



Untitled Vessel

Odundo, Magdalene

Not on display

Title/Description: Untitled Vessel

Artist/Maker: Odundo, Magdalene

Born: 1986

Materials: Terracotta

Technique: Burnishing, Carbonised

Measurements: h. 290 mm

Accession Number: 50870

Production Place: England

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Credit Line: Purchased with support from Martin and Katharine Pinfold, 2023

Made in 1986, this beautiful work is an early example of an anthropomorphic vessel by Magdalene Odundo, for which she is now widely celebrated. Odundo is interested in the bodily associations with vessels, and how their parts are linguistically described: with foot, neck and lip.

In this work, a voluminous body meets a narrow neck, which flares to a wide, asymmetrical opening. This silhouette has a close association with the figurative vessels of the Mangbetu culture, from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Historically, the Mangbetu peoples wrapped the heads of their babies to give them an elongated shape and sometimes wore their hair in broad styles reinforced by reeds; a shape depicted in their ceramics. Whilst Mangbetu vessels have faces, Odundo's is more abstract, but a line running down the long edge of the neck subtly suggests a face with a nodule representing a nose, though it could also be read as a spine.

Odundo was born in Kenya and moved to the UK in 1971 to attend art school at the Cambridge College of Art. It was here that she made the decision to focus on ceramics. In 1974 Michael Cardew encouraged her to visit the Abuja pottery that he had set up in Nigeria. There she was trained by, amongst others, famed ceramicist Ladi Kwali and learnt the Gbari (Gwari) pinch-pull technique that she still uses. The potter starts with a ball of clay, making a hole and pulling it outwards to make the base before adding thick coils of clay to make the rest of the vessel. Odundo is now the most famous potter working in this technique in Britain. [1]

Odundo works in terracotta, burnishing the surface both inside and out to achieve an exceptionally smooth surface. This attention to the interior, though not seen, is for Odundo a crucial aspect of the work. Writing of the practice in Africa, she explains that finishing the inside serves to, 'visually, conceptually, and materially *contain* its contents – be it grain, water, millet beer, palm wine, medicines, sacrificial offerings, ancestral spirits, or the awesome power of deities. For me, this deliberate process defines the sculptural quality of the vessel.' [2] When the form is complete, Odundo covers it with a *terra sigillata* slip, made from the same clay as the body of the vessel mixed into water, and burnishes it again. Finally, she fires the work, once to maintain the bright orange of the terracotta, and then up to four times restricting the oxygen to achieve different degrees of black on the surface.

Odundo completed her MA at the Royal College of Art in 1982. She wrote of her studies there, 'I explored clay as a material, wanting to understand what was inherent in this very basic material, which gave it such a universal and sacred appeal'. [3] The present work was made only four years after graduating but is already distinctive of her unique visual language. As Andrew Bonacina writes, 'Many writers and peers have remarked on the fact that when Odundo graduated in 1982, her voice appeared already fully formed.' [4]

In 2019, Sainsbury Centre hosted the exhibition *Magdalene Odundo: The Journey of Things* in collaboration with The Hepworth Wakefield.

Tania Moore, April 2023

[1] Moira Vincentelli, *Women and Ceramics: Gendered Vessels* (Manchester and New York:

Manchester University Press, 2000), p.237.

[2] Magdalene Odundo, 'Design, Form, and Decoration in African Ceramics. The Unique Collection of Franz, Duke of Bavaria' in Barbara Thompson and Angelika Nollert (eds.), *African Ceramics: A Different Perspective from the Collection of Franze, Duke of Bavaria* (Munich: The Design Museum, 2019), p.105.

[3] Ibid., p.103.

[4] Andrew Bonacina (ed.), *Magdalene Odundo: The Journey of Things* (London: InOther Words, 2019), np.

Exhibitions

'Crafts Council', Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 1986

'From Joséphine Bowes: Trendsetters and Trailblazers', The Bowes Museum, Barnard Castle,
8/2/2025 - 29/6/2025

Provenance

Purchased from the Crafts Council exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1986 by Mr Chris White.

Purchased through Sotheby's for the Sainsbury Centre, 2023 with funds donated by Martin and Katharine Pinfold.
