Malangatana: Mozambique Modern

Director’s Foreword

The Art Institute of Chicago has been at the forefront of American museums in collecting and displaying modern art since the early twentieth century, and boasts an ongoing commitment to extending this vital legacy with research, publications, and exhibitions. In that spirit, a number of our curators came together in 2013 for a series of discussions exploring ideas about modern art, in particular the ways in which it manifests across our collections. This gave rise to the Modern Series, a set of three experimental, challenging, and provocative exhibitions and publications that are co-organized by curators across departments, with divergent but complementary specialties. The two previous iterations—Shatter Rupture Break (February 15–May 3, 2015) and Go (February 23–June 4, 2017)—sought to present the museum’s holdings in departments including Arts of the Americas, Modern and Contemporary Art, Photography and Media, and Textiles in fresh and exciting ways.

Malangatana: Mozambique Modern (July 30–November 16, 2020), the third and final project in the series, expands our understanding of modernism and modern art in a global context by bringing the work of celebrated Mozambican artist Malangatana Ngwenya (1936–2011) into conversation with our own international collection. It not only showcases the evolution in style and content within his early paintings and drawings, but also contextualizes his practice within the social and political conditions that framed the emergence of modern art in Mozambique and across the African continent. The exhibition also contributed to the cultivation of a more global perspective on artistic creation and its representation in the museum, both by providing the basis for this publication and, not least, by prompting us to acquire a painting and six works on paper by Malangatana for our permanent collection. Africa and its diasporas, with their deep history and wide geographical reach, occupy a prominent place within global art history and modern art that merits many more such efforts and programs in the years to come.

Our colleagues—notably Sarah Guernsey, Ann Goldstein, and Greg Nosan—deserve my sincere gratitude for their continuing critical support for the Modern Series. But I am especially thankful to
the exhibition’s curators, Hendrik Folkerts, Felicia Mings, and Constantine Petridis, for introducing our staff and visitors to the fascinating milieu and work of Malangatana Ngwenya and for helping the Art Institute expand its representation of modern art from around the world.

This exhibition would not have been possible without the generosity of the individuals and institutions in the United States, Portugal, and Mozambique who lent works from their collections. I am particularly grateful to the Malangatana Valente Ngwenya Foundation in Maputo for its invaluable loan of a significant number of paintings and drawings. Major funding for Malangatana: Mozambique Modern was provided by Sylvia Neil and Dan Fischel and the Alfred L. McDougal and Nancy Lauter McDougal Fund for Contemporary Art. Additional support is contributed by the Society for Contemporary Art through the SCA Activation Fund and the Miriam U. Hoover Foundation. Members of the Luminary Trust provide annual leadership support for the museum’s operations, including exhibition development, conservation and collection care, and educational programming. The Luminary Trust includes an anonymous donor; Neil Bluhm and the Bluhm Family Charitable Foundation; Jay Franke and David Herro; Karen Gray-Krehbiel and John Krehbiel, Jr.; Kenneth Griffin; Caryn and King Harris, The Harris Family Foundation; Josef and Margot Lakonishok; Robert M. and Diane V.S. Levy; Ann and Samuel M. Mencoff; Sylvia Neil and Dan Fischel; Anne and Chris Reyes; Cari and Michael J. Sacks; and the Earl and Brenda Shapiro Foundation.

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James Rondeau
President and Eloise W. Martin Director