

Week 3

El Anatsui

- Ghanaian sculptor who has spent much of his achievement-packed career living and working in Nigeria.
- Runs a very **robust** studio practice, situated in Nsukka, Enugu, Nigeria, and Tema, Ghana
- Highly **acclaimed** artists in African History and **foremost** contemporary artists in the world.

🔊 **acclaimed** [ə'kleɪmd]

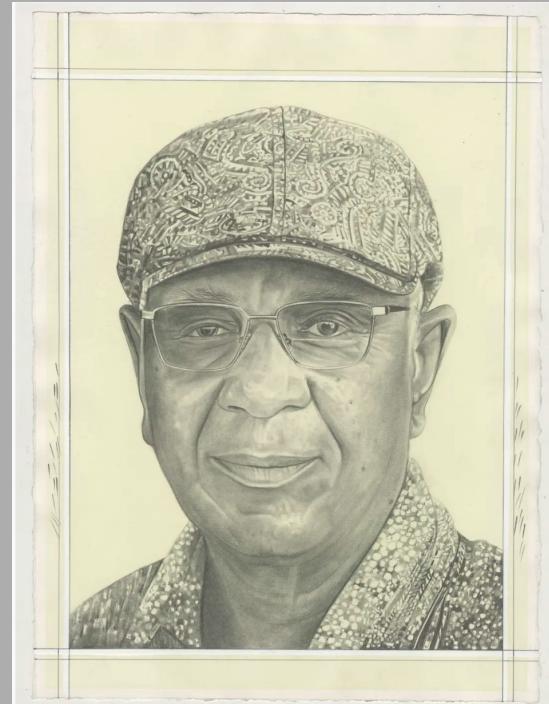
adjective

🔊 **célèbre**

🔊 **foremost** [fɔ:meəst]

adjective

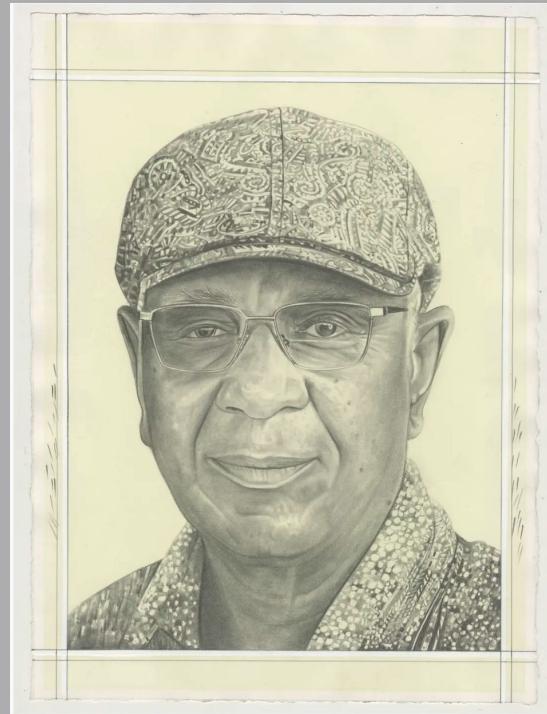
[first - in position] 🔊 le plus en avant
[- in importance] 🔊 **principal**, le plus important



El Anatsui, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

El Anatsui

- Defies categorization: uses resources typically discarded such as liquor bottle caps, cassava graters and newspaper printing plates to create sculpture.
- Materials: A way to connect to his continent while *transcending* the limitations of place.
- Composed of thousands of folded and **crumpled** pieces of aluminium bottle caps sourced from local alcohol recycling stations and bound together with copper wire



El Anatsui, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

El Anatsui, *Fractured World Order*, 2025. Burnt and incised tropical hardwood, tempera



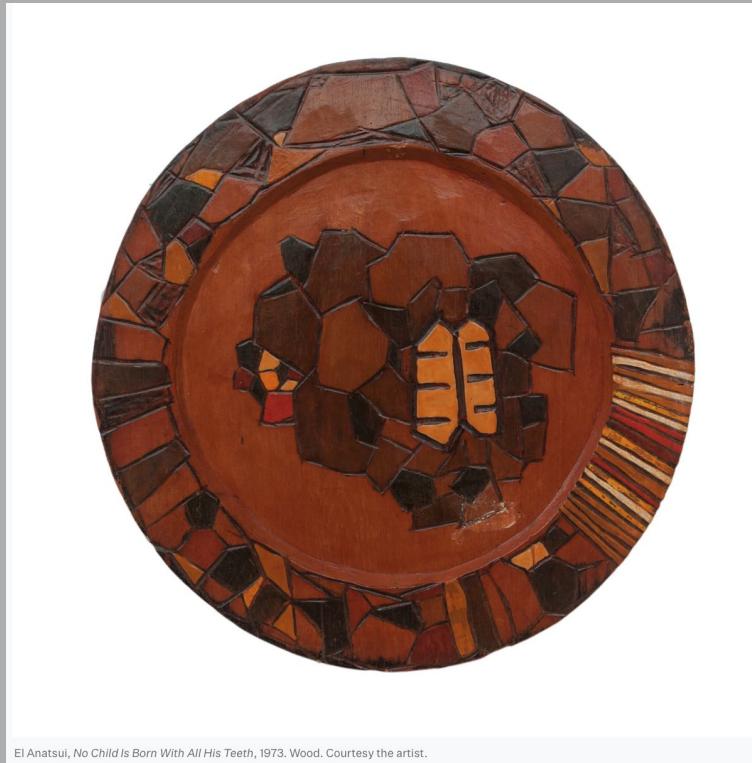
El Anatsui, *Fractured World Order*, 2025. Burnt and incised tropical hardwood, tempera, 55 1/10 x 165 3/4

El Anatsui, *Fractured World Order*, 2025. Burnt and incised tropical hardwood, tempera



What makes this piece “**Robust**”?

El Anatsui, *No Child is Born With All His Teeth*, 1973. Wood.



El Anatsui, *No Child Is Born With All His Teeth*, 1973. Wood. Courtesy the artist.

El Anatsui, *No Child is Born With All His Teeth*, 1973. Wood.

What makes this a “foremost” piece of his?



El Anatsui, *Chambers of Memory*, 1977. Clay, $15 \frac{3}{5}$ x $11 \frac{4}{5}$ x $10 \frac{3}{5}$ in.



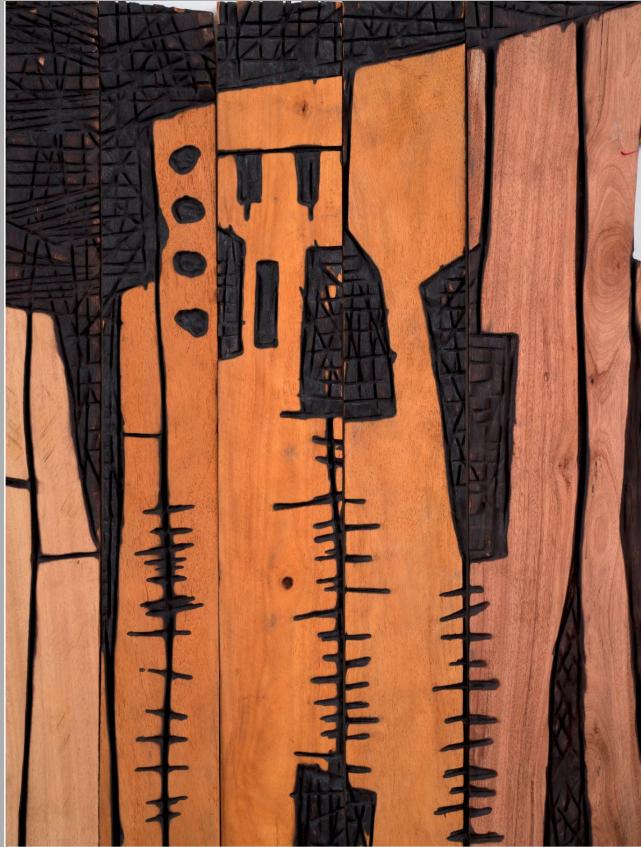
El Anatsui, *Chambers of Memory*, 1977. Clay, $15 \frac{3}{5}$ x $11 \frac{4}{5}$ x $10 \frac{3}{5}$ inches. © El Anatsui. Courtesy El Anatsui Studio.

El Anatsui, *Chambers of Memory*, 1977. Clay, $15 \frac{3}{5}$ x $11 \frac{4}{5}$ x $10 \frac{3}{5}$ in.



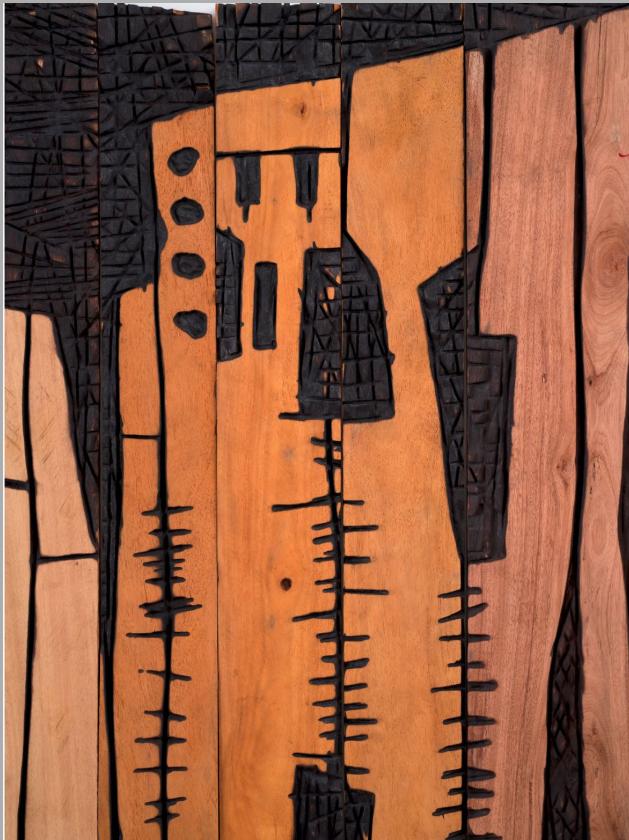
How does this “transcend”
limitations of traditional
sculpture?

El Anatsui, *Conference of Knives* (detail), 2025. Burnt and incised tropical hardwood, $90\frac{1}{5}$ x $138\frac{3}{5}$ inches.



El Anatsui, *Conference of Knives* (detail), 2025. Burnt and incised tropical hardwood, $90 \frac{1}{5}$ x $138 \frac{3}{5}$ inches.

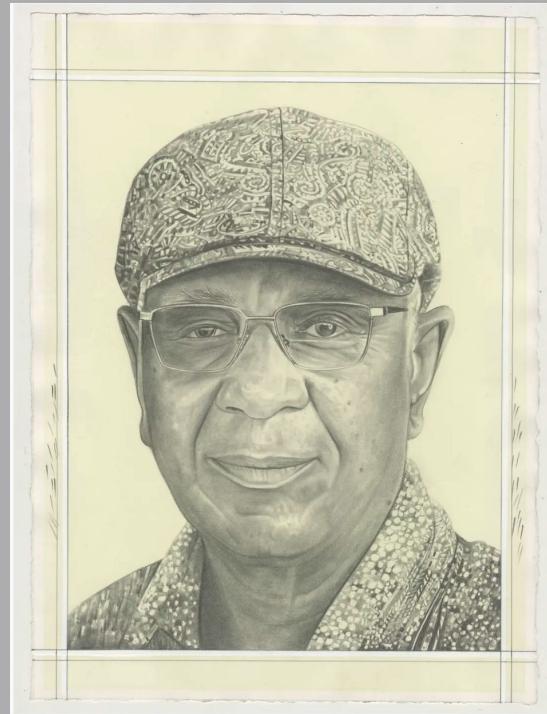
How could this “crumple” artistic conventions of today?



El Anatsui

Post-colonial Ghana & Nigeria

- From his artwork, what are details we notice that could **stem** from growing up in a “post-colonial society”?
- How can an ugly past, conceive a beautiful future? Give examples.



El Anatsui, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

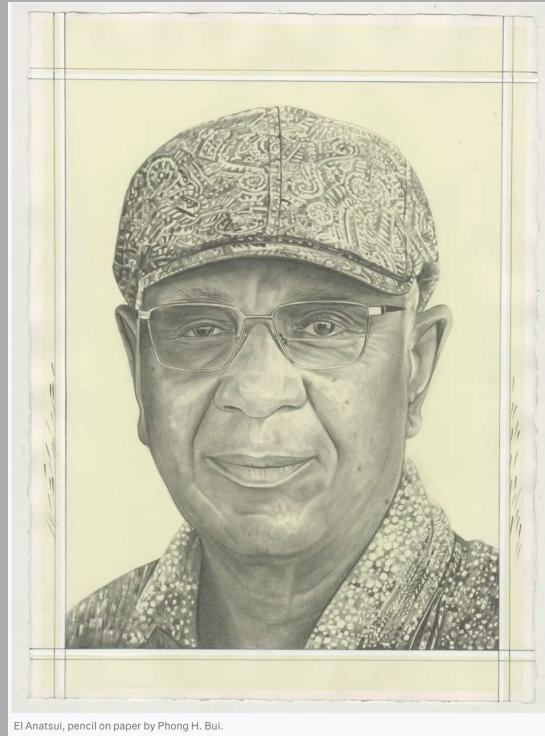
Part 1 - Reinventing Sculpture

Zoé Whitley (Rail): The authoritative study of your art, co-authored by Chika Okeke-Agulu and Okwui Enwezor, is titled *El Anatsui: The Reinvention of Sculpture*. The tome examines in detail the contexts that nurtured your revolution of form. From your earliest explorations in wood reliefs, across your less well-known terracottas, and to the worldwide acclaim of your metal cloths, you have taken the noun “sculpture” and made it a verb. Indeed, most of your oeuvre is polymorphous and cannot be displayed in precisely the same manner twice: the metal will **contort** at different angles, pool at new circumferences, the wood achieves balance in subtly different choreographies each time. Did you set out to change the meaning of sculpture?

El Anatsui: I would not say that I consciously set out to “change the meaning of sculpture” but rather to question and extend its possibilities. Each material I work with—be it metal, wood, or any other—carries its own memory and energy. And when they are reconfigured or installed in different contexts, they begin to converse with their surroundings and, in that process new meanings emerge.

For me, sculpture is not a fixed object; it is a living form that can shift in response to light, space, and the people who encounter it. I am interested in that fluidity, in allowing the work to breathe and transform rather than remain confined to a single interpretation. In this sense, the act of installing also becomes part of the sculpture’s life, a moment when its meanings are renegotiated rather than predetermined.

 **contort** [kən'tɔ:t]
transitive verb **Conjugaison**
[body, features]  **Conjugaison** **tordre**



El Anatsui, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

El Anatsui, *Chambers of Memory*, 1977. Clay, $15 \frac{3}{5}$ x $11 \frac{4}{5}$ x $10 \frac{3}{5}$ in.



How does this represent the
“unconscious change of the
meaning of sculpture?”

Part 2 - Art Education, Flux, & Identity

Rail: So then, let's go back to the beginning. What was your early art education like?

Anatsui: We followed a Western curriculum, which included life modelling and **plaster** casting. At the time, I did not find them useful. Artwork should replicate life, not life caught at a certain moment and just kept there.

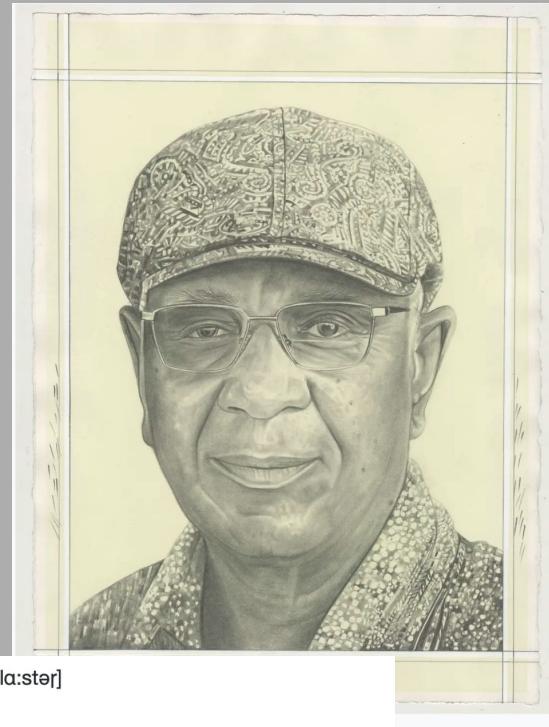
Rail: No one can accuse your art of stasis! Did art pedagogy feel like it was stuck in the past?

Anatsui: I do enjoy looking at traditional forms of art, but I thought from the very beginning that art should do something else—or something more. Because life is not a static thing, it's constantly in flux. Initially, my work taught me that a situation is not fixed, and transition is inherent.

Rail: You found freedom in the form. In many ways, your work gives shape to Stuart Hall's assertion that "identity is not a set of fixed attributes, the unchanging essence of the inner self, but a constantly shifting process of *positioning*." Can you say more about how important it is in your work to be able to reposition things?

Anatsui: Repositioning is at the core of how I think and work. I have always felt that materials, like people, histories or ideas, carry multiple possibilities within them. When you shift their context or relationship to one another, something new emerges. So, this act of repositioning is a way of freeing both the material, and myself, from fixed meanings.

I am drawn to forms that allow for change, for movement, for reconfiguration, because they reflect the fluid nature of identity itself. Each installation becomes an opportunity to reconsider how things might relate differently, to find new resonances between parts that were once separate. In that sense, the work is never final; it remains open, available to transformation, just as our understanding of who we are continues to evolve over time.



ⓘ **plaster** [pla:stər]

noun

1. [for walls, modelling] ⓘ **plâtre** m

ⓘ **plaster of Paris** ⓘ **plâtre de Paris** OR à mouler

El Anatsui, *No Child is Born With All His Teeth*, 1973. Wood.

Where do we see a sense of
“reconfiguration” from more
traditional art pedagogy?



El Anatsui, *No Child Is Born With All His Teeth*, 1973. Wood. Courtesy the artist.

Part 3 - Breaking, Repair, & Memory

Rail: How did this approach manifest?

Anatsui: The breaking of a pot, for instance: in my culture, this doesn't mean the pot's use has ended; rather now it's open to more uses. If it was a water pot, it was only for water; if it was a grain pot, it was only for grains. But once it breaks, it can be used for so many other things. It's a kind of freedom that is given to the medium in the broken form. And again, this idea ties in with art being life. I even think that the idea of breaking or dilapidation is a prerequisite for growth or change. In pottery or ceramics, when a fired pot—clay taken to, say, 1200 or 1400 degrees celsius—breaks, there's a practice of pulverizing it and mixing it with fresh clay, like mixing different generations together. That the clay has been through the firing process gives it more resilience and more strength. It withstands subsequent firing better than it would have before and better than clay fresh from the ground.

Rail: Your "Broken Pots" series (1977–81) is a testament to this. We Dey Patch Am (1979) draws on traditions of Nok clay firing. I love your use of Pidgin English in that title, referring also to the saying "We dey patch am e dey leak," which translates to "It leaks even as we try to mend." Far from the futility of patching, you demonstrate that from the destruction of one function, a new purpose can be born. The ceramic sculpture Chambers of Memory (1977), which is supported by an intricate internal scaffolding, appears to commemorate a rebirth as much as anything.

Anatsui: That period was also very much about finding meaning in fracture. About things that had lived, had broken, and yet could still speak. The title We Dey Patch Am implies both irony and resilience; it acknowledges the impossibility of returning something to its original state, yet affirms the human impulse to keep repairing, to keep making do. In that gesture, I saw a metaphor for history itself: how cultures and identities continue to build from what has been damaged or dispersed.

With Chambers of Memory, I wanted to take that idea further, to construct something that carried the memory of breaking within it yet stood with its own new strength. The internal scaffolding was a way of showing that what holds us up is often invisible—a network of connections, of repairs, or past experiences that continue to support the present form. So yes, both works were about transformation, but not to erase the wound but to reconfigure it into another kind of wholeness.

 **scaffolding** [skæfəldɪŋ]

noun

[framework]  **échafaudage** m



 **withstand** [wɪð'stænd] (pt & pp)  **withstood** [-'stʊd]

transitive verb **Conjugaison**

[heat, punishment]  **résister à**

 **dilapidation** [dɪlæpɪ'deɪʃn]

noun

[of building]  **délabrement** m, **dégradation** f

El Anatsui, *Fractured World Order*, 2025. Burnt and incised tropical hardwood, tempera



How could one describe this using the following:

Breaking

Repair

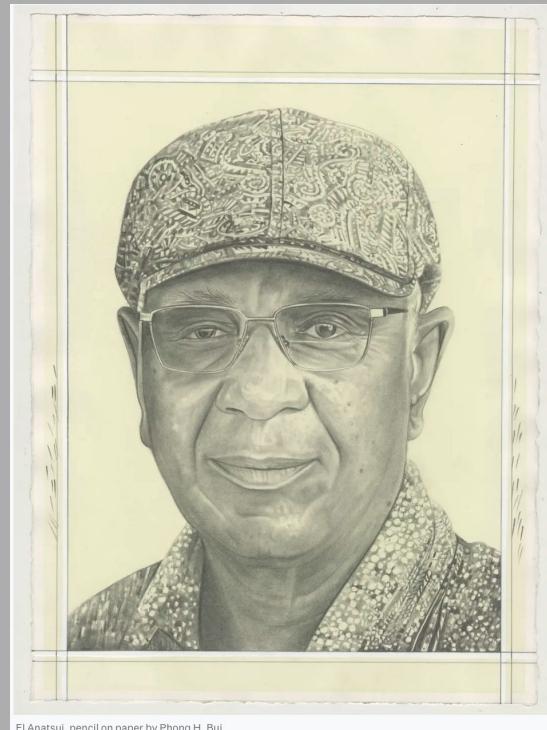
Memory

Part 4 - Wood, Relation, & Mixed Media

Rail: So, how did this approach translate into your work with wood?

Anatsui: After working with clay, I turned back to wood again, this time using strips so that I could line up many of them into one work. The idea was that each element could retain its individuality and change, just like in life, where you find yourself close to somebody one day and at another time, closer to someone else. This idea of relation, of things that are always in a state of flux, is very important to my work.

Rail: This ethic of relation also seems to retain something fundamentally playful. I'm reminded of Ghanaian playwright and poet Efua Sutherland (1924–96), whose book *Playtime in Africa* contained evocative visualizations of sails in the wind, of kites fighting then finding the breeze to soar. I thought of these poems when observing how your recent works conjoin different properties into a new whole. In *One Teaspoon Daily* (2022), wood and metal coexist in more than fifty panels, some dangling, others overlapping. When was the turning point in your work where your two defining materials could start to intertwine? Anatsui: After working with materials in series, I thought about marrying them, having them in the same composition, where each says, or does, what it wants to do. We call it "mixed media." I think about mixed media as a situation whereby you bring in a medium that does what you want done better than others. When I was teaching, I would give to students the example of a building as being "mixed media" where the properties of each material endow it to perform specific functions within a greater whole. I got my students to interrogate why each material was present. A roofing sheet is light and waterproof. A window must be something that lets in light and air. They can apply the same thinking to their work as I do to mine. When I'm making my work and I need an area that is light, then I think about a material that is endowed to do that.



El Anatsui, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

El Anatsui, *Conference of Knives* (detail), 2025. Burnt and incised tropical hardwood, 90 $\frac{1}{5}$ x 138 $\frac{3}{5}$ inches.

How does this material convey
“a state of flux” ?

flux [flʌks]

noun (uncountable)

1. [constant change]

to be in a state of constant flux

a. [universe] être en perpétuel devenir

b. [government, private life etc] être en proie à des changements permanents



Words:

Acclaimed

Definitions

A. To resist pressure or damage; to endure

Foremost

B. A state of decay or falling apart

Crumpled

C. Publicly praised or admired, especially by experts

Transcend

D. To go beyond normal limits or expectations

Contort

E. Bent, crushed, or wrinkled out of shape

Plaster

F. Constant change or movement

Scaffolding

G. A soft material used for casting that hardens as it dries

Withstand

H. The most important or leading of its kind

Dilapidation

I. A supporting framework, often temporary or internal

Flux

J. To twist or bend into an unusual or strained shape



EL ANATSUI
STUDIO PROCESS

art21 EP

Now it's your turn: In groups, write an essay about the following topics.

Group 1: Explain what sculpture as a “verb” means.

Group 2: How is shifting forms representative shifting perspectives of culture of self?

Group 3: How does culture help shape Anatsui's choices of materials and form?

Group 4: What allows art to be always “in a state of flux”?

Vocabulary Review