



«THE BLACK OCEAN »

Europe-Africa-the Americas

by William Adjété Wilson

“The past isn’t dead and buried.

In fact, it isn’t even past.”

William Faulkner

“No charge nor acquittal, simply understanding.”

Paul Ricœur

For the past thirty years, William Adjété Wilson has been exploring the twists and turns of his own imagination and expressing himself in a vibrant and polychromatic style. He works on a wide range of supports, dry pastel on paper, oil paintings on canvas, ink or acrylic. The author of many lithographies and etchings, he is also a sculptor, with an eye for intriguing blending of recycled material.

Whatever technique he favors, his style and imagery reveal a connection with the African roots he inherited from his Togolese father.

With this new series of tapestries, Wilson constructs an entire narrative of his African lineage in a work that reaches far beyond the field of art alone.

The **Black Ocean** series is composed of 18 hand-woven cotton panels(1,60m x1m) - patchwork, appliqué and embroidery- illustrating in chronological order the adventure of the African people and in European and American diasporas from the XV th century to the 2000s.

An unusual story

It was while researching his own family history that William Adjété Wilson discovered the hidden part of History, with a capital H, that retraces the links between the African continent and the creation of the modern world.

Born in France to a French mother and a Togolese father, he had to wait until the age of 18 to embark upon his first trip to Africa. It took time and patience to discover the astounding past of his African family, through historical research and interviews with the people he met on his trips. Using their long-existing economic links with Europeans, his ancestors in Togo and Benin were members of the families who served as intermediaries in the slave trade.

Much later, the children of those ruling families became intellectuals, lawyers, doctors and politicians, who were often educated in the West, mostly in Great Britain, France and Germany.

In the beginning of the XXth century, Togo and Benin, with their high literacy rates and well established educated elite, were considered the cultural center of " French-Africa". From the group of families William

Wilson was born into (the Wilson, Lawson, D’Almeida...etc.), rose the men and women whom shaped the history of their country in the XIXth and XXth centuries, a period that spans colonization to independence and up to the present. This heritage is the background Wilson wanted to explore in his new series.

In his early teens, William Wilson discovered the US Civil Rights Movement of the 60s as well as messages of Black artists and intellectuals such as Richard Wright and Malcolm X. A passionate admirer of the great black musicians of the 70s and 80s (from Jimi Hendrix to Bob Marley), William Wilson grew up a French mixed-race citizen of the world even before the term was coined, he was aware of racial stereotyping and ready to explore his African-European-American connections.

With his new series, William Wilson represents his personal narrative of the painfully convoluted alliances which for hundreds of years have tied the three continents together.

The educational value of such a narrative has never been greater than it is today in a world bitterly aware of its problems of identity, culture and global mixture.

The narrative intent is to teach people of all origins about the beginning of the world and historical events that shaped the society they live in today.

Subject

For centuries, the area facing the Gulf of Benin on the western coastline of the African Atlantic, was known as the Slave Coast. In the 1700s and 1800s, the slave trade was particularly booming in Ouidah (Benin), as more people embarked to the Americas than from any other port in west Africa.

From the west, slave ships dealing with Europeans in the infamous Triangular trade came from Liverpool, Nantes, Bordeaux, Saint-Malô, La Rochelle, Amsterdam, London, Barcelona, Marseilles, Lisbon and many

other European ports. A thriving slave trade also linked Africa directly with Brazil and the Caribbean islands.

The history of commercial relations between Europe and that part of Africa began as early as the mid-XIVth century with the well known Portuguese explorers. European merchants (French, British, Danish, Dutch, German) broke into the Portuguese monopoly in the mid XVIth century.

These Europeans cultivated close relationships with the African kings and chiefs of the coastal regions and started their enterprise with exportation of gold, ivory and weapons before the slave trade started to expand. From the XVIIIth century onwards, the new trade strengthened alliances and helped the advancement of a thriving economy, bringing into this enterprise a new human commodity which deeply changed the destinies of all the participants, Africans and Europeans alike. The wealth nurtured at the expense of the captives carted as cargo throughout the Caribbean islands and the American continent flourished so much that the traffic became the greatest commercial activity for more than two centuries.

It took half a century after the official abolition of the slave trade for the lucrative commerce to stop, and even more time for slavery to be effectively banned, at least legally.

After the abolition of slavery (1848 in France), Africa went through a period of colonization which was followed by struggles for independence in the 1950s and 1960s.

On the other side of the Atlantic, Black Americans had to strive to end segregation and to gain civil rights. That particular battle has not yet ended.

Black men are the main subject of the project: powerful African kings, slave dealers or captives carried away to the Caribbean islands and the American continent, taking their culture and traditions along with them, maroons slaves who escaped upon arrival or later, living hidden in the forest, aided by indigenous people, the educated elites of the Mina kingdom who were so intriguing to the foreign powers, France and Great

Britain, royal hostages at the time of early colonization taken to Europe then brought back to their country in Africa after the signing of a treaty, Black Americans united by Martin Luther King Jr with a peaceful banner or the most active branch of the Black Panthers, Black musicians, Black artists, Black freedom fighters, Black people.

The Black ocean is an epic and tragic saga, spread on several centuries and three continents, of the bonds and struggles fuelled by slavery. It is displayed in 17 original appliquéd tapestries.

The Medium

The city of Abomey, Benin, is located 80 miles from the coast. Once the main city of the old kingdom of Danxomé, defeated by the French in 1894, it is today the historical capital of Benin, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The arts developed in the royal court included weaving and “appliquéd” tapestries.

These tapestries were sewn together in traditional fabric made of dyed cotton, with all kinds of shapes and silhouette cut-outs composing a sort of fresco which originally evoked the stories of the kings and Fon people. Some pieces include embroidered or sewn words. Different kinds of material are used, from the traditional to the more contemporary fabric, depending on what effect one wants to capture.

The city of Abomey has kept this local craft alive and several workshops perpetuate the tradition. Contemporary African artists of international renown, such as Romuald Hazoumé, Cyprien Tokoudagba, Yves Apollinaire Kpede, have adapted and developed this technique.

William Wilson chose this medium for his 17 panel historical fresco also in memory of his grandmother on his father’s side, Hélène Kokwe d’Almeida. She was a cloth trader in Cotonou and a fellow member of the “Nana Benz” women guild who developed a unique system of international business as early as the mid 19th century. At the time of her rare visits to France, William Wilson, as a child, was deeply charmed and overwhelmed by the bright colors she invariably brought with her.

Realization

During the fall and winter of 2007 to mid 2008, William Wilson stayed in Benin on four different occasions in order to work at Yves Apollinaire Kpede's workshop. William Wilson designed and supervised the making of the Black Ocean tapestries, derived from the fruit of the union between the artist's unique style and of the expertise of the local artisans.

Book-catalog

A book devoted to Black Ocean is underway, has been published by Editions Gallimard (Paris France) into the spring 2009. Hopefully it will be translated in English, Portuguese and Spanish.

It's used as a catalogue of the exhibition, displaying the entire collection, and fusing an the artistic approach with a pedagogic one. With this work, William Wilson provides the historical background necessary to understand the full meaning and scope of the work.

Each tapestry will be explained in detail and each symbol of the Adinkra Akan symbols represented will be deciphered.

- **Text William Wilson**
- **Forwords Catherine Clément writer**
- **and Joseph Adande Art historian University of Bénin**

The accompanying catalogue is an integral part of the exhibit.
An English translation is available on pdf on demand.

Exhibitions

Since 2009 and at this time, the exhibition has been showed in many places (34). On the 3 atlantic continents.

Museums, Cultural centers etc.

In France in the main ancient slave trade ports (St Malo, Nantes, Bordeaux, La Rochelle), in Paris, Lyon, and many smaller cities. But also in Bologna (Italy) Tel Aviv (Israel) and in Africa : Dakar, Bamako, Lomé, Cotonou. In Brazil (Salvador de Bahia), In French Guyana and in **Usa: Ann Harbour University (MI), Lincoln (NE) , and The Textile Museum In Washington DC (2016).**



Black and proud: Power to the people
N° 13 from The Black Ocean series.

This hanging is dedicated to the resistance of the Africans-Americans