

Engaging Spirits, Empowering Man: Sculpture from Central and West Africa

Allen Memorial Art Museum Teacher Resource Packet



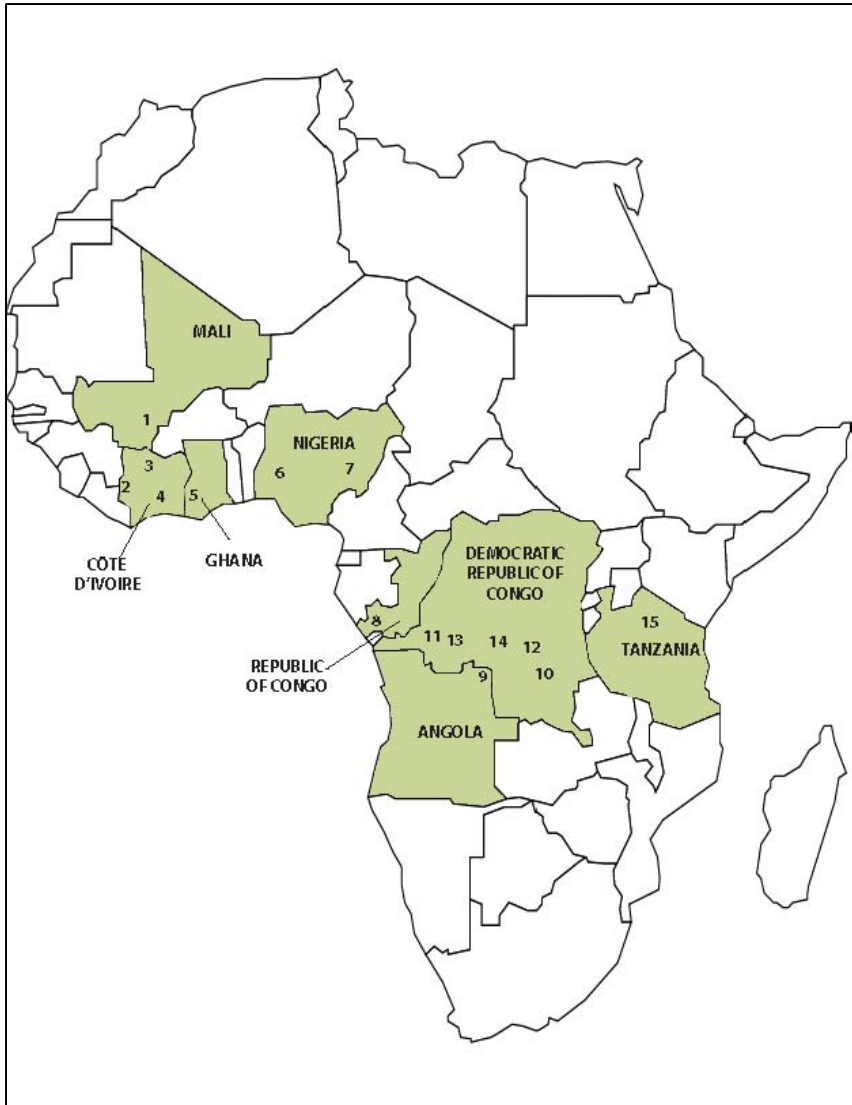
The dynamic African sculptural works exhibited are primarily from Central and West Africa and were all made in the twentieth century. The twenty-one pieces—from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Ivory Coast, Ghana, Mali, and other African countries—were chosen to supplement the AMAM's permanent collection of African art, which has a strong emphasis on West African art of the Yoruba peoples.

The masks, furniture, figures, and other works on view played a critical role in the spiritual life of the community. These functional objects were used in public and private rituals—including initiations, masquerades, processions, and funerals—seeking to mediate the physical world of man with the closely related world of spirits and ancestors. Their form and decoration communicate directly their spiritual significance through symbolic visual references. Themes such as fertility and women, temporal power, initiation, agricultural prosperity, and divination emerge as focal points of traditional African life, engaging both the individual and the community.

These works do not simply reproduce or abstract nature, but rather through ritual practices become powerful conceptual objects that focus on unseen forces and empower man. Aesthetically engaging, these objects possess a visual command that reflects their concealed power and continues to captivate a contemporary audience.

This exhibition was curated by Mara Spece (OC '10) and Stephanie Wiles. We wish to extend our thanks to the PoGo Family Foundation for its generous support.

Map of Africa, with key indicating locations of tribes represented in the exhibition.



1. Bamana
2. Dan
3. Senufo
4. Baule
5. Asante
6. Yoruba
7. Mumuye
8. Vili
9. Chokwe
10. Luba
11. Yombe
12. Hemba
13. Kuba
14. Songye
15. Sandawe

This resource packet provides background information on many of the topics and thematic ideas represented in the exhibition, as well as information on specific works in the show. You can browse the packet as a whole, or click on the topics listed in this index to take you to a specific section.

For more information, or to schedule a tour of this exhibition or the AMAM galleries, please contact Jason Trimmer, Curator of Education, at jtrimmer@oberlin.edu, or phone (440) 775-8671.

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Bamana Peoples, Mali

Chi Wara Headdresses, 20th century

Figures: wood, glass beads, cloth, leather fringe, red cotton fringe, brass bells, small mirror pieces, burlap, gourd, cowrie shells

Hats: animal hide, burlap, bush twine, glass beads, cowrie shells, grasses

Background: The Bamana people are part of the larger ethnic group of the Mande people, living primarily in Mali. The Mande are a large group of ethnic peoples living in Western Africa, related by a similar language group. Of these, the Bamana people are the largest. The origins of the Bamana can be traced to the Mali Empire established in Western Africa in the 13th century which continued in some form through the 18th century. While the source of the ethno-linguistic term is still debated, the Bamana people had risen to dominance within the region beginning in the 17th century with the establishment of the Bamana Empire. The empire was a centralized state, primarily in modern day Senegal in the 18th and

19th century. It was subdued in 1861 when Islamic peoples from the east of the empire invaded. As a result, the population was forced to convert to Islam- a cultural effect felt to this day, as over 90% of the current population of Mali is Muslim.

Bamana social structure is rigidly codified. Like the other Mande peoples, the society is primarily patrilineal and patriarchal. The concept of the *ton* is particularly important in understanding their social organization. A *ton* is essentially a caste, with nobility and vassals on top and slaves- often war prisoners- on the bottom. The origins of these castes can be found in the organization of warriors into groups, with the subjected prisoners beneath them. Through time, the caste system became organized according to profession, with specialized laborers living with others of their trade. Today, the castes have eroded to some degree, although there remains a strong link between vocation and family and ethnic background.

Cultural Context:

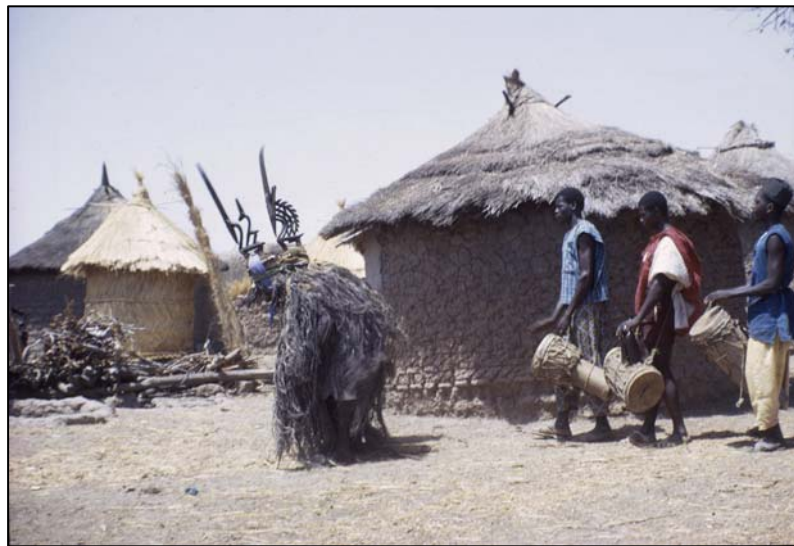
The chi wara figurines represent a similar enmeshment in ceremony. These figures, which we see in the exhibition, were worn on top of the head in agricultural ceremonies. In Bamana belief, the primordial Chi Wara was the first farmer, and was the figure which had imparted agricultural knowledge on the Bamana.

The male and female headdresses shown here are characteristic of the eastern Bamana style and were used by the *chi wara* society—the fifth of six initiation societies required for Bamana males—to encourage collaboration between men and women for a fertile harvest. The male body is modeled after a roan antelope, while the female takes the shape of an oryx antelope. The male horns represent crop growth and the zigzag pattern alludes to the sun moving across the sky. The female headdress includes a child on her back, a metaphor for the relationship between the earth and human beings.

In late April or May, before a field was to be tilled, the *chi wara* society hosted masquerades to encourage agricultural labor as mankind's primary duty. Two dancers performed wearing headdresses, raffia costumes, and leaned on *sunsun* sticks. Since the mid-twentieth century, the performances have been largely for entertainment, and *chi wara* societies have changed from religious groups that imparted esoteric knowledge to secular labor associations.

Art Historical Context:

The Bamana people are known for creating artworks with diverse functions from religious to cultural. Most of the works now are created for the tourist market. In the past, however, production focused on figure sculptures and objects that played a role in the important masquerades and rituals which took place in society.



©National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution

Two dominant forms of artistic production are the *n'tomo* masks and the Chi Wara figurines. Here, ceremony and societal structure blend to create objects that served important roles in the masquerades of Bamana society. The masks range from animal subjects to idealized human characters, who symbolize the epitome of human achievement. Mask styles vary, and it is difficult to make a generalization as they can be strictly geometric or more naturalistic and fluid. The *n'tomo* masks in particular were used for a boy's initiation into manhood, performed a few years prior to circumcision. Like the societal division, the *n'tomo* ceremony involves the separation from their families into age-grades.

The figurines are always worn by a pair of opposite gender dancers, in what is generally considered to be an invocation of the reproductive reality of humans. This gendered pairing, in turn, is thought to encourage the creation and fertility of the crops which are so central to Bamana society. The figure itself is usually an antelope. Like the *n'tomo*

masks, the chi wara figurines rely on the *ton* organization of the Bamana society, and are worn the members of society involved with agricultural labor- both male and female.

The figurines vary in size, and present regional differences. The figurines in the AMAM's exhibition are from the Segou region, and feature a distinctly vertical and geometrical orientation. Likewise, the gender of the figurines is differentiated. The male chi wara often has bent horns and a phallus. The female is often shown with a baby antelope on her back, and straighter horns. The geometry, particularly of the male figure, is striking- in the Northern or Segou style, the male is usually presented with a distinctive "cut out" pattern, made of triangular segments.



Kuba Peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Mwaash aMbooy Mask, 20th century
Cloth, animal hide, fur, hair, wood, glass beads, cowrie shells, bush cord, burlap

Background: The Kuba are an ethnic group centered primarily in the Southeastern Congo and Zaire. The Kuba people originally migrated from the north of the continent, creating the Kuba Empire. The empire originally consisted of a federation of several chiefdoms, which were eventually united in the 17th century. Power was largely concentrated in the hands of the existing aristocracy, and the government was organized on a merit-based title system. The empire reached its zenith in the mid-19th century.

Europeans began to penetrate the areas

surrounding the Kuba at this time, but their relative isolation kept them apart from a great deal of the slave trade that occurred. The empire was eventually invaded by a neighboring tribe, and fractured into chiefdoms yet again. This fracturing of power marks Kuba society to this day. As a result, a number of the art objects of Kuba society are associated with leadership and asserting authority.

Art Historical Context: The Kuba are known for their textiles, fiber works, beaded hats, and most importantly, their monumental helmet masks. These masks, like the one on display at the AMAM, are characterized by their stunning use of geometric pattern, fabrics, seeds, beads, shells and colors. The color red, in particular, is important in Kuba culture. Made from ground wood, the powder, called *tukula*, is used in many of the helmet masks. Red is said to signify suffering and abundance, while white refers to purity, and blue to high rank. Red is also thought to be central to understanding the Kuba concept of beauty. Likewise, the use of pattern is critical to understanding Kuba art. Over two hundred unique geometrical motifs can be identified. Each of the patterns were named, mostly referring to physical objects, although some are named after the creator of the pattern, and a few after animals. The most famous pattern, *imbol*, is a knotted pattern and is self-referential.



ROYAL KUBA MASQUERADES,
NSHENG, KASAI, CONGO. 1909

©University of California, San Diego

Cultural Context:

There are over 20 different kinds of masks in the Kuba artistic tradition. Three of these are considered royal, including the one represented in this exhibition. The decoration of this royal mask is both symbolic and prestigious: the animal skin represents the leader's power; the elaborate beadwork and cowrie shells are evidence of royal wealth; and the light beard indicates the wisdom of age. The features of the mask blend human and animal symbols, as the form of the mask is derived from a malevolent water spirit. The mask simultaneously represents the primordial ancestor and founder of the Kuba kingdom called Woot, his continuous lineage to the present king, the wisdom of the elders, and nature spirits. The chief or king wears this mask with an elaborate costume that completely covers his body, including gloves and shoes, and a tunic of alternating black and white triangles of beaten bark. The dance of this blind mask is slow, with highly symbolic movements. The mask is almost always buried with the king when he dies.



Chokwe Peoples, Angola and Democratic Republic of the Congo

Ngunja Chief's Chair, 20th century
Wood, animal hide, brass nails

Background: The Chokwe are an ethnic group located primarily in central Africa, including Angola, Zambia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Their language is Bantu in origin, though their ancestry can be drawn from the Mbundu and Mbuti Pygmies. Between the 17th and 19th centuries, the Chokwe were largely under the influence of the peoples of the Lunda state, which was located in Angola. The second half of the 19th century, however, saw the Chokwe people gain increasing independence. The development and strengthening of trade routes through Angola aided in the establishment of their independence. Trade was focused primarily on ivory and rubber, and the wealth acquired

from trading eventually allowed the Chokwe to expand and overtake the previously dominant Lunda state. Their dominance was short-lived; however, as exposure to Western European powers quickly broke down Chokwe power structures and resulted in colonization. Of the colonizers, the Portuguese played the most important role and many of the artistic and cultural influences they brought to bear can still be seen in Chokwe culture. Politically, the Chokwe follow a system of local chiefs who inherit their position matrilineally, through their maternal uncle. The chiefs, called *mwana nganga*, play a central role in art production for the society, as many of the objects produced are produced to celebrate and validate the royal court.

Cultural Context: The chiefs of Chokwe culture were looked upon as deities or divine. They were seen as both political leaders and religious personages. This centrality of the leader in everyday life and as a symbol of the overall well being of the nation deeply affected art production with the most valuable and meaningful objects being produced as symbols of leadership.

The rich figuration on this *ngunja* (throne) represents the temporal and spiritual power of the chief to whom it belonged; it demonstrates his wealth, his ancestral right to lead, and both his advisors and those who support and serve him. In the seventeenth century, contact with Portuguese goods changed the style of Chokwe leadership arts: the chair or throne carved from a single block of wood was replaced with a European-style chair, made up of separate pieces with a leather seat and backrest, and often decorated with

precious imported brass nails to demonstrate the importance of the chief's position. These chairs quickly became the primary symbol of the chief's temporal and spiritual authority.

Art Historical Context: Chokwe art is particularly well known for its dynamic use of volumes and its variety of facial features, ranging from attempts at honest portraiture to stylized representations of ideals. Their decorative patterns are known for their ability to illustrate fables and legends and are sometimes thought of as ideograms. The best known of these patterns is an interlace which takes its inspiration from the Portuguese Order of Christ, an example of the permeation of Chokwe culture by the Western European cultures.

The most notable of these European influenced objects were the chairs- like we see in the AMAM exhibition. Similar to the other surrounding cultures, these chairs find their origin in the production of stools. It was contact with Europeans in the 17th century, however, which altered production from the low lying stools to ever grander and larger chairs. These chairs are created from separate pieces of wood joined together, rather than carvings from a single piece. The design is largely Portuguese in origin, featuring a leather seat and backrest. While the style of carving was still predominantly Chokwe, the chair itself conformed to the European notion of the throne and represented the chief's right to rule, his power, and the central role he played in Chokwe society.

The chairs consisted of a number of allegorical assertions at power, creating a piece of furniture that was intended to be read as a complete assertion of authoritative control. The masks on the chairs are often *chihongo* masks, which represent the primordial male ancestor and which serve as a symbol of masculine power and dominance. The sculptural forms on the bottom rungs of the chair were often times scenes of daily life. The chair featured in the exhibition, however, focuses more heavily on figures of divination.

Staffs, scepters, and spears were also considered to be representative of court power, and were sculpted to celebrate the court. The faces and figures in the staffs are often symbolic portraits of the chief who would have carried it, or alternatively, a chief's ancestor.



Dan Peoples, Côte d'Ivoire

Wakemia Ceremonial Spoon, 20th century

Wood

Background: The Dan people are located in the West African countries of Liberia and the Cote d'Ivoire. The Dan are believed to have moved south from present-day Mali in the last few centuries, relying primarily on agricultural production and slash and burn farming. While not certain, oral traditions describe the Dan society in the 19th century as lacking any central governing power. Rather than grow out of an organized political centrality, the Dan people emerged as a distinctive ethnic peoples through social cohesion. Shared language and a preference for intermarriage played a huge role in encouraging this development.

Community was organized in a village context, with each village being centered on a headman who earned his position through success at hunting and farming. These village leaders were thought to have created a 'good name' for themselves which would in turn protect them from danger and suffering. The deeds of these wealthy and protected men and women would be fostered through lavish gatherings and exchanged gifts with other chiefs. It is this tradition which gave rise to the idea of *tin*, which is still an essential element of Dan society today. The ability to succeed is exhibited through extensive communal spending and it is through this proven economic ability to succeed that one can earn a 'good name,' which then reflects that person's importance in Dan society.

Only recently was a comprehensive political system visible in Dan society. This organization, called the Leopard Society, or *go*, centers around the powerful spirit, also called *go*, which represents peacemaking.

Cultural Context: Although this spoon appears purely decorative, it is a highly symbolic object that signified the status of its owner and was inhabited by a spirit. The anthropomorphic shape of this spoon honors its owner; it shares the woman's function as a source of food and life, and its bowl represents the woman's belly or womb, pregnant with rice. Commissioned by the *wakede*, the most important woman in a Dan village or neighborhood, a *wakemia*, or "spoon associated with feasts," is inhabited by a spirit that assists with her responsibilities of hosting the village feast before masquerades to welcome the visiting masked spirits. When a *wakede* dies or is no longer able to fulfill her role, a spirit visits a different woman in her dreams to offer its services, and a new spoon is carved. Often, the *wakede* parades through the neighborhood carrying the *wakemia* while giving out bowls of rice or small coins.

Art Historical Context: Dan art production centers primarily on mask making traditions. Dan sculptors have created a mask for virtually every element of Dan society, from education to social regulation and entertainment. The masks are known as *gle* in the west and *ga* in the east, and are thought to be the embodiment of forest spirits. The *deangle*, or ‘smiling mask,’ is the most common type of Dan mask and is often considered very graceful, with oval features and a small mouth.

Interestingly, the Dan also produce ornate spoons and mancala boards (a type of game). The spoons are called *wakemia* or *wunkirmian* and are often times associated with feasts. In this context, the spoons fulfill a similar function to the Dan masks in being emblems of status, prestige, and power. While small spoons are also produced, it is the large spoons which feature centrally in Dan cultural traditions. The *wakemia* spoon, also known as a ‘feast acting spoon,’ often features a large female head, and pair of legs. The spoons have an oval scoop and were the personal possession of the *wunkirle*. The *Wunkirle* was the woman who had proved herself most worthy in the areas of hospitality, generosity, and industriousness. The spoons were carried at festivals as status symbols and were used to carry rice which was then thrown at guests in a sign of prosperity.

Each spoon was believed to house a spirit or spirits called *du*, which would help the woman with all of her responsibilities. The spoons were owned by a single individual and oftentimes the spoons were carved to represent the owners’ beauty and fertility. Likewise, the anthropomorphic shape of the spoon honors the hostess as a source of food and life. The curve of the spoon was believed to represent a fertile female womb. When the original owner of the spoon passed away, it was often passed down to the most efficient daughter-in-law of the family.



Luba Peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Stool, 20th century
Wood

Background: The Luba people are first documented in the 5th century AD, in what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo. As a civilization, they rapidly advanced through agricultural and mercantile technology, trading for copper, glass beads, and shells from the Indian Ocean by as early as the 6th century. The widespread expansion and cultural dominance of the Luba in the region can be traced to the beginning of the 16th century, when Luba peoples unified into a single state, under a king who was believed to have been chosen by divine sanction. The leader controlled the state through a vassal-like organization of underlings, garnering loyalty and giving gifts to loyal followers in return. At the

end of the century, the Luba controlled most of the copper mines, fishing, and palm oil cultivation in the region. The golden era of the empire occurred in between the 1700 and 1800s. With new crops and new trade routes, the empire was able to expand its territory and influence, eventually trading with European colonizers through Angola. By the 19th century, the empire had largely dissolved, buckling under external and internal pressure and involving itself in the slave trade. By 1885, the territory had been subjugated under King Leopold II of Belgium.

During the height of its reign, the Luba Empire depended on a complex system of tributes and trade. Coupled with the empire's monopoly on key resources, the Luba were undoubtedly the dominant force in the region. As such, much of the art in central Africa still displays Luba characteristics. Likewise, their encounters with Europeans in the 19th century caused a great deal of Luba art to find its way to Western art markets.

Cultural Context: The expressive faces of the couple beneath the seat suggest age and wisdom, pointing to the stool's possible use as a *kitenta*, a receptacle of their leader's spirit. In traditional Luba culture, the prestige of an officeholder's seating indicated his rank: only a chief or king would have possessed a stool. Such stools, which united the chief with the ancestors, were used only when it was important to publicly demonstrate the chief's position as an intermediary with the spirit world. These valuable stools were often kept hidden in another village, wrapped in white cloth, and guarded by an appointed official to prevent theft or destruction.

Art Historical Context: The creation and commission of Luba art objects was most prolific during the height of their empire and during its expansion. Art was used for a broad variety of purposes, including forging treaties and settling debts. Luba art is deeply involved in expressions of ideology and religious belief, royalty and symbols of power, and ritual activity. Almost all Luba insignia involve human imagery, both naturalistically and via abstract geometries.

The role of the female in Luba art is particularly interesting, as only the female form was seen as capable of holding the great spirits. Women in Luba culture were considered guardians of royal decrees, and held prominent positions in the Luba royal structure. Most importantly, the deceased king was believed to be incarnated by a female spirit medium, making women the source of the spiritual authority of the king. It was this social reality which created an art production remarkable for its widespread depiction of women.

The Luba royal arts were particularly dominant due to the strong centralized nature of Luba society. Of these stools, divination bowls, bow stands, and memory boards are the most important. The stool in particular stood as an important symbol of Luba kingship. The seat referred not only to the concept of a throne, but also the hierarchy of power, and was closely linked with the potency of the ruler. Two types of stool exist. The first, which is largely represented in European collections, feature a single female figure which supports the seat. The women are meant to embody physical perfection and are thought to represent women with high positions in the government. It also parallels the cultural belief of the support of the royal line through matrilineal possession and incarnation in a female form. The second type of stool was largely abstract and geometric, and is thought to be a predecessor to the figurative stools. Because of their close link to the king, stools were thought to be extremely important receptacles of power. As such, they were often kept wrapped in a cloth and were safeguarded by an official. Used only rarely, the stool was thought of more as a vassal for the king's spirit than as an everyday emblem of power or functional object. This secrecy suggests that the Luba stools were not meant for human eyes but were seen primarily as links between the divine kingship and the spirit world.



Senoufo Peoples, Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast)

Rhythm Pounder, 20th century

Wood

Background: The Senoufo are an ethnic group made out of a number of diverse subgroups who migrated in the 15th and 16th centuries to the south of Mali and the extreme west of Côte d'Ivoire. Because of their diversity, it is possible to speak of distinct groups in different regions, depending on their linguistic and cultural differences. Heavily influenced by the surrounding Mande peoples in the 14th century, they remained relatively isolated from outsiders, particularly European, in the interceding centuries.

The Senoufo are agriculturally-based, with village identity based on lineage affiliation. Unlike some of the more predominant African ethnic groups, the Senoufo can be either patrilineal or matrilineal depending on their location. All males pass through age-grades, which form the initiation cycle of the Poro secret society. This extended process evolved to strengthen village bonds. Women, on the other hand, belong to the Sandogo association, which helps to maintain society through

divination and kin relations. Labor is divided into agricultural and artisan roles.

Cultural Context: This highly geometric figure represents the Senoufo primordial ancestor Katyeleeo, the Ancient Mother. Originally paired with the male primordial ancestor Kolotyolo, the creator of the first human couple, the two rhythm pounders together are the ideal social unit of fully initiated members of society. The female figure on view holds a rattle, an attribute of Poro, the socio-political society responsible for the initiation of Senoufo boys. A Poro member would carry this rhythm pounder at funerals and initiation ceremonies, using the large base to strike the ground, thereby purifying the earth and calling the spirits to participate in the rites.

Art Historical Context: The Senoufo are known for their figurative sculpture, as well as several masks used by the Poro society. While individuals are rarely recognized for their works, they may gain a reputation among other artists as well as their patrons within the Poro societies. Art production is focused largely on personal and social identity and transitions from one life stage to the next, such as initiations and funerals. Figures can

serve an educational function, and reinforce the teachings of society. The two most important types of figures are the divination figures and the rhythm pounders.

Rhythm pounders are used primarily by the Poro societies during initiation rights. They typically come in pairs, one male and one female. The pair is thought to represent the primordial couple and represent the ideal standard of social formation, as well as a reverence for ancestry. The two figures are thought to represent complementary spheres of Senufo life. Oftentimes, the figures are used in coming of age rites, when the Senufo individual undergoes a symbolic death and rebirth into their adult life. The figures themselves would be carried in these ceremonies by the initiates, swung from side to side, and rhythmically pounded on the ground.

Stylistically, the pounders are usually elongated and carved with a high pedestal. With the exposure to the Western art market, these figures have undergone a great deal of change, with many now being produced exclusively for the tourist market.



Songye Peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Nkisi Community Power Figure, 20th century
Wood, copper plate, copper tacks, animal horns, hides, hair, and teeth, glass beads, wooden beads, seedpods, bush twine, brass bell, ritual materials

Background: The Songye people share common ancestors with the Luba and are believed to originate from the same mythical ancestor. They emerged as a distinct group around the 16th century when they migrated to live near the Lualaba River in the Democratic Republic of Congo. They share a great deal in common linguistically with their neighbors. The Songye themselves are divided into a number of sub-groups. In the past, the Kalebwe chiefdom was one of the dominant political institutions, however with the presence of epidemics, Europeans, and the introduction of the slave trade, the Kalebwe's influence was greatly curbed. The 20th century has seen the Songye people are under the leadership of a central chief known as *Yakitenge*. Local governance is dealt with by local chiefs known as *sultani ya muti*.

They are primarily an agricultural people and are extremely well known for their past artistic production.

Cultural Context: The visually commanding nature of this *nkisi* expresses the magnitude of its power and its importance to the community as a hunter of witches and other evil spirits. The aggressive horn on the top of its head serves as a holder for ritual materials, which are also contained in the figure's swollen belly, its shape a reference to fertility and ancestral continuity. The *nkisi*'s broad forehead suggests omniscience, while the copper sheets on it allude to its ability to channel lightning to defend the community. The dress of the *nkisi* includes empowering animal hides and teeth, and a hunting bell to call the diviner, *nganga*, when witches are found. Too powerful to be touched directly, the *nkisi* was carried on wooden poles attached under its arms in a procession in which it would confront evil spirits and sometimes, as in the case of an epidemic, indicate which herbs should be collected to create a remedy.

Art Historical Context: Due to their closeness with the Luba, many objects of Songye origin have been misattributed to the Luba and vice versa. The best known of the Songye objects are the magical power figures and wooden *bifwebe* masks. They were also renowned metal workers through the 18th and 19th centuries.

The majority of the figurative sculpture in Songye tradition takes the form of the power figure. These power figures, called *nkishi* or *mankishi*, are used within society to assist in protection. Traditionally, they were used to ward off illness, famine, and sterility. Indeed, most Songye are intended to manipulate spiritual powers. The figures could be used by either an entire community or by an individual person. The larger community figures are usually considered benevolent and were thought to be living spirits, and powerful guardians of the community. The individual figurines were generally smaller and sometimes considered dangerous, as their smaller size and personal connotations meant that they could be used for black magic.

The figures were created by a specialist, called a *nganga*, who has to endow the figure with power through the inclusion of a magical substance known as *bishimba* inside the head and abdomen of the object. This magical element turns the figure into a *nkishi*, and endows it with the ability to intervene in the spirit world on behalf of the owner or owners of the object. If the *nganga* who created the figurine dies, the object is thought to lose some of its power. The figures are often arrayed in ceremonial and symbolic clothing, ranging from skins, fur, and beads, to metal and nails in their bodies. Some of these objects, such as blue beads or feather headdresses, refer directly to chieftainship. These external elements can be ambiguous. For instance, metal appliqué resembling lightning is a common feature of the *nkishi*. Lightning, however, is often associated with sorcerers, one of the things the objects are meant to repel.

The diverse use of material can be divided into two symbolic categories, and they represent the dual functions of the *nkishi*. The aggressive elements include the claws of a leopard, scales of dangerous snakes, sexual organs of a crocodile, or bones or flesh of someone who committed suicide. Nail clippings from twins were also often used, as they were mystically regarded. The second category involved the benevolent function of the *nkishi*. It includes nail clippings and hair of the individual or community who wished to use the figure. These inclusions would prompt the statue to confer the benefits on those people. Often, the figurines were created for a generation of children born at the same time, and were assigned to protect them. A figure's power also relied on the use of the object in rituals. Certain people in the community are assigned to guard the *nkishi* and to interpret the dreams which are sent to them by the figure. These dreams, known as *kunca*, are meant to alert the community to impending danger. After receiving a dream, the chosen guardians would carry the figure through the village during which the *nkishi* was expected to confront the evil spirits. The figures themselves were much beloved, and often receive sacrifices and offerings, and are rubbed with oils.

Stylistically, the objects are often male figures standing on a pedestal. They are bent at the knee in a frontal pose, with hands held to a protruding stomach. They often vary in style and quality by region, particularly when discussing the smaller, personal figurines. As discussed above, they arrayed with external elements and often feature metal nails or appliqué.



Ashante Peoples, Ghana

Akua'ba Doll, 20th century
Wood, glass beads

Background: The Ashante, also known as Asante, people are a large ethnic group centered primarily in Ghana. The Ashante have an incredibly long and complex history. The rise of the early Akan centralized states can be traced to the 13th century and begin to grow as trade routes expanded in the region. The Ashante kingdom itself was founded in the 1670s, and came to dominate most of Ghana and the adjoining territory. The descendants of the original king of the empire, Osei Tutu, still represent the dominant political force in modern day Ghana.



The story of the Golden Stool is central to understanding the Ashante people. According to legend, it descended from the heavens to rest on the lap of Osei Tutu. The stool is believed to be sacred and is thought to contain the spirit of the people. The stool is an important symbol of nationhood, and is featured on the flag for the Ashante people.

The Ashante are a matrilineal society, with the mother-child relationship determining land rights, inheritance, offices, and titles, although the inheritance can occasionally be from the father. The Ashante economy depended largely on the trade of gold and enslaved peoples to Mande and European traders. The Ashante were some of the few people able to offer serious resistance to the Europeans, succumbing only in 1900 to the British. This late defeat, coupled with the complex and lengthy history of the Ashante marks

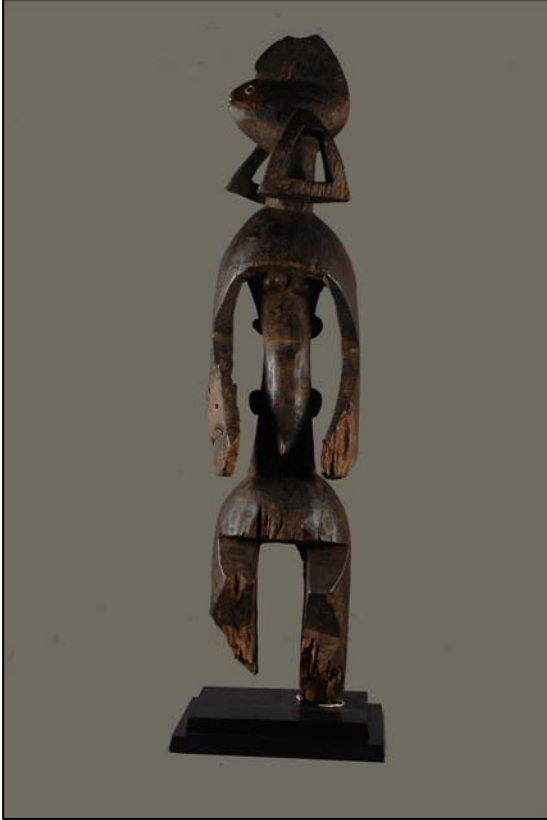
them as one of the societies with the richest documentary history.

Cultural Context: A highly symbolic object decorated with white beads and visual motifs characteristic of the Ashante culture, this type of doll is commissioned and consecrated by a priest-healer for women who wish to conceive or protect a pregnancy. Ashante legend describes how a barren woman named Akua was instructed by a priest-healer to care for a wooden doll, which eventually led to her pregnancy and the birth of a healthy girl. Called *Akua'ba* ("child of Akua"), these dolls are bathed, fed, and clothed. Their features—a small mouth, high oval forehead, and ringed neck of healthy fat—represent Ashante ideals of feminine beauty.

In addition to the royal regalia, the Ashante also produce religious art objects. Best known of these are the akua'ba sculptures. The akua'ba is named after the first woman who conceived with the help of the figurine. The akua'ba is considered a fertility object and is given to women by a priest to help solve infertility. The woman carrying the object would hold it and care for it as if it were an actual infant. The objects would be carried behind the woman's back and she would give it beads and various other objects. When the woman successfully gave birth, the akua'ba would be given to a shrine, where it would serve as a symbol of the priest's powers. Very rarely, the object would be given to the newborn as a toy.

The akua'ba is always female. They tend to have a flat, pancake-shaped head, with facial features restricted to the lower portion. The resulting high forehead is probably representative of an Ashante standard of beauty. The head is placed on a legless, cylindrical torso, with short arms protruding from the side at ninety degree angles. The Allen's akua'ba is notable for the inclusion of animal carvings on the back of the head, which most likely relates back to the verbal/pictorial representation in Ashante art and culture.

Art Historical Context: The Ashante are best known for their royal arts, which include stools, staffs, and umbrellas. Kente cloth is a highly regarded textile originally worn by rulers, but has now disseminated into popular culture and has become an important African-American cultural symbol. Their art and design draws largely from zoological and botanical elements and portray all aspects of life. One of the most unique and interesting elements of the Ashante is the association of verbal and visual art. Almost all of the Ashante images are linked to verbal expressions as varied as jokes, riddles, proverbs, and insults. Many images have become verbally linked to their expressions, so that one can literally *read* the images on the art works, such as the symbols on the back of the figurine in the AMAM exhibition.



Mumuye Peoples, Nigeria

Maternity Figure, 20th century
Wood, nails, kaolin

Background: The Mumuye live primarily in Nigeria, and there is a theory that they originally migrated from Egypt. They were likely pushed into their current location by a series of holy wars that occurred between the 17th and 19th centuries. Settling near the Benue River Valley, there was little to offer Europeans in regards to resources, and so the area escaped a great deal of colonization.

Most of the Mumuye way of life is based on a culture of sedentary agriculture. Communities remain relatively isolated from one another, with villages consisting of one or more extended families and spouses who have married into it them. Mumuye beliefs and practices remain very diverse from village to village despite a growing

involvement in modern Nigeria and commonalities with neighboring cultures.

Cultural Context: The highly geometricized quality of this figure, with its massive shoulders, cylindrical torso, notched legs, and crested head, is characteristic of the Mumuye style. The distinctively shaped ears of these figures indicate that this figure is female, as only Mumuye women distend their earlobes. The baby is carved as an extension of the mother rather than as a separate entity because infants primarily serve as a representation of the productivity of women. A figure like this often served multiple functions, including rainmaker, greeter, house guardian, oracle, confidant, or as an object to reinforce the status of elders.

Art Historical Context: In the past, a great deal of Mumuye sculpture was attributed to the neighboring Chamba people. Their style, however, is very distinctive, assuming a long, narrow pole-like style. Figurative sculpture focuses on a number of different uses, ranging from rainmakers, house guardians, to oracles or totemic figures. Most of the images can be described as having angular legs, cradling arms, massive neck and shoulder formations. Rather than distinguish gender via genitalia, the ear lobes serve as the signifier. Rectangular openings in the ear lobe distinguish the female figure. The large ear lobes reflect the women's cultural practice of piercing and subsequently distending earlobes to fit ever larger jewelry.



Yoruba Peoples, Nigeria

Gelede Mask, 20th c.
Wood, paint, kaolin

This striking mask, with its white kaolin face and contrasting dark features articulated with black paint, was worn in the *Gelede* festival to honor women. The elaborate decoration alludes to binary opposites: the dynamic snakes are at once a symbol of rejuvenation and a reminder not to provoke adversaries; the three large birds honor the power of women, while four half-hidden, smaller birds in the pecking position surrounding the mask warn about witchcraft; the sheathed knives balance the celebration of feminine power with a reminder of masculine strength.

During the new agricultural season, the Yoruba host the *Gelede* masquerades during the day and the related *Efe* masquerades at night in celebration of the primordial power and authority, or *ashe*, of women, collectively called “our mothers.” The *Gelede* society honors the mysterious power of women in the hope that they will use their *ashe* for good, but also warns about its negative use or witchcraft, and what awaits those women who misuse their power.

©National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution



Websites:

National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution:

<http://www.nmafa.si.edu/index2.html>

Brooklyn Museum of Art – African Collections Online:

http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/african_art

Philadelphia Museum of Art – African Art, African Voices:

http://www.philamuseum.org/micro_sites/exhibitions/africanart/

National Museum of African Art:

<http://www.nmafa.si.edu/exhibits/multimedia.html>

Metropolitan Museum of Art – Art and Oracle:

<http://www.metmuseum.org/explore/oracle/glossary.html>

Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History – African Art:

http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hi/te_index.asp?i=Africa

University of Iowa Art Library – African Art Resources Web links

<http://www.lib.uiowa.edu/art/african.html>

Thematic Tours Possibilities:

Trade Routes and Trading

Magic & Magical Objects

Animals - depiction of animals vs. reality

Slave Trade

Stories in Art: telling stories through symbols and ornamentation

Curriculum Ideas

Chi Wara

Mathematics/Geometry (Elementary): Use cut outs of different geometric shapes to design your own *chi wara* headdress. Experiment with making different animal shapes, and see how different shapes ‘feel’ like different animals.

Language Arts (High School): Study, compare, and contrast ancient stories and legends from a variety of cultures related to agricultural cycles, such as the planting of new crops, or those ceremonies that relate to harvest time.

Kuba, Mwaash Mask

Visual Art (Elementary): Create a pattern of your own based on something you encounter in your every day life. Explain why the different patterns represent what you see. Examine the common materials used in this work, and use object from everyday life to create your pattern or artwork.

Chief’s Chair

Social Studies (Middle/High): Think about symbols of power, such as those on display in this exhibition, and compare with traditional Western symbols. Think about and discuss the different qualities these symbols evoke.

Explore myths related to power and power structures, such as creation myths and stories of primordial ancestors.

Rhythm Pounder

Music Education (Elementary): Create and design your own instrument or rhythm object. Design it with stylistic markings that represent the type of music you will be making.

Inkisi

Language Arts (Middle/High): Write a story about a magical object. What gave it its powers? Was it used for good or evil? What became of it after it was done? Think about how stories like this might be used to illustrate a moral or lesson in different cultures.

Mumye Maternity Figure

Social Studies (Middle/High): Trace historical trade routes in your country. How does the flow of goods affect the people who live in the area? How have different things been imported and exported? What sort of cultural consequences does this have?

Find area of Benue River on a map and note how its location isolated it from Colonization, or talk about the importance of natural resources in determining where human civilizations have grown and flourished.

Ohio Academic Content Standards

The following is a list of benchmarks and indicators that the study of this exhibition and its materials meets.

Social Studies

History; People in Societies; Geography; Government; Skills and Methods

Visual Art

Historical, Cultural, and Social Contexts; Creative Expression and Communication; Analyzing and Responding; Valuing the Arts/Aesthetic Reflection; Connections, Relationships and Applications

Language Arts

Acquisition of Vocabulary; Information, Technical, and Persuasive Text; Literary Text; Communications: Visual and Oral Standard

Science

Life Sciences; Science and Technology

Mathematics

Geometry and Spatial Sense