

CONTEMPORARY & AFRICAN ART COLLECTION

El Anatsui

Old Man's Cloth

2003

Aluminum and copper wire

192 × 216 in. (487.7 × 548.6 cm)

Museum purchase, funds provided by friends of the Harn Museum

2005.37

El Anatsui has lived and worked in Nigeria since 1975. Over the past decade, he has emerged as one of Africa's most widely acclaimed and influential contemporary artists. Anatsui has worked in several media, but he is best known for his luminous metal sculpture constructed from recycled bottle tops. Large in scale and rich in color, these "cloths" are stunning works that suggest the power and opulence of royalty. Nonetheless, the artist's work is deeply embedded in the challenging social conditions and political realities of Africa.

Anatsui's *Old Man's Cloth* is inspired in part by kente cloth, the royal and ceremonial strip-woven cloth made by the Asante and Ewe people of Ghana and Togo. Kente cloth is hand-woven into four- to eight-inch strips that are subsequently cut into smaller pieces and sewn together to form a single cloth with a unique geometrical pattern. Color and design convey specific meanings. Anatsui uses a similar process; however, the fragments

that constitute his work are the flattened tops of recycled liquor bottles created by Nigerian distilleries. Names such as Chairman, Dark Sailor, and King Salomon are printed on the labels—words that evoke and relate to the history of liquor imports by Europeans from the West Indies to Africa. The bottles recall the colonial trade in slaves and commodities. Anatsui's eye is also on the consumerist drive of globalization and economic imbalances that leave Africa in crushing poverty and its people seeking solace in drink. El Anatsui merges traditional art with contemporary practice, local events with global economies, and historical narratives



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with the present moment. In unexpected ways, he transforms the detritus of contemporary life into compelling works of beauty and multiple meanings.

Anatsui's personal and professional life mirrors the cross-cultural character of his work. He was schooled in a British education system that often overlooked indigenous culture while his father and brother were expert weavers of traditional Ewe kente cloth. He studied European art at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology in Kumasi, Ghana. At the same time, he immersed himself in workshops of traditional craft. In 1975 Anatsui began teaching at the University of Nigeria Nsukka, where he is still a professor. There he joined those who argued against formal British training to advocate and champion indigenous art.

