

El Anatsui (born 1944)

'Erosion', 1992

Key facts:

- **Date:** 1992
- **Medium:** Wood, paint, woodchips, sawdust
- **Dimensions:** H: 297.2 cm (117 in.)
- **Location:** The Smithsonian, Washington

El Anatsui, *Erosion*, 1992, wood, paint, woodchips, sawdust, H: 297.2 cm. Digital image courtesy of National Museum of African Art Collection, Smithsonian (96-36-1)



1. ART HISTORICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Subject matter: El Anatsui carved 'Erosion' with a range of Adinkra symbols which contain aphorisms (wise sayings or ideas) from his original home in Ghana. His subsequent slashing and burning of the piece evokes the wilful destruction of the Amazonian forest, of global cultures and of our planet. By maintaining the scraps of wood at the bottom of the piece, he suggests that these crucial elements are fallen and destroyed. However, there is perhaps a hope that they will in fact continue to nourish the work and thus be reborn.

Composition: This huge, totemic composition has a strong vertical, referencing both the original tree and the strength of the desire to act on climate change. The three-dimensional piece invites the viewer to move around it, to follow the path the artist has cut through the forest and therefore perhaps to feel a sense of guilt or responsibility for the destruction. The horizontal cuts counter the height and verticality of the piece, offering the viewer a figurative path on which to step as they move around. There is a strong contrast between the strength, warmth and vibrancy of the original

piece and the shattered sawdust and scraps at the bottom. These shards also subvert the traditional idea of a plinth for sculpture, suggesting instead the roots of a tree.

Decoration & texture: The abstract nature of the work allows it to symbolise both the languages of Ghana through the use of the Adinkra symbols, and the deforestation of the Amazonian forest 5000 km away across the Atlantic. The backward facing sankofa bird, for instance, symbolises the wisdom of learning from the past in your future actions. El Anatsui adopted the phrase *sankofa*, a Ghanaian term meaning “go back and pick”, to describe the process of reclaiming one’s roots in the act of making art.



El Anatsui working on Erosion. Digital image courtesy of El Anatsui Studio

Scale: At almost twice the size of (most) spectators, this work invites awe and respect by virtue of its size. The invitation to look up and to move around the work encourages reflection on the damage we have done and our determination or initiative for proactive intervention to change behaviour.

Colour: The warm, earthy tones of the Pau Marfim tropical wood obviously encourage and reiterate the connection with the organic materials of nature. The burnt, black lines and dark inkiness of the remains of the symbols suggest humanity’s ‘raping’ of the environment as well as the coloniser’s ‘raping’ of Indigenous culture.

2. CULTURAL, SOCIAL, TECHNOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS

This work marks the culmination of Anatsui’s work in wood and pre-dates his metalwork which earned him the Golden Lion award for lifetime achievement in 2015.

El Anatsui was born and educated in Ghana. He was 13 years old when Ghana achieved independence in 1957. As a child, he navigated both traditional and colonial worlds: watching the weaving of kente cloth as part of his Ewe heritage, but also educated in a British-modelled system that ignored local tradition.



Map of West Africa. Digital image courtesy of Google Maps

After graduation, he began teaching at the College of Art in Kumasi. Kumasi was also the main area for the production of Adinkra. These wood-cut stamps were often used to decorate cloth worn at funerals, thus El Anatsui's use of these symbols adds both an inspiring and sombre note to 'Erosion', effectively linking past, present and future and intertwining our global responsibility.



Calabash adinkra stamps carved in Ntonso, Ghana. Digital image courtesy of Wikimedia

El Anatsui arrived in Nsukka, Nigeria (marked with red symbol on the map above) in 1975, after the culmination of the Biafran War (1967-70) and amidst efforts to encourage a greater recognition of Indigenous culture and traditions at the school and to reject the previously dominant teaching of European naturalism. Led by Uche Okeke, this Nsukka movement, known as Natural Synthesis, aimed to blend both Indigenous and European elements in a similar way to its Senegalese counterpart, Negritude. During subsequent years, Okeke turned increasingly towards the exploration of Igbo cultures, creating the Ulism style which reworked the traditional ideas of body and wall decoration and was influential on El Anatsui's use of decoration in this work.

3. DEVELOPMENTS IN MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES

El Anatsui continued to seek inspiration from a range of global traditions. Throughout the 1970s, he worked with wood, clay and fabric, using natural materials to rework ideas of identity and humanity. In 1980, while on a residential at the Cummington Community of Arts in Massachusetts, he used a chainsaw to cut firewood and realised its potential. "I discovered that the chainsaw was a very evocative sculpture tool, and I started using it."¹

The power of the saw to impact on life with barely controlled violence might make Literature students think of the representation of nature in Robert Frost's 1916 poem 'Out, Out' (also produced in New England). In 'Erosion', repetitive lines are roughly cut with the saw and then further damage is done by burning and blackening the splintered edges with a blowtorch. This was a process, Anatsui says, of "civilising" the "savagery" of the saw, but he has also likened the scorching of the torch to the injuries inflicted on the African peoples by colonial rule.

¹ Vogel, Susan 'El Anatsui: Art and Life'

Dark Adinkra *aduro* pigment for the stamping is made by soaking, pulverising and boiling the inner bark and roots of the badie tree in water over a wood fire. Once the dark colour is released, the mixture is strained, and then boiled for several more hours until it thickens. The stamps are carved out of the bottom of a calabash plant.

4. WAYS IT HAS BEEN USED AND INTERPRETED BY PAST AND PRESENT SOCIETIES

El Anatsui carved 'Erosion' with a chainsaw at an Earth Summit workshop in Manaus, Brazil, 1992. The finished work was displayed in the exhibition Arte Amazonas at the Modern Art Museum in Rio de Janeiro.



El Anatsui photographed with Erosion. Digital image courtesy of El Anatsui Studio

The Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro was unprecedented for a UN conference, in terms of both

its size and the scope of its concerns. Twenty years after the first global environment conference, the UN

sought to help Governments rethink economic development and find ways to halt the destruction of irreplaceable natural resources and pollution of the planet.

The Rio Summit was also the site of Antony Gormley's modern terracotta army 'Amazonian Field,' which has subsequently been displayed around the world to galvanise and encourage action on climate change.



Antony Gormley, Field for the British Isles, 1993, terracotta, overall size variable, each figure 8-26 cm. Digital image courtesy of Antony Gormley

FURTHER READING AND LINKS:

- On Erosion: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JtKIT0r1ihI>
- On the career of Anatsui: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4bx0Mf4nH9E>
- In London, visit The October gallery or see their site here: <http://www.octobergallery.co.uk/>
- Chike Okeke. 1994. "Slashing Wood, Eroding Culture: Conversation with El Anatsui." *Nka: Journal of Contemporary Art* 1, p. 40.
- Vogel, Susan 'El Anatsui Art and Life' Prestel, 2012
- <http://www.warscapes.com/art/el-anatsuis-shifting-planes>