

Amherst College

# Mead Art Museum

## **THE AMERICAN LIBRARY COLLECTION (ACTIVISTS) BY YINKA SHONIBARE ACQUIRED BY THE MEAD ART MUSEUM AT AMHERST COLLEGE**

Amherst, MA—July 30, 2018—The Mead Art Museum at Amherst College has acquired *The American Library Collection (Activists)*, a large-scale installation piece by the Britain-born, Nigeria-raised artist Yinka Shonibare MBE. Consisting of 234 books wrapped in Shonibare’s signature Dutch wax print fabric, each book holds the name of a first or second generation American “activist” writer inscribed on its spine in gold foil. This is the first artwork by Shonibare in the Mead’s collection; it will be on view at the Museum beginning October 30, 2018.

“Yinka Shonibare’s library highlights the vital, complex, and important contributions of American immigrants, and the descendants of immigrants, who brought forward ideas that represent a spectrum of social and political thought,” said David E. Little, Director and Chief Curator of the Mead Art Museum. “Touching on current debates on immigration, the artist invites viewers to consider the varied people and cultural sources that inform our sense of history and culture, and shape our perceptions of our own place within it. With brightly-colored fabric, Shonibare presents to us the names of activists whose ideas may appeal to us—or appall us. Moreover, at a time when questions of academic and intellectual freedom can be so contentious on college campuses and in the mass media, bringing this work to Amherst College supports our ongoing efforts to embrace open debate and discussion and seek ways in which art and artists can support these conversations. We are grateful to the donors who have made possible this important acquisition.”

Also this fall, the Mead will host a debate among Amherst College faculty on the subject of the global migration of people, commodities and ideas, for which the Shonibare work will serve as the starting point. The debate—which will serve as a model for how students can facilitate constructive discussion of sensitive topics—will bring together faculty from American studies, economics, political science, and other disciplines. The debate will take place as part of the public opening for the Shonibare installation, from 5-7pm on October 30.

The Mead’s acquisition of *The American Library Collection (Activists)* is part of ongoing initiatives that unearth and explore the multiple, often hidden narratives found throughout the history of art and ideas, and help audiences connect those to

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present-day challenges facing different communities. Shonibare's work will go on view as part of the fourth iteration of the Museum's *Rotherwas Project* series of focused installations. The Rotherwas Room, a carved walnut- and oak-paneled room, was originally built for Rotherwas Court, the estate of English knight Sir Roger Bodenham. It was given to the Mead and incorporated into the Museum's building when it was constructed in 1949. As an historic, site-specific installation, it makes a statement about a sense of Anglo-Saxon authority—and, as such, serves as an exceptional environment for the presentation of contemporary art, encouraging audiences to ask questions about how we perceive and interpret history and culture. The new exhibition will be curated by Little and will include examples of other libraries of notable musicians and artists.

Shonibare's work was created as a commentary on how literature can knit together disparate points of view—and how such intellectual processes can also serve to normalize extremist perspectives. It contains the names of American writer-activists from across the political spectrum, including:

Mary McLeod Bethune (1875-1955)	Gordon Kiyoshi Hirabayashi (1918-2012)
Grace Lee Boggs (1915-2015)	Sarumathi "Saru" Jayaraman (1976- )
Pat Buchanan (1938- )	Jacob Riis (1849-1914)
Cesar Chavez (1927-1993)	Linda Sarsour (1980- )
Eldridge Cleaver (1935-1998)	Sonia Sotomayor (1954- )
David Duke (1950- )	Jared Taylor (1951- )
Nathan Bedford Forrest (1821-1877)	
Emma Goldman (1869-1940)	

In addition to the wrapped books, the collection comes with a bookshelf designed by the artist and a card catalog of names from the included books. The work is an extension of the artist's 2017 series *The American Library Collection*, which included other groupings, such as (*Politicians*), (*Filmmakers*), and (*Scientists*).

Support for this acquisition was provided by the William K. Allison '20 Memorial Art Fund, the Wise Fund for Fine Arts, the Mead Art Acquisitions Fund, and the Charles H. Morgan Fine Arts Fund.

### **About Yinka Shonibare MBE**

Yinka Shonibare MBE (RA) was born in London in 1962 and moved to Lagos, Nigeria at the age of three. He returned to the UK to study Fine Art at Byam Shaw School of Art, London and Goldsmiths College, London, where he received his Master's in Fine Art. Shonibare has become well known for his exploration of colonialism and post-colonialism within the contemporary context of globalization. Working in painting, sculpture, photography, film and installation, Shonibare's work examines race, class and the construction of cultural identity through a sharp political

commentary of the tangled interrelationship between Africa and Europe and their respective economic and political histories.

Many of Shonibare's works use wry citations of Western history, art history and literature to question the validity of contemporary cultural and national identities. For example, his first public art commission, *Nelson's Ship in a Bottle* (2010), was displayed on the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square, London, evoking the history of the famous English admiral in the public square that celebrates his death, and the English victory, at the Battle of Trafalgar. Similarly, in 2013 Shonibare's work *RA Family Album* was used to wrap the Royal Academy's Burlington Gardens building during its renovation, presenting images of art and artists from across the Academy's 248-year history. *The American Library* series—from which Shonibare adapted the work being acquired by the Mead—was commissioned by Front International, which is presenting the installation at the Cleveland Public Library from July 14 until September 30 2018.

Shonibare's works are included in art museum collections around the world, including: the Tate Collection, London; Victoria and Albert Museum, London; National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C; Museum of Modern Art, New York; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; Moderna Museet, Stockholm; National Gallery of Modern Art in Rome and VandenBroek Foundation, The Netherlands.

### **About Mead Art Museum**

Established with funds bequeathed by William Rutherford Mead (Class of 1867), a partner in the storied architectural firm of McKim, Mead, and White, the Mead Art Museum holds the 19,000-object art collection of Amherst College, representing a wide range of historical periods, national schools, and artistic media. The Mead's collection includes American and European paintings, the Thomas P. Whitney, Class of 1937, Collection of Russian Art, Mexican ceramics, Tibetan scroll paintings, an English paneled room, ancient Assyrian carvings, West African sculpture, Korean ceramics, and Japanese prints, along with fine holdings of American furniture and silver.

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