

The Dallas Morning News

ARTS & LIFE SUNDAY

SECTION E | DECEMBER 17, 2023

From culture and community to epic conflicts, 'Afro-Atlantic Histories' explores 100 works related to the African diaspora.

By Benjamin Lima, 6E

400 YEARS OF HISTORY

THEATER

Theatre Three thrills with surprise twists in the murder comedy *Deathtrap*.
By Manuel Mendoza, 4E



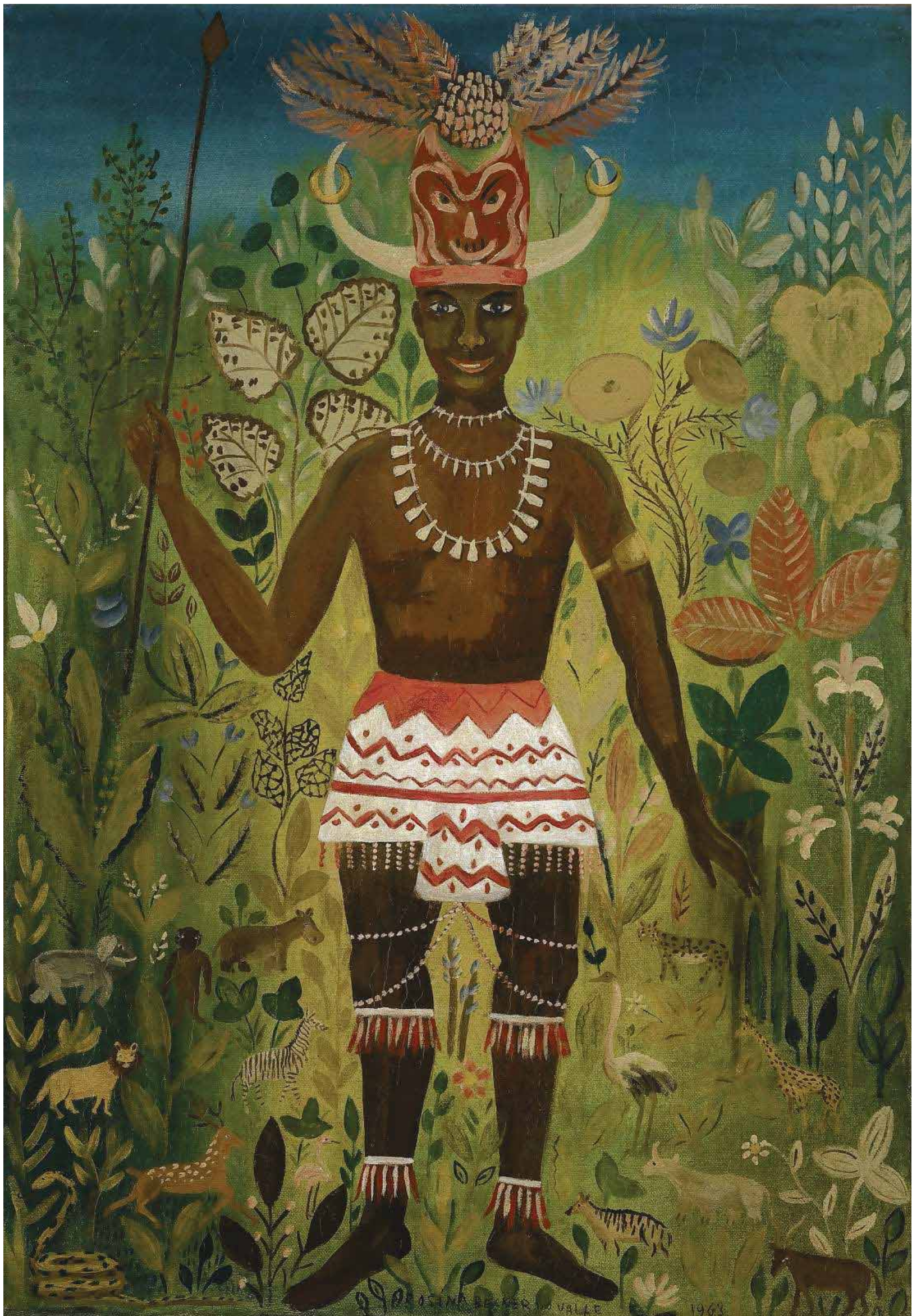
MUSIC

A capella group Kings Return puts a bow on Christmas album with upcoming Kessler show.
By Thor Christensen, 5E



ART

The Kimbell announces one of the most important acquisitions in its history.
By Michael Granberry, 12E



Indian from the Forest (Caboclo) (1963) by Rosina Becker do Valle

Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand

Untitl

Four centuries of 'Afro-Atl

'Afro-Atlantic Histories" is one of the few exhibitions that can open a viewer's mind to an entire field of study, and set up a lifetime of looking and thinking.

The original exhibition debuted in Brazil with over 400 works; the U.S. version (scaled down, but still encyclopedic, with over 100 pieces) came to the National Gallery in Washington (where it was toasted by Vice President Kamala Harris), Houston and Los Angeles before arriving at the Dallas Museum of Art.

What holds the show together is not a common style or school, but a common cultural identity: It considers artworks made over the past four centuries by and about members of the African diaspora, which originated with the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Viewers might be familiar with how this story has played out within U.S. borders, but its international aspects may be less well-known, particularly the parallels with Brazil, the largest and most significant counterpart to the U.S. in the show, and which received 40% of all the enslaved people in the Americas (the U.S. received less than 10%).

"Afro-Atlantic Histories" comes amid a stream of publications that aim to rectify the historic imbalance in our understanding of American history (a prime example being David Hackett Fischer's recent landmark book *African Founders*, which conclusively demonstrates what American institutions owe to African influence). Yet the exhibition's international emphasis is distinctive.

First and foremost, the scale is an accomplishment in itself. There is far more to see than anyone could assimilate in a single visit. My suggestion would be: Zero in on what is most compelling, and start from there.

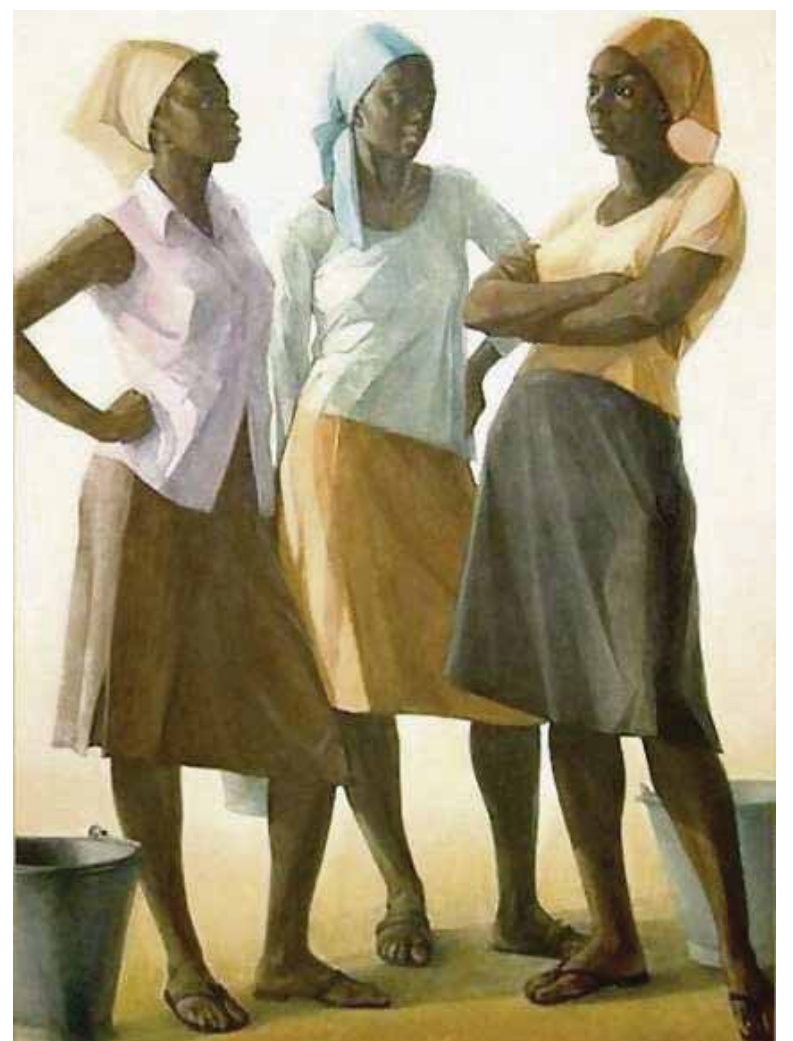
In my mind, the show's six sections sorted themselves into two broad groups: "Portraits," "Rites and Rhythms" and "Everyday Lives" give a sense of culture and community among the African diaspora, while "Maps and Margins," "Resistances and Activisms" and "Enslavements and Emancipations" tell of the grand struggles and epic conflicts that shaped the history. Of course, these thematic divisions are somewhat arbitrary, and many artworks could have fit well in more than one section.

Right off the bat, the tone is set by Harlem Renaissance painter Aaron Douglas' solemn and heart-breaking 5-foot-square 1936 canvas *Into Bondage*, on loan from the National Gallery. In it, a series of figures emerges from an Edenic forest, lit by shimmering rays of light,



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Conversation (1981) by Barrington Watson

National Gallery of Jamaica

Into B



ed by Paulo Nazareth (2011), from the series "For Sale"

Galeria Mended Wood DM, São Paulo

Atlantic Histories'

Encyclopedic show at DMA explores 100 works related to the African diaspora

© 2021 Heirs of Aaron Douglas/Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY
Bondage (1936) by Aaron Douglas

their wrists shackled in blood-red manacles, as ships loom ominously in the distance.

Into Bondage was one of four paintings made by Douglas for the Hall of Negro Life at the Texas Centennial Exposition in Fair Park, the first celebration of Black culture at a world's fair. The exhibition premiered on Juneteenth 1936 and was estimated to have been seen by more than 400,000 visitors of different races — a milestone for the public recognition of Black modern artists in this country. One hopes that whatever happens at Fair Park for the 2036 Texas Bicentennial lives up to the standard set by Douglas' work.

The range of work makes generalizations impossible, which is perfectly fine. Figures expressively posed in classical style can be used just as well to represent daily life in the Caribbean (the cool 1981 *Conversation*, by Barrington Watson of Jamaica) as to describe dramatic history (*A Slave Rebellion on a Slave Ship*, 1833, by the white Frenchman Édouard-Antoine Renard).

Alma Thomas' semi-abstract treatment of the 1963 March on Washington, in which she participated, defamiliarizes a well-known subject and lifts it out of the day-to-day. Brazilian 1950s-era works by Djanira da Motta e Silva and Heitor dos Prazeres represent aspects of folk culture poised between tradition and modernity.

Ironically, despite the vast amount of territory covered, but as an inevitable result of the show's conceptual framework, Africa drops out of the picture, as only a small handful of the objects on view originated there, and very little of modern African history is shown in detail. Without background knowledge, a viewer wouldn't necessarily know whether the artworks here, made by artists of the diaspora, bear any resemblance to those made by African artists in the same era.

For instance, what did African artists think of seeing elements of African culture used by Black American artists in the name of pan-African ideals, as in the Yoruba-influenced works by the late David C. Driskell that were inspired by his travels in West Africa?

And on the historical side, one would have to look elsewhere to learn about the effects of war, slavery and colonialism within Africa. This isn't to criticize "Afro-Atlantic Histories," which is substantial enough already; rather, it's to its credit that such questions arise. All that aside, there is more than enough here to chew on for a long time.

Benjamin Lima is a Dallas-based art historian and the editor of Athenaeum Review, the University of Texas at Dallas journal of arts and ideas.

Details

"Afro-Atlantic Histories" continues through Feb. 11 at the Dallas Museum of Art, 1717 N. Harwood St. afro-atlantic-histories.dma.org.