

# Stephen Friedman Gallery

Artsy  
Inside my collection: Tunji Akintokun MBE  
Jareh Das  
20 August 2021



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Image: Portrait of Tunji Akintokun MBE with, from left to right and top to bottom, Karl Barrie, "Untitled," 2001; Lola Betiku, "Spiritually (Fela)," 2019; Yinka Shonibare, "Self-Portrait (after Warhol) 4," 2013; Lauren Pearce, "Untitled 1," 2021; and Babajide Olatunji, "Tribal Marks Series 3 #13". Photo by Christina Nwabugo for Artsy.

Tunji Akintokun MBE, a London-born businessman and philanthropist of Nigerian descent, has steadily built a remarkable collection of modern and contemporary African art over the past three decades. Based out of northwest London, Akintokun is also the founder of the Ilesha Charitable Trust, which supports causes in the arts, sports, science, technology, and social mobility. Through Ilesha, he has supported artists with development grants as well as exhibitions, including the critically acclaimed show "Get Up, Stand Up Now," celebrating 50 years of Black creativity, at Somerset House in London in 2019.

Akintokun's collection reflects his own African diasporic heritage, as well as his experiences, including overcoming adversities and contending with issues of identity and politics. He owns works by emerging and established artists alike, including Yinka Shonibare CBE, Nike Davies-Okundaye, Victor Ekpuk, Shannon Bono, Lemi Ghariokwu, and Niyi Olagunju, among others.



Image: Installation view of art objects Akintokun collected during his travels to Nigeria and Ghana, 1990s–2015. Photo by Christina Nwabugo for Artsy.

We recently caught up virtually with Akintokun at his northwest London home for a lively conversation about where his passion for art originated. He shared more about his collection, his first encounters with art, the considerations that lead to acquiring works, and his philanthropic ambitions to support artists on the rise and next generation of Black collectors in the U.K.

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## **Artsy: How and when did you start collecting in earnest?**

**Tunji Akintokun MBE:** I'm showing my age here, but I've probably been collecting for almost 30 years. I had a general appreciation of art and admired the works of Surrealist artists – Salvador Dali in particular—but I quickly realized I couldn't afford those works. I was quite lucky as one of my mentors advised me to look into art as one way to diversify my investment portfolios, which I took up.



Image: Victor Ekpuk, 'Woman Dancing in the Mirror', 2009. Photo by Christina Nwabugo for Artsy.



Image: Perer Odeh, 'Fertility', 2003. Photo by Christina Nwabugo for Artsy.

In the 1990s, I stumbled upon a gallery called Kaleidoscope in north London, where I live, founded by the late art dealer and artist Karl Barrie; he became a really good advisor. Through his astute advice and his gallery, Barrie gave me my first introduction to modern and contemporary African art. I loved what I saw and began to research the artworks on view further. This was when I decided to start building a collection centered on African art.

## **Artsy: Did you grow up with art or were there particular artists or museum shows that were particularly formative early on?**

**T.A.:** Unfortunately, I lost both of my parents at a young age, so this meant that my childhood was spent raising myself and I came to art in my late teens. Travels through my career to countries in the Caribbean, Africa, and South America were impactful. I would visit national museums during these trips, learning more about culture and heritage.

A trip to Cuba stands out. I was on a tour and got to talking with one of the guides about the Cuba's history and its link to the African continent. We discussed my Yoruba heritage and he then introduced me to someone who

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took me on this journey through alleyways and the back streets of Havana, eventually leading to a historic building closed to the public. Inside, to my amazement, was the Yoruba Museum of Cuba, filled with artifacts and objects that were staggering to witness. The experience made such an impression on me, to this day.



Image: Gbenga Offo, installation view, from left to right, of 'Man' and 'Woman', both 2000. Photo by Christina Nwabugo for Artsy.

**Artsy: Are there other Nigerian or African collectors or arts patrons who have inspired your collecting practice or offered advice along the way?**

**T.A.:** I have a broad, global network of like-minded individuals in the business world who collect and I am in dialogue with them, alongside gallerists such as Ayo Adeyinka of TAFETA and curator Lisa Anderson, who has her own advisory and advises me. I'm also very passionate about collecting centered around Black collectors and I am part of a growing network of Black gallery owners, collectors, curators, and artists who are starting to have conversations around how to better facilitate and enable this.

**Artsy: Is there a piece that you consider the beginning of your collection? If yes, how did you discover the work?**

**T.A.:** Two paintings, Man and Woman (both 2000), by Gbenga Offo when I seriously began collecting. I got introduced to Offo's work by Karl Barrie, who had met the artist during his travels to Nigeria. Barrie, I believe, was one of the first dealers responsible for introducing Offo's work to a U.K. audience.

**Artsy: Are there threads that run throughout that drive you as you continue to build your collection?**

**T.A.:** I mostly buy what moves me and what I enjoy seeing around my home. I rely on my instincts, which I feel are very good, but I'm sure my wife and kids will probably have a different opinion on this. It ranges from figuration to abstraction, and across generations. Recently, I've turned my attention to sculptures to explore the medium and counter limited wall space.

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Image: Shannon Bono, 'Untitled (Mangbetu)', 2006.

Photo by Christina Nwabugo for Artsy.

Figuration and portraiture are important for depicting and telling stories about individuals and communities, and the politics present. For instance, Shannon Bono's painting *Untitled (Mangbetu)* (2019) is a striking work with an underlying story about the suffering of Black women. Lemi Ghariokwu's *New Beast of No Nation* is a work I commissioned, based on his famous Fela Kuti album sleeve, updated with

contemporary political figures including Theresa May and Donald Trump. The piece comments on how little has changed between the '80s and now. I went to the original Fela shrine and I was lucky enough to see him here in London before his passing. My collection is personal but there are also political and identity threads running through the works such as Babajide Olatunji's "Tribal Marks" works, which resonate deeply in my (Yoruba) culture.

### **Artsy: How has living in the U.K. and traveling globally shaped the way you collect art?**

**T.A.:** Being fortunate enough to travel has profoundly shaped the way I collect art. It has given me an opportunity to visit many museums and exhibitions in Africa, the U.S., the Middle East, and Europe. I have taken the family to visit the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., which further solidified my conscience around collecting work that tells a story or shapes a narrative on our history.

Attending art fairs such as Art X Lagos and 1-54 has exposed me over the years to an increasing number of artists, galleries, and curators who have helped shape my thinking on what and how I collect. My collection continues to tell stories of our history and build a narrative that I want my children to know as part of the legacy of the Ilesha Charitable Trust, which owns the collection. I would say the pieces in the collection by Nike Okundaye, Victor Ekpuk, and Lola Betiku, to name a few, were all influenced by my visits to galleries, exhibitions, or museums.



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Image: Yinka Shonibare, 'Self Portrait (after Warhol) 4', 2013. Photo by Christina Nwabugo for Artsy.

**Artsy: Can you tell me about a couple other works in your collection that are especially meaningful? Or pieces you've purchased recently?**

**T.A.:** I am fortunate to have Yinka Shonibare's Self Portrait (after Warhol) 4 (2013), which is a really important work by one of the U.K.'s most celebrated artists of Nigerian heritage. The work's reimagining of Yinka after Warhol is an interesting juxtaposition of Pop

art with postcolonial legacies of the Ankara cloth, a recurring motif in his work. I am also pleased that Niyi Olagunju's sculptures Mangbetu (2016) and Woman (2017) are both in the collection.

My real passion is to buy the work of emerging artists and through the Ilesha Charitable Trust, supporting their careers. One of the artists we have supported is Agathe Silvagni, whom the trust provided a grant to in order for her to pursue her passion for painting. She now contributes 10 percent of the proceeds of the sales of her work back to the Trust as a way of saying thank you for helping out early on in her career, which is really nice, she doesn't have to do that. I am delighted we have a piece of her work in the collection.

**Artsy: Can you speak about the Ilesha Charitable Trust and plans for its future?**

**T.A.:** The Ilesha Charitable Trust takes its name from Iléshà, the town in southwestern Nigeria where my parents were born, and it was set up in their memory. I lost both my parents by the time I was 11 and really had to raise myself from this age. My father was a lawyer in England in the 1960s but succumbed to sickle cell disease. I wanted to connect with charities which support individuals living with this illness and that's one of the areas the trust supports.

The trust is also about building a legacy that improves the lives of others, which is something I always promised myself I would do growing up. I wanted to help others reach their potential regardless of their circumstances. I set the trust up to essentially provide scholarships, bursaries, and grants to students with a focus on STEM, and to get more people from diverse backgrounds studying and working in this area. So far, we have supported students to study STEM subjects at Oxford, Cambridge, and renowned London universities; that's something I'm pleased about, but there's still a lot of work to do.

The trust owns the collection with the idea that my children will carry this on when I am no longer here. My wish is that it continues to grow and develop in the future. I want to leave a legacy that creates a better world than the one I came into.

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Image: Niyi Olagunju, 'Mangbetu', 2016. Photo by Christina Nwabugo for Artsy.



Image: Niyi Olagunju, 'Woman', 2017. Photo by Christina Nwabugo for Artsy.

**Artsy: Do you have a preference for how you collect work—via galleries, auctions, online, directly from the artist?**

**T.A.:** It's a combination of all of the above. Nothing really beats engaging with the work in person, seeing how textures in paintings come to life in different light, for example. I do collect across the board and try to collect ethically with an awareness of the ecosystem in place—in other words, galleries, artists, auction houses, and online platforms all have a role to play in all of this. It's important to research thoroughly and I am quite lucky to have reliable counsel and people I can turn to if I am dealing with an

artist or platform for the first time.

**Artsy: Who are the artists you're excited about now? Whose works do you wish to have in your collection?**

**T.A.:** I'm hoping one day I can afford to get a sculpture by Ben Enwonwu MBE, one of the masters of African modernism. I am also a big fan of Hassan Hajjaj and Adelaide Damoah, although her large-scale paintings, which I love, require a lot of space. Enam Gbewonyo's intricate textile explorations on canvas are also superb.

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Image: Portrait of Tunji Akintokun MBE with, from left to right and top to bottom, Joan Miro, Untitled (m.884), 1972; Dennis Osadebe, The Consultant, 2017; Lemi Ghariokwu, New Beast of No Nation, 2017; Variety Brown, Head of State, 2021; and Nike Okundaiye-Davies, Couple, 2012. Photo by Christina Nwabugo for Artsy.

**Artsy: In your opinion, what goes into being a collector beyond just buying work?**

**T.A.:** I see collecting as part of a wider art ecosystem that requires a lot of time investment and support for artists beyond just buying an artwork. I am interested in how artists' careers can be supported in practical terms—what they need to thrive, like further education, studio space, learning and skill development, and so on.

One area of interest that needs further development is art and tech as it relates to digital archives of modern and contemporary African art. This is something that would help create provenance and data for collections that would outlive the collectors. Blockchain technology, which is a system of recording information in a way that makes it difficult to change, hack, or cheat, could be really useful for this.

**Artsy: Where would you advise a new collector to begin?**

**T.A.:** Educate yourself! We are all so lucky to have so many resources available freely online, so there's really ample material to acquaint yourself with art history. For someone who wants to gain further expertise, there are a lot of courses online that serve as a foundation to this field. Going to museums, galleries, and exhibitions are also essential to building a network, and also, meeting artists. I tend to advise a younger generation of budding collectors who I mentor that collecting shouldn't scare people off. Set realistic budgets and start gradually. My advice is to research, build a network, and set up a buying strategy that works for you, so that in 20 years or so, your commitment will become a meaningful collection.