

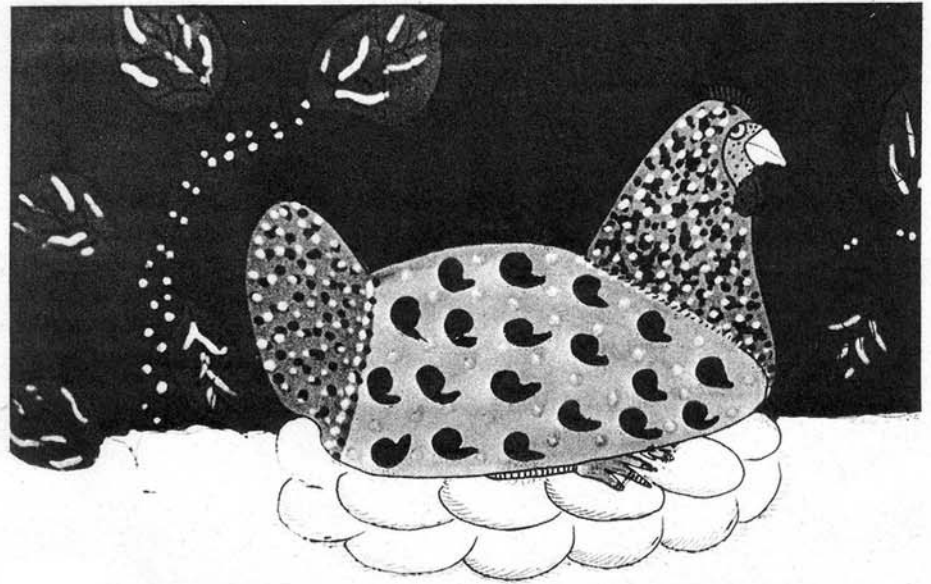
GLASS PAINTINGS FROM SENEGAL

*The Best of Africa, Toronto*  
April 1980

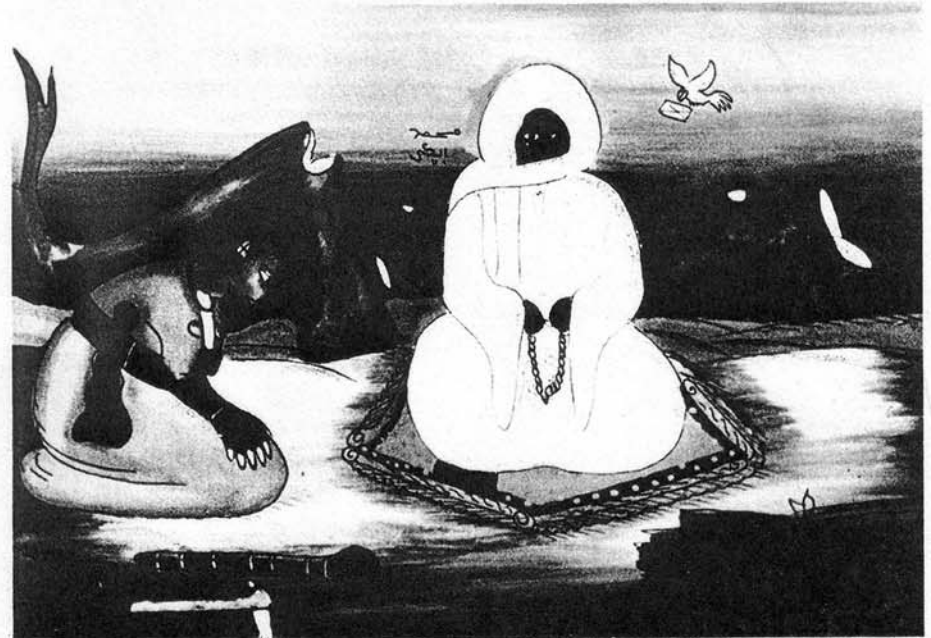
Last April *The Best of Africa* presented an exhibition of eighteen paintings on glass from Senegal. All were purchased for the gallery by noted artist Souleymane Keita, and as such represent an informed Senegalese's selection of what he considered the best of this genre. Most visitors were caught off guard by these works. In their simplicity, directness, and lack of pretense the glass paintings are quite different from most other modern art forms, African or otherwise.

Glass painting is not a new art form, and certainly not unique to Senegal. According to Josef Vydra, in his book *Folk Painting on Glass* (Prague, 1957), the technique of painting on glass probably came to Europe via Byzantium in the fourteenth century. From its beachhead in northern Italy it spread to central Europe, probably in the wake of new discoveries in the production of glass. Although the notion of painting on glass has since spread to many areas of the world (notably Victorian England, modern Rumania, and numerous Mediterranean areas), only the relatively recent development of facilities for the mass production and shipment of glass has made this technique accessible to areas such as Senegal.

"Glass painting," "reverse glass," "on glass," "sur verre"—even the more appropriate Senegalese "*sous verre*" expression—all refer to the same basic technique. A painting, drawing, or other design is made on the side of the glass away from the viewer—that is, on the reverse side of the glass. As some designs are repeated many times, it would not be unusual for the artist to use a stencil, a model, or some sort of tracing paper to create the basic outline. The Toronto exhibition featured as an example two small (33 cm. x 22 cm.) paintings of animals in the Garden of Eden by the same artist, obviously a familiar theme. Over the basic outline are laid colored paints, in most cases oils or enamel house paints. (The Czech glass paintings from the sixteenth to eighteenth cen-



M'BENGUE. OIL ON GLASS. 30 x 42cm.



M'BENGUE. AMADOU BAMBA AND IBRA FALL. OIL ON GLASS, 30 x 42cm.

uries were frequently baked for a longer-lasting finish and to improve the adhesion of the paint to the glass.) Note the technical difficulties in painting the background last, and imagine the artist trying to paint it without really being able to see foreground figures!

Who are the artists? Unfortunately, the answer to that question probably awaits an in-depth field investigation of the sort that Benetta Jules-Rosette has done on Zambian painters. But one could start out by saying that these are not "Sunday painters"; they are professional, full-time artists who take their art quite seriously. Moudou Fall, for instance, not only signs his name but adds his title as well: "Grand Artiste." The artists come from Dakar and other urban centers in Senegal: Rufisque, Kaolack, St. Louis, Diourbel, Thiès, and areas associated with *magals* (pilgrimages) such as Tivouane, Touba, and M'Backé. They are nearly all Muslim males, often as-

sociated with Muslim *confreries* such as the Mourides. Many of the painters work from no fixed address but tend to take their talents wherever the business is.

Perhaps by grouping the paintings according to subject matter we can get a better idea of what appeals to the typical Senegalese client. The most popular themes are those inspired by the Koran (Noah's Ark, the Garden of Eden) or the life of Amadou Bamba, founder of the Mouride brotherhood. *Amadou Bamba and Ibra Fall*, for instance, tells quite a story. Bamba, the Koranic scholar, teacher, and theorizer, is naturally the focal point of the piece: large, nearly featureless, profoundly pious. Kneeling before him is Sheikh Ibra Fall, Bamba's first disciple and the main organizing force behind the growth of the Mouride movement. Fall founded a Mouride subgroup (Bay Fall) whose motto is "To work is to pray" and who supplied the muscle behind the

Mourides' colonization and clearing of land in the interior of Senegal during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; the fallen trees behind the two figures await only the farmer's *daba* to begin the cultivation of groundnuts. At Fall's side are the Bay Fall's symbols: a hoe-*daba* for clearing land, and a club for maintaining order. As in many of the Mouride paintings, a small bird flies toward Amadou Bamba, bringing the Word in the form of a letter.

Another favorite theme is "L'Elégante." These are "portraits" of an idealized, beautiful woman, or perhaps copies of a portrait done on commission for a local family. This, of course, is a theme found in many nontraditional art forms from Senegal to Zambia, whether done on cloth, velvet, canvas, or glass. The Senegalese portraits, however, seem to be of a particular person, not some vague abstraction.

Decorative scenes are also quite popular. Idealized village scenes could serve as travel posters, while one painting featured camels at an oasis, replete with black-clad Bedouin and tent—perhaps a souvenir of a trip to Mecca? Even potentially kitsch efforts can turn into something quite special: a gaudy orange-and-black rendering of a baobab tree really manages to capture some of the eeriness of these bald giants.

Several paintings depict mythical scenes and genies. One shows a many-winged female (angel?) head on a horse's body, a definitely Muslim figure (a crescent adorns her tiara) obviously influenced by the iconography found in prints of Indian origin that now circulate in Africa.

Finally, several paintings bear witness to a fine and rather unexpected sense of humor. Artist Mbengue shows a distraught woman helplessly watching her husband dance a jig as he tries to deal with a snake that has crawled into his voluminous trousers. Another of Mbengue's efforts shows us a most prolific hen sitting atop an enormous mound of eggs, wearing an embarrassed expression.

It is interesting to note that the best-represented categories are not too dissimilar from those proposed by Vydra for the Czech paintings. They, too, largely focused on religious subjects, particularly the healing power of holy-saintly figures associated with places of pilgrimage where glass paintings were sold. Other categories included pieces for the protection of the home and secular narratives that advertised the owner's material well-being.

Senegalese glass paintings represent an important aspect of modern African art: the development of an urban "art populaire" with a specifically African clientele in mind. They are among the finest examples of a recently developed African folk-art form, recording symbols firmly planted in the artists' memory with a naive unity and clarity of composition that is the hallmark of the magic of folk art everywhere.

Bob Barde  
*The Best of Africa*