



# DAM good friends

## shrine paintings of ile ife

*When you give a gift of money to the DAM Good Friends Annual Fund, you support the museum's mission to acquire, present, and preserve works of art. Even a small donation to DAM Good Friends can help make extraordinary things happen. For instance, your gift supports the only museum in the world where you can see art by the sacred Nigerian painters known as the Akire Group (pictured above).*

DAM curator Moyo Okediji first heard of the Akire Group's paintings from his grandmother. In the city of Ile Ife, she told him, the walls of the shrines are covered with sacred murals revered for their beauty. These murals are believed to protect the community against evil forces.

The Yoruba culture sees the Nigerian city of Ile Ife as the spiritual center of civilization. In that city, at the end of each year, the artists of the Akire Group move from shrine to shrine, covering up the murals

with black paint. By doing so, they remove poisons that have built up in the bodies of the people over the past year. At each new year's beginning, the sacred artists paint new murals to herald the healing of old wounds, both physical and psychological.

Okediji, who was born and raised in Nigeria, was determined to witness this unique artistic process. But the Akire Group is made up exclusively of women. Because he is a man, "it took seven years before I had access," Okediji says. "I went through initiation as a priest in their society. That was the only way."

Before, after, and while they paint, the women of the Akire Group chant, pray, dance, and sing. "They believe their dances, ceremony, poetry, and prayers dry into the painting," explains Okediji. "This allows visitors to the shrine to speak to the gods through the paintings on the walls."

None of these sacred paintings had ever been seen outside the shrine walls of Ile Ife—until Okediji asked the group whether they would consider making paintings on canvas that could be shared with the people of Denver. The women responded with excitement. "They see painting on canvas as a very unique technology," says Okediji. "The canvas enables them to extend their healing powers beyond the confines of their shrines."

The group even created a slightly modified ritual so that Okediji could film the event for mixed-gender audiences in Denver. "These objects are not supposed to be regarded simply as a visual experience," he explains. "The process of infusing these objects with sacred energy is almost as important as the objects themselves." Today, in the Daniel Yohannes Family African Gallery on the fourth level of the Hamilton Building, visitors can watch a video collage of the Akire Group creating the paintings on view while sounds of the women's songs and prayers fill the air.

*only at the DAM*

Before the Denver Art Museum's Daniel Yohannes Family African Gallery opened in October 2006, the only way to glimpse the murals of the sacred painters of the Akire Group was to travel to Nigeria and seek out the shrines of the city of Ile Ife. When you give money to the DAM Good Friends Annual Fund, you help the museum display art like this painting, which people from the Rocky Mountain region would otherwise never get a chance to see. For more information about the DAM Good Friends program, please call 720•913•0033, or visit our website at [www.denverartmuseum.org](http://www.denverartmuseum.org) and click on "Get Involved," then "Donate."



*Akire Icons, 2002, Akire Group, Yoruba culture, Nigeria. Funds from 1996 Collectors' Choice.*