

Dame Magdalene Odundo reveals Cambridge as the inspiration behind her ceramic career in personally curated exhibition:

Magdalene Odundo in Cambridge 5 October – 24 July 2022



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2021 marks 50 years since Dame Magdalene Odundo moved from Kenya to Cambridge in order to take an Art Foundation Course at Cambridge School of Art. She is now arguably Britain's most successful ceramic artist. Her work can be found across the globe, in more than 40 museum collections and a piece by her holds the record as the most expensive work in clay sold at auction made by a living ceramic artist (sold at Sotheby's London, June 2021).

To celebrate the pivotal role that Cambridge played in her astonishing career Odundo has personally curated a new exhibition - Magdalene Odundo in Cambridge 5 October – 24 July 2022. Odundo's words form the narrative of this exhibition and her voice will be heard through audio clips available via the labels in the gallery and via the Fitzwilliam's website. Four works by her are included in the display, two on loan from the British Museum one from a private lender and a work from our permanent collection.

Originally intending to study commercial art, Odundo's pottery teacher at Cambridge School of Art, Zoë Ellison, encouraged her to begin to work in clay. At the same time, Odundo was inspired by the museum collections in Cambridge, especially those of the Fitzwilliam Museum and Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, which demonstrated the incredible variety of ceramics and the potential of this medium.

Odundo has selected a range of art works from around the world, which are shown alongside examples of her own unmistakable work. Accompanied by her own words, they reveal for the first time her personal narrative of the impact of her time in Cambridge.

Born in Nairobi in Kenya in 1950, Odundo initially trained in commercial art. She travelled to England in 1971 fully intending to study graphic design and continue her work in advertising but under the inspirational guidance of her pottery teacher, Zoë Ellison, she switched her focus to ceramics, which would become her life's work.

Odundo has exhibited continuously around the world since her graduation from the Royal College of Art in 1982. Her instantly recognizable vessels are constantly in demand. All of Odundo's work takes the form of non-functional terracotta vessels, which are hand-built and burnished to highlight the natural colour of the fired clay or, following multiple reduction firings, turn an inky, mottled black. Central to her work are notions of containments and emptiness, where the hidden interior of the pot is just as important as the exterior. She says, ***'Although the inside of each piece is hidden and enclosed, my hope is that the viewer can imagine it by examining the exterior and the empty space that the piece occupies. When you are well inside, your exterior and poise show it. When you're not well, everyone looks at you and knows it. It's the same for pots.'***

The display begins with Odundo's personal memories of her teacher Zoë Ellison and her time at Cambridge School of Art, represented by works by Ellison from the Fitzwilliam's collection.

These are shown alongside works by British Studio potters from the late 1960s and early 1970s to whom Odundo was introduced by Ellison's own collection of ceramics, which includes a pot given by Lucie Rie to Zoë Ellison as a wedding gift in 1952. Odundo reflects too on her later apprenticeship at the Abuja Pottery Training Centre in Suleja, Nigeria, illustrated with works by master British Studio Potter, Michael Cardew and internationally-renowned potter, Ladi Kwali, with whom Odundo spent time training.

Odundo has also selected a number of works from museum collections that have stayed with her throughout the last 50 years. Odundo has vivid memories of frequent visits to Cambridge University Museums, including the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, which was the first time she had seen objects from so many parts of the world in one place, allowing her to make connections between them: ***'I saw how cultures from around the globe had always used similar patterns, proving the connection and universality of our human experience. The vessel form too, is essential to people all over the world, and central to my own work.'***

From Peruvian vessels made in the Nazca valley, which combine strong forms with artistic surface decoration, to incised pieces made in Nigeria and Uganda and intricately carved pots from Papua New Guinea, it was looking at these objects that helped Odundo to understand the versatility of clay and the possibilities that lay before her.

Similarly, the 17th-century slipware that Odundo encountered at the Fitzwilliam Museum remains her favourite type of English pottery, because like the ceramics she saw elsewhere, these pieces tell a story of the people who made them and their culture. She says, ***'these pieces tell us about the society in which they were made and also display the incredible skill and dexterity of the makers. Their decoration has a great sense of animated enjoyment and liveliness.'***

For Odundo, no matter where or when they are made, ***'ceramics allow makers to express themselves, to describe their cultural norms and preserve their society. There is a lot of storytelling in ceramics and it is a tradition that we see on pots from all over the world, throughout the ages.'***

Bringing together a range of global ceramics from Cambridge collections, Odundo celebrates her own time spent in the city as well as the importance of museums in bringing together in one place cultural material from around the globe, sparking curiosity of distant places and people. ***'Museums hold the key to helping us to develop a visual literacy,' she says, 'enabling the eye and brain to relate to objects and to the people who made them.'***

The exhibition will also be accompanied by a new film, showing Odundo in the Museum, with the objects on display.

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Notes to Editors

About the Fitzwilliam Museum

Founded in 1816, the Fitzwilliam Museum is the principal museum of the University of Cambridge and lead partner for the University of Cambridge Museums (UCM) Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation funded programme. It houses over half a million objects from ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman artefacts, to medieval illuminated manuscripts, paintings from the Renaissance to the 21st century, world class prints and drawings, and outstanding collections of coins, Asian arts, ceramics and other applied arts. The Fitzwilliam is an internationally recognised institute of learning, research and conservation. www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk / <https://beta.fitz.ms>

The Fitzwilliam Museum, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RB | Free admission Tuesday – Saturday: 10.00 - 17.00, Sundays and Bank Holiday Mondays: 12.00 – 17.00; CLOSED: 24 - 26 & 31 December, 1 January, Good Friday.