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Wangechi Mutu: A New Face for the Met

Nourished by Kenyan culture, the transnational artist is filling the niches on the Fifth Avenue facade, for the first time in the Met's history. It's a step on the museum's rocky road toward diversity.



Wangechi Mutu in her Brooklyn studio in August with a work, "Flying Root I". On Sept. 9, she takes over the Metropolitan Museum of Art's facade. Sunny Shokrae for The New York Times

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You've probably never noticed the vacant sculpture-ready niches flanking the Metropolitan Museum of Art's front doors. The Kenyan-born artist [Wangechi Mutu](#) hadn't either, until she was invited to be the first to fill them.

Inaugurating what will be an annual commission for the Met's facade, Ms. Mutu is placing bronze statues of seated women in four of the niches, from Sept. 9 through Jan. 12. Crowned, blinded and gagged by highly polished discs, and born of traditions both European and African, these graceful, commanding figures will change the face of the museum, literally and figuratively. As a test run suggests, they will sometimes reflect sunlight with spooky intensity, in what Ms. Mutu calls "a stunning message from beyond." It is testament to her belief that, like street theater or religious rituals, art can nudge viewers toward congregation.

The facade commission arrives in the run-up to the 150th anniversary next year of the Met's founding, and heralds the commitment of Max Hollein, its director, "to expand and amplify dialogues with contemporary artists," as he puts it.

Under Mr. Hollein's leadership, the museum is announcing a turn toward the new and the global. Skepticism is not unwarranted, given the museum's history. But the choice of an insistently transnational artist who, while acclaimed, is still not widely popular, and whose work is as dark as it is dazzling, does suggest the museum's antennae are being retuned.

As its contemporary art curator Kelly Baum observes, "Had the niches been filled in 1902," when the Richard Morris Hunt building was completed, "the artist would certainly have been male and white."

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Ms. Mutu, who at 47 is tall and poised, likens her facade sculptures to caryatids. In classical Western architecture, these figures generally support balconies or roofs. (Indeed a contract for the Met's niches had been awarded in 1899 to the Viennese Neoclassicist Karl Bitter, who proposed four caryatids, one each for painting, sculpture, architecture and music. They were executed at full scale in plaster, but a funding shortfall prevented their realization in limestone.) But African examples abound, Ms. Mutu explains, found in "staffs and in beautiful royal stools that are representative of where a king would sit. Essentially they're holding the weight of the king. Or the royalty of that culture."



Wangechi Mutu at the Walla Walla foundry, applying patina to "The Seated III", a work in progress.

Wangechi Mutu, Walla Walla Foundry, and Gladstone Gallery

Her caryatids clearly radiate power of their own. Titled "The NewOnes, will free Us," they represent, for Ms. Mutu, "words that we haven't heard, people we haven't noticed. They will be our redemption." Preternaturally serene and imposingly tall — roughly seven feet high — with sloping eyes

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and long fingers expressive of exceptional reach, they speak as messengers from an Afrofuturist-inflected otherworld that all her work invokes.

Among her sources of inspiration is a modest Congolese “prestige stool” in the Met’s collection that Ms. Mutu admires for its earthiness — the figure’s knees are on the ground, rather than a pedestal — and for the eroticism of her parted thighs. Generally she favors sensuality in her own work, although for the Met she opted for figures that are resolutely chaste.

She is also drawn to a more elaborate Yoruba caryatid in which a standing female is accompanied by two children, a horse and baskets of food. “Given the opportunity, if the king gets off that stool, she’s ready to go,” Ms. Mutu adds. “The work of these women is immense. The regard for them is not.” That complicated social position is reflected in the caryatids’ striking discs, which relate back to lip plates and crowns and heavy earrings. Along with filed teeth and scarification, they can cause women substantial pain. The status they confer is costly in more ways than one.

KNOWN FOR SPARKLING, LIQUID DRAWINGS and collages on paper and Mylar, Ms. Mutu began her career as a sculptor. After attending high school in Wales, she came to the United States to study art (she holds degrees from Cooper Union and Yale). As early as graduate school she was mingling African and Western idioms. At the current Whitney Biennial, she is showing a haunting pair of standing figures made of wood, concrete and bone.

Caryatids were already on Ms. Mutu’s mind when the Met approached her just under a year ago — a tight schedule for a project of this scope. She created clay-like Plasticene models; then, using one of the oldest methods

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of working clay, she formed the figures' garments in coils, which spill down in great pleated skirts. At a foundry in Walla Walla, Washington, the models were 3-D scanned and scaled up; she visited the foundry to rework the models, and again after they were cast to work on the patinas.



The exterior niches on the building's facade have been empty since 1902.

Brittainy Newman/The New York Times



Plasticine maquette models of the ornamented figures for the Met commission. From left, "The Seated II," "The Seated IV," and "The Seated I." Sunny Shokrae for The New York Times

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Ms. Mutu has a Brooklyn residence where she has worked since 2006, but she traveled to Walla Walla from Nairobi, where she established a second studio ten years later. Asked about her decision to go back home, she emphasizes, “I’m not back, I’m back and forth.” A dual citizen, she is married to Mario Lazzaroni, a consultant, who is from Italy. Their daughters, ten and eight, go to school in Nairobi, which is, Ms. Mutu concedes, a commitment to that city. She is nourished by Kenya’s material culture, and its landscape. But she describes the art scene in Nairobi as nascent. The art community that matters to her is international.

Conflicted identity is Ms. Mutu’s birthright. In her Catholic grade school, she says, “We were taught good posture and decorum and how to speak English properly and how to position ourselves as part of the ruling class of Kenya, but also as Anglophile Africans.” She describes her father, a businessman, as a self-made academic and sometime poet; her mother is a nurse and a midwife. Ms. Mutu (like many of her urban peers) learned about her cultural background by visiting her grandparents upcountry. Her parents speak the language of the largest ethnic group in Kenya, the Bantu Kikuyu language, and they worked to preserve that heritage by conducting interviews with elders in the countryside. “These are oral cultures — there isn’t a literary record,” Ms. Mutu points out. “They say that when an old person dies, a library goes with them.”

Living under British rule, as the generations preceding Ms. Mutu had, meant “you had to somehow make an agreement with a colonial administrator or convert to Christianity to go to a hospital or wear Western clothing to go to school.” And overthrowing that rule was a bloody struggle. The artist’s mother witnessed the Mau Mau rebellion in the late 1950s and “remembers as a little girl having to take a secret oath to promise never to

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be a traitor. There was killing, there was cruelty, and there were foreigners telling your elders what to do,” Ms. Mutu continues. “The one thing that’s always missing — I think it’s part of the trauma — is the personal element. My parents don’t often talk about their experiences in terms of how it made them feel.”

It could be said that she has taken up the task — but also that she remains true, in her work at the Met in particular, to their emotional reserve.



Wangechi Mutu’s “The Seated IV,” 2019, a bronze sculpture headed for the Met’s Fifth Ave. facade. The female figure’s complicated social position is reflected in striking discs, which relate back to lip plates. The status it confers is costly in more ways than one.

Wangechi Mutu and Gladstone Gallery; Joseph Coscia, Jr.; The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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The long expressive hands of Ms. Mutu's female bronze figures, in progress, at the Walla Walla Foundry in Washington.
Wangechi Mutu, Walla Walla Foundry, and Gladstone Gallery



Ms. Mutu was still working on "The Seated I," a bronze figure with a large disc over her mouth.
Wangechi Mutu, Walla Walla Foundry, and Gladstone Gallery

The prototype for the current commission is the Met's rooftop series, which offers an unusually immediate engagement with new art. Similarly, with Ms. Mutu's sculptures, Mr. Hollein says, "the dialogue starts before you even enter the gates of the museum."

For Seph Rodney, a Jamaican-born critic of African descent who is an admirer of Ms. Mutu's work, that's something of a problem. While Dr. Rodney, who has written extensively about institutional efforts to enhance community involvement, is enthusiastic about introducing the facade program with a female artist of color, he notes that her sculptures will be "literally outside the museum — that gives me a bit of pause."

His wariness reflects, perhaps, the Met's rocky progress toward diversity. While art by indigenous Americans was donated to the museum soon after its 1870 founding, by 1911 it had come to an agreement with the Natural History Museum that "primitive works of art" by "prehistoric peoples" would go across the park; the Met would focus thereafter on the Mediterranean world, Asia and the European tradition. And so things

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remained until 1969, when the museum began showing art from Africa, Oceania and Native America. This year also marks the 50th anniversary of the exhibition “Harlem on My Mind,” criticized in two recent books for treating African Americans as producers of a social culture but not an artistic one. Dr. Rodney, speaking of the show’s legacy, said, “I think what matters about ‘Harlem on my Mind’ is how the Met *now* approaches the work of people of color.”

Although these controversies occurred before her time and an ocean away, Ms. Mutu has had to reckon with the dubious judgments museums sometimes make. Questioned about the controversy surrounding the Whitney Biennial, in which several artists threatened to withdraw their work in protest against a [board member \(now resigned\)](#) whose business produces military equipment, Ms. Mutu replies that her preference is to let the art do the job of heightening social awareness; she could not justify withdrawal. Her instructors at Cooper Union included pioneering activists like [Hans Haacke](#), Fred Wilson, Dennis Adams and Faith Wilding. Carrying forward their efforts, she says, is an essential and unending commitment.

Ms. Mutu is satisfied that she’s challenging the Met (and vice versa). And she has more than race in mind. Always aware of the “where art history has positioned the female body,” generally as the passive subject of painting, she notes that “in classical African art, the female body in some instances is the museum — she is where the art is placed.” That is, women express “wealth, status, family, tribe” through their bearing and ornamentation, which are “all languages definable as art.”

For the next four months, these languages will be the first ones visitors hear.