

## FOUND OBJECTS

# The Power of the Portrait

Celeste and Reggie Hodges gift their collection of African works to the Museum of the Peace Corps Experience.

BY ZACHARY KLIM

**P**ortraiture has been central to museum collections for centuries because it is a profound medium for storytelling and emotional connection. Portraits give viewers a window into the worlds of both the subject and the artist. Reggie and Celeste Hodges, who met as Peace Corps Volunteers in Sierra Leone in 1969, recently donated an inspirational collection of hand-drawn and photographic portraits, as well as other artifacts including masks, household items, games, and musical instruments from West Africa, to the Museum of the Peace Corps Experience.

Reggie studied art at North Carolina Central University and started sketching his village surroundings in Sembehun, Sierra Leone, where he served as a primary school teacher.

"I loved drawing," Reggie says. "When I departed for the Peace Corps I packed a few art pads, drawing pencils, and charcoal. When the children saw me drawing in the village, they asked if I could draw them. In response to growing demand, I began drawing the students under a tree during our lunch breaks at school. Each sketch took 15 to 20 minutes and focused on facial relationships, light, and shadow. I

drew several days a week and over the course of a year I drew every child in the school. I gave most of these drawings to the children but retained several that we donated to the museum."

One of Reggie's most memorable subjects was Fatmata Jalloh, a neighbor's daughter and a class 5 student at Reggie's school. Fatmata loved to pose, and Reggie drew her on several occasions. For Reggie, drawing was a means of expression, relaxation, and a way to document his surroundings.

Celeste also served as a school teacher in Sierra Leone and was a prolific photographer during that time. Much of her photography documents fishing and agricultural practices in Shenge, Sierra Leone. "Being welcomed into a community is a gift, and every portrait I took is a reminder of a connection made, a moment and



person I cherish to this day," she reflects.

One of Celeste's favorite images is of Mama Fillie weaving a basket. Celeste recalls how Mama Fillie could often be found weaving baskets and fishing traps, or spinning cotton while surrounded by family members on the veranda of her home. For Celeste, the image evokes powerful memories of her time in Sierra Leone, and for future museum visitors it will serve as a visual record of Celeste and Mama Fillie's relationship—helping audiences participate in these lived experiences that bridge the past and the present. ●

*Zachary Klim (Bangladesh 2000–01) is Executive Director of the Museum of the Peace Corps Experience. To donate an item or share a story, use the QR code below.*

