

SOULEY KEITA OF SENEGAL  
*Phelps-Stokes Fund, New York City*  
*September 1976*  
*The Best of Africa, Toronto*  
*October-November 1976*

In autumn 1974, *African Arts* published a review article on the Paris exhibition "Senegalese Art Today" (VIII.1). One of the artists included in that Paris show, but not mentioned in Bernard Pataux's article, is Souley Keita, whose work was recently displayed at two separate exhibitions: one at New York's Phelps-Stokes Fund and the other at Toronto's The Best of Africa.

Souley Keita, who lives on the island of Gorée, is one of a number of younger Senegalese artists trying to follow in the footsteps of Iba Ndiaye and Papa Ibra Tall. The new generation is virtually unknown outside Senegal, unlike Tall and Ndiaye, whose works are widely exhibited and appreciated.

Keita has produced works in several media. His Toronto exhibition, for example, included six etchings (each in runs of eight), a woodcut, seven oils on canvas, fourteen watercolors, and a tapestry. Each medium, however, firmly reflects Keita's own particular style: an obvious exposure to European techniques and an equally obvious personality deeply rooted in Africa. His oils and watercolors especially are faithful expressions of his gentle, reflective nature.

Of particular interest was a large oil entitled *Adam et Eve*, which is a remarkable blend of the European and the African. Keita's translation of this biblical couple depicts a sensuous black Eve closely watched (jealously?) by a stoic, wooden Adam who bears marked resemblance to a Dogon ancestor figure. Other works dealt with common local themes: *Poisson-Lune*, a whimsical fish turned inside out; a sympathetic treatment of *Les Hommes Bleus* from Mauritania; and several multiple-exposure effect watercolors, where



ADAM ET EVE. OIL ON CANVAS

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a human head metamorphoses into a piscine figure. Several watercolors such as *Takoussan* and *Rythme* are reminiscent of Chagall, while others such as *Tete de Jeune Fille* and *La Marchand de Poissons* are adoring female studies.

The exhibition at The Best of Africa featured a great many semi-representational works and marked a distinct phase in Keita's stylistic development. Early works, undoubtedly done under the European influence prevailing at the Dakar Ecole des Arts where he studied, were highly abstract. It was for this reason that they were selected by the organizers of the previously mentioned Franco-Senegalese exhibition at the Grand Palais' Galeries Nationales in 1974. A later phase, seen at the Phelps-Stokes Fund, dealt frequently with the historical side of Gorée, focusing on the slave trade and its legacy. The most recent phase is relatively apolitical. While some criticized Keita's work as "pretty, but lacking depth," or as not being African enough—whatever that means—others shared in the relaxed, lyrical mood that Keita projected.

Souley Keita's prospects and problems are indicative of the obstacles confronting African artists. The Senegalese government doesn't have the resources to support its artists, the level of French *assistance technique* has declined, and the number of galleries in Senegal is extremely limited. The path to prosperity and recognition would thus seem to lie in exhibitions in Europe and North America; few private galleries, however, are willing to risk the expense involved in showing African artists who, by and large, are unknown outside the Africanist milieu.

One ray of hope came out of the Toronto show: at this writing, Keita and Bruce Onobrakpeya are tentatively slated for inclusion in the London (Ontario) Art Gallery's international graphic art show, "Process," in March 1977. The works of two African artists will be shown along with those of Picasso, Chagall, Oldenberg and Calder—an important step toward meeting the gallery-going public.

Bob Barde  
*The Best of Africa*