

United States Embassy
Cotonou, Benin



ART IN EMBASSIES EXHIBITION

COVER

Arnold Sobers

Hendro I, undated

Graphite and ink

38 ⁹/₁₆ x 38 ⁹/₁₆ in. (98 x 98 cm)

Courtesy of the artist, Accra, Ghana



The U.S. Mission in Benin greatly appreciates and thanks the artists for the loan of artworks currently on exhibit at the Chief of Mission Residence in Cotonou, Benin, under the auspices of

the Department of State's ART in Embassies Program. My goal was twofold in selecting the artwork on display. First, I particularly wished to represent the cultural and historical ties between Africa and the United States of America, and sought works reflecting African American artists' interpretation or manifestation of this connection. Second, it was important to me to represent my home state of West Virginia.

With the assistance of curator Robert Soppelsa, I selected the black and white photographs by Linda Ammons of sweetgrass basketmaking, and an actual basket for display made by the artist Mary Jackson of South Carolina, who wrote that sweetgrass, a plant found only in the coastal dunes of the southeastern United States, is woven into baskets and considered to be "one of the oldest art forms of African origin in America." Synthia Saint James' *Offering to Oshum*, truly bridges the cultural divide and with its vibrant colors brightens the surroundings. *Hendro I* is so powerful that it dominates an

entire room; I marvel at Arnold Sobers' ability to capture the essence of the subject. Benny Andrews' collage *Viola Andrews Teaching Sunday School* captures the flavor of all of my Sunday School teachers at once, notably Mrs. Minnie Belle Veal of North Edison, New Jersey. Jacob Lawrence's abstract *Supermarket Flora* is a floral delight in my dining room. Finally, the *West Virginia Star Quilt*, which was created especially for this exhibition by Liz Nutter of Parkersburg, West Virginia, reminds me of home and the good folks in the West Virginia hills.

I wish to thank the Mission staff and local curator who worked so diligently and carefully on this project, to ensure the safety and protection of these precious items. This exhibition represents a journey across two continents and an ocean, and I hope that my visitors share some of the joy that the artworks are giving to us at the Chief of Mission residence in Cotonou.

Yours truly,

Gayleatha B. Brown

U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Benin

*Cotonou
September 2007*

Linda Ammons is a photographer, an attorney, and an academic administrator. Currently Dean of Law at Widener University in Wilmington, Delaware, she continues to pursue her photographic art. About her work she says: "For over twenty-five years, I have sculpted with light by photographing the world around me. My photography career began while I was a television anchorperson in the southern United States during the 1970s. Photojournalism, social documentary, portraiture, trav-

el, landscapes, and other fine art genres are included in my published and exhibited works. Capturing city life, in sacred and secular settings, is often the subject of my social documentary, black and white photographs. My fine art photography can be found in private, corporate, and public collections internationally, including the ART in Embassies Program's current exhibitions in the U.S. Embassies in the Republic of Benin and Lesotho."



Sweetgrass Basket Maker at Work, undated
Black and white photograph
16 x 20 in. (40,6 x 50,8 cm)
Courtesy of the artist, Wilmington, Delaware



Sweetgrass Basket Maker at Work, undated
Black and white photograph
20 x 16 in. (50,8 x 40,6 cm)
Courtesy of the artist, Wilmington, Delaware

Benny Andrews was born on November 13, 1930, in Plainview, Georgia. Andrews' family worked as sharecroppers, and his mother, Viola, made sure that her children attended school when it rained or when they were not needed as field hands. Although his education was sporadic, Andrews distinguished himself with his talent in drawing and used it as a survival tool to get through school. He used the G.I. Bill to partially fund his art education when he received his honorable discharge from the U.S. Air Force in 1954. In the fall of that year, Andrews began classes at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Illinois. His drawings and paintings employed an economy of line, figures were elongated in order to emphasize gesture, and for the first time, he experimented with collage. The dominant art movement at the time was abstract expressionism, but Andrews adhered to his figural expressionistic style, which bears the influences of abstraction, social realism, surrealism, and the American scene. When he was awarded a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1958, he left Chicago having had his work rejected from every art show at his school.

Andrews spent his career in New York City as an artist, teacher, author, activist, and advocate of the arts. He produced the *Autobiographical Series* as a result of a trip to his home town in Georgia. This portrait of his mother is one of the works from that series. Andrews worked as a curator, critic, and writer. He was elected to the National Academy of Design in 1997, and received numerous awards and accolades. His work is found in more than thirty major museums, as well as many private collections.

www.askart.com

Viola Andrews Teaching Sunday School, 1989

Oil and collage on canvas
60 x 24 in. (152,4 x 61 cm)

Estate of the artist, New York, New York



BENNY ANDREWS (1930-2006)

Mary Jackson of South Carolina makes very distinctive baskets woven from sweetgrass, a plant that can only be found in the coastal dunes of the southeastern United States. According to the artist: "It [weaving sweetgrass baskets] is considered to be one of the oldest art forms of African origin in America, and is the only basket of its kind in the United States." Jackson's work has been widely exhibited throughout the nation and is also represented in many private collections. She is a member of Charleston, South Carolina's, Mount Pleasant community, the center of sweetgrass basket-making, and a founding member and president of the Mount Pleasant Sweetgrass Basketmakers' Association. "Until recently, this was a very guarded tradition," says Jackson, "because people in the community were afraid outsiders would come in and tell us how to make and sell the baskets."

Jackson learned how to make baskets from her mother at the age of four, but abandoned the art when she moved to New York after graduating from high school. She returned to South Carolina in 1972, and took up basketmaking again in her spare time. When she decided to leave her secretarial position to take care of her son, she became a full-time basketmaker and began to appreciate the legacy. "The baskets are practical; they were made to be used. But, at the same time, they will always be a link to our past." Jackson is aware that not many young people are attracted to the idea of basket-making. An even greater threat is the increased coastal development, which has created a shortage of sweetgrass by wiping out many of the wetland areas of the southeast. "Sweetgrass basketmaking is a tradition that I am very proud of and I won't let die," she declares.

www.scafricanamericanhistory.com



Sweetgrass Basket, undated

Woven sweetgrass

12 x 11 x 10 ½ in. (30,5 x 27,9 x 26,7 cm)

Courtesy of an anonymous lender, Washington, D.C.

Jacob Lawrence was a great American modern painter of history and urban life. His paintings are a unique blend of sensibilities - part mural painting, part social realism, and part modernist abstraction. In 1962 and 1964 Lawrence traveled to Africa, lecturing and teaching in Nigeria. There he created elaborately patterned paintings

of village life in a post-colonial country. Throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, Lawrence committed himself to commissions, especially murals and limited edition prints, for the benefit of non-profit organizations. These included New York's Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, for which *Supermarket Flora* was created.



Supermarket Flora, 1997

Silkscreen on paper

38 x 30 in. (96,5 x 76,2 cm)

Gift of the Foundation for Art and Preservation in Embassies to the ART in Embassies Program, Washington, D.C.

Liz Nutter is a fabric artist who lives and works in Parkersburg, West Virginia. She is a graduate of Glenville State College and has taught her art in schools, camps, churches, workshops, and conferences for over twenty years. Her work has been juried into West Virginia's Tamarack art and craft collection as well as craft fairs and festivals. Nutter helped found Camp Echo for the

handicapped and served as its director for three years. Through her business, "Seams a Bit Different," she markets wearable art and home decor items. Her quilt, *West Virginia Star*, was created especially for this exhibition.

Information provided by the artist, 2007



West Virginia Star Quilt, 2007

Pieced fabric

53 x 41 in. (134,6 x 104,1 cm)

Courtesy of the artist,

Parkersburg, West Virginia

Self-taught artist and author Synthia Saint James was born in 1949 in Los Angeles, California. Her professional career as an artist began in 1969 in New York City, where she sold her first commissioned paintings. Today she is an internationally recognized fine artist. Since 1990 she has completed over fifty commissions for major organizations, corporations, and individual collectors. The United States Postal Service commissioned Saint James to create the first Kwanzaa Stamp, which was issued on October 22, 1997, and celebrated with a ceremony held at the Natural History Museum in Los Angeles. She has also completed commissions for Coca Cola “The Lady of Soul Awards;” the American Dance Legacy Institute (in honor of Donald Mc Kayle’s Ballet “Rainbow ‘Round My Shoulder”); the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles (in honor of the late Congressman Julian Dixon); Children’s Institute International; Crystal Stairs; Maryland’s Human Resource

Department; the International Association of Black Professional Fire Fighters (in tribute to the twelve Black fire fighters lost in the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center); and for many other non-profit organizations.

Synthia Saint James has illustrated thirteen children’s books, three of which she wrote: *The Gifts of Kwanzaa*, *Sunday*, and *It’s Kwanzaa Time*. She received a 1997 Coretta Scott King Honor for her illustrations in *Neeny Coming*, *Neeny Going* and four activity books co-authored with Bunny Hull. She has also written and illustrated two books of poetry and prose: *Girlfriends* and *Can I Touch You: Love Poems and Affirmations*, and a multi-cultural cookbook: *Creative Fixings from the Kitchen*.

Oshum is the Yoruba *orisha*, or spirit, of the river named for her. She is still honored in West Africa with an annual ceremony where women dance for the goddess. Oshum

is especially consulted by those who wish to have children, for she encourages this womanly activity.

www.synthiasaintjames.com



Offering to Oshum, 1992
Print
25 x 31 in. (63,5 x 78,7 cm)
Gift of the artist to the
ART in Embassies Program,
Washington, D.C.

Arnold Sobers was born and raised in New York City. After obtaining a Master's degree in business administration, he worked for Citibank and later volunteered with the United States Peace Corps, serving at the Central Bank of the Philippines. Returning from Manila at the end of his Peace Corps tour, Sobers joined the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) in Washington, D.C., where he met his wife, Sharon Cromer. Sobers, his wife, and their two daughters have lived in Pakistan, Cote d'Ivoire, Senegal, Indonesia, and Ghana. They moved to Accra in 2002, where his wife serves as the Director of USAID/Ghana.

In 1991 Sobers started painting and drawing at the urging of his wife. Since then he has sold and exhibited his works all over the world, in places such as Senegal, Mali, Indonesia, New York City, Belgium, and The Netherlands. His work reflects his love of the diverse people and cultures he has experienced throughout his life. In each piece, Sobers captures the essential uniqueness of the individual as well as his or her emotion. Each work is an act of love of mankind and of God. The creative process is a cocktail of inspiration, time, effort, and love. It involves a detailed study of both human and photographic subjects. An original drawing can take anywhere from several days to several months of continuous work to complete. Each stroke of the pencil adds life to the image.

Information provided by the artist, 2006



Hendro I, undated

Graphite and ink

38 ⁹/₁₆ x 38 ⁹/₁₆ in. (98 x 98 cm)

Courtesy of the artist, Accra, Ghana

The ART in Embassies Program (ART) is a unique blend of art, diplomacy, and culture. Regardless of the medium, style, or subject matter, art transcends barriers of language and provides the means for the program to promote dialogue through the international language of art that leads to mutual respect and understanding between diverse cultures.

Modestly conceived in 1964, ART has evolved into a sophisticated program that curates exhibitions, managing and exhibiting more than 3,500 original works of loaned art by U.S. citizens. The work is displayed in the public rooms of some 180 U.S. embassy residences and diplomatic missions worldwide. These exhibitions, with their diverse themes and content, represent one of the most important principles of our democracy: freedom of expression. The art is a great source of pride to U.S. ambassadors, assisting them in multi-functional outreach to the host country's educational, cultural, business, and diplomatic communities.

Works of art exhibited through the program encompass a variety of media and styles, ranging from eighteenth century colonial portraiture to contemporary multi-media installations. They are obtained through the generosity of lending sources that include U.S. museums, galleries, artists, institutions, corporations, and private collections. In viewing the exhibitions, the thousands of guests who visit U.S. embassy residences each year have the opportunity to learn about our nation – its history, customs, values, and aspirations – by experiencing firsthand the international lines of communication known to us all as art.

The ART in Embassies Program is proud to lead this international effort to present the artistic accomplishments of the people of the United States. We invite you to visit the ART web site, <http://aiep.state.gov>, which features on-line versions of all exhibitions worldwide.

Acknowledgments **Washington** Anne Johnson, Director, ART in Embassies Program | Robert Soppelsa, Curator | Rebecca Clark, Registrar | Marcia Mayo, Publications Editor | Sally Mansfield, Publications Project Coordinator | Amanda Brooks, Imaging Manager and Photographer **Cotonou** Javier Araujo, Installation Supervisor | Nazaire Kiki and Moinou Moussa, Art Handlers | Wabi Kouchoro, Francois Kpakossou, and Blaise Abode, Carpentry and Installation | Richard Jean Sogan, Art advisor and Photographer **Vienna** Nathalie Mayer, Graphic Designer



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