

**festac '77**



**IBETYE SAAR**



BETYE SAAR  
FESTAC '77



ROBERTS PROJECTS



Betye Saar FESTAC '77 sketchbook, February 1977

*Betye Saar: FESTAC '77* is a selection of Betye Saar's artworks organized around her participation in and travel to the major cultural festival FESTAC '77. The Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture, or FESTAC '77, was held in Lagos, Nigeria from January 15 - February 12, 1977. The exhibition highlights how, inspired by her journey, Saar's assemblages and collages from that period investigate concepts of the ritual, community and inherited traditions, the social and political influences of anti-colonial resistance, and how objects retain the histories of their owners.

The month-long event celebrated African culture and showcased internationally African literature, music and dance, art and religion. Custom "Festival Villages" were built in Lagos and Kaduna to house the performers, with hotels housing scholars and visiting dignitaries. Over 16,000 attendees, representing 56 African nations and

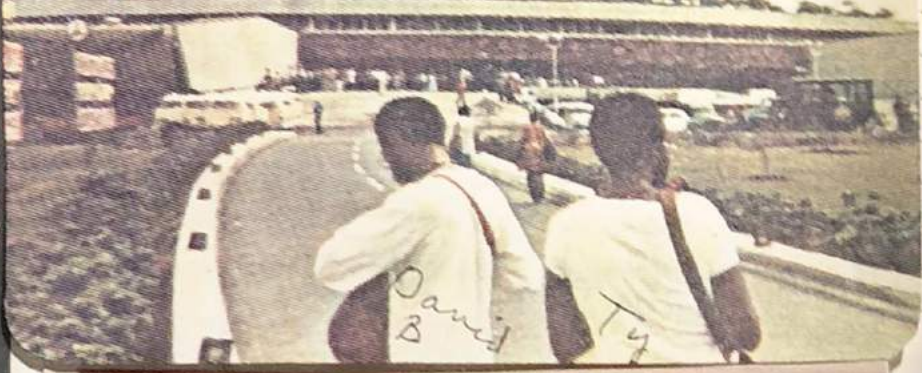
countries of the African Diaspora, performed at the National Stadium, Tafawa Balewa Square, the Durbar in Kaduna, Boat Regatta in Rivers State, and the newly built National Arts Theatre. The American contingency included artists Samella Lewis, Faith Ringgold, Barkley Hendricks, Nathaniel Bustian, Ta-coumba T. Aiken and Noah Purifoy, with Betye Saar.

FESTAC '77 was a crucial nexus for total black cultural immersion at a time when the Civil Rights movement and decolonization efforts began to industrialize. It was significantly larger in scale, ambition and reach than its first manifestation in 1966—held in Dakar, Senegal—in part bolstered by Nigeria's new status as a booming petro-state, and that most of the African countries as of 1977 had gained independence from colonial control. In this push towards forming a universal black consciousness, significant stakes were attached to the divestment from dominant American and European-derived, white aesthetic experience. The multi -event and -site festival gave participants the opportunity to design a functional agenda, both on the continent and of the Diaspora, to identify interlocking social, political, and economic spheres. Among the contributors were a wide range of scholars and academics, many of them chairs of the nation's newly established Afro-American Studies programs. If a subtext of the Black Power movement was to strengthen the connections, spiritual and otherwise, between black America and Africa, FESTAC represented a substantial realization of that, with state support.

Invited by Scripps College professor and FESTAC committee member Samella Lewis, Saar joined the American delegation during the second half of the trip. She and others traveled from Los Angeles to San Francisco to meet with others from the American delegation, then

National Theatre Lagos, Nigeria

MONDAY



TUESDAY



WEDNESDAY



Clip For Current Week  
Works by Women

from **FEBRUARY 3**

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Thursday, February 3 34

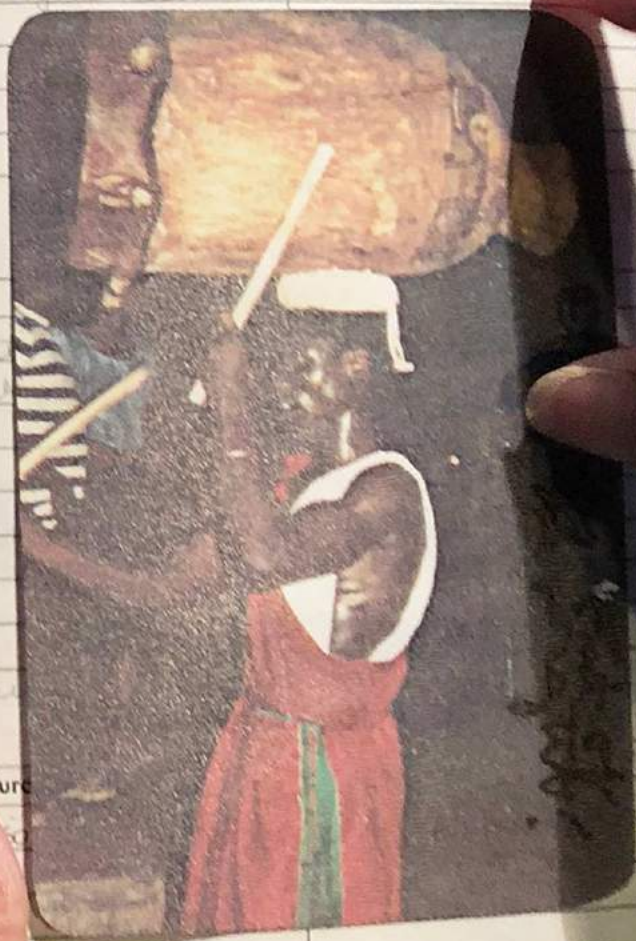
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EVENING

Some photos  
no fashion



Ta-coumba T. Aiken and Betye Saar, Badgry, Lagos, Nigeria, February 1977

Previous and following pages: Betye Saar datebook, February 1977

onwards to Chicago and New York, Madrid, and finally Nigeria. Once there, she attended various discussions, panels, a group exhibition, and walked in the closing ceremony with the American delegation on February 12th; highlights included nighttime performances by Stevie Wonder, Miriam Makeba, and The Sun Ra Arkestra.

The days were spent with other artists on various short trips, including to the historical site of Badagry, where in the early 1500's slaves were moved across the Atlantic slave trade, and the Benin City National Museum, home to a notable collection of historic



bronzes, cast iron pieces, and terracotta works of the Benin Empire; cameras were not allowed inside, so Saar faithfully reproduced the artifacts against brilliant washes of color in her sketchbook. Gberefu Island's slave barraccons – pits where slaves were kept imprisoned before being sold—affected her the most. Saar interpreted these slave wells as ancient edifices renewed and retold with the memories of those once mined for profit. Deeply marked and changed by her experiences at the island, Saar began to incorporate the slave ship imprint as a reoccurring motif in future series.

Saar's participation was part of a newly invigorated interest in the political potentialities materializing in the U.S. during the Black Arts Movement. Prior to this trip, exposure to Arnold Rubin's seminal article "Accumulation: Power and Display in African Sculpture," first published *Artforum* in May 1975, introduced Saar to how materials have power and how materials are for display, and when ritualized action allows work to be re-contextualized in the present through a range of possible variations. This accumulative process, inspired by the tradition of African sculpture incorporating both decorative and "power" elements – either material or technical – from the community, dramatically changed the way Saar thought about the boundaries between art and non-art, further challenging and changing the relationship to her work.

Her FESTAC visit, which marked her first travel to Africa, gave her important tools to apply these lessons of diasporic consciousness, based in mutuality and respect rather than on power and privilege. Subsequent pieces inspired by her trip highlight the potency of her ritualistic imagery with newly introduced themes of women's political mobilization, collective action, and historical traditions of resistance. Shortly after, Saar exhibited a number of these new pieces in her

1977 FEBRUARY 1977

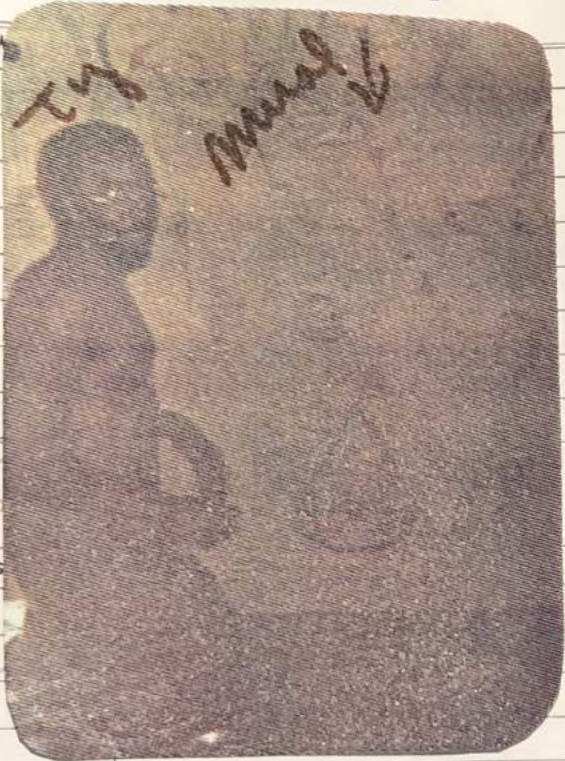
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WEEK AT A GLANCE

from FEBRUARY 7

MONDAY

9 AM  
10 Natl. Museum  
11 Training Sq. Shop  
12 Natl. Theater



TUESDAY

9 13ADAP - Lunch Pric  
10 University  
11  
12

WEDNESDAY

9  
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12



Clip for Current Week

Party at US Embassy

EVENING

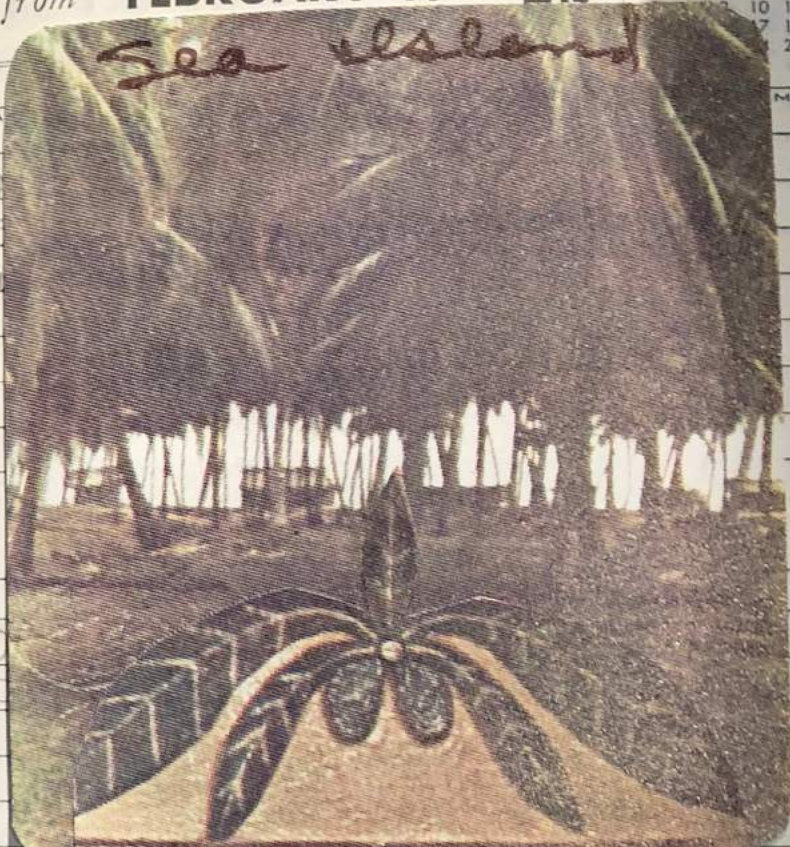
from

FEBRUARY 10

WEEK

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Sea Island



IN LOVING MEMORY OF  
 OUR DEARLY BELONGED FATHER  
**CHIEF SUNDU MOBEE OF**  
**BEOKOM BADAGRY**  
 WHO DIED ON OCTOBER 14, 1913.  
 SWEET  
 IS THE RECOMPENSE OF  
 THE JUST.  
**REST IN PEACE**

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F R I D A Y  
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EVENING

EVENING

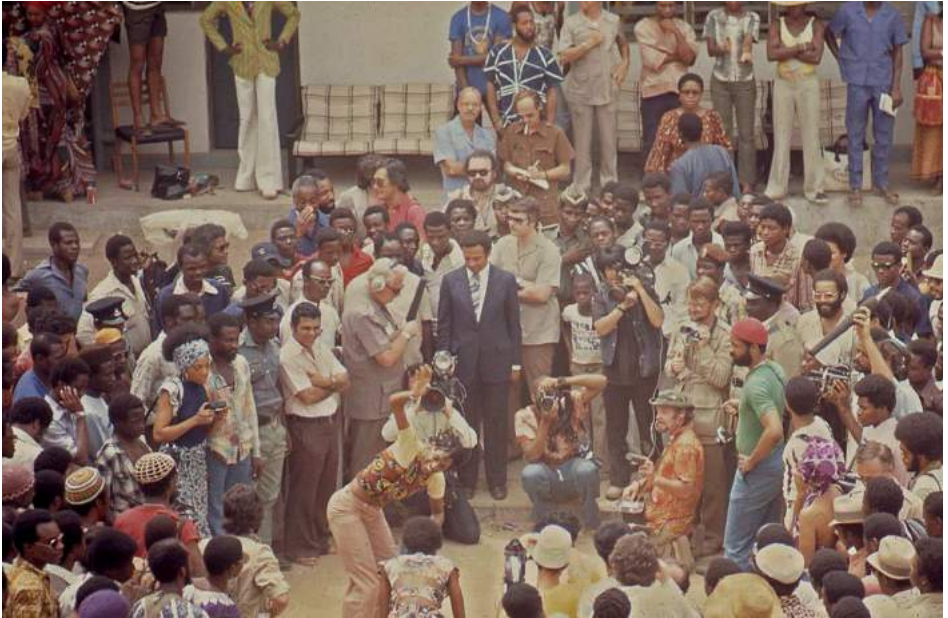
solo show *Ritual* at Baum-Silverman Gallery, Los Angeles in October 1977; these earlier assemblages, among others, are on view for *Betye Saar: FESTAC '77*.

*Ritual* was particularly notable for introducing audiences to Saar's freestanding sculptural works – including the alter *MTI* (1973) and *Spirit Catcher* (1977) – and assemblages featuring collected rocks, beads, feathers, and other matter from her trip to FESTAC. The impenetrable arrangements making up *Secrets* (1977) and *Umbia* (1977) appear bound only by the conventions of magic and religion. These works, examples of which the power of the whole is made cumulative, were greatly influenced in part by Rubin's essay, his defining of African sculpture as an articulation of a composite voice, and by the personal evolution afforded to her by her FESTAC trip.

In January 1977, Jimmy Carter is President; Andrew Jackson Young, Ambassador; "Roots," based on Alex Haley's best-selling 1976 book "Roots: The Saga of an American Family," had premiered. Isolated in a culture that can't relate to their traumas, FESTAC's participants were now making connections between each other elsewhere on the continent, not as tourists but as delegates, looking to anti-colonial resistance and liberation movements across the globe, in effect symbolizing a mass physical reversal of the transatlantic slave trade.

These strategies of formation of that time provided a path for the increasingly influential voices and innovative practices of new generations of contemporary performers, thinkers, and artists, and fostered even more work, projects, and initiatives. The depth of this aspect on Saar's radical work remains immeasurable.

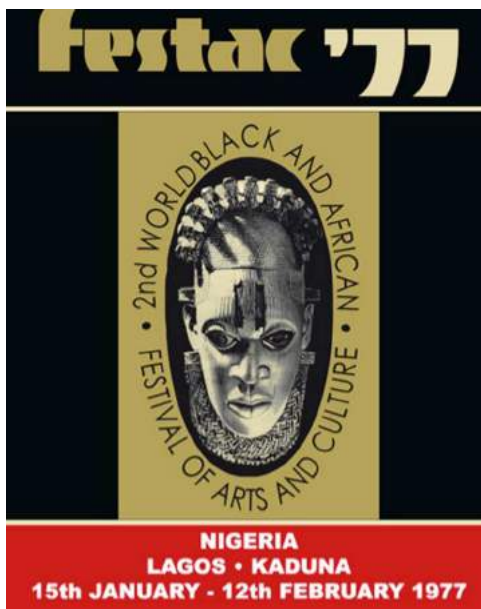
Neither previously exhibited nor reproduced as a whole, this grouping of expansive collages and assemblages compels deeper



Procession for US Ambassador Andrew Jackson Young, Lagos, Nigeria  
February 1977; photo Ta-coumba T. Aiken

deliberation into Saar's thought processes and methodologies. More importantly, when seen together, *Betye Saar: FESTAC 77* reveals the expansive and fluid nature of her practice. As has been mentioned before, the deep involvement and emotional investment of the entire FESTAC experience functioned as a catalyst for Saar, her flow of thoughts and ease of action, burgeoning an aesthetic identity made salient through being and unbeing, naming and un-naming of self, situation, and history.

If there is one distinguishing characteristic in Saar's work post-FESTAC, it is her concern of multi-locality, further demonstrating her struggle with connecting loss and hope as a defining tension in her work—an empowering paradox, one consistent with her belief in the transformative power of change.



Betye Saar FESTAC '77

Identification Card, Festival Poster, Certificate of Recognition

Right and page 1: Betye Saar, Badagry, Nigeria, February 10, 1977  
 photo Ta-coumba T. Aiken







# GABON



sticks w/ pods  
Tied together  
RATTLE  
Museum 2-7-77

seashed leather  
twisted - pods  
tied on ends  
RATTLE

MUSEUM  
7-2-77

HORN (in case)





Raddle  
(Paddle w/ poles &  
pods tied thru)  
Museum 2-7-77



The IEZA  
arrangements  
to the museum  
of an exhibit



TALL CARVED POKES  
set in earth 1500 with  
platform offering



Betye Saar  
*Secrets*, 1977  
Mixed media collage on paper  
16.25 x 19 in (41.3 x 48.3 cm)



Betye Saar  
*Umbia*, 1977  
Mixed media collage on paper  
15.50 x 16 in (39.4 x 40.6 cm)



Betye Saar  
*Lost Legends*, 1978-1998  
Mixed media assemblage  
17 x 20 in (43.2 x 50.8 cm)



Betye Saar  
*Tarigat*, 1980  
Mixed media collage on paper  
20 x 26 in (50.8 x 66.0 cm)



Betye Saar  
*Nubian Shadows*, 1977  
Mixed media collage on paper  
19.5 x 23.25 in (49.5 x 59.1 cm)







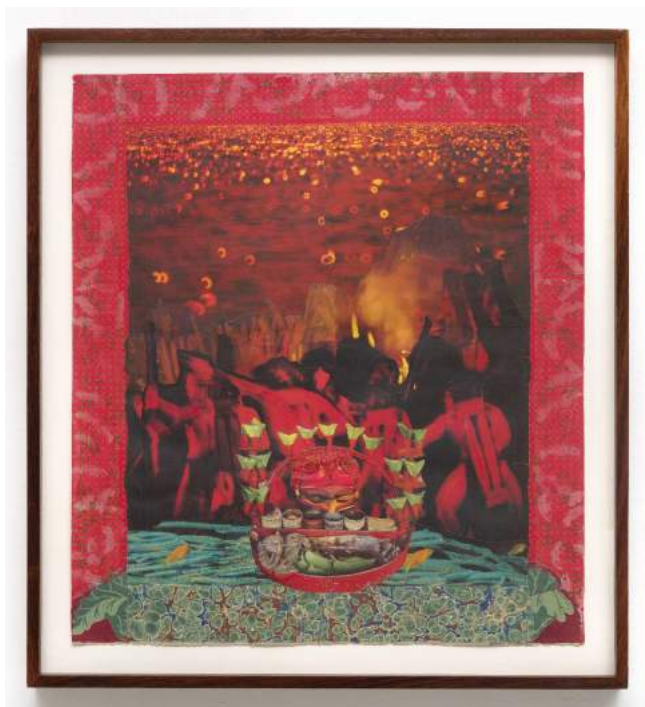
Betye Saar  
*Shadows of Reason*, 1979  
Mixed media assemblage  
13.25 x 10.75 in (33.7 x 27.3 cm)



Betye Saar  
*The Domain of Chance*, 1979  
Mixed media assemblage  
14.75 x 12.12 x 1 in (37.5 x 30.8 x 2.5 cm)







Betye Saar  
*Dispeller of Darkness*, 1980  
Mixed media collage on paper  
22.25 x 20 in (56.5 x 50.8 cm)



Betye Saar  
*Dervish*, 1979  
Mixed media collage on handkerchief  
11 x 10.75 in (27.9 x 27.3 cm)

(I never had the stroke for 'mainstream'  
it went against my flow)

From the past  
the essence  
of accumulative  
consciousness  
the remnants of lost ceremonies  
the loosening and  
unwrapping of  
mystery  
the emergence  
from shadow  
facing the unknown.  
Purification.

(these works are what I leave behind)

Betye Saar, 1977



Betye Saar, Badagry, Nigeria, February 10, 1977  
photo Ta-coumba T. Aiken



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