

El Anatsui

El Anatsui has been described as "the most significant living African artist". In 1968 Anatsui obtained his first degree from the University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana. By 1975, he had become professor of sculpture at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, where he taught for the next 35 years.

"If you leave your country you develop a kind of a nomadic mentality, and a mentality which wants you to be roaming about," he once said. "If I had lived in Ghana, my mind wouldn't have roamed, therefore I wouldn't have expanded my experiences. Or I would have been too comfortable."

Emerging as an artist during the vibrant West African post-independence art movements of the 1960s and 1970s, he has gone on to receive international acclaim for his constantly evolving and highly experimental sculpture. He is one of a handful of highly revered, internationally acclaimed contemporary artists whose inventive works are widely acknowledged.

His work is especially significant as he has attained this stature without losing sight of his artistic roots, reworking designs that signal his appreciation for Ghanaian traditions of weaving, especially Kente cloth, and aesthetically reinventing discarded materials, a tradition that is a distinctive feature of different forms of African art, past and present. Anatsui's huge tapestry-like installations made with bottle tops, deal with themes such as power, migration and the environment.

"One thing that I have grown into is working with things which have been used before - things which link people together. I don't know about DNA, but if you touch something, you leave a charge on it and anybody else touching it connects with you in a way," explains Anatsui. "As individual pieces, they are not linked, but when linked together they become powerful."

Anatsui's work attracted particular attention in the landmark exhibition Africa Remix (2004 to 2007 in Düsseldorf, London, Paris, Tokyo and Stockholm). In 2008 he received the Visionaries Artist Award from the Museum of Arts and Design in New York City. He is also a recipient of the 2009 Prince Claus Award from the Netherlands. His work has been collected around the world by major institutions, including the British Museum, London; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto; Setagaya Art Museum, Tokyo; Metropolitan Museum of Art and Museum of Modern Art, New York; Blanton Museum of Art, Austin; and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Seattle. In 2015, Anatsui received the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement Award at the Venice Biennale.

"My work has kind of tried to revolve around the history of the continent of Africa. These bottle tops have served as a link between my continent, Africa, and Europe. Drink was one of the prime objects that they brought," noted Anatsui.

Anatsui's work, which is taught in the curriculum in a variety of disciplines, has had an important epistemic contribution in the training of artists nationally, in particular at South African universities, and his life's work bears testament to the kind of scholarship UCT invites.