

**Categories and Contemporaries:  
African Artists at the Slade School of Fine Art, c. 1945–1965**

Gabriella Nugent  
Leverhulme Early Career Fellow  
University of East Anglia

## Introduction:

Artists from all over the world studied at London's Slade School of Fine Art, but the categories of art history and the organisation of museums have rarely allowed them to be studied, taught or exhibited alongside each other. Their separation and dissociation can be attributed to art history's strong attachment to national narratives. The nation state has operated as the epistemological framework through which artists are grouped and artwork is examined. Even as the "global turn" in art history has sought to combat the Eurocentric assumptions of modernism, it has often perpetuated the discipline's methodological nationalism.<sup>1</sup> These national narratives contribute to larger continental frameworks that exasperate divisions between artists who often sat side by side together in the same classroom.

The Slade was an important site of convergence for many African artists central to modern art movements tied to decolonisation between 1945 and 1965.<sup>2</sup> From its establishment within University College London in 1871, the Slade admitted students to its programme regardless of gender, race or religious belief, an attitude in direct opposition to the racial supremacism of British colonial ideology. In comparison to artists who were born and trained in Europe, African artists from British colonies who studied at the Slade were compelled to know multiple worlds, often working between Africa, Europe and North America. However, the categories of art history have not been designed for the capacious lives led by these artists, or indeed the entanglements wrought by colonialism. The discipline tends to marginalise transnational experiences, preferring, especially in the case of African artists, essentialised notions of identity premised on difference.<sup>3</sup> These artists are often separated out from their peers and situated in continental isolation. This isolation can be traced back to the emergence of the category of "African art" in the late nineteenth century when objects of ritual or

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Atta Kwami, *Kumasi Realism, 1951–2007: An African Modernism* (London: Hurst, 2013); Chika Okeke-Agulu, *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonisation in Twentieth-Century Nigeria* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015); Elizabeth W. Giorgis, *Modernist Art in Ethiopia* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2019), Alex Dika Seggerman, *Modernism on the Nile: Art in Egypt Between the Islamic and the Contemporary* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Ming Tiampo and Liz Bruchet conceive of the Slade as a contrapuntal node that connects multiple people and histories with the aim of proposing new ways of writing histories of contrapuntal – not multiple – modernisms. See Liz Bruchet and Ming Tiampo, "Slade, London, Asia: Contrapuntal Histories Between Imperialism and Decolonization 1945–1989 (Part 1)", *British Art Studies*, Issue 20 (July 2021), <https://dx.doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-20/tiampobruchet>. Accessed 4 February 2022.

<sup>3</sup> See Olu Oguibe, *The Culture Game* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

ceremonial purpose entered the European market. Their artistic forms were subsequently adopted by modernist painters, leading to the prominence of “African art” in the Western world. The construction of “African art” was mobilised thereafter to group together artists from across the continent, even if they were operative in Europe or North America. The study of these artworks, otherwise known as the field of “African art history”, was largely the purview of anthropologists and gallery professionals – it was for a long time performed outside the realm of art history proper.

Bearing this past in mind, art history has had much to answer for in recent years, from calls to address the legacies of slavery and colonialism prompted by Rhodes Must Fall and Black Lives Matter to concomitant surveys of decolonisation published in some of the discipline’s foremost journals.<sup>4</sup> However, the demand to expand art history beyond its Eurocentric matrix has largely taken an “additive” approach – new classes, new textbooks and new hires – rather than an essential integration of what was once deemed periphery to a mainstream art history. Bringing together unpublished archival material from UCL Special Collections and artworks from the UCL Art Museum and other collections based in the United Kingdom and abroad, “Categories and Contemporaries” proposes a new methodological framework that situates the selected artists alongside their contemporaries, challenging the categories and interpretative frames that have been imposed onto their work. I seek to demonstrate the entanglement of modern art movements globally by examining the artwork and correspondence of artists such as Ben Enwonwu, Ibrahim El-Salahi, Sam Ntiro, Paula Rego, Patricia Gerard, Margaret J. Rees, Menhat Helmy, Michael Tyzack and Amir Nour.

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<sup>4</sup> Catherine Grant and Dorothy Price (eds.), “Decolonizing Art History”, *Art History*, vol. 43, no. 1 (2020): 8–66; Huey Copeland et. al (eds.), “A Questionnaire on Decolonisation”, *October*, no. 174 (2020): 3–125.

Federal Information Service, Lagos. January 17th. 1955.

Dear Sir;

I received your letter of January 5th. for which I am very grateful. My last one crossed it en route; however, I have this morning received your second letter of January 12th.

I am to say that I fully appreciate your point that my trip would not be academically profitable unless I can arrange it to take place at another period of time. The fact is that (a) as a civil servant, my leave cannot be postponed. (b) I have arranged a one-man-exhibition in Paris for October at a gallery which I cannot afford to miss the rare opportunity of showing there. So, I have to get to U.K. for my London show which takes place before October.

These exhibitions have nothing to do with the refresher course, but I cannot fix them to take place at another time except when I have the leave to U.K. which is once in five years officially.

I am not however, thinking of taking a full-time course at the Slade as I already did that, and got the Diploma. The trouble is that every Government official here is entitled to a refresher course at his old College, and I have no other than the Slade. Having been practising art and holding exhibitions since I left the Slade in 1947, I would not necessarily like to do another systematic course. All I need is to be allowed the chance of coming in at the Slade as an old boy, and taking part in one or two activities. I am acquainted with the National Gallery and the Tate facilities for going to public lectures having been there regular every two years that I have continually revisited England. From June this year to April 1956 is all I can ask of my Government. I would not like to ~~stay~~ stay a year at the Slade. So that I would like to be considered as being taken care of by the Slade while I make my own arrangements for visiting galleries in G. Britain as from June to October; and then to attend lectures on History of Art at the Slade as from October 1955 to April 1956.

If my request can be considered along the lines I have suggested above, I would like to know how much the fee from Oct. this year to April next year would be. My Government has granted my study leave as I have requested, and now, it remains the question of fees which they are eager to know about. I should be grateful if you would consider my request as it is the only possibly accessible way at the present time.

Yours sincerely  
Ben Enwonwu.

The Slade Secretary.

Figure 1

Letter from Ben Enwonwu to I.E. Tregarthen Jenkin, 17 January 1955. UCL Special Collections.

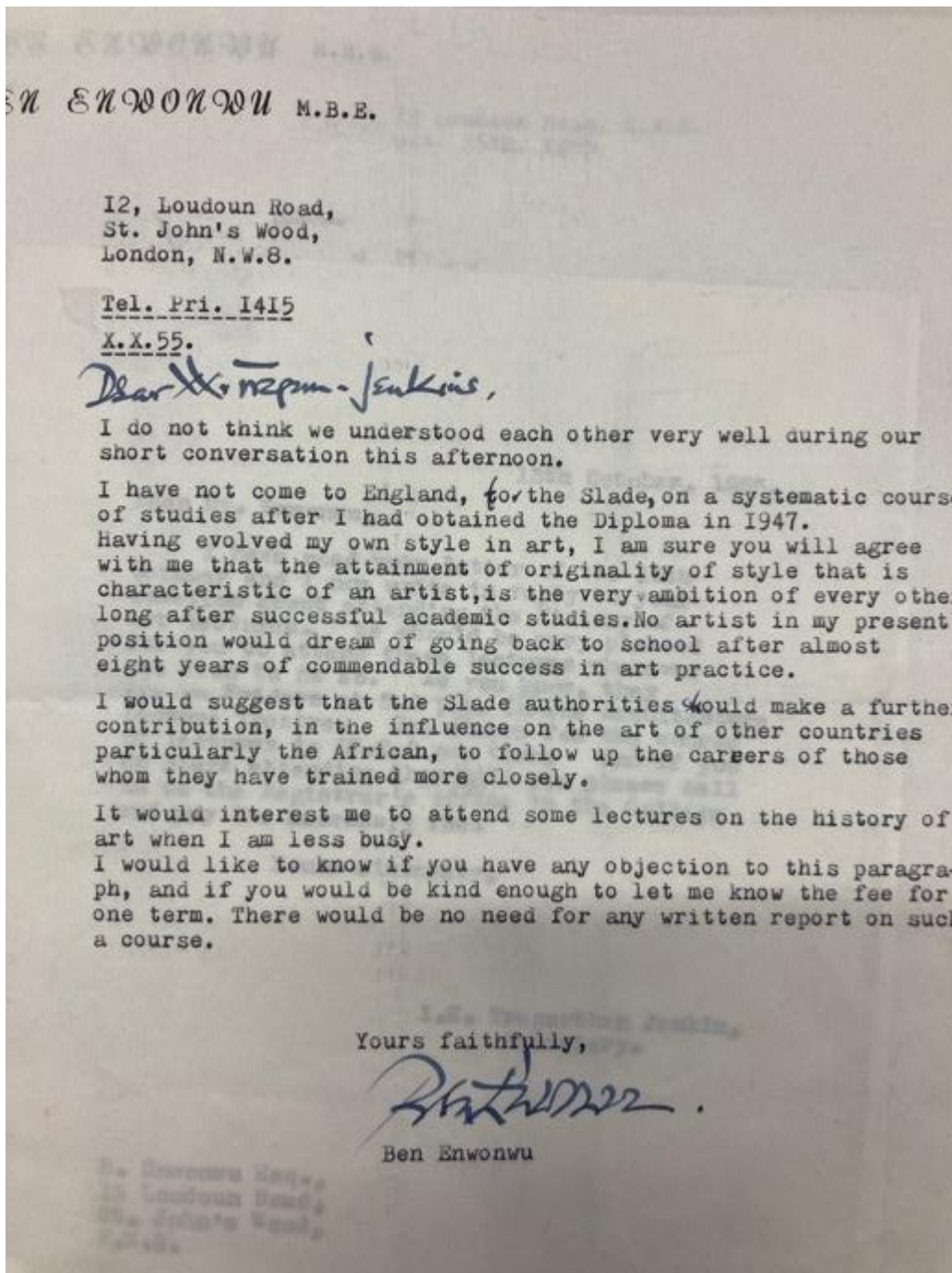
In January 1955, the Nigerian artist Ben Enwonwu, who had received a fine arts diploma from the Slade in 1947, petitioned the school's secretary I.E. Tregarthen Jenkin for a refresher course. He writes: "Every Government official here is entitled to a refresher course at his old college, and I have no other than the Slade". This request is not to suggest that Enwonwu so relished his time at the Slade that he wished to repeat his education. As detailed by Ming Tiampo and Liz Bruchet in their discussion of the pedagogy at the Slade, the curriculum that

Enwonwu was taught was based on a Beaux Arts model, which followed a progression from drawing antique plaster casts to life drawing, before taking up painting and sculpture at more advanced levels.<sup>5</sup> This methodology stressed the superiority of European models of artmaking, both visually and ideologically, and left little space for other modes of representation. Enwonwu's response to this curriculum was one of rejection, emphasising the status of the Slade as a contact zone between imperialism and decolonisation. Enwonwu even supplemented his Slade degree with a postgraduate year studying West African ethnography at University College London.<sup>6</sup> He also later repudiated the Slade's intervention into the Nigerian art school system in 1958.

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<sup>5</sup> Tiampo and Bruchet (2021).

<sup>6</sup> Sylvester Okwunodo Ogbechie, *Ben Enwonwu: The Making of an African Modernist* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2008), 84.



**Figure 2**

Letter from Ben Enwonwu to I.E. Tregarthen Jenkin, 10 October 1955. UCL Special Collections.

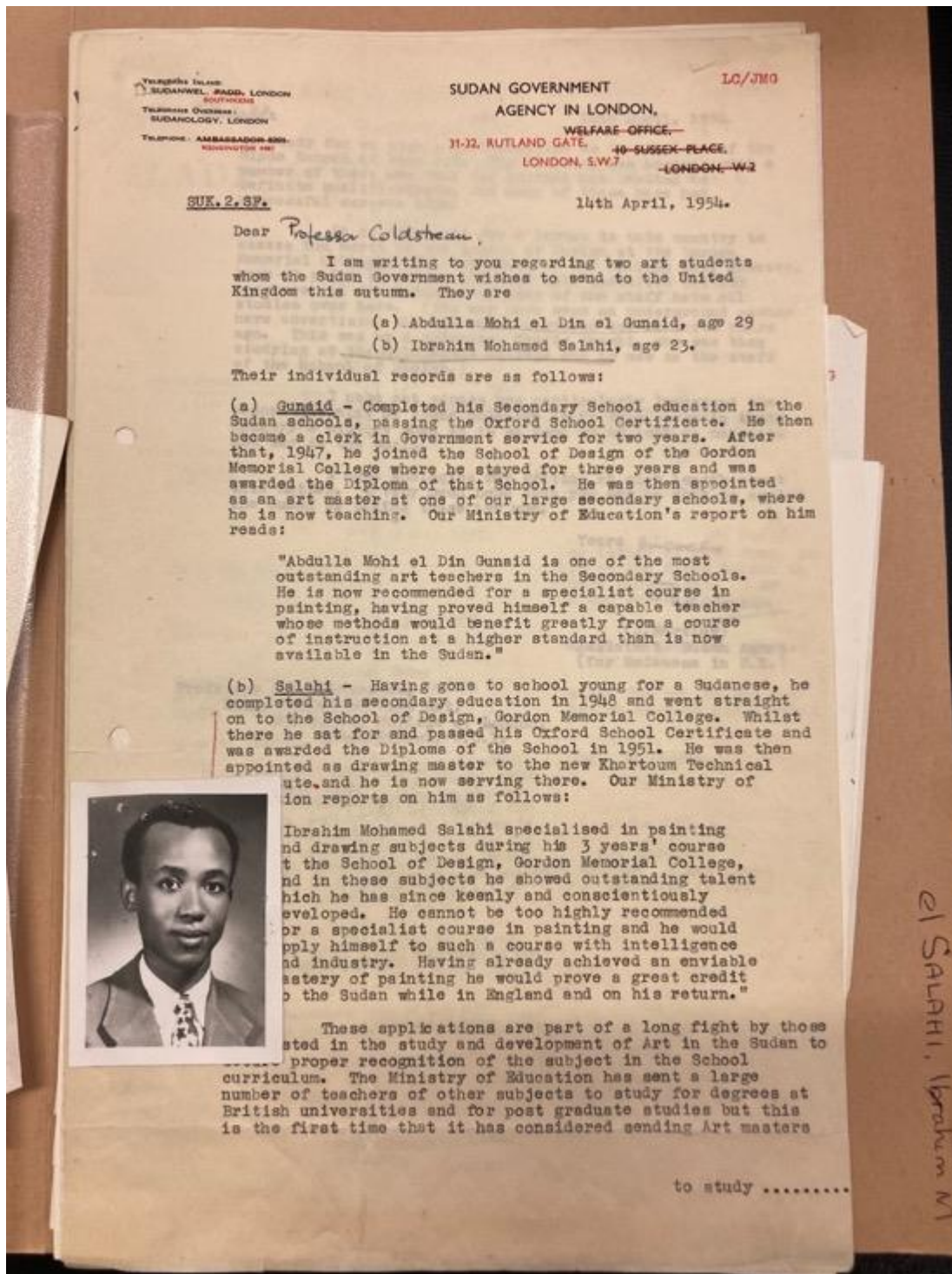
When his demands are not met, Enwonwu admonishes the Slade authorities for not keeping up with his success and urges them to follow the careers of those whom they have trained more closely, especially those from African countries. Enwonwu takes several months to respond to Tregarthen Jenkin's letter, finally writing from his London address in October 1955. Over the course of 1955, Enwonwu was awarded a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) for his contributions to art and culture, and his new letterhead bears this insignia.



**Figure 3**

Ben Enwonwu with Queen Elizabeth II and his bronze statue of her at the Royal Society of British Artists, 1957. Courtesy of The Ben Enwonwu Foundation.

In 1956, Enwonwu was commissioned to create an official portrait of Queen Elizabeth II. The queen sat for him a dozen times, including at Buckingham Palace; the sculpture was completed in 1957.

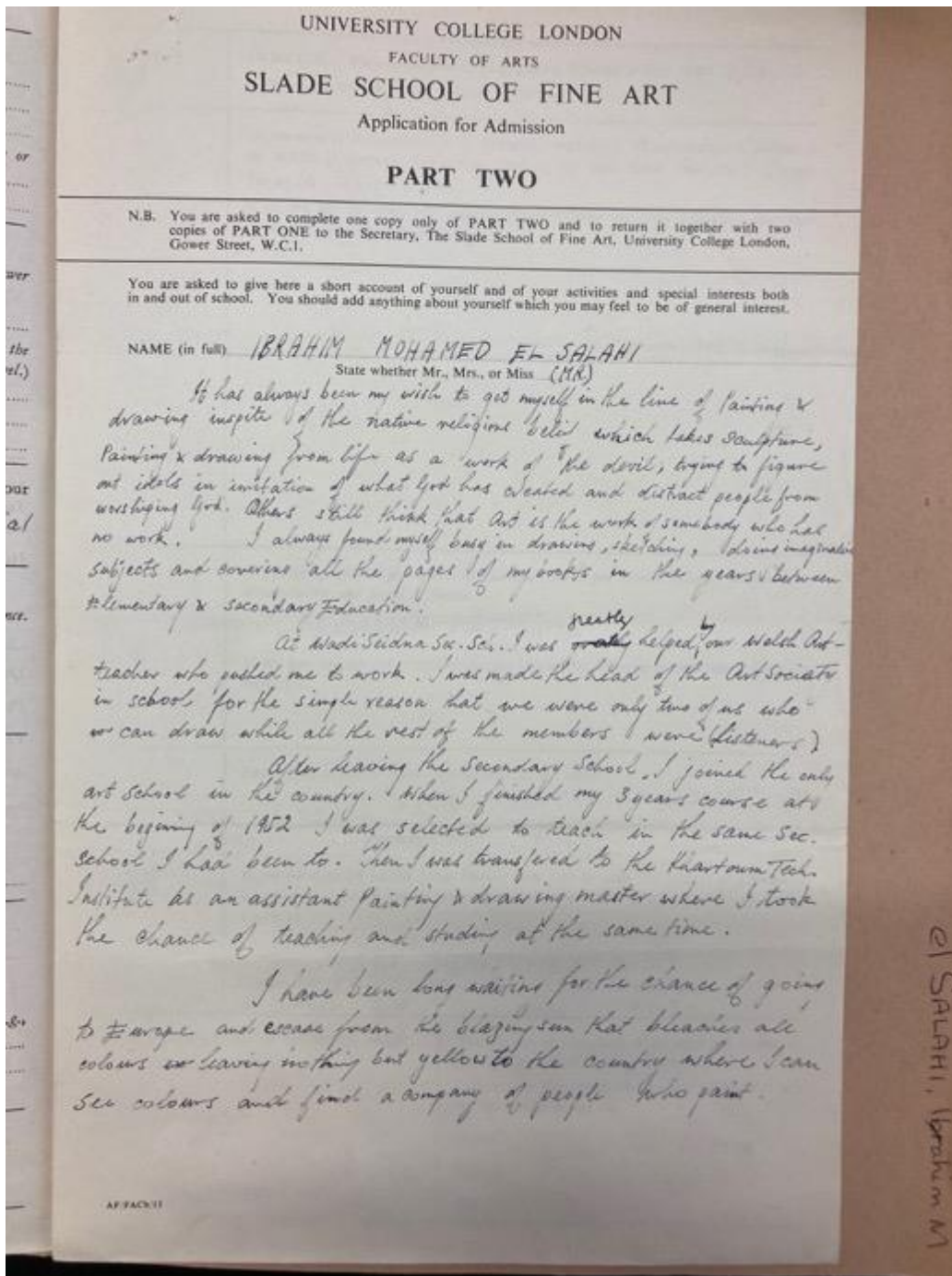


**Figure 4**

Letter from the Sudan Government Agency in London to Slade Professor William Coldstream regarding two prospective students, Abdullah Mohi Din el Gunaid and the pictured Ibrahim Mohamed Salahi (known today as Ibrahim El-Salahi), 14 April 1954. UCL Special Collections.

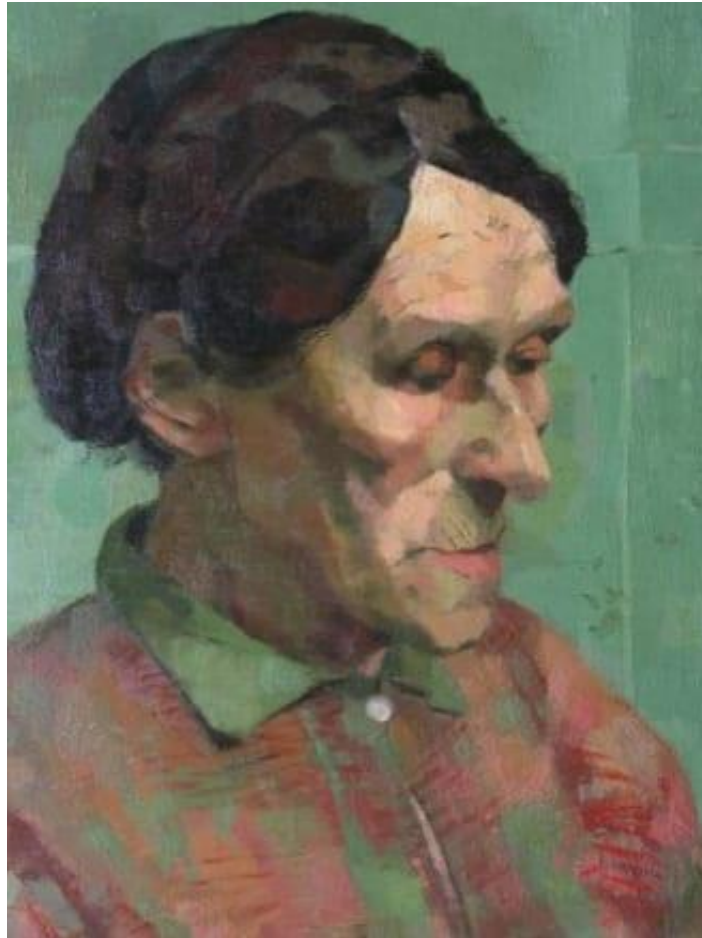
A year prior to Enwonwu's petition to attend a refresher course at the Slade, Ibrahim El-Salahi won a scholarship courtesy of the Sudanese government to study at the school for a three-year course from 1954 to 1957.





**Figure 5**  
Ibrahim El-Salahi's application to the Slade, completed 3 May 1954. UCL Special Collections.

In his application to the Slade, El-Salahi expresses his desire to study in London: "It has always been my wish to get myself in the line of painting and drawing in spite of the native religious belief which takes sculpture, painting and drawing from life as a work of the devil, trying to figure out idols in imitation of what God has created and distract people from God". He continues: "I have been long waiting for the chance of going to Europe and escape from the blazing sun that bleaches all colours leaving nothing but yellow to the country where I can see colours and find a company of people who paint".



**Figure 6**

Ibrahim El-Salahi, *Figure (female model)*, 1956. Oil on plywood board, 42.5 x 57.5cm.  
Collection of Eve El-Salahi.

El-Salahi had been introduced to Western empirical approaches to art by British colonial artists at Sudan's Gordon Memorial College where he studied from 1949 to 1950. At the Slade, El-Salahi attended compulsory courses in anatomy and life drawing supplemented by art historical lectures by eminent art historians, such as E.H. Gombrich, whose book *The Story of Art* was the set reading for the students.<sup>7</sup>

As previously mentioned, the Slade curriculum had been based on a Beaux Arts model, that is until the appointment of William Coldstream in 1949.<sup>8</sup> Coldstream reoriented the school's focus towards methods of enquiry, moving away from antique models and idealised aesthetics. Based on his experience with the Euston Road School, which sought to create works that were accessible to a larger public through observational realism and engagement with social issues, Coldstream established an environment where representation and form were aligned with research and society.<sup>9</sup> In the wake of World War Two, these reforms pivoted students away from the history of Continental European art as the model for artmaking. They were encouraged to articulate their own vision of the world.

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<sup>7</sup> Amna Malik, 'Transnational Slade: Ibrahim El-Salahi', Slade Archive Project (17 June 2014), <https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/slade-archive-project/2014/06/17/transnational-slade-ibrahim-el-salahi/>. Accessed 5 February 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Tiampo and Bruchet (2021).

<sup>9</sup> Tiampo and Bruchet (2021).



**Figure 7**

Ibrahim El-Salahi, *They Always Appear*, 1964. Oil paint on canvas, 610 x 460 cm. Tate.

After graduating from the Slade in 1957, El-Salahi returned to Sudan to teach at the College of Fine and Applied Arts. He became a key member of the Khartoum School, a group of artists formed in 1961 that sought to develop a new visual vocabulary for the independent nation. While some scholars argue that El-Salahi overthrew his academic training from the Slade, one could argue that Coldstream's example of Euston Road had taught him that there was more than one way to be modern.<sup>10</sup>

El-Salahi's *They Always Appear* is part of a series of eight paintings that he began in 1961. After complaining about "the blazing sun" in his application to the Slade, El-Salahi adopts Sudan's sun-baked earth tones in *They Always Appear*. The painting combines mask-like figures, a well-known trope of artistic modernism, with the curved lines, spheres and crescents of Arabic calligraphy and Islam. While El-Salahi's work fulfilled the expectations of a nationalist art in Sudan, it is a mistake to understand it purely in these terms. In actuality, El-Salahi's work transcends national bounds, exemplifying a postcolonial aesthetic in dialogue

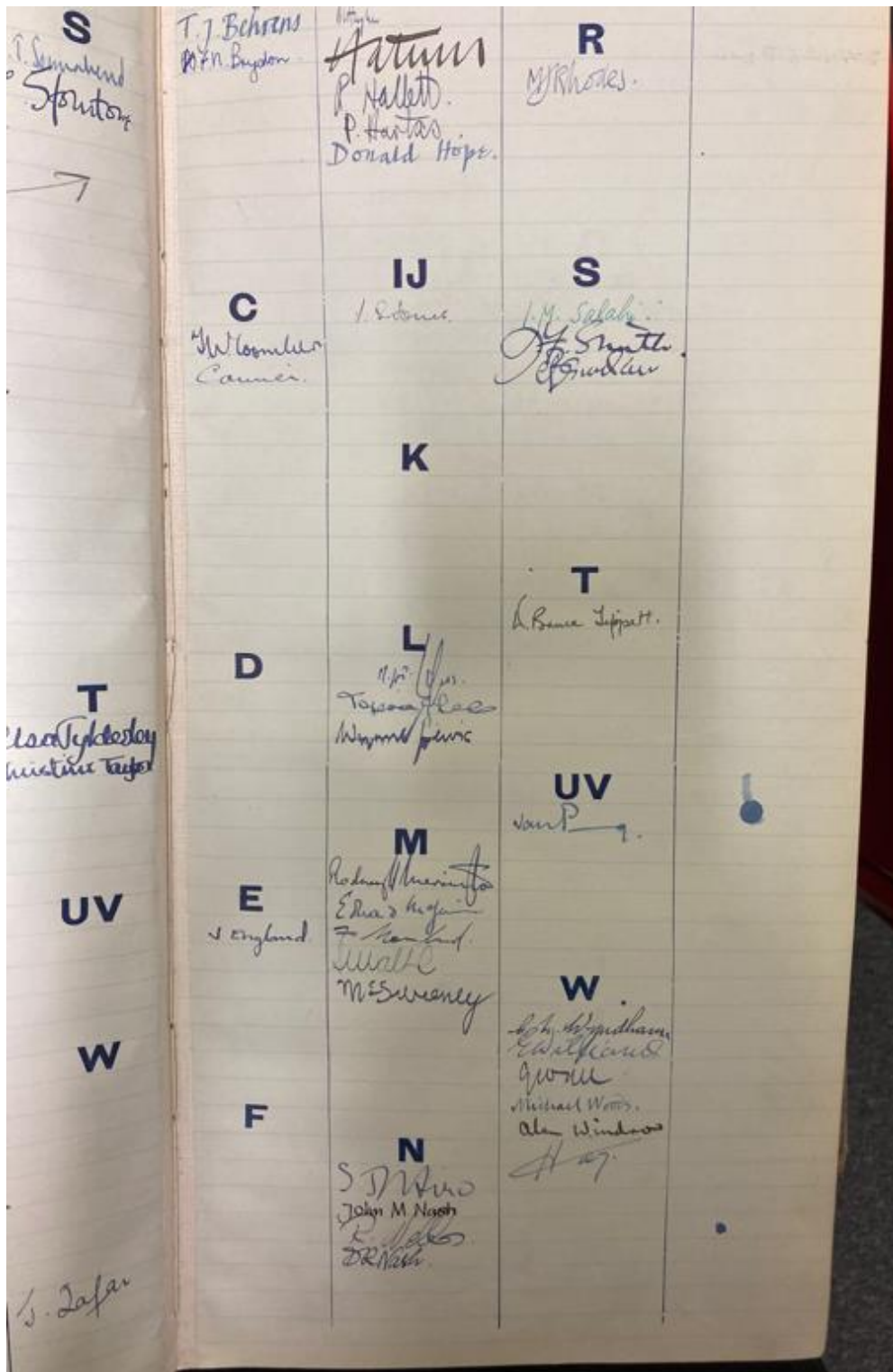
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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Iftikhar Dadi, "Ibrahim El Salahi and Calligraphic Modernism in a Comparative Perspective", *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 109, no. 3 (2010): 555–576. I borrow here from Courtney Martin who argues of Coldstream's significance to the Pakistani artist Anwar Shemza: "The Euston Road example would also have showed Shemza that there was more than one way to be modern". Courtney J. Martin, "Anwar Jalal Shemza's Art World in London: 1956–60", *Anwar Jalal Shemza*, ed. Iftikhar Dadi (London: Ridinghouse, 2015), 26–31 (28).

with metropolitan developments while also taking account of regional and national specificities.<sup>11</sup>

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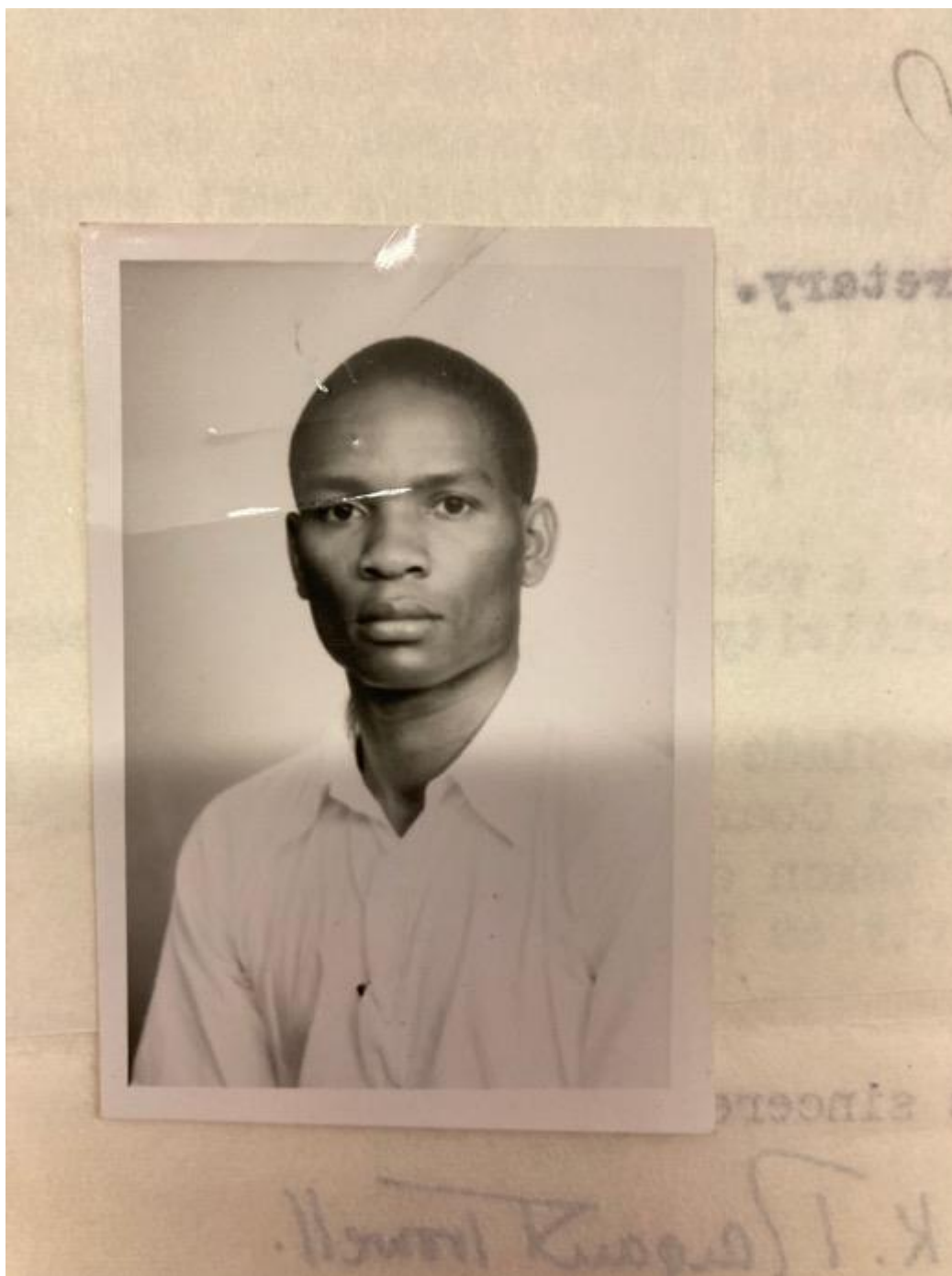
<sup>11</sup> Dadi (2010) and Salah Hassan, *Ibrahim El-Salahi: A Visionary Modernist* (London: Tate Publishing, 2103).



**Figure 8**

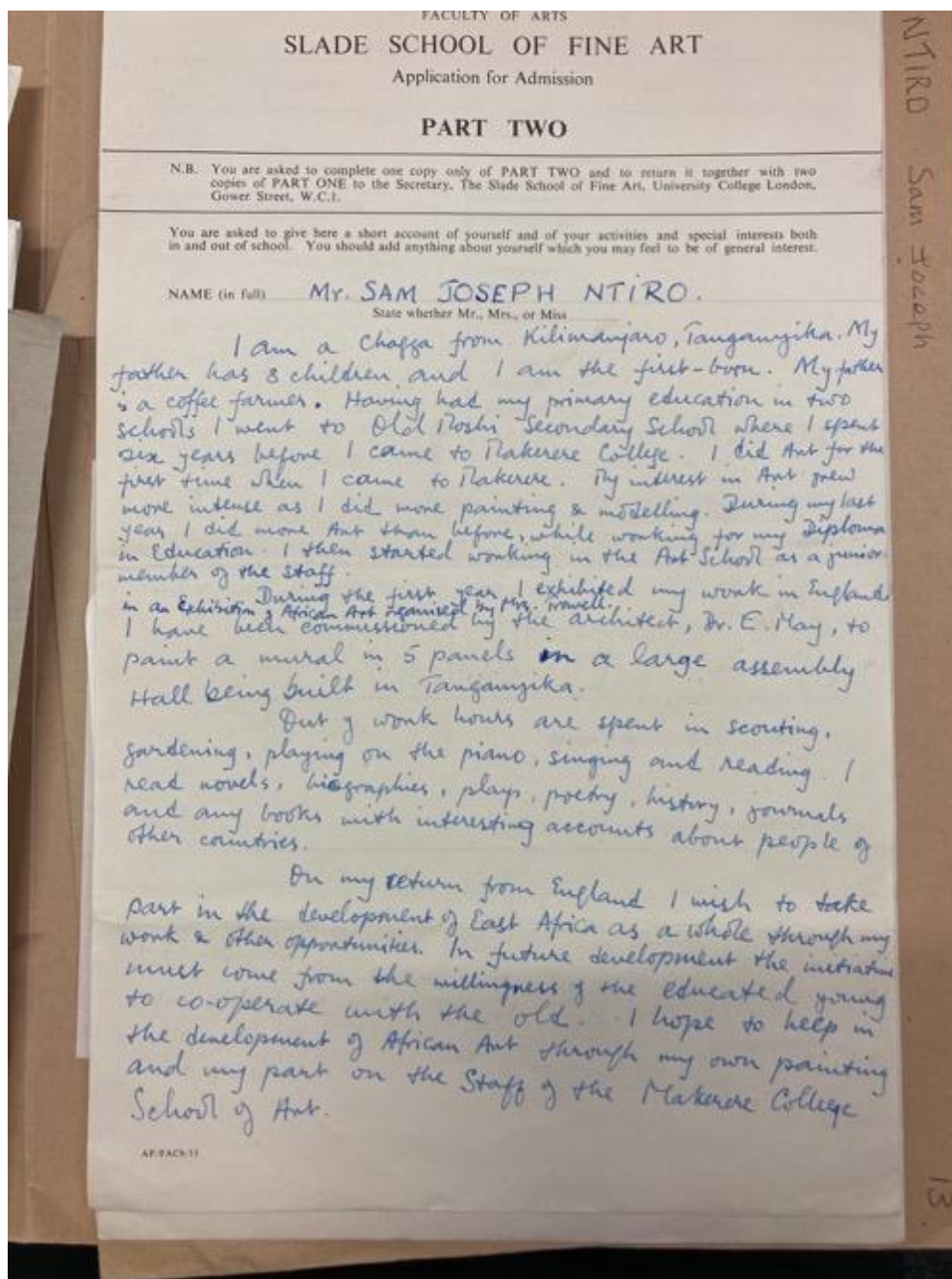
Slade sign-in sheet, signed by Ibrahim El Salahi and Sam Ntiro, 4 October 1954. UCL Special Collections.

At the Slade, El-Salahi studied alongside Tanzanian-born artist Sam Ntiro, who attended the school from 1952 to 1955. This sign-in sheet shows both artists entered the Slade building on 4 October 1954. Ntiro is the first signature under “N” and El-Salahi is the first signature under “S”.



**Figure 9**

Photograph of Sam Ntiro included in his application to the Slade, completed 22 November 1951. UCL Special Collections.



**Figure 10**

Ntiro's application to the Slade, completed 22 November 1951. UCL Special Collections.

In his application to the Slade, Ntiro states that he “did Art for the first time” while studying at Makerere College in Kampala, Uganda between 1944 and 1947. Born in 1923, Ntiro belonged to the Chagga people who lived on the slopes of Tanzania’s Mount Kilimanjaro. He grew up in Chagga country where his father was a coffee farmer. Ntiro completed primary and secondary education in Moshi, a municipality on the lower slopes of Kilimanjaro, before leaving Tanzania for tertiary education in Uganda. At Makerere, Ntiro was taught by Margaret Trowell, a Slade alumna who had established formal art education in Uganda in 1937. Upon graduation in 1947, Ntiro was invited to join the school’s teaching faculty. With Trowell’s encouragement, he applied to the Slade in 1951, enrolling in 1952.



**Figure 11**

Paula Figuerioa Rego, *Under Milk Wood*, 1954. Oil on canvas, 109.3 x 109.3 cm. UCL Art Museum.

El-Salahi and Ntiro were classmates to Portuguese-born artist Paula Rego. In 1954, they competed against each other in the Slade's Summer Composition Competition. Rego's painting *Under Milk Wood* won joint First Prize with Patricia Gerrard and Margaret J. Rees. In 1954–55, Rego also shared the prize for Head Painting with the Chinese artist Tseng Yu. Like Rego, Gerrard and Rees depicted passages from *Under Milk Wood* by Dylan Thomas, first broadcast as a radio play in the same year as the competition. In addition to *Under Milk Wood*, students had the option of choosing from either the biblical scene of Jesus raising of Jairus's daughter or the myth of Apollo and Daphne from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. As a student of Trowell, Ntiro would have been familiar with the representation of biblical scenes as his former teacher believed in spreading the gospel through visual arts.<sup>12</sup> Ntiro often portrayed these Christian themes in an African setting. Only the winners of the Slade prize system were acquired by the UCL Art Museum, so we can only speculate on the work submitted by other students.

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<sup>12</sup> On Trowell's curriculum, see Emma Wolukau-Wanambwa, "Margaret Trowell's School of Art, or How to Keep the Children's Work Really African", *Palgrave Handbook on Race and the Arts in Education*, eds. Amelia M. Kraehe, Rubén Gaztambide Fernández and Stephen B. Carpenter II (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018) 85–101. While Wolukau-Wanambwa contends that Trowell's pedagogy propagated colonial subject formation, I believe that this line of argument overlooks the agency and subjectivity of her pupils, including Ntiro.





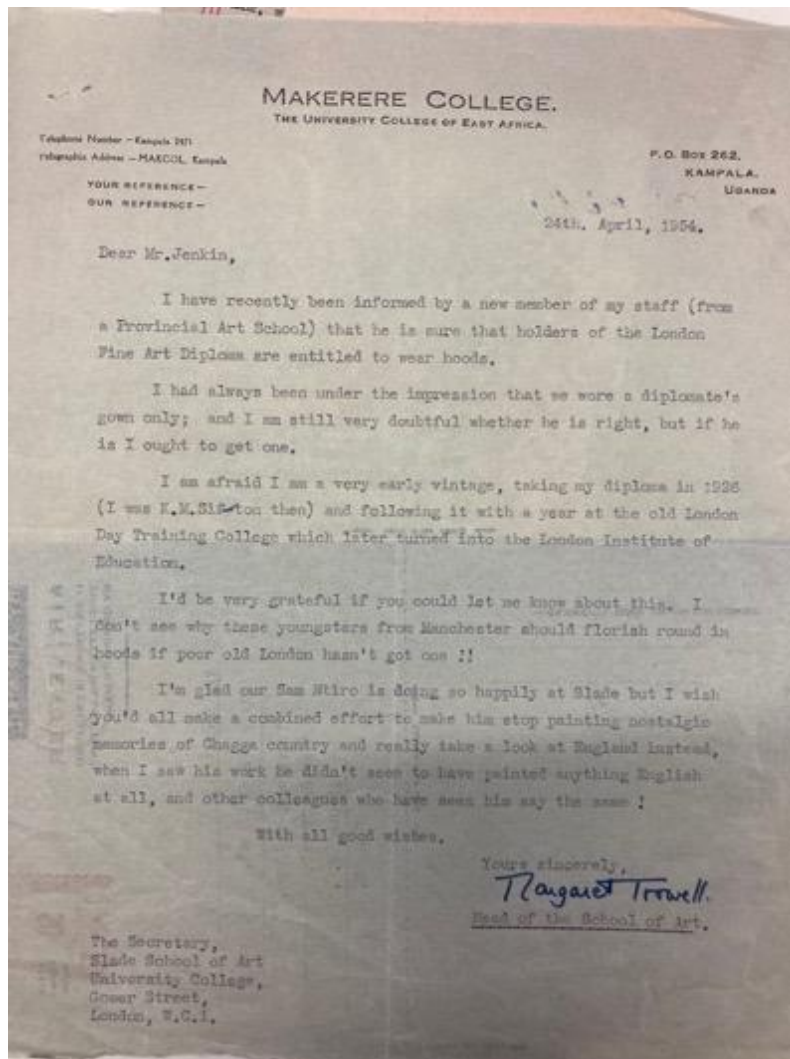
**Figure 12**

Patricia Gerrard, *Welsh Interior (Under Milk Wood)*, 1954. Oil on hardboard, 91.5 x 122 cm.  
UCL Art Museum.



**Figure 13**

Margaret J. Rees, *Under Milk Wood*, 1954. Oil on canvas, 102.3 x 127.7 cm.

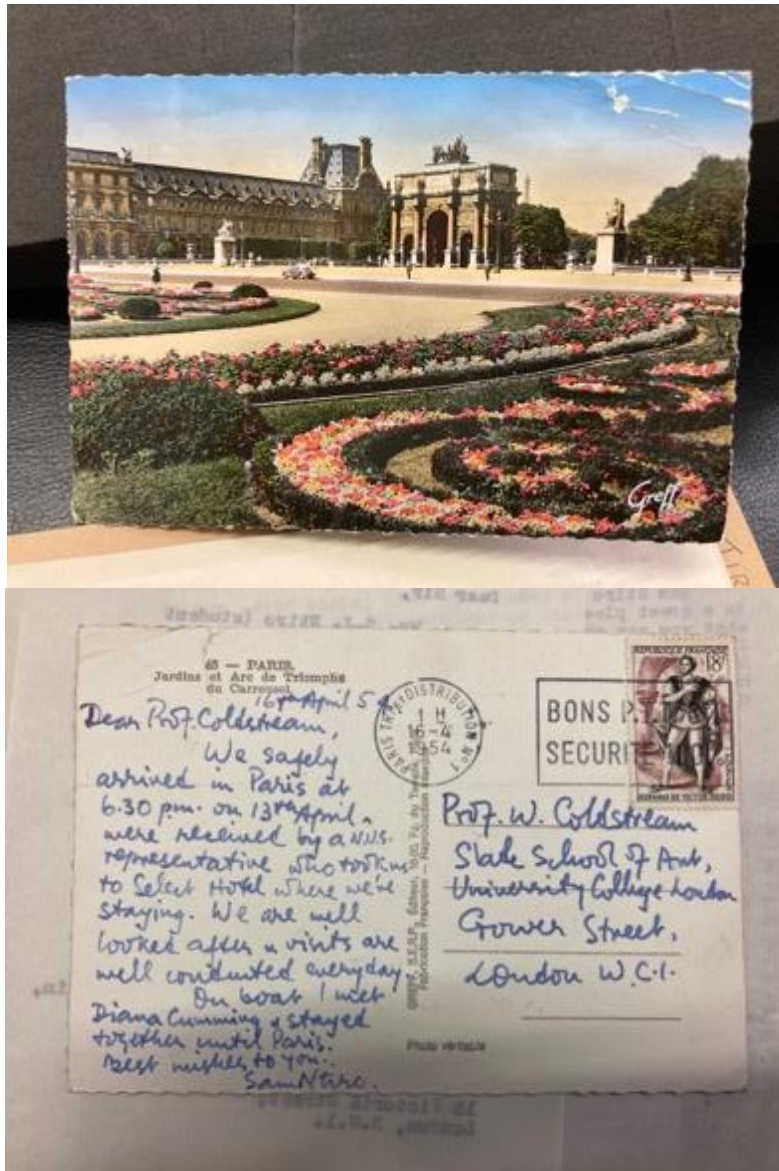


**Figure 14**

Letter from Margaret Trowell to I.E. Tregarthen Jenkin (Secretary of the Slade), 24 April 1954. UCL Special Collections.

On 24 April 1954, Trowell wrote to Tregarthen Jenkin, commenting on Ntiro: “I’m glad our Sam Ntiro is doing so happily at Slade but I wish you’d make a combined effort to make him stop painting nostalgic memories of Chagga country and really take a look at England instead, when I saw his work he didn’t seem to have painted anything English at all, and other colleagues who have seen him say the same!”. Ntiro was committed to depicting scenes of rural labour in Chagga country. After graduating from the Slade in 1955, Ntiro debuted with Piccadilly Gallery in October of that same year. Echoing Trowell’s comment, the British press celebrated Ntiro for having been “untouched” by his exposure to Western art education.<sup>13</sup> Working against these stereotypical responses, I argue that Ntiro’s practice was one enabled and forged through distance from Chagga country, beginning in Uganda and continuing in Europe. His paintings act as a repository for memories of his home, a gesture only made possible by his departure.

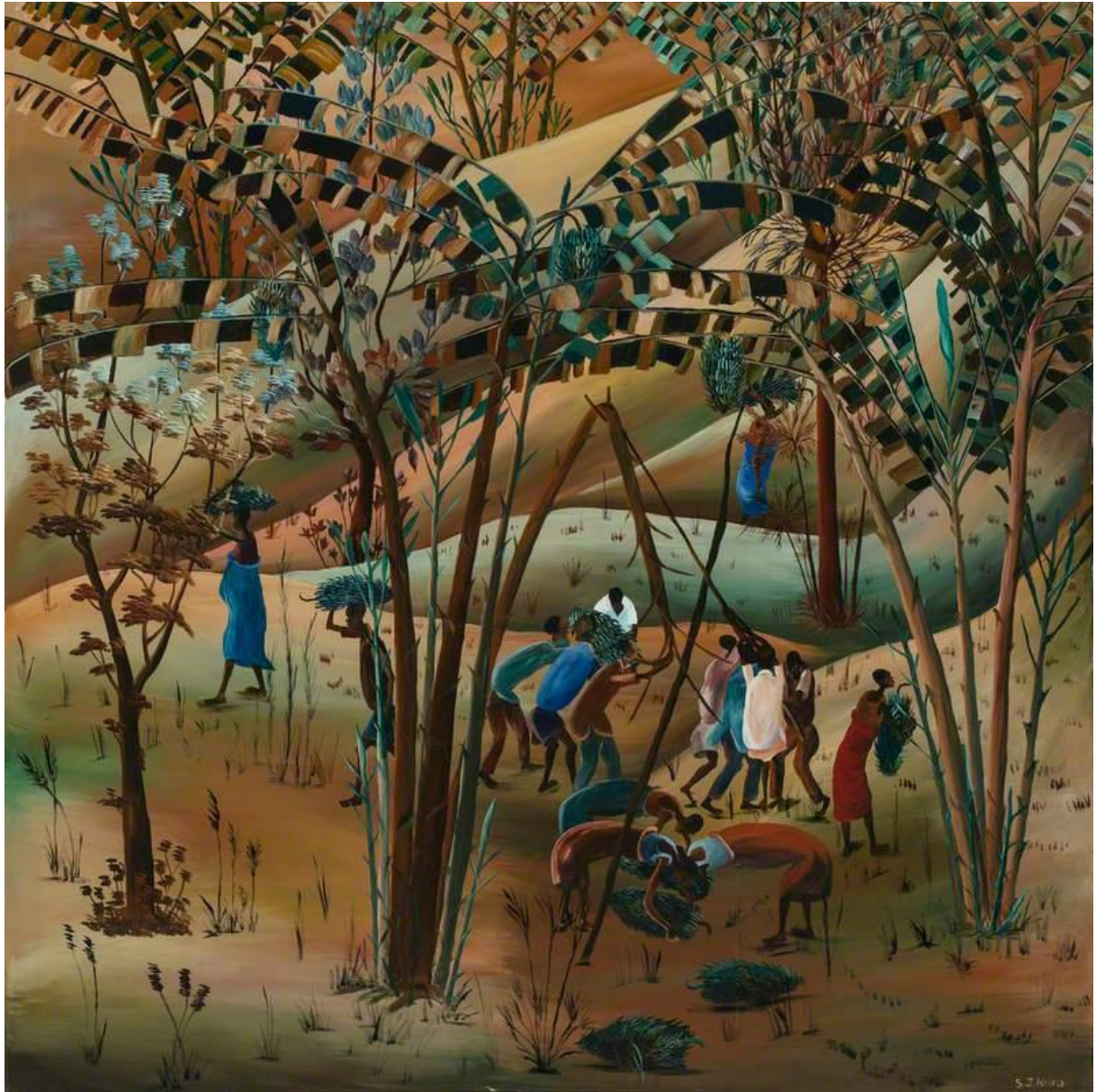
<sup>13</sup> Eric Newton, “Sam Ntiro Exhibition”, *The Guardian* (18 November 1964).



**Figure 15**

A postcard sent from Paris by Sam Ntiro to Slade Professor William Coldstream, 16 April 1954. UCL Special Collections.

While at the Slade, Ntiro travelled to Italy and France. In Paris, Ntiro sent a postcard to Professor William Coldstream, followed up by a letter on 26 April 1954: “On the whole I liked the pictures in the French Impressionist Gallery best, especially H. Rousseau, Renoir and Van Gogh”. Ntiro describes being “completely captivated” by two paintings: “The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian by Piero” and “Jesus holding a candle while Joseph does woodwork by night by G. Dela Tour (1593–1652)”



**Figure 16**

Sam Ntiro, *Banana Harvest*, 1962. Acrylic on canvas, 120 x 120 cm. Bristol Museum and Art Gallery.

Ntiro was commissioned to create three paintings for the 1962 opening of the new Commonwealth Institute building on London's Kensington High Street. The resultant works – *Banana Harvest*, *Village Gathering* and *Cattle Drinking* – create a subversive vision of the Commonwealth for British audiences, one premised on Tanzanian self-government. The people of Chagga country are depicted as in control of their own land. Indeed, Ntiro was an ardent supporter of independence. Upon graduation in 1955, he returned to teach at Makerere. Writing to Tregarthen Jenkin on 16 October 1958, Ntiro expressed his hopes for self-government. He also responds to an inquiry about the Capricorn Africa Society, stating: "You asked me about Capricorn Africa Society. It is regarded by Africans in East Africa as a means of pacifying Africans and keeping from attaining self-government". Tanzania gained independence in 1961, and Ntiro was asked to serve as the first East African High Commissioner to the Court of Saint James in London from 1961 until 1964.



**Figure 17**

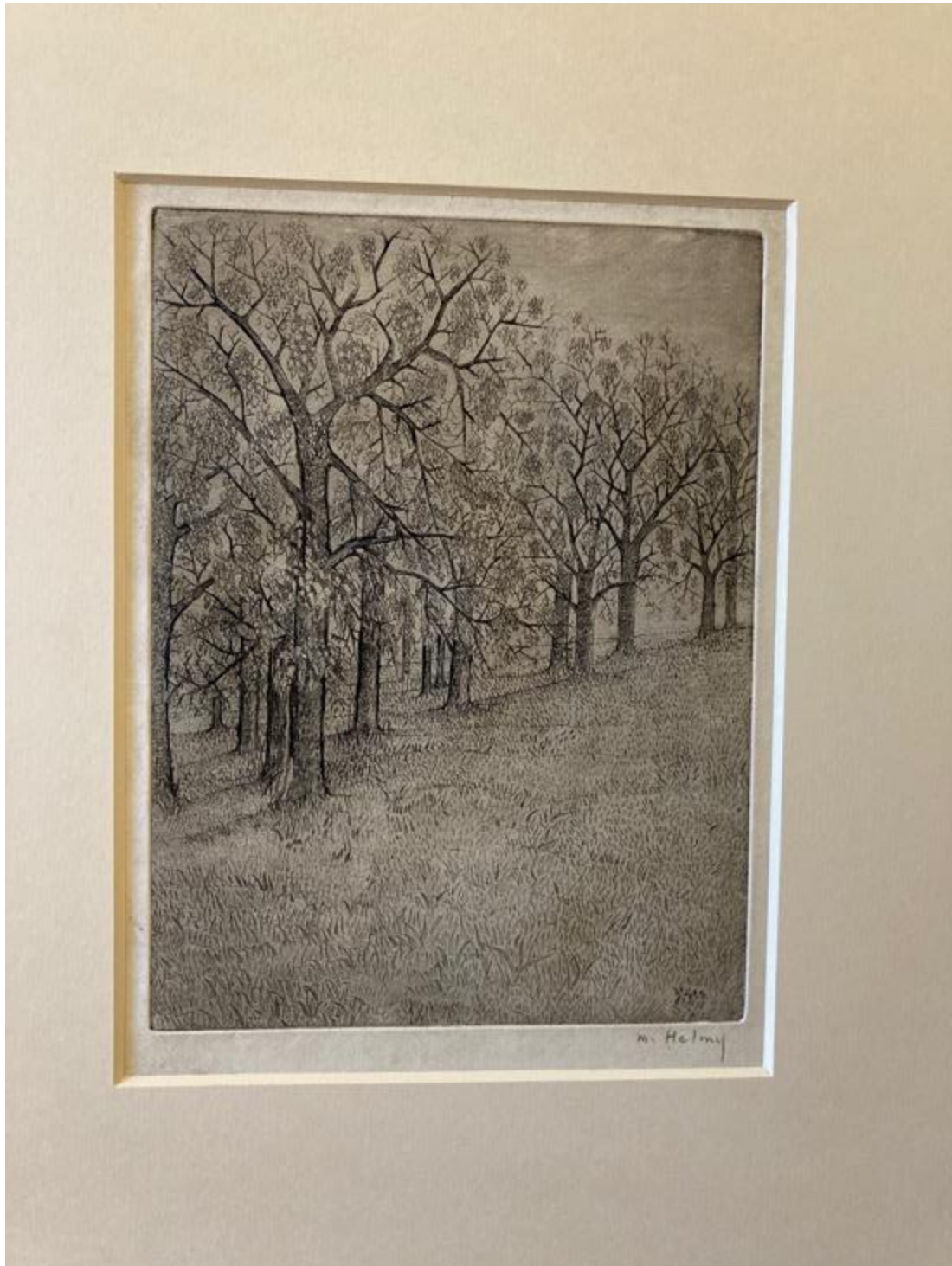
Sam Ntiro, *Village Gathering*, 1962. 120 x 120 cm. Bristol Museum and Art Gallery.

Of note in the paintings completed for the Commonwealth Institute is the attention to detail Ntiro paid to the flora and fauna of Chagga country. Calling to mind Ntiro's reference to Henri Rousseau in his 1954 letter to Coldstream, his plants are rendered with an intricate care for botany. He appears to use a variety of brushes and strokes to render the leaves on the trees, varying from bulbous and round to loose and wispy. Through their close attention to detail, Ntiro's paintings become a repository for his memories of the landscape.



**Figure 18**

Sam Ntiro, *Cattle Drinking*, 1962. 120 x 120 cm. Bristol Museum and Art Gallery.



**Figure 19**

Menhat Helmy, *Untitled*, c. 1954–1955. Dimensions tbc. UCL Art Museum.

The Egyptian artist Menhat Helmy studied at the Slade from 1952 to 1955. Her classmates included El-Salahi, Ntiro and Rego. *Untitled* was awarded the prize for etching and engraving in the 1954–55 session alongside co-winner British artist Michael Tyzack.





**Figure 20**

Michael Tyzack, *Untitled*, c. 1954–55. Dimensions tbc. UCL Art Museum.

The above etching by Michael Tyzack was Helmy's co-winner. With their attention to plants, it is easy to imagine the two works being completed in the same classroom.



**Figure 21**

Menhat Helmy, *Untitled*, 1954–55. Dimensions tbc. UCL Art Museum.

Another engraving by Helmy depicting the surrounding area of Bloomsbury.



**Figure 22**

Menhat Helmy, *Untitled*, 1954–55. Dimensions tbc. UCL Art Museum.

Helmy's depiction of a British seaside town.

EGYPTIAN MINISTRY OF EDUCATION  
EGYPTIAN EDUCATION BUREAU  
10/10/55

Miss Menhat Helmy:  
Has been a charming & admirable student,  
her attendance & progress completely satisfactory:  
her diploma was very well deserved.  
John Aldridge

V. R. P.

**Figure 23**

Note from Slade tutor John Aldridge commending Menhat's work and the achievement of her diploma, c. 1955. UCL Special Collections.



**Figure 24**

Menhat Helmy, *High Dam II*, 1964. Dimensions, tbc. Collection of Karim Zidan.

After receiving her diploma, Helmy returned to Egypt. She documented the changes in the country spurred by the Egyptian Revolution of 1952 and the ascension of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser through black and white etchings, a technique she honed at the Slade. One of Helmy's etchings depicts the construction of the Aswan High Dam.



**Figure 25**

Amir Nour, Self-portrait at the Slade School of Fine Art, 1962. Sharjah Art Foundation.

Supported by a grant from the Sudanese government, Amir Nour studied at the Slade for a Diploma in Fine Art between 1959 and 1962. In his application, Nour states that he wished to see the wider world, “a world of Michael Angelo [sic], Rodin and Henry Moore”. One of the referees for his application was Ibrahim El-Salahi.



**Figure 26**  
Amir Nour, *Untitled*, c. 1961–1962. UCL Art Museum.

While Nour specialised in sculpture under Slade tutor Reg Butler, he also excelled in printmaking, winning the prize for lithography in the session of 1961–62. He petitioned to remain at the Slade for a further year after taking his diploma, but his request was denied by the Sudanese government.

Slade School of Fine Art

2nd August, 1965

Dear Mr. Gaddal,

Thank you for your letter. I have today written to Reg Butler about Nur and I will make enquiries as to the possibility of his working with Henry Moore. I am afraid it is very doubtful whether either Butler or Moore need an assistant at the moment, but I will certainly do my best to see if there is any eminent sculptor who could help.

I will write to you as soon as I have any news.

Yours sincerely,

Slade Professor

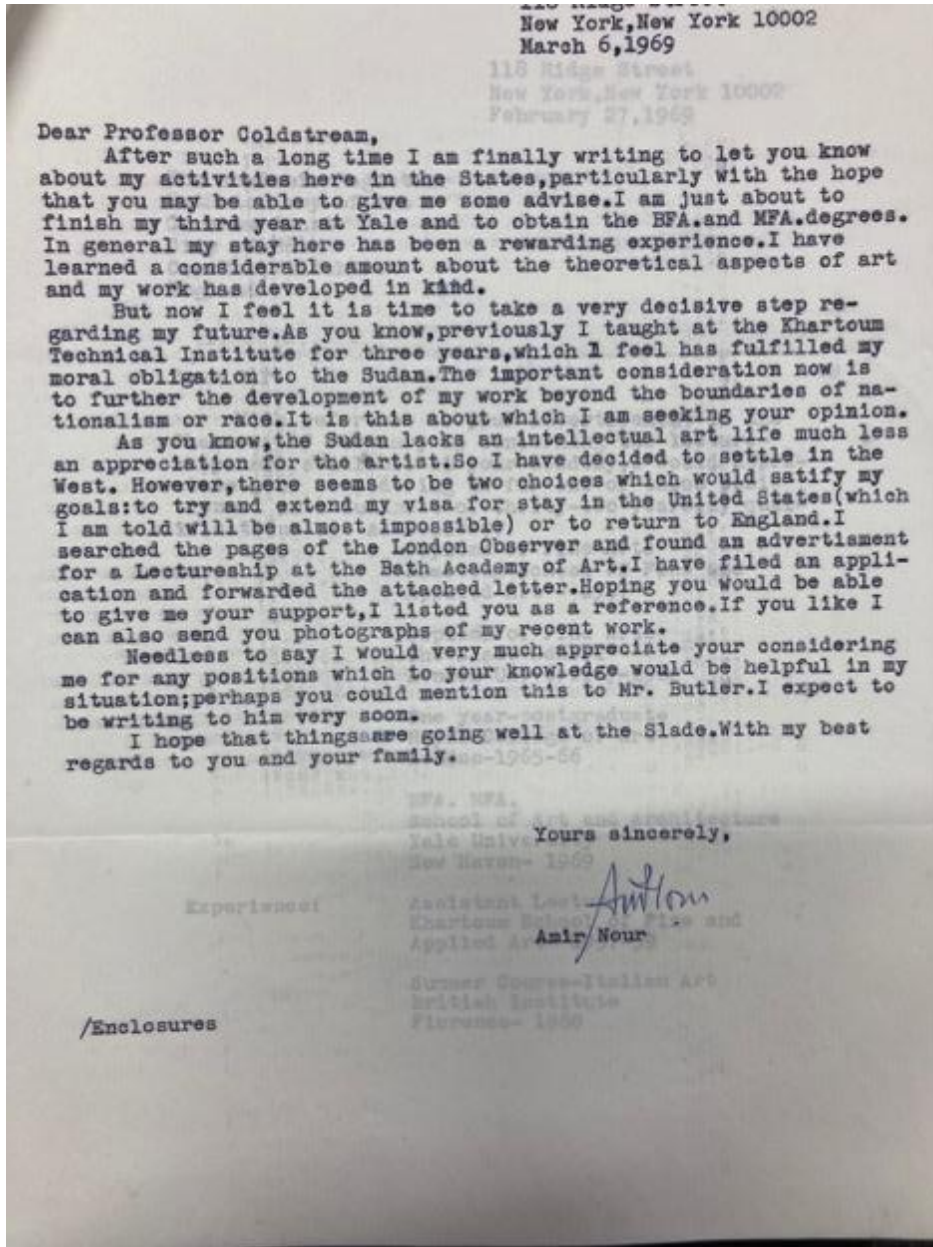
Mr. Saeed Ayoub El Gaddal,  
School of Art - K.T.I.,  
Khartoum,  
Sudan.

**Figure 27**

Letter from Professor William Coldstream to Saeed Ayoub El Gaddal, 27 July 1965. UCL Special Collections.

Upon graduation, Nour returned to Khartoum to teach for three years before he was awarded a one-year scholarship by the Sudanese government for postgraduate work. Nour wanted to study at the Slade, but the school did not yet offer a postgraduate course in sculpture and bronze casting. An alternative was proposed for Nour to seek out professional experience with either Reg Butler or Henry Moore. He ended up completing a postgraduate course in sculpture at the Royal College of Art from 1965–66.





**Figure 28**

Letter from Amir Nour to Professor William Coldstream, 6 March 1969. UCL Special Collections.

In 1967, Nour was awarded a Rockefeller Fellowship to study at Yale University where he completed a two-year BFA course before moving onto the one-year MFA degree. At Yale, Nour continued to take classes in Western art theories and philosophies while expanding his studies in African and Islamic art.<sup>14</sup> African and Islamic art had been absent from the curricula at the College of Fine and Applied Arts in Sudan as well as at the Slade. As Nour recalled:

The first time I heard any formal lectures on African art, particularly Yoruba art, was at Yale University in 1967. To learn about African art in a context other than "primitive art" had a

<sup>14</sup> Salah Hassan, "Brevity is the Soul of Wit: Amir Nour Between Minimalism and Africanism", *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 41 (2017): 84–107 (87).

significant impact on me... It was inspirational to hear Professor Robert F. Thompson lecturing on Yoruba art.<sup>15</sup>

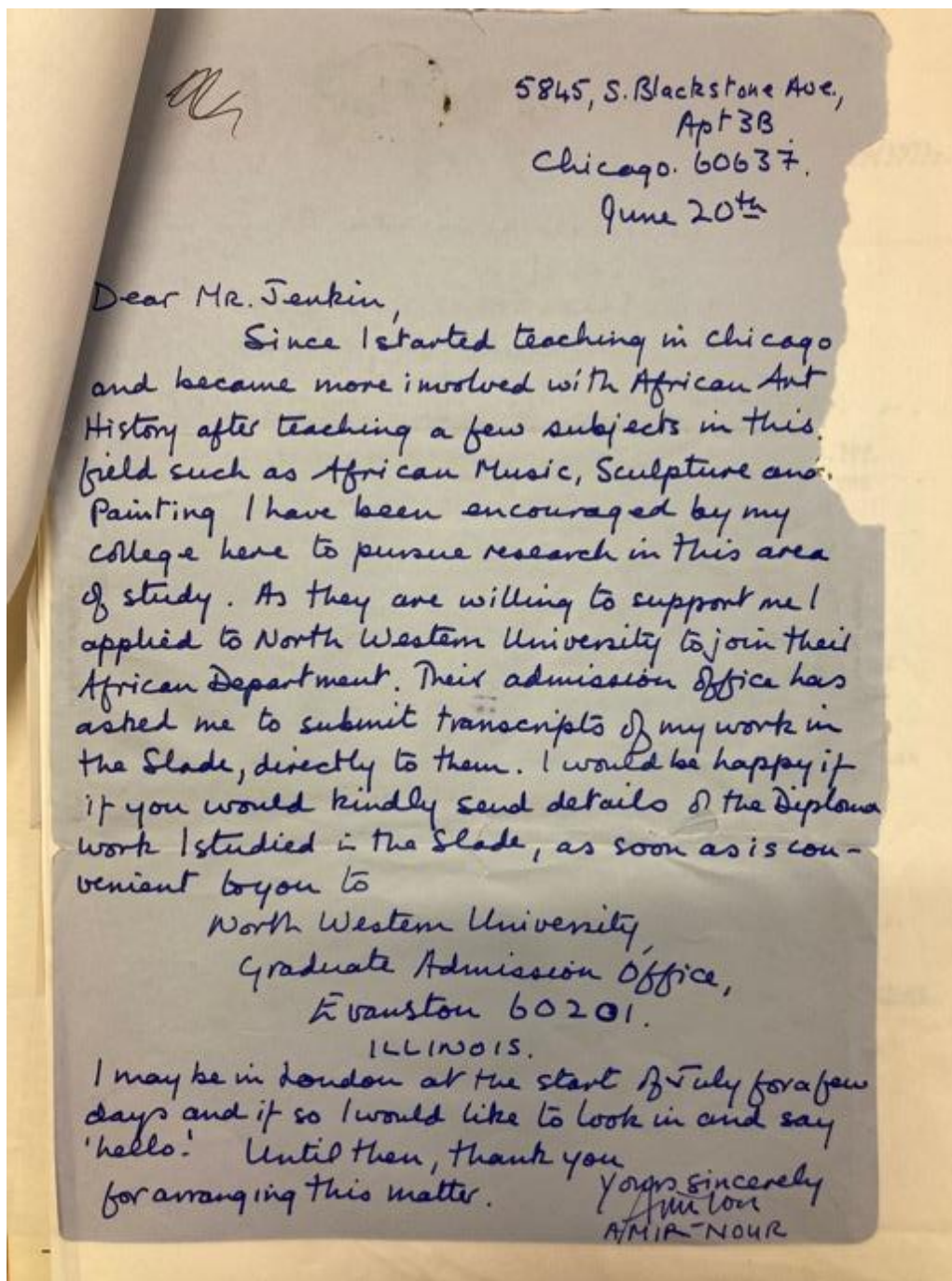
Nour was also exposed to minimalism and its debates as part of a larger discussion emerging at the time around the work of artists such as Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt and Robert Morris.<sup>16</sup>

During his third year at Yale, Nour wrote to Coldstream on 6 March 1969, expressing a sense of frustration with identity-based understandings of his work. He stated: “the important consideration now is to further the development of my work beyond the boundaries of nationalism or race”. He describes his plans to stay in the West, declaring that “Sudan lacks an intellectual art life”. Over the course of the following years, Nour would request several references from Coldstream as he applied for teaching posts at various institutions in the United Kingdom and the United States.

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<sup>15</sup> Amir Nour, "Developing African Art: Innovation and Tradition Seen through the Work of Two Artists: Lamide Fakaye and Ahmed Shibrain", PhD diss. (University of St Andrews, 2006), xv–xvi.

<sup>16</sup> Hassan (2017), 95.



**Figure 29**

Letter from Amir Nour to Slade secretary I.E. Tregarthen Jenkin, 20 June 1972. UCL Special Collections.

Nour eventually finds success teaching “African Art History” at the City Colleges of Chicago. He was encouraged to pursue this area of research by his college and had applied to join Northwestern’s African Department. In Chicago, Nour benefits from artistic exchange with the AfriCOBRA, a collective comprised of artists who had found a new resonance in their African ancestral heritage following the global decolonization movement, as well as other sculptors such as Richard Hunt and Melvin Edwards.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Hassan (2017), 90.

**AFRICA REPORT:** We'd like to try to get some perspective on how you see your work fitting into an African context. So we thought we'd begin by asking you why you are working here in the United States.

**NOUR:** That's a difficult question; I really can't answer that question. I taught in the art school at Khartoum [the School of Fine and Applied Art] for about five years and I think that's just about enough. I mean, if I was in the army I would have only done two years. Also I feel I am free and that as a free man I can live anywhere I like in this world. The thing I didn't like about the Sudan was that they really try to control your life—in terms

of where you stay and what you do. That's one thing I just couldn't take, and that's why I left. This is the first time that I really feel free, and now I'm happy because I can do what I like to do. If I don't want to be in the United States I can leave.

But at the same time, I am trying to be fair. I did my share. Five years of teaching in the Sudan—that's enough. Besides, I quit because I wanted to give the younger generation a chance; I think a place like that needs to change its staff every two or three years. That way things keep moving. . . .

**AFRICA REPORT:** But you think a school of fine arts is the only place to develop artists in an African context?

**NOUR:** Yes. In the Sudan the art school is the only place that is actually established to teach the students art. I don't approve of that place, but that's a personal matter. What they're doing is westernizing.

When I was there, they weren't teaching, for example, the history of the Sudan, and they never tried to examine the crafts or the history of Africa or the history of Islamic culture. The Sudan is Afro-Islamic culturally; so they ought to give more time to these two cultures than to others. But they were teaching Giotto, the Renaissance, Leonardo and Michelangelo—things like that. And they were still insisting that students get

## on the Place of the African Artist



Amir I. M. Nour with his sculpture, *Grazing at Shendi*. Photo by Bernard Pierre Wolff.  
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**Figure 30**

Amir Nour interviewed in *Africa Report: Magazine for the New Africa*, May–June 1974.  
UCL Special Collections.

To recall the 1969 letter addressed to Coldstream, Nour expressed a desire for his work to escape the confines of nationalism and race. As an artist who straddled multiple worlds, there seems to have been a limited capacity for understanding the transnationalism of his work at this current moment in time and beyond. In 1974, Nour was interviewed by *Africa Report* and photographed alongside his stainless-steel sculpture *Grazing at Shendi* (1969), which is comprised of two hundred and two semicircles of varying size. The work is based on the artist's childhood memories of watching sheep graze on the hillside near his hometown of Shendi, an

ancient city on the bank of the Nile River. In the interview, the reporter immediately tries to fit Nour's work into an African context to which the artist responds, "That's a difficult question; I really can't answer that". Alternatively, when *Grazing at Shendi* was first exhibited the critical reaction deemed it "too Western" for an artist of African descent.<sup>18</sup> Nour lamented being labelled as "Western", while conversely he noted that Western artists who borrowed from African art were never labelled as "African".<sup>19</sup> In actuality, *Grazing at Shendi* is a work that transcends these cultural distinctions: it is based on the domes and arches, cattle horns, calabashes and sand hills of Nour's homeland and combined with the visual vocabulary and materials of minimalism. To take up the headline from *Africa Report*, the case of Nour demonstrates the entangled "place of the African artist" and the ways in which these labels derived from national and continental frameworks can obfuscate more than they reveal about artmaking and identity formation, both then and now.

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<sup>18</sup> Hassan (2017), 98.

<sup>19</sup> Hassan (2017), 98.