

Unveiling Hidden Histories

A groundbreaking documentary that reveals the overlooked presence of African figures in Renaissance Europe, challenging perceptions of art, history, and identity

Fred Kudjo Kuwornu's *We Were Here* offers a groundbreaking exploration of the often-overlooked presence of Black Africans in Renaissance Europe. This compelling documentary, produced by Do The Right Films, journeys through six European nations—Italy, Spain, Portugal, the UK, France, and the Netherlands—to uncover the extraordinary stories of African Europeans who were not merely servants or enslaved people but also diplomats, artists, scholars, and knights. Combining reenactments of Renaissance masterpieces with modern cinematic techniques, Kuwornu brings historical figures to life, challenging conventional narratives and encouraging audiences to reevaluate the Eurocentric portrayal of art and history. Through interviews with renowned scholars, curators, and activists, *We Were Here* delves into identity, representation, and cultural heritage questions. With its powerful visual archaeology and thought-provoking commentary, the film seeks to reshape our understanding of Europe's multicultural past while sparking vital dialogue about race, art, and history in today's world.



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ART AFRICA: *We Were Here* delves into the hidden presence of Black Africans in Renaissance Europe. What inspired you to explore this particular chapter of history, and how does it resonate with contemporary conversations about identity and representation?

Fred Kudjo Kuwornu: *We Were Here* is a work that underwent a long development process, drawing subliminal inspiration from numerous preceding endeavours. These include the collaborative efforts of art historians in Harvard's *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, edited by Dr. David Bindman and Dr. Henry Louis Gates Jr.; Fred Wilson's project *Speak of Me as I Am* at the 50th Venice Biennale; Raoul Peck's documentary-style works such as *Exterminate All the Brutes*; and the work of John Akomfrah, particularly *Peripeteia*.

The film's objective extends beyond the pedagogical and historical investigation of this African presence in Europe. It aims to contextualise it within the contemporary European narrative, where the African presence is often perceived as foreign. This perception is compounded by the amnesia surrounding European colonialism and the long-standing African presence in Southern Europe, dating back to the Roman Empire.

Through this cinematic exploration, I sought to provide a critical tool and reference point for those residing in Europe—whether part of the Black diaspora or not—and for new generations of Africans. Africans must gain insight into these under-narrated centuries of history, understanding how their kingdoms interacted with other continents, sending ambassadors and merchants to Europe rather than being mere subjects of exploitation. The dynamics were far more intricate.

As Stuart Hall aptly noted, "The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity."

The documentary blends reenactments of works by artists like Velázquez and Carracci with modern cinematic techniques. Can you share your creative process in bringing these historical figures to life and balancing historical authenticity with artistic interpretation?

The driving force behind this artistic exploration, which gave such impetus to the film, was a question that persistently intrigued me: What stories would the Black faces painted by Renaissance masters tell if they could speak? These faces, "frozen" in static poses as if in a photograph, have a before and after beyond the confines of the canvas. Despite limited resources, we aimed to give meaning to this before and after, to breathe life back into these figures and make them relevant to the present.

We intended to provide a new impetus to audiences, including those who could be better-versed in art or regular museum-goers. We wanted to encourage a more attentive observation of the composition of paintings and to spark critical and creative questions about what we often view passively. The goal was to transition from a passive gaze to an active, curious one.

This artistic endeavour challenges conventional representations in cinema. Rarely do we see individuals of African descent portrayed in 15th-century attire on screen. We presented this visual narrative to challenge the film industry and propose a different aesthetic vocabulary.

The film also serves as a form of visual archaeology, unearthing stories and perspectives that have been buried beneath layers of historical interpretation. It asks viewers to consider the aesthetic qualities of these artworks and the social, political, and economic contexts in which they were created.

In essence, *We Were Here* is not just a film but a multifaceted artistic intervention. It seeks to reframe our understanding of history, challenge our perceptions of identity, and inspire a more inclusive and nuanced appreciation of art

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and culture. Through this work, we hope to contribute to a more complex and truthful narrative of European and African interconnectedness that resonates with historical accuracy and contemporary relevance.

As someone with Italian-Ghanaian roots, how did your heritage influence your approach to the narrative of *We Were Here*?

My Ghanaian and European roots profoundly influence me, offering diverse perspectives in narrating the stories I wish to represent. My most frequent observation is that these roots enable me to select situations that can and should involve Europe but from a perspective that embodies pride and inspiration from the African continent. I would never create a work about the Black diaspora that solely utilises a Western gaze and its paradigms. When I do my films, sometimes I think what my cousin who lives in a small village in West Ghana would think.

The film spans several European countries—Italy, France, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, and the UK. What differences or commonalities did you observe in how these nations have addressed the legacy of Black Africans in their histories?

This is an essential and profound question that is challenging to answer concisely. However, an invisible line separates two slightly different perceptions between Southern Europe (Spain, Portugal, Italy, Greece) and Northern Europe (UK, France, Netherlands, Belgium, Germany). Although historically and numerically more subject to African presence since the Roman Empire, Southern Europe seems to have only "discovered" the Black presence in the last twenty years with immigration. It self-proclaims as white when it has never been so, having undergone centuries of miscegenation. Northern

Europe, on the other hand, has more familiarity and perception of multiethnicity, although in some cases, more responsibility for colonialism, the exploitation of the Black body, and the creation of racial hierarchies.

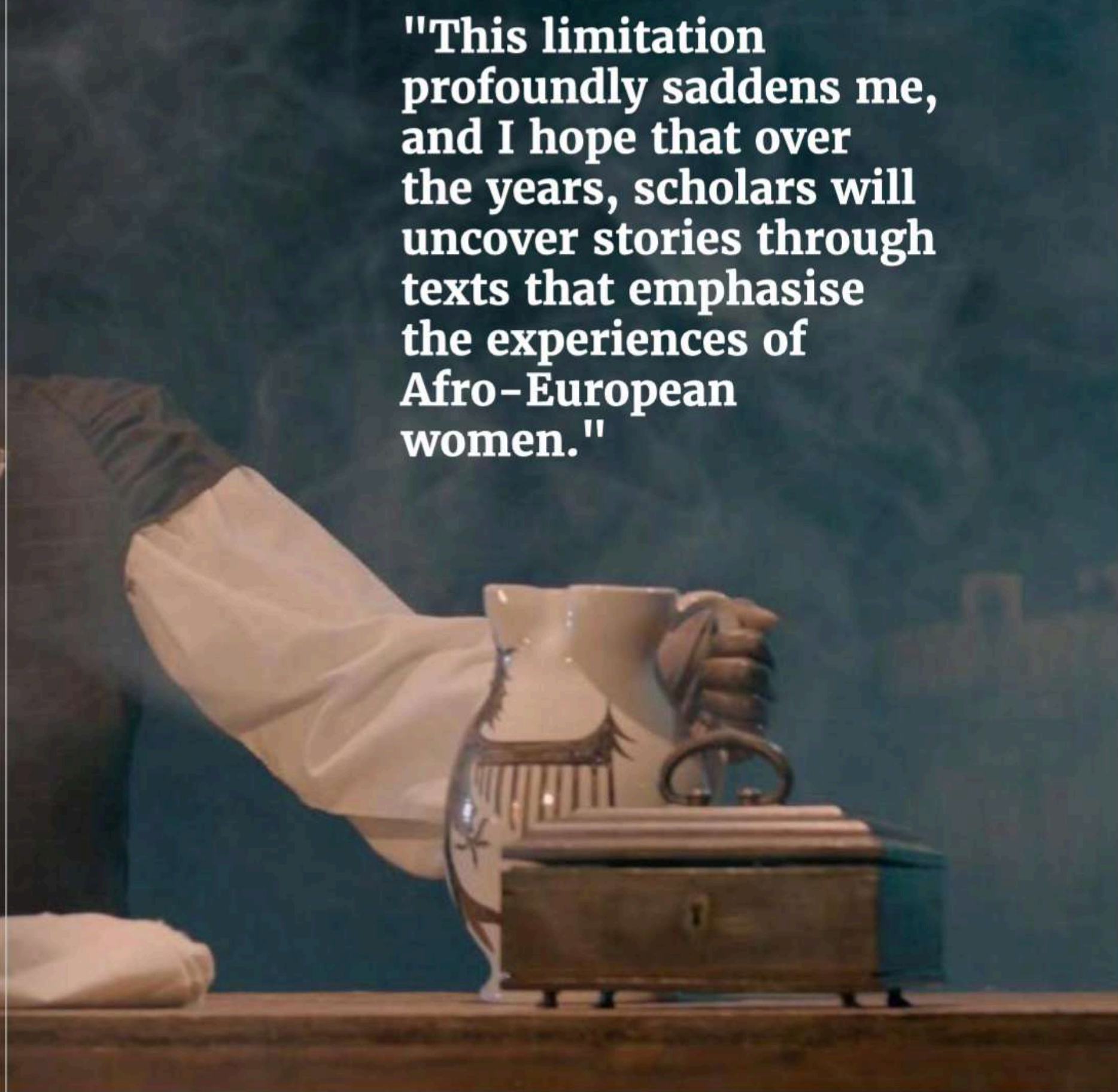
For me, this film was crucial in challenging the concept of "European" more than the concepts of Italian, Spanish, or German. Behind this word "European" still lurks the belief that it equates solely to white. My work aims to dismantle this notion, revealing the complex, multicultural tapestry that has always been at the heart of European identity.

Through this lens, the film becomes a tool for cultural dialogue, encouraging viewers to question their preconceptions and engage with a more nuanced, historically informed view of European identity. It underscores the importance of recognising and celebrating the diverse roots that have always been integral to the European story.

You've described *We Were Here* as "not just a film but a platform to spark dialogue on race, art, and heritage." What conversations or actions do you hope the film will inspire in audiences, mainly as it tours museums and universities?

We Were Here, being a fluid product that will be programmed in museums for extended periods in both its classic version and video installation format, as well as a film that can be screened at festivals or in any space, becomes a platform to validate this African presence in the museum spaces that have the intrinsic prerogative of institutionalising and displaying history. This is why it was crucial to have a product capable of fulfilling these purposes, especially in museums' public or educational programs. Gradually, this function will extend to other spaces as well.





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Screenings of *Where We Are*.
©Fred Kudjo Kuwornu

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The primary contribution is to encourage the audience and students to think critically about the hidden details in representations, not just about how Afro-descendants are portrayed. The same principle applies to the historical representation of other ethnic or social groups.

What were some of the most surprising or challenging aspects of uncovering and portraying the stories of Black figures as leaders, artists, and diplomats in Renaissance Europe?

Some of the challenges we faced were iconographic. For instance, to accompany the in-depth exploration of specific stories, such as that of Juan Latino, the first African professor to teach at a Spanish university in the 1500s, or the João de Sá Panasco, a knight of the Order of Saint James in Portugal, there weren't enough paintings available. Conversely, there were numerous representations of figures like Alessandro de' Medici. Therefore, in the film, while considering historical accuracy fundamental in demonstrating the existence of these stories, we had to allocate more space to historical reconstruction.

Another challenge that limited the film concerns the stories of Afro-descendant women. We recounted their dramatic experiences as sexual objects in the 1500s and as domestic workers, unfortunately lacking different narratives. Only in the 1700s and 1800s did we begin to have more detailed female stories that could become richer narratives. This limitation profoundly saddens me, and I hope that over the years, scholars will uncover stories through texts that emphasise the experiences of Afro-European women.

Following the Venice Biennale and the film's upcoming international tour, what are your hopes for *We Were Here's* legacy? Are there other historical narratives you're eager to explore in future projects?

I am thrilled about the film tour starting in 2025. The Venice Biennale, directed by the brilliant Adriano Pedrosa, whom I thank again for this excellent visibility and opportunity given to *We Were Here*, is now ready to engage in dialogue with the world tour. I'll begin in February with the Minneapolis Institute of Art, followed by Louvre Abu Dhabi, Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid, Museum of Art and Cultural History Schloss Gottorf, and other venues in Germany, and 40 art university museums and museums in North America before from the second half of 2025 we will approach Europe and Africa. The film will be accessible on different exhibition platforms, including museums, film festivals, and cultural hubs.

My artistic practice has always led me to work on historical subjects. I'm already working on my next project, which will be 100% African as it will focus entirely on Ghana and be based on Adinkra symbolism combined with A.I. 2025 has been a pivotal year for me. The news of Koyo Kouoh's appointment as director of the Venice Biennale, which came at the end of the year, could only make this year and the coming years more significant for both Afro-descendant artists and those dealing with themes of African art. I believe this edition of the Biennale has hosted, in my opinion, some of the most interesting pavilions, such as the one from Benin, curated by Azu Nwagbogu, and the Nigerian pavilion, curated by Aindrea Emelife. It would be great if, in the next edition in 2026, Ghana could return with its pavilion as well.