



Portrait of Chéri Samba, © Elie Jorand Courtesy André Magnin

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## Chéri Samba

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## Biography

Born in 1956, Kinto M'Vuila, Democratic Republic of Congo  
Lives and works in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo

Chéri Samba is exclusively represented by the gallery MAGNIN-A, Paris.

In 1972 Chéri Samba left school in order to become a sign painter on Kasa Vubu Avenue in Kinshasa. From this circle of artists (which included Moke, Bodo, and later Samba's younger brother Cheik Ledy) arose one of the most vibrant schools of popular painting of the twentieth century. Working both as a billboard painter and a comic strip artist, Samba employed the conventions of both genres when he began making paintings on sacking cloth (canvas being too expensive) in 1975. Indeed, he borrowed the bubbles from the comics in order to incorporate in his paintings not only narrative but also comments. Samba has recalled how he came to use text in these paintings: *"I had noticed that people in the street would walk by my paintings, glance at them and keep going. I thought that if I added a bit of text, people would have to stop and take time to read, to get more into the painting and admire it. That's what I called the 'Samba signature'. Since then I put text in all my paintings."* In the early 1980s he began signing his paintings 'Chéri Samba: Artiste Populaire'. Indeed, the popularity of his paintings soon went beyond Kinshasa's borders. By the mid 1980s his work was gaining an international audience.

Samba's paintings of this period reveal his perception of the social, political, economic and cultural realities of Zaïre (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), with subject such as everyday life in Kinshasa, customs, sexuality, AIDS, social inequalities, and corruption. Samba explained, *"My painting is concerned with people's lives. I'm not interested in myths or beliefs. That's not my goal. I want to change our mentality that keeps us isolated from the world. I appeal to people's consciences. Artists must make people think."* Since the late 1980s on, he became the main subject of his paintings. For Samba, this is not an act of narcissism but the narrative of a successful African artist in the art world.

## SOLO SHOWS (SELECTION)

2005

*J'aime Chéri Samba: A selection of paintings from the exhibition at the Fondation Cartier, Texas Southern University, Houston, USA*

*Les débuts de Chéri Samba, Kunstverein Braunschweig, Germany*

2004/2007

*Chéri Samba, Corsoveneziaotto Arte Contemporanea, Milano, Italy*

2004

*J'aime Chéri Samba, Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain, Paris, France (curator : André Magnin)*

2003

*Chéri Samba moto na Tervuren, Musée royal de l'Afrique Centrale, Tervuren, Belgium*

1998

*Chéri Samba : Tableaux récents, MAMCO, Geneva, Switzerland*

1997/1998

*Chéri Samba, Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie, Paris, France (curator : Jean-Hubert Martin)*

1991

*Chéri Samba, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, USA*

*Formas de dissidencià : Chéri Samba, Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona, Spain*

1984

*Chéri Samba, Centre Culturel Français, Lubumbashi, DRC*

## GROUP SHOWS (SELECTION)

2020

*Alpha Crucis, Musée Astrup Fearnley, Oslo, Norway (curator : André Magnin)*

*Kings of Kin, Galerie MAGNIN-A, Paris, France*

2019

*Truth Tellers, Richard Taittinger Gallery, New-York, USA*

2018

*Africa Passions, Evora Africa, Palais Cadaval, Portugal (curator : André Magnin)*

*Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, A Beautiful Elsewhere, Power Station of Art (PSA), Shanghai, China*

2017

*Art/Afrique : le nouvel atelier \_ Les Initiés : sélection d'œuvres (1989-2009) de la collection d'art contemporain africain Pigozzi, Fondation Louis Vuitton, Paris, France (curators : Suzanne Pagé, Angéline Scherf, Ludovic Delalande ; scientific exhibition council : André Magnin)*

*E-Mois, MACAAL, Marrakech, Morocco (curators : Othman Lazraq, Meriem Berrada)*

*AFRICA. Raccontare un mondo*, PAC Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea, Milano, Italy

2016

*Regarding Africa: Contemporary Art and Afro-Futurism*, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tel Aviv, Israël (curator : Ruth Direktor)

*Congo Art Works. Peinture populaire*, Palais des beaux-arts de Bruxelles (Bozar), Brussels, Belgium

2015

*Picasso Mania*, Grand-Palais, Paris, France (curators : Didier Ottinger, Diana Widmaier-Picasso, Emilie Bouvard)

*Beauté Congo 1926-2015 Congo Kitoko*, Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain, Paris, France (curator : André Magnin)

*Une brève histoire de l'avenir*, Musée du Louvre, Paris, France (curators : Dominique de Font-Réaulx, Jean de Loisy, Sandra Adam-Couralet, Martin Kiefer)

2014

*Ici l'Afrique / Here Africa*, Château de Penthes, Geneva, Switzerland (curator : Adelina von Fürtsenberg)

2013

*Raw Vision, 25 ans d'Art Brut*, La Halle Saint Pierre, Paris, France (curators : Martine Lusardy, John Maizels)

2011

*JapanCongo, Double regard de Carsten Höller sur la collection de Jean Pigozzi* (curateur : Yves Aupetitallot), Le Magasin, Grenoble, France ; The Garage Center for Contemporary Culture, Moscow, Russia

2010

*African Stories*, Marrakech, Morocco (curator : André Magnin)

2009/2010

*Africa, una nuova storia*, Complesso del Vittoriano, Roma, Italy (curator : André Magnin)

2009

*Against Exclusion*, 3rd Moscow Biennial, The Garage Center for Contemporary Culture, Moscow, Russia

2007

*Think with the Senses Feel with the Mind*, 52nd Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy

2007/2008

*Why Africa ? La collezione Pigozzi, Pinacoteca Giovanni e Marella Agnelli*, Turin, Italy (curator : André Magnin)

*"Popular Painting" from Kinshasa*, Tate Modern, (Room 10), London, UK (curator : André Magnin)

2006/2007

*100% Africa*, Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, Spain (curator : André Magnin)

2005/2006

*African Art Now: Masterpieces from the Jean Pigozzi Collection*, Museum of Fine Arts Houston, Houston, USA National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, USA (curator : André Magnin)

2005

*Arts of Africa, The Contemporary collection of Jean Pigozzi*, Grimaldi Forum, Monaco (curator : André Magnin)

2004/2007

*Africa Remix* (curator : Simon Njami)

Museum Kunst Palast, Düsseldorf, Allemagne ; Hayward Gallery, London, UK  
Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France ; Mori Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan ;  
Johannesburg Art Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa

2002

*Iconografias Metropolitanas, 25<sup>a</sup> Bienal Internacional de Arte de São Paulo*, São Paulo, Brazil

1998

*Dak'Art 98*, Biennale de Dakar, Dakar, Senegal

1995/1996

*An Inside Story: African Art of Our Time* (curator : Yukiya Kawaguchi)

Setagawa Art Museum, Tokyo, Japan ; Tokoshima Modern Art Museum, Tokoshima, Japan ; Himeji City Museum of Art, Himeji, Japan ; Koriyama City Museum of Art, Koriyama, Japan ; Marugame Genichiro-Inokuma Museum of Contemporary Art, Marugame, Japan ; Museum of Fine Art, Gifu, Japan

1991

*Africa Hoy* (curator : André Magnin)

Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain ; Groninger Museum, Groningen, Netherlands ; Centro Cultural de Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City, Mexico

1989

*Magiciens de la terre*, Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou et Grande Halle de la Villette, Paris, France (curators : Jean-Hubert Martin, André Magnin)

1982

*Sura dji. Visages et racines du Zaïre*, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, France

1978

*Art Partout*, Académie des Beaux-arts, CIAF, Kinshasa, DRC

## PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Musée National d'Art Moderne - Centre Pompidou, Paris, France

Museum of Modern Art, MoMa, New York, USA

Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, USA

Musée royal d'Afrique centrale, Tervuren, Belgium

Smithsonian Institute, National Museum of African Art, Washington, USA



Alpha Crucis, Astrup Fearnley Museet © Christian Øen



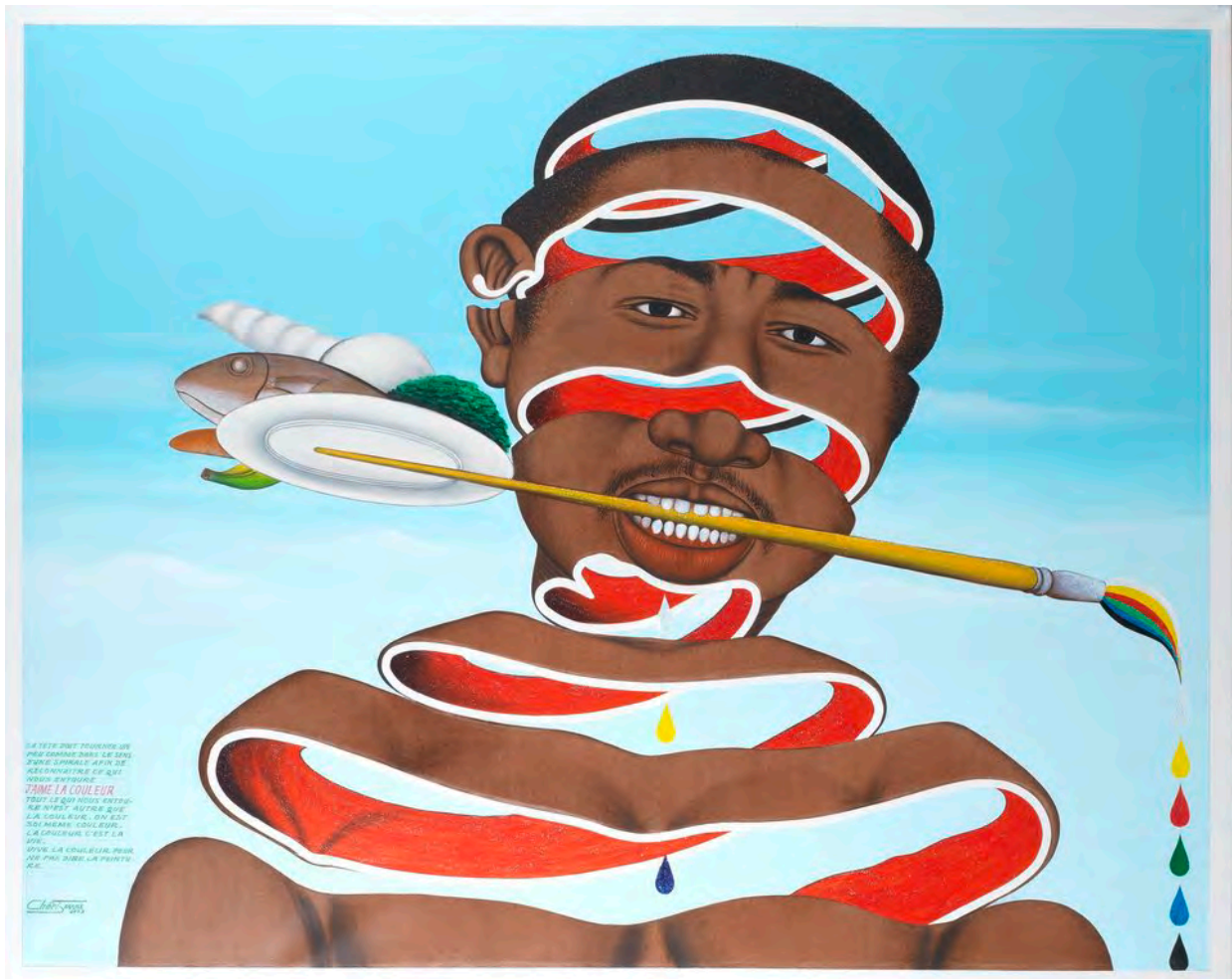
Kings of Kin, Galerie MAGNIN-A, Paris © Gregory Copitet

## 10 Contemporary African Artists You Don't Know But Should

[Priscilla Frank](#) Arts Writer, The Huffington Post

Posted: 10/20/2015 11:06 AM EDT

### 1. Cheri Samba (Democratic Republic of Congo, born 1956)



Bonhams "J'aime la couleur," Cheri Samba

**Medium:** Painting

**Previous jobs:** Billboard painting and comic strip design

**On drawing as a child:** "[I grew up in a village](#) where we could catch and grow all our own food. I used to enjoy sketching animals and faces with my finger in the sand. My father was a blacksmith who made hunting rifles. He wanted me to help him at the forge after school, so I hid my notebooks and sketched at night. I would copy pictures from a popular comic to sell to my friends. I told them I would become a famous artist, that I'd travel everywhere and have a big house."

**On his work:** "[When I paint](#), my main concerns are to represent things as they are, to communicate with humor, to ask relevant questions and to tell the truth. I consider myself a sort of painter-journalist. My source of inspiration is daily life. I always have suitcases full of ideas. As long as the world is the world, and writers have stories to tell, I will have something to say."

## Thirsty for solutions

African artist Chéri Samba speaks to the theme of scarcity amid abundance



Chéri Samba's "Problem of Water," 2004. On view at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. (The Museum of Modern Art, New York; CAAC; The Pigozzi Collection)

By **Sebastian Smee** Sept. 23, 2020

How stupid some ideas look in retrospect — and how prescient some pictures.

Chéri Samba, who is from the Democratic Republic of Congo, painted this work in 2004. It's called the "Problem of Water," and it hangs in the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Like many of Samba's paintings, it features the artist himself — in this case, spiffily dressed in red suit and red shoes, and [riding a rocket to Mars](#).

He's in search of water. He has two buckets in which to carry whatever he might find back to Earth, where, as the title suggests, there's a problem. Although the DRC is the most water-rich nation in Africa, about three-quarters of its people experience acute shortages of clean drinking water.

Dangling from Samba's left hand, to light his way, is a gas lantern. This minor irony also speaks to the theme of scarcity amid abundance: The surrounding cosmos is lit like chandeliers by a surfeit of stars.

"Problem of Water" isn't just about water, of course. It's about the perils of techno-utopianism, and of thinking that to solve an urgent problem, you have to do something extreme, unlikely and against human nature.

More often, solutions are close-at-hand (which doesn't mean they're easy). You could fix the police by abolishing them or replacing them with robots, for instance, or you could do the work of changing their training and tactics and introducing accountability. One doesn't have to go to Mars.

Samba is the best-known of a coterie of African artists who, although already celebrated in their homelands, came to wider prominence only after a 1989 exhibition in Paris called "[Magiciens de la Terre](#)." Organized by Jean-Hubert Martin, the show highlighted the ways in which the West's guilt about colonialism had blinded it to the merits of art coming out of societies scarred and irrevocably transformed by colonialism.

*[\[A poignant utopian impulse informs the work of this great African artist\]](#)*



long valued African carvings and masks (in part for their influence on modernism). But they tended to dismiss most contemporary art from Africa as “inauthentic,” sad and naive.

Which is nothing if not naive.

Samba, 63, was born in Kinto M’Vuila, a small village near Madimba, in the lower Congo, one of 10 children. His father was a blacksmith, his mother a farmer. As a student, he copied comics and sold them to friends. When he was 15, he moved to Kinshasa, where he painted advertising billboards and transposed comic strips onto canvas.

As Samba’s reputation grew, so did his political engagement. Working on a large scale (this painting is 53-by-79-inches), he addressed a wide variety of subjects, from the effects of his country’s rapid modernization to the AIDS crisis and post-9/11 conflict. He took all of this on with a wit “so quick and disarming,” wrote curator Robert Storr, “one only realizes how caustic it can be after having first succumbed to its charms.”

Samba wanted his work to speak to as many people as possible. He made multiple versions of works he liked. He set up a studio system to increase his production and introduced text to make people linger over it longer. And he made himself the sly subject and twinkling star of his own work.

But look, here, at our hero’s anguished expression. He tried so hard, went to such extreme lengths! All to no avail.

Of course, there actually is water on Mars. But almost all of it is ice.