and still are, important animals in the agrarian economies of both Russia and Uzbekistan. Jengis Lepesov’s “Old Man and Bull” was painted in 2020, and appears to possibly reference Lysenko’s “The Bull,” except that there is a man riding it. He wears a colorful, billowing cloak and a nomad’s shaggy sheep wool hat. Behind the man and bull, two women of Uzbekistan perform farm chores, and a yurt is seen in the background. The bull looks a bit fierce, but has a remarkably more human-looking face than Lysenko’s beast. The “old man” astride it looks a bit concerned, but apparently in control. I wondered if the man riding the bull represented Uzbekistan’s current President, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, as he attempts to lead his diverse, modern state in the post-Soviet era, with its many challenges (including the proximity of Russia’s Putin.) Alternatively, could the man riding represent the people of Uzbekistan, and the bull represent the fractious forces inside and outside the country that have their own strong ideas about which direction the country should go? Lepesov is still alive, and I would like to ask him. Given the historical controversies over the art contained in this museum and the alarming geopolitics of today, might he choose not to answer?
The one ndwango work I will reference in this section is titled “Funky Bull,” created in 2006 by Bonqiswa Ntobela, who died in 2009. The signage explains that the image is of an “Nguni bull, an animal associated with the wealth of the Nguni king and famous for the patterns on their hides, which are used to identify them as individuals. Traditionally, each bull was named after the patterning on its back.” Historically, the Nguni people, including the Zulu and Xhosa, took over large pasture areas and rich farmland and succeeded in establishing a few kingdoms prior to colonization, the most famous of which was headed by Shaka Zulu.

The naming of individual bulls is a common practice among many African pastoralists, and is an indication of the significance of cattle for tracking both livestock breeding lineages and formal relations between the individual people who share interests in each animal. People create social relations through the circulation of cattle; the breeding and disposition of cattle is determined by how human social relationships are activated. Cattle are wealth, security, and social connectedness. Exhibition signage explains that cattle are given as bridewealth, lobola, so that men and their patrilineages can obtain wives with which to produce the children needed to tend and milk the cattle. In many African pastoral communities, cattle and women are treated in some ways as equivalent or exchangeable in this manner. Beautiful women are often compared to beautiful cattle. Those who have viewed ethnographic films on African pastoral people such as the Nuer and Maasai may recall that men in these cultures compose songs and poems for their cattle extolling their beauty in a manner they would not usually dare refer to the daughters and sisters of other men. Here, metaphor and simile come in handy when praising women through the use of respectable cow references. Less well documented is women’s use of bull references as metaphors for admirable men. Many of the ndwango in this exhibit are explicitly foregrounding bulls – even when the artists explicitly say these male animals remind them of their strong mothers!

African pastoral women themselves commonly gain access to milk cattle through their husbands and sons; these are the animals from which they feed their families with milk and occasionally meat. Generally, there are few other ways in which a woman can unequivocally secure an animal for her own use. Inheritance is generally patrilineal, through male kin lines. However, we learn that the creator of “Funky Bull” is a sangoma, a “traditional healer.” Such healers were and are able to receive payment for their services, and this has sometimes been a pathway for women sangoma to secure rights in cattle for themselves. The signage on “Funky Bull” noted that artist Bonqiswa depicted the bull with markings in a way that gave it an individual identity. Was this just wishful thinking, or an actual expression of her proprietary interest, a financial plan, or an economic portfolio? The signage says only this: “As a sangoma, Bonqiswa is certain to have imbued these patterns with specific meanings. This is true of most ‘traditional’ beadwork that survives; however, learning what the patterns originally meant is difficult, because the stories of the women who made the works have not been recorded.” Alas, she is no longer here to ask.

The symbolic potency of cattle in these two very geographically distant countries should not be surprising, given that the people in both regions have strong pastoral roots of many centuries extending up to the present. Cattle represent power and value in both locales. In both of these regions, “tribal” identities based on kinship continue to have relevance, even as national identities are superimposed over them and global economic forces engage them. Art production in both places, and the styles associated with specific cultural communities, has been commercialized. In South Africa, that art commercialization process has been limited to only the past few centuries, but in Central Asia, the Silk Road has been a factor in their lives and art much longer, especially when it comes to textile arts. The Silk Road was especially important as a conduit for silk, cotton and wool textiles. Uzbekistan today is still known for its substantial cotton production, for silk and cotton textiles (especially in colorful ikat designs and suzani embroidery) and for highly decorated wool and silk clothing materials and rugs.
The bead-on-cotton textiles of the Ubuhle women’s collective are a unique innovation based on older beadwork products that were strung or sewn on leather and made for personal use or traded locally. The earliest beads were made of stone, ivory and bone, eggshell, iron, and wood. Beads from the Mediterranean, India, and Europe later made their way to South Africa, and some South African beads made the reverse journey northward. It was not really until the mid-nineteenth century that large numbers of commercially-produced glass beads came in large quantities to South Africa, followed by plastic beads in the twentieth century. Cotton cloth was not a significant commodity in South Africa until the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, gradually replacing leather. Industrially produced beads and cotton cloth, both in bright color combinations, are now a standard in African decorative arts and fashion and have become part of the global economy. What is distinctive about the Ubuhle textiles is the hand-made, labor-intensive, boutique quality of production, combined with the backstory about the women’s collective itself as an example of women’s self-empowerment under extreme duress. The technique of “painting with beads” by covering large pieces of cloth with swirling pictorial designs and supplying text, video, and other media coverage that tells the story and identity of the artists is a real innovation that explicitly seeks to cross over cultural boundaries and appeal to audiences and consumers of other countries. It is an art form specifically adapted to global market forces in response to local needs.

Especially interesting on the last day of this exhibit at the Bowers was the enthusiasm of those who came to meet one of the artists, the “Induna” (Leader) and founder of the collective, master beader Ntombephi Ntobela, who spent the entire day on site working on a single piece. Attendees (mostly women) surrounded her to watch, ask questions, and visually record her technique. She graciously explained and demonstrated how the beading was done, and allowed individuals to hold and examine the piece she was working on or others that were available from docents. Many of those who came were beaders themselves and attend regular events at the museum organized by the Orange County Bead Society. A few noticed some similarity to quilting and other textile arts in the manner in which the hand stitching forms secure and precise patterns visible on the backside of the piece. Some women even brought the guest artist gifts of beaded jewelry from various other sources and cultures, while others wore pieces of Ubuhle bead jewelry they had purchased at the Bowers Gift Store. The reverence shown to this guest beader and other artists featured in the exhibit and accompanying video was a remarkable feature of this exhibit, similar to the reverence expressed for the avant garde painters on display at the Savitsky Museum. I found that to be a satisfying demonstration of how attitudes about art, in all its diversity, are evolving.
A Note on Videos for Each Exhibit

Savitsky Museum
In Uzbekistan, I was shown the documentary film, “The Desert of Forbidden Art.” It is currently available for rent on Amazon. It is also currently available for rent or purchase on YouTube here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WuMoVj1TCXQ

The film has been featured on the PBS series, Independent Lens. https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/documentaries/desert-forbidden-art/

This blog site discusses the film “The Passion of Igor Savitsky,” a joint Uzbekistan, Italy, France documentary and includes an embedded video (also on YouTube) of the film itself: https://karakalpak-karakalpakstan.blogspot.com/2017/04/a-documentary-film-passion-of-igor-art.html

This 2021 video, “The Improbable Museum: Igor Savitsky’s Collection of Russian Avant Garde and Karakalpak Art in Soviet Central Asia,” features a detailed and scholarly talk about the history and significance of the Savitsky Museum by Zukhra Kasimova, then a PhD candidate at University of Chicago. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tx9dx6IP6iE

Ubuhole Women: Beadwork and the Art of Independence
The film that is played on continuous loop at this exhibition, wherever it appears, can be seen here on Vimeo: https://vimeo.com/321580358
It is also embedded in this website from another museum: https://fourarts.org/event/ubuhole-women-beadwork-and-the-art-of-independence/

Helpful Web Articles on the Savitsky Museum


Note: All photos by Hilarie Kelly.

References


Have an opinion on an issue? Photographs you’d like to share? Research report from the field? Book review? Seen a great museum exhibit? Events happening on your campus?

We welcome your contributions for publication in the SWAA Newsletter! All topics of anthropological interest, from any of the subfields of anthropology, may be submitted.

Please send directly to the acting Newsletter Editor [Barbra Erickson] at beerickson@fullerton.edu.

~Include a photo of yourself and a brief bio~
SUMO: A Thinking Fan’s Guide to Japan’s National Sport
by David Benjamin, Tuttle Publishing, Rutland, Vermont

"The most entertaining and irreverent guide to sumo." -- James Fallows, The Atlantic

Sumo is a fresh and funny introduction to the fascinating world of sumo, Japan's national sport. Author David Benjamin peels away the veneer of sumo as a cultural treasure and reveals it as an action-packed sport populated by superb athletes who employ numerous strategies and techniques to overcome their gargantuan opponents. Sumo provides an engaging, witty, behind-the-scenes look at sumo today.

A complete guide to sumo for both curious novices and long-time fans, you'll learn about:
- The greatest sumo match ever
- The many strategies employed by wrestlers, such as "the Hooker," "the Bulldozer" and "the Matador"
- Sumo's most stunning move
- Why rikishi sometimes throw a match
- The backroom politics that influence who is promoted to the highest ranks
- The "foreign invasion" of sumo and what it means for the sport's future


Review by
William Fairbanks II Ph.D.

Using Clifford Geertz’s concept of convergent data—defined as “descriptions, measures, observations, what you will, which are at once rather miscellaneous, both as to type and degree of precision and generality, unstandardized facts, opportunistically collected and variously portrayed, which yet turn out to shed light on one another”—I frequently find significant insights in the works of non-anthropologists. In this case, David Benjamin’s book Sumo: A Thinking Fan’s Guide to Japan’s National Sport gives insight into how corruption is viewed differently in different cultures, and beyond that the insights cultural anthropologists can gain when analyzing American culture.

When studying sumo, and other aspects of Japanese culture, Benjamin advises against “getting bogged down in Cultural Appreciation.” A Rikishi (pronounced Richie) is a man participating in sumo, or as Benjamin defined them, a “big strong bastard.” They are ranked by the Sumo Association in a hierarchy with Yokozuna at the top followed by Ozeki, Sekiwake, Komusubi, and Magushita. Magushita are further broken down into ranks descending from 1 to 17. Below that is the Juryo division, and occasionally a Juryo moves up during a tournament (basho) and is matched against a lower ranked Magushita. Benjamin says fans might prefer classifying rikishi in ways that make more sense to them. For example, Hippos who are heavy, quick and although not fast, dangerous. Jocks who are smaller and, had they not chosen sumo, would do well in sports such as baseball, football or basketball. Butterballs are short, fat and mediocre.

“Old farts” [Benjamin’s words] head the Sumo Association and keep a tight grip on the sport, so NHK television follows the association’s script. Watching a digest of a basho, which runs 15 consecutive days with each rikishi fighting each day on television, a viewer sees and hears what the old farts approve. Before a match you get the rikishi’s rank, and during the match a bit on the technique the two participants prefer, such as thrusting-slapping. After the match the technique used to win, such as tsuridashi, grabbing the opponent’s mawashi, (the belt which goes between the legs, the only clothing worn by rikishi during a match) and with both hands carrying him out of the ring. (The first rikishi to touch the ground with any part of his body other than his foot inside the ring loses; or outside the ring, the first to touch the ground with any part of his body, including the foot, loses.) Rings are defined by tawara, ropes made of straw set on the dohyo, a raised earthen platform in the middle of the stadium.

Sumo, like much in Japan, is influenced by Confucian thought, such as reverence for ancestors and hierarchy. Being an American and beginning his career as a newspaper reporter in a small New England town, Benjamin—like most Americans—says he was “hung up on the notion of the ‘public trust,’” so was quick reacting to “the faintest whiff of fishy goings on.” Corruption in Japan such as conniving, cheating, nepotism, etc. is viewed differently. Japanese are pieces “of living history” including privileges “established long before those now living were born.” They are “mysteries that present-day mortals can neither truly understand nor retrieve from an inscrutable past.”

Political scandals reported in the press may drag on for some time, earning “plaudits, for the ‘openness’ of the Japanese political system” by the international press. On the other hand citizens are “ashamed something like this got into the tabloids and made all of us look bad” and eventually the scandal comes to be seen as “a mere misunderstanding.”

Anthropologists know traits tend to manifest themselves in all aspects of a culture, and so it is with corruption in Japan. Benjamin cites a match during the spring 1990 basho between Takanohama and Tamaryo. Takanohama was young,
handsome and had “sex appeal.” Futagoyama, who served as a ring judge at the match was President of the Sumo Association, and Takanohana’s grandfather. Tamaryo was from a weak heya (“stable where rikishi live and train”) and was gradually slipping toward retirement. Throughout the match Tamaryo was on the offensive and Takayama on the defensive; eventually they tumbled out of the ring together. The gyōji (referee) pointed his goombai (war fan) indicating Tamaryo won. Judges called a mono-ii, a conference where the judges meet briefly and make one of three decisions: the gyōji was right, the gyōji was wrong and the decision is reversed, or they both hit the ground at the same time which means the match is replayed. Benjamin commented in situations like this the decision goes in favor of the aggressor, which in this case would have been Tamaryo, but in this case the decision was reversed! Benjamin commented as he watched on television, “I flashed back to my previous incarnation as a crusading New England newspaper editor. ‘Just a damn minute!…I’m afraid Mr. Futagoyama might be involved in a conflict of interest here!’”

Benjamin was right, there was a conflict of interests, but what was it? The Sumo Association feels a responsibility to the sport, one being to pack stadiums with fans during bashos, so cultivating a young fan base was a priority. With national prosperity and the increasing popularity and salaries of other sports like baseball, disadvantaged Japanese boys no longer want to undertake the demanding and demeaning path to success as a rikishi, a situation similar to what occurred in the U.S after World War II when Caucasian boys left boxing to Afro-Americans. Foreigners, (gaijin), began entering sumo and attaining elite states such as Akebono and Konoshiki from Hawai’i, followed by a flood of “faux Japanese” from Mongolia who, starting in 2006 and continuing to 2008, won 13 straight bashos!

Every match according to the Sumo Association is on the up-and-up, but rikishi need a kachikoshi, (a winning record, eight wins during a basho) to insure they will not be demoted and may advance in rank. If close to kachikoshi as the basho winds down they may make a deal, yaochozumo, with another rikishi, perhaps with a rikishi who already is makekoshi, a losing record to let him win; later the favor will be returned. Generally yaochozumo occur during the last three days of a basho.

Shukan Post contended a three-way tie to determine the winner of the 1990 Spring basho “was bought and paid for” (Benjamin believes it was too important a match and was on the up-and-up). Shukan Shincho took up the cause resulting it being sued for libel by the Sumo Association. “Shincho’s lawyers could not find a single rikishi to testify yaochozumo” existed, so the Sumo Association won.

Benjamin contrasted American athletes and fans with sumo. Football players not only have to learn the playbook, but the year’s sack dance, touchdown boogie, handshake, and fans when their team is ahead jeer, sneer and swagger. Rikishi behavior, win or lose, is tightly controlled by the Sumo Association. Losers bow and leave the dohyo. Winners squat facing the loser and perform a ritualized series of hand gestures.

In the final chapter Benjamin sketches out an alternate sumo association utilizing training, scheduling and marketing techniques of major American sports. The best the Sumo Association can do in marketing souvenirs are “framable placards bearing a rikishi’s signature and in red ink—I love this part—his handprint”, which he contrasted with the Red Sox selling over 10,000 t-shirts for around $22.95 each honoring a pitcher who was “a swell guy but not exactly a star.” He concluded his ideas will never be implemented.

Corruption for Americans is easy: something is or is not corrupt. Here we have a more complex example of corruption. Is the Sumo Association corrupt because of the nepotism of a mono-ii declaring Takanoyama a winner, and not rooting out yaochozumo or is it not corrupt because, as leaders of the Sumo Association their responsibility is to preserve the sport? In some ways their corruption was functional and some ways dysfunctional.

After admitting to his share of “nitwit sportswriting” Benjamin concluded “sportswriters are the caboose of journalism, the fatuity of our output isn’t entirely our fault, because sports readers tend toward ignorant expectations.” These and similar comments on his profession scattered throughout the book, appear particularly relevant to the United States and cultural anthropologists today. Benjamin demonstrated what sportswriting could be by making it more analytical, a sine qua non of anthropology. It will be interesting to see how our discipline does with emerging American pop cultural brouhahas such as that over “legacy admissions” at Harvard.

*Sumo* is the most insightful book I have read on Japan since *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*!

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**William Fairbanks** is a Cuesta College Anthropology/Sociology Faculty Emeritus. He was SWAA President 1999-2000, and SWAA Executive Board Chair 2008-2010, and the recipient of the Dan Crowley Award in 2012. After retiring from Cuesta College, he walked across America between 2009 and 2014.