

AFRICAN & CONTEMPORARY ART COLLECTIONS

Skunder Boghossian

Time Cycle III

1981

Embossed bark and sand with collage on board

48 x 47 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (121.9 x 121.6 x 7 cm)

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Skunder Boghossian has been hailed as a leading artist and educator of African descent who has had a profound influence on artists in the United States and in his homeland, Ethiopia. Boghossian was born in Addis Ababa in 1937. His art training began in Ethiopian art schools that departed from traditional art by encouraging representation of daily life. In 1954 he received a national award for his art, and in 1955 he was awarded an imperial scholarship to study in England. After two years at Saint Martins School of Art and the Slade School of Art in London, he moved to France, where he spent nine years studying and teaching at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière in Paris.

Boghossian's years in Europe were critical to his intellectual and artistic development. In France he was immersed in the Negritude movement and neosurrealism, both of which had a lasting impact on his art. A year after his return to Ethiopia, in 1965, he was offered a position at the Addis Ababa Fine Arts School, and he taught there until 1969. In 1965 the Museum of Modern Art in New York acquired one of his paintings, and in 1966 a solo exhibition in Addis Ababa revealed Boghossian as a pioneer of modern Ethiopian art. In 1969 Boghossian escaped from the politically tumultuous climate of Ethiopia to the United States. In 1972 he began teaching at Howard University, and he served on the faculty there until his retirement in 2001. In the late 1970s Boghossian traveled to Africa, and the journey fueled his interest in African traditional imagery combined with indigenous materials.

The experience clearly inspired the composition and content of Boghossian's 1981 work *Time Cycle III*, a relief constructed of bark cloth the artist collected in Uganda, impregnated with motor oil and sand and replete with Ethiopian traditional iconography. The concentric circle motif in the center serves as a cosmogram in many cultures, including ancient Ethiopia, and also suggests the



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layout of Ethiopian Christian Orthodox churches, the dominant site of Ethiopian spirituality and art production for centuries. The Ethiopian reference is strengthened by the image of the lion, possibly alluding to the Ethiopian saint Samuel of Waldebba, who rode a lion he tamed. Letters in Amharic, the modern language of Ethiopia, combined with other alphabets spell out the word “welcome,” suggesting that the rectangle encasing a circle symbolizes a space—whether spiritually charged space or alternate time-space—that the artist invites the viewer to enter. The rich dark brown hues, and the multitextural surface that contrasts the subtle weave of the barkcloth and the fine grains in a column of sand against the bolder embossed shapes, offer a visual and tactile enticement. To draw the viewer further in, the surface hues and patterns shift light and shadows to create the sensation of a space that is as shimmering and elusive as it is deep and somber.

