

El Anatsui, *Danu*, 2006



Aluminum, copper wire, 88 x 138 in.

J. David and Laura Seefried Horsfall Endowment Fund purchase, 2006.35



## **Artist's Biography**

El Anatsui (Ghanaian, active in Nigeria, b. 1944) was born in the southeastern region of the West African nation of Ghana. He graduated in 1969 from the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Kumasi, Ghana. Due to the university's affiliation with Goldsmith's College in London, England, Anatsui received a formal education heavily weighted towards Western art history. While at university, however, he sought out a parallel educational experience in contemporary Ghanaian culture. Kumasi is the capitol of the region, which is home to the Ashanti people. By frequenting the arts center there (the National Culture Centre), Anatsui and his fellow art students were exposed to the local music and visual arts scene, which included communities of weavers, potters, textile artists, sculptors, and musicians.

At the time, multiple African nations were in the process of claiming their independence from the colonial rule of European nations that had divided up the continent for political and financial gain in the late nineteenth century. Ghana had been occupied by the British (under the name of the Gold Coast) until it became a republic in 1960—the first country south of the Sahara to throw off colonial rule. Anatsui has spoken of *sankofa*—an idea that predates the colonization of Africa—that translates as “go back and retrieve.” The term gained additional significance during this era of independence movements, during which Ghanaians recaptured their cultural pride and revived indigenous traditions (a “quest for self-rediscovery” as the artist has called it), while coming to terms with the legacy of colonialism. To the artist, however, it had additional meaning: “To me [*sankofa*] implied even the need to search immediately around.”<sup>1</sup> His early work from the 1970s and 1980s engaged with the reuse and repurposing of found materials. He explained, “my practice revolved around materials, processes, forms, and ideas largely from my immediate environment and circumstances.”<sup>2</sup> He created sculptures composed of used wooden objects and scorched blocks of wood and ceramic vessels and sculptures that reused shards of broken pots. By incorporating these fragments into new works, he alluded to the process by which West Africa's fractured history of colonialism was recombined to create a new society.

In 1975, Anatsui was hired to teach sculpture in the Department of Fine and Applied Arts at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, in the southeastern part of the country. In 1990, Anatsui was one of the first African artists whose work was shown at the Venice Biennale, one of the most prestigious international exhibitions of contemporary art. Anatsui's artwork changed dramatically in 1998, however, when he began creating wall-mounted hanging sculptures, which he calls “sheets.” The year prior, Anatsui had found a bag of bottle caps near a distillery in the vicinity of his studio, which led him to experiment with the material, ultimately flattening the colorful metal caps and wrappings and connecting them with copper wire to form a malleable, tapestry-like material. The artist explained how his aesthetic concerns developed over time: “Initially these were purely sculpture, but as time went on, I saw that there was a need for me to consider so many other elements, ... like the reds, the blacks, the

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<sup>1</sup> Anatsui, El and Laura Leffler James, “Convergence: History, Materials, and the Human Hand—An Interview with El Anatsui,” *Art Journal* vol. 67, no. 2 (Summer 2008), p. 43.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*



yellows, and so forth. And I work more like a sculptor and a painter put together, because the concern of the sculptor and painter are what I am grappling with as well.”<sup>3</sup> Breaking the boundary between two-dimensional painting and three-dimensional sculptures, these artworks captured the attention of the global art world as they were exhibited more widely. Scholars have also made the association between Anatsui’s works and another artform: the traditional Ghanaian craft of *kente*, a type of colorful, strip-woven textile.

El Anatsui’s work continues to be displayed in exhibitions and museum collections all over the world, including in the 2007 and 2019 Venice Biennales. In addition, in 2008 he won an award for Lifetime Achievement at the Biennale.

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<sup>3</sup> Clark Art Institute, *El Anatsui at the Clark*, exh. cat. (Williamstown, MA: Clark Art Institute, distributed by Yale University Press, 2011), p. 10.

### **Location**

*Danu* is installed in the Ruth and George W. Mead Gallery XVII (17). To view this artwork in person, see the Chazen's website for the latest information about open hours and entry. Admission is always free.

### **Visual Description**

*Danu* is a large sculpture created by the artist El Anatsui. The sculpture hangs on the wall in a horizontal position and measures roughly seven feet by eleven and a half feet. The sculpture is not entirely flat and fabric-like ripples run across its surface. It juts from the wall about eight inches at its deepest point and has jagged, irregular edges on all sides. The sculpture is colorful containing red, green, black, blue, orange, pink, purple and other colors, but gold is the dominant color in the piece. It is made from both metal bottle caps and metal wrappings that have been cut, folded, and hammered flat. In many instances, brand names that appear on the bottle wrappings are evident. In their shape, the bottle wrappings resemble sticks of gum and measure 3.5 inches long by 1 inch wide in most places. The wrappings are joined to one another with thin copper wire, which is looped through holes in the wrappings at six different points, almost like thread. The wrappings are seemingly attached in random order to form long horizontal strips that undulate like folds of a blanket. Though there appears to be no purposeful patterning in this work, there are a few places where color is concentrated through the use of similar-colored wrappings in bands. A two-foot-wide band of mostly red gingham print wrappings marks the vertical edge of the sculpture's right side. On the left side, a similar foot-wide vertical band of red-gingham print wrappings marks the sculpture's edge. Along the entirety of the sculpture's bottom, flattened bottle caps are joined at four points with copper wire to create a band that is roughly ten inches tall. Here, the bottle caps have been flattened and folded into square shapes and some caps are shown face up to reveal a brand name, while others are shown face down revealing the scalloped edges of the bottle cap. Slightly off center of this band is a section of all-black caps that resemble a sideways "U" shape.

## **Content and Context**

*Danu* is an early rectilinear example of one of Anatsui's wall-mounted "sheets" constructed from liquor-bottle caps. While glass liquor bottles are recycled in Nigeria, the screw tops and metallic wrappings that typically bear the liquors' brand names are discarded. Anatsui's repurposing of found objects relates to the work he made early in his career. In addition to bottlecaps, he has incorporated library printing plates, ceramics, milk-bottle caps, and other materials into his artworks. Despite Anatsui's initial experimentation with found bottle caps, he has purchased all subsequent caps either from neighboring distilleries or on the scrap-metal commodities market.

By using bottle caps and wrappings from liquor bottles specifically, the artist comments not just on waste, but also on conspicuous consumption. Nigeria, Anatsui's country of residence for over forty years, has a thriving liquor industry that feeds rampant alcohol consumption among its citizens.<sup>4</sup> Alcoholism, in turn, causes high rates of disease and death among the Nigerian population. Anatsui's interpretation of the bottle caps and the history of the alcohol consumption, however, speak to historic global relationships. His works weave together the international liquor trade, global economy, slavery, and Africa's colonial history. He recounts the history transmitted by the bottle caps:

"It is from the relationship between Europe and Africa that these bottle caps came to Africa. Not that we didn't have our own way of presenting drinks, but then, this way of putting them in bottles and capping them came from Europe, and in fact drinks were among the items that Europe brought to Africa in order to start trading with Africa. And drink, we saw, eventually became a currency that was used in doing so many things, so that when I take a bottle cap and I cut it, I just have the feeling that I am working with the material which was there at the beginning of the contact between two continents (and eventually three continents) because the currency of drink happened to be used in paying for slaves which were brought to the Americas, where they produced the raw materials for more drink, which went back into Europe and then came back into Africa."<sup>5</sup>

The heritage of the country's colonial history of liquor outlined by Anatsui above continues to be played out today and presents both an unsustainable economic model and a social crisis.

In addition to his use of found materials and that material's relationship to contemporary social concerns and historic colonial trade, Anatsui is also attracted to the liquor bottle caps because of the interconnection they represent, by way of the number of human hands through which they have passed. "When I saw the bottle tops," he has said, "what struck me was that they are from bottles that have been used, and therefore human hands have touched them. . . . People have really drunk from

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<sup>4</sup> Adebowale, Adedigba, "South-south leads Nigeria's huge alcohol consumption, NBS data shows," *Premium Times NG* (June 13, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Clark Art Institute, *El Anatsui at the Clark*, exh. cat. (Williamstown, MA: Clark Art Institute, distributed by Yale University Press, 2011), p. 12.



these bottles, and therefore human hands have left a charge on them.”<sup>6</sup> One can imagine the chain of individuals through whose hands the material has passed up until reaching the artist’s studio: from the hands of the Nigerian factory workers who collected and stamped the metal to create the liquor bottle caps to the hands of the consumers of the liquor itself to the hands of the workers who collected the bottle caps for recycling to those who sold them on the scrap metal market. Once reaching Anatsui’s studio, they pass through even more hands, for *Danu* was not constructed by the artist alone, but rather with the aid of a team of paid studio assistants. Within a small warehouse studio, more than a dozen assistants work six days a week to assist in the preparation of the artworks. Even after leaving the studio, artworks like *Danu* are influenced by others, since the artist encourages museum and gallery staff to hang the works as they see fit, influencing the way it appears each time it is hung. This accumulated history of touch that is captured and preserved in *Danu* forces us, the viewer, to ponder the enormity of the impact of human imprinting preserved in each work and how it reflects the implications for the social, economic and environmental sustainability of the community.

*Danu*, like Anatsui’s other bottle-cap works, embodies consumption, waste, and sustainability in its materiality, its process of production, and its references to the colonial liquor trade that continues to impact West Africa today. The artist’s use of liquor bottle caps as the primary material for works like *Danu* is testimony to the interconnectedness of the sustainable reuse of material and the deep historical ties to the past that objects like the bottle caps signify.

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<sup>6</sup> El Anatsui and Laura Leffler James, “Convergence: History, Materials, and the Human Hand—An Interview with El Anatsui,” *Art Journal* vol. 67, no. 2 (Summer 2008), 38.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. What makes this sculpture “sustainable”? What makes it “unsustainable”? Can a material be both?
2. Supplies of bottle caps used by Anatsui were not collected from the trash, as has often been proposed in commentary on his work. Instead, the artist purchases the bottle caps on the commodities market of recycled material mostly from local manufacturers. Does knowing this change the impact of the work? If so, in what way?
3. Is knowing that the metal caps and wrappings once belonged to alcohol bottles important to your interpretation of the work? How would the work change if the artist has used wrappings and caps from soda bottles, for instance?
4. "I believe that artists are better off working with whatever their environment throws up," Anatsui has said of the “sheet” works like *Danu*. If you could pick one material that your environment “throws up” to create a work of art, what would you choose? Why would you choose this material?
5. Anatsui allows curators to hang his pieces any way they see fit when putting them on display. A piece can be hung with gentle folds, or completely straight, or wildly scrunched up. Is there a way *Danu* could have been hung differently that would change how the work is interpreted?

**Collection Connections for Further Engagement:** *Not all these artworks are currently on view; click the titles of each to determine if they are currently on view in the museum, and in which gallery.*

El Anatsui (Ghanaian, active in Nigeria, b. 1944), [Old Used Torn Towel](#), ca. 2003. African hard woods, pigment, 24 x 54 x 1 in. J. David and Laura Seefried Horsfall Endowment Fund purchase, 2005.58a-n

El Anatsui burned, incised, carved, and painted native African hardwoods to create surface patterns reminiscent of kente cloth of his native Ghana. He intentionally leaves the arrangement of the fourteen panels up to the owner as a reference to colonialism, when Africa was arbitrarily divided and reassembled according to European interests.

Willie Bester (South African, b. 1956), [Untitled \(Township Scene\)](#), 1997. Mixed media photo-collage with oil, 16 1/2 x 33 17/16 in. J. David and Laura Seefried Horsfall Endowment Fund purchase, 1997.18

In this mixed-media collage, Bester uses found materials to reflect the lived environment of a South African township. Materials he incorporates into his compositions include machine parts, sticks, tin cans, animal bones, and old sacking, along with newspaper clippings and his own photographs.



John Chamberlain (American, 1927-2011), [Nehoc](#), 1962. Steel, chromed steel, paint, 33 x 32 x 27 in.  
Terese and Alvin S. Lane Collection, 2012.54.10.5

Chamberlain became well-known for creating artworks from discarded automobile parts, as in this sculpture. Like Anatsui, Chamberlain's work serves as a commentary on the culture of consumerism and consumption of American society in the 1960s.

Atta Kwami (Ghanaian, b. 1956), [Some Other Time II](#), 2011. Acrylic on linen, 57 3/4 x 58 in. J. David and Laura Seefried Horsfall Endowment Fund purchase, 2012.19

Kwami, another contemporary Ghanaian artist, shares with Anatsui an interest in traditional indigenous art forms. In his painting, he references kente cloth, to which Anatsui's work has often been compared.



### **Additional Resources**

El Anatsui's website: <https://elanatsui.art/>

Adebowale, Adedigba, "South-south leads Nigeria's huge alcohol consumption, NBS data shows," *Premium Times NG* (June 13, 2019), <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/health/health-features/334887-south-south-leads-nigerias-huge-alcohol-consumption-nbs-data-shows.html#jp-carousel-334897>

Anatsui, El and Laura Leffler James, "Convergence: History, Materials, and the Human Hand—An Interview with El Anatsui," *Art Journal* vol. 67, no. 2 (Summer 2008), pp. 36-53.

Art 21, "Studio Process: El Anatsui," *Extended Play* (July 20, 2012), 4 minutes, 23 seconds, <https://art21.org/watch/extended-play/el-anatsui-studio-process-short/>

Brooklyn Museum, *In Conversation: El Anatsui with Susan Vogel* (posted February 20, 2013), one hour, 2 minutes, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gr\\_L5u1cFQQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gr_L5u1cFQQ)

Clark Art Institute, *El Anatsui at the Clark*, exh. cat. (Williamstown, MA: Clark Art Institute, distributed by Yale University Press, 2011) [Kohler Art library NB1099 G53 A532 2011]

Icarus Film, *Fold Crumple Crush: The Art of El Anatsui* (excerpt), posted March 30, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gr0sSCV2UDg>

Preece, Robert. "Out of Africa: A Conversation with El Anatsui," *Sculpture* (July 1, 2006), <https://sculpturemagazine.art/out-of-africa-a-conversation-with-el-anatsui/>

Sytsma, Janine, "[The Sculpture of El Anatsui: Rupture and Renewal at the Chazen Museum of Art](#)," *Chazen Museum of Art Bulletin*, July 1, 2003 - June 30, 2005; July 1, 2005 - June 30, 2007. (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2010): pp. 36-41

The University of Texas at Austin, *A Conversation with El Anatsui: When I Last Wrote to You about Africa* (posted January 9, 2012), one hour, nine minutes, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N\\_Hc67P3qmo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N_Hc67P3qmo)

Vogel, Susan Mullin. *El Anatsui: Art and Life* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2012) [Kohler Art Library, NB1099 G53 A538 2012, in library use only]