IN MEMORIAM

Simon Ottenberg, 100

Anthropologist, sailing enthusiast, avid puzzler, and longtime supporter of contemporary artists from West Africa and the Pacific Northwest

The anthropologist Simon Ottenberg, Emeritus Professor at the University of Washington, died in Seattle on November 1, 2023 at the age of 100. A keen outdoorsman from youth, nurtured during family vacations in the Adirondacks, Ottenberg never let the moss grow under his feet, but often stopped to smell the flowers or enjoy a mountain vista. He seemed constantly in motion, particularly late in life when he was determined to publish all remaining research to stimulate future generations of anthropologists and art historians. Friends and colleagues alike valued Ottenberg’s intellectual curiosity, witty sense of humor, and commitment to artists and communities with whom he worked.

Africa was not Simon Ottenberg’s first intellectual passion. As an adolescent, he wanted to be a polar explorer, though he didn’t have a preference for the North or the South Pole. He received a Bachelor of Arts in Anthropology in 1948 from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. It was at Northwestern University, where he studied with the renowned anthropologist Melville Herskovits, that Ottenberg became interested in Africa. He pursued his doctoral research in Nigeria in the early 1950s, a time when many Americans knew little about the peoples and cultures of Africa. Ottenberg completed his PhD at Northwestern in 1957, briefly taught anthropology at the University of Chicago and Washington State College in Pullman, and served in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Washington from 1955 until his retirement as emeritus professor in 1990. He taught for a year as an honorary visiting professor at the University of Ghana, Legon, 1970-71, and was a visiting scholar at the University of Cambridge, United Kingdom, 1987-88.

Doctoral research in 1952-53 led Ottenberg to Nigeria’s Afikpo region. While his early publications focused on more traditional anthropological fare – kinship and social structure, political systems, religious beliefs and practices, and initiation rites – Ottenberg pivoted to focus on art and aesthetic systems that reflected the complexity of Africa’s societies and fueled his abiding interest in artistic creativity and expressive culture. Simon the anthropologist became a fixture at scholarly meetings devoted to Africa’s arts. His Masked Rituals of Afikpo: The Context of an African Art (1975) remains a classic reference for scholars and a source of cultural information and pride for members of Afikpo communities worldwide. Several of his publications emphasized the role of the arts in the education of Afikpo boys, a topic addressed in the 2004 exhibition and 2006 book on children’s masquerades in Africa entitled Playful Performers, jointly authored and curated with David A. Binkley for the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African Art.
Simon Ottenberg was a highly productive scholar; his publications on Africa’s arts, religion, and social structure are voluminous. He remained professionally active up to his 100th birthday with the release of two 2023 publications, Final Africa Papers of Simon Ottenberg and Imagined Tales from Southeastern Nigeria. A year earlier Ottenberg delved back into his 1978-80 field notes and published Design and Music in a Changing Northern Sierra Leone Kingdom (2022) in the hopes of encouraging others to pursue research in Sierra Leone’s Bafodea Kingdom. That same year, Ottenberg shared reflections on his long career working in and writing about Africa’s cultures and arts in Anthropologists in America Take a First Look at Africa. In the last few years, he was driven to share as much of his unpublished work as possible for the benefit of future scholars. Ottenberg recognized that with the passage of time, topics he left out of previous publications might gain relevance in light of current realities or the evolution of his own thought process.

While appreciative of Africa’s “traditional” arts within their changing social contexts, Simon Ottenberg was also drawn to the work of Africa’s contemporary artists and the ideas and aesthetic systems that fueled their creative practice. A year-long Smithsonian Regents Fellowship enabled Ottenberg to devote attention to Nigeria’s Nsukka group of artists, which resulted in the 1997 publication New Traditions from Nigeria: Seven Artists from the Nsukka Group and the exhibition “The Poetics of Line” on view in 1997-98 at the National Museum of African Art. Ottenberg edited the project’s related conference volume, The Nsukka Artists and Nigerian Contemporary Art (2002).

In Sierra Leone, the work of Olayinka (Olayinka Miranda Burney-Nicol, 1927-1996), an artist living in Freetown, Sierra Leone, caught Ottenberg’s attention during his research tenure in the late 1970s among the Limba, who lived in the northern part of the country. He became intrigued with Olayinka’s biography and the challenges she faced as an artist and feminist who had limited access to art supplies, patronage, and the moral support of fellow artists. Ottenberg’s conversations with Olayinka in Freetown in the late 1970s, and in England a decade later where she had relocated, remained with him over the years and yielded his 2015 publication Olayinka: A Woman’s View – the only monograph to date on this artist.

Simon Ottenberg also considered the aesthetic contributions of Coast Salish artists from the Pacific Northwest, particularly those working in and around Seattle, where he lived for more than half a century. Ottenberg formed a friendship with Ron Hilbert (1943-2006), and gleaned insights into the artist’s life and work during formal interviews and informal conversations enjoyed over the years. Ottenberg worked closely with Jill LaPointe, the niece of the late artist, to realize the publication Ron Hilbert čadasqidad: The Life and Work of a Coast Salish Artist (2019) that explored Hilbert’s paintings, sculptures, and metalwork that enhanced Seattle’s artscape.
A common thread that weaves together Simon Ottenberg’s interest in Native American and African contemporary arts is the manner in which artists draw upon longstanding cultural traditions, including the visual and performing arts, as sources of inspiration. As a friend to so many artists, Ottenberg supported their work through acquisitions, particularly works on paper. Consistent with his ambition to fuel intellectual and aesthetic enquiry in future generations, Ottenberg ensured that his art collection, research notes, field photographs, and other materials found appropriate homes within museums, libraries, and archives committed to scholarly and public access.

The Burke Museum at the University of Washington holds an impressive 870 artworks – mostly works on paper by Coast Salish and other Native American artists – donated by Simon Ottenberg from the late 1980s through 2018. This collection provides an enduring visual resource on the themes and aesthetic strategies employed by Native American artists in their creative practice. The Libraries Special Collection includes Ottenberg’s research files on Coast Salish artist Ron Hilbert, as well as ephemera collected from 1985-2006 on contemporary Northwest Coast Native American artists and their exhibitions. The University’s Ethnomusicology Archives has silent 16 mm films taken during Ottenberg’s field work in Nigeria in the early 1950s, videos from the 1990s of Afikpo (Nigeria) cultural dances, chieftaincy ceremonies, and festivals, and audio recordings made during his 1978-80 field research in Bafodea Kingdom, northern Sierra Leone. These likely include recordings of Limba Kututeng music and songs, the focus of Ottenberg’s publication *Seeing with Music: The Lives of Three Blind African Musicians* (1996).

The Seattle Art Museum is the recipient of donations of African art, including an entire Afikpo masquerade ensemble (prominently displayed in the museum today) Ottenberg assembled in collaboration with Afikpo colleague Sam Irem, as well as over one hundred works on paper by Native American artists, including Ron Hilbert, Stan Greene, Marvin Oliver, Susan Point, and many others. Ottenberg also donated 145 works by artists from the Nsukka group to the Newark Museum of Art, with some two dozen featured in their 2013 exhibition, “The Art of Translation: The Simon Ottenberg Gift of Modern and Contemporary Nigerian Art.”

Simon Ottenberg’s generosity extended to the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African Art, where he conducted research almost every year from the 1990s through 2019. The art collection received rare inscribed paper talismanic amulets and woven and dyed textiles from Sierra Leone. The museum’s Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives holds Ottenberg’s field photographs from Nigeria and Sierra Leone, and the Warren M. Robbins Library boasts a comprehensive collection of his books. Ottenberg’s field notes went to his alma mater, Northwestern University. Ephemeral pamphlets, booklets, and government documents from Nigeria, which he collected from the early 1950s to the mid-1960s, reside in Stanford University’s Hoover Institution Library.
Simon Ottenberg was the recipient of prestigious research grants and fellowships awarded by the Social Science Research Council, the National Science Foundation, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the National Endowment in the Humanities. In 1992, he received a Doctor of Letters (honorary) from the University of Nigeria. Ottenberg was named the Smithsonian Research Fellow for 1993-94. He served as president of the African Studies Association and was also on the board of the Arts Council of the African Studies Association (ACASA). In 1992, Ottenberg received ACASA's Leadership Award in recognition of his research and publications on the arts.

Simon Ottenberg was tremendously proud of being named an onikara, or Afikpo elder, an honor bestowed on him in the mid-2000s by the Afikpo Organization, Inc. (AOI). In 2015, Ottenberg was presented with their Dike of AOI Award that is reserved for those who have demonstrated the highest level of support for the organization. It acknowledged the significant assistance Ottenberg provided over decades to members of the Afikpo community residing in Nigeria and the United States. In accepting the award, Ottenberg said, “I was welcomed very openly when I went to your community as a naïve young American anthropologist. My work would not have been possible without the help of some of your ancestors.”

Simon Ottenberg was born in New York City on June 6, 1923. He was the son of Reuben and Clarisse (Chène) Ottenberg, and a devoted brother to his late sister, Rose. He completed high school at the Bronx campus of the progressive Ethical Culture Fieldston School. He was a sergeant in the U.S. Army, serving in the Pacific during World War II (1943-46), and he would smile with a faraway look in his eyes whenever friend and fellow anthropologist Adrienne Kaeppler treated him to a rousing rendition of the Princess Pupule song, a Hawaiian classic, replete with double entendres. He conducted research in Nigeria with his second wife, the late Phoebe (Vestal) Ottenberg Miller, who died in 2002. His third wife, Nora Clarke Ottenberg, founder of Seattle’s highly regarded Ottenberg Books, passed away in 1977. Simon’s love of puzzles was inspired by his surviving spouse of 37 years, Carol Perry Barnard Ottenberg, a wooden jigsaw puzzle artist and avid gardener whom he married in 1986.

Simon Ottenberg leaves behind a large and devoted group of family and friends, some of whom, including relatives from Switzerland, gathered in Seattle in June 2023 to observe his 100th birthday. It was a grand celebration, with tributes by friends from Nigeria and Sierra Leone who recounted how Simon’s generosity enabled them and their families to start new lives in the United States and to help their communities back home. Simon Ottenberg will be sorely missed.

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