

## African Art at NOMA

New Orleans is often called “the most African of American cities.” Its music and cuisine are recognized worldwide as unique contributions to the cultural fabric of the Americas; the most famous of those contributions – jazz, America’s quintessential musical style – is primarily African in origin. It is, therefore, appropriate that the New Orleans Museum of Art was among the first American municipal museums to form an important collection of African art. Unlike most European national museums, which began as repositories for the material culture of their colonies, the New Orleans Museum of Art focused on aesthetics. In 1966, the museum opened a permanent gallery for the arts of Africa, and a major bequest in 1977 from Victor K. Kiam added over a hundred works to the collection. While covering much of the African continent, the museum’s collection is not an encyclopedic presentation of the art of all African peoples.

The African continent is the second largest in land mass and population and has been the host to numerous diverse cultures that have flourished throughout the ages. In a sense all African art is utilitarian. Sculpted artworks, including masks, pots, costumes, and musical instruments, represent elements of divination and initiation ceremonies, bestow power on their owners, and serve as altars to mediate between humans and the divine. These are objects that are meant to be used within the society.

NOMA’s collection is focused on sculptural objects and architectural adornments of the principle art-producing peoples living south of the Sahara Desert. The Western Sudan, Guinea Coast, Equatorial Forest, Southern Savannah and East Africa are best represented within NOMA’s holdings. Other African artistic achievements and eras from the richly diverse continent are also recognized in NOMA’s galleries, including a representation of the art of Ancient Egypt.

The objects selected for inclusion in this Educator Guide are a sample representation of the great variety of the objects, materials, peoples and eras that make up the NOMA African art collection. This packet is organized by the utilitarian purpose of the work of art. Sections include instruments, clothing, architectural adornment, masks and ritual objects.



*Egungun Dance Costume, Yoruba Peoples, Nigeria, Oyo Region, early 20<sup>th</sup> C, cloth, metallic thread, glass beads, cowrie shells, Museum Purchase, 92.54*



*Drum from an Akan Popular Band, Fante Peoples, Ghana, c. 1960, wood, pigment, Gift of Carol and Dr. George Harrell, 2005.185*

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## INSTRUMENTS

***Drum from an Akan Popular Band, Fante Peoples, Ghana, Circa 1960, wood, pigment, gift of Carol and Dr. George Harrell, 2005.185***

[Pictured page 1]

The Asante and Fante peoples in Ghana, as well as the Baule in Côte d'Ivoire speak Akan languages and share many art traditions. Naturalistic carvings of human beings are found in most Akan groups. In Ghana sculptures are generally associated with political power. Music, dance, textiles, and gold work are the visible expressions of the power of chiefs, especially in Ghana where traditional leaders continue to play a major role in civil life. Among the Fante, neighborhood associations known as “companies” reflect the former military organization of the society. Historically musical instruments were used in processions to celebrate the military power of these companies.

Akan popular bands are instrumental, singing and dancing groups that are identified with one of a variety of distinctive music and dance styles. Similar to western bands, a style may come in and out of favor among the populace. Such bands may play for entertainment or for social or recreational reasons and may be hired for an assortment of social gatherings such as naming ceremonies, weddings, installations of new chiefs, or to mark important historical events. Funerals are the most important context for performances, as they are meant to ensure a successful send off. The centerpiece of most popular bands, collectively called *agoru*, is the drum. The master drum is typically anthropomorphized as a female; often nursing a child, as in this example. The drum is invariably referred to as the “mother” of the group.

***Thumb Piano with Figurative Handle (Sansa), Dan Peoples, Liberia/Sierra Leone, wood, iron, brass tacks, hair calabash, caning, pigment, promised gift of Françoise Billion Richardson.***

The handheld, plucked instrument called an *mbira* is found throughout Africa and only in Africa. It is often referred to as a “thumb piano” or “finger xylophone,” reflecting the manner in which the metal or bamboo keys are plucked to produce a sound. Keys are attached to a sounding board which is often attached to a resonator such as a gourd. The instrument is common in Liberia, especially among the Dan and Mano Peoples, and is played either by a single musician or as part of an ensemble.

Among the Dan, the sounding board of the *mbira* is typically incised with geometric designs. This example, however, is one of only two known to



include a carved head as part of the design, and scholars believe that the two instruments were made by the same carver. This instrument would be considered a prestige piece and was probably commissioned from a celebrated carver by a musician to celebrate his own position and notoriety.

### Questions

- What types of celebrations include music in our society?
- Why would a musician want to decorate an instrument?

## CLOTHING

One role of art within African society is to indicate the status of an individual. Various accoutrements including costumes and masks distinguish the gender, age, and status of a person. Additional signs may indicate more specific association, religious affiliations, and even particular accomplishments.

### ***King's Tunic, late 19th century, Yoruba Peoples, Kingdom of Owo, Nigeria, glass beads and cloth, Museum Purchase, 91.29.***

The Yoruba have existed in the countries of Benin and Nigeria in West Africa since around 800 CE. The Yoruba region encompasses people who speak the same language and share common belief systems, yet are divided geographically into various kingdoms. Historically, the Yoruba were farmers. The centralization of wealth in cities allowed for the development of a complex market economy. There are some differences in the individual governments, trade patterns and exports, and in certain details of rituals and religious ceremonies within each of the regional centers, and each urban area has its own political and social system. However, art is one force which binds the Yoruba kingdoms to each other despite time, inter-tribal warfare, and distance.

Tribal royal kingdoms in sub-Saharan Africa utilize magnificent objects associated with positions of power and prestige. In the Yoruba culture, possessions of royalty including vestments, canes, thrones, fans and staffs are distinguished by their lavish beadwork. The excellent condition of the tunic indicates that it was worn only for special occasions and ceremonies. Great care and respect were given in the creation of the piece as well as in maintaining it, denoting the importance of the chosen wearer.

This royal tunic is thought to be the only one of its kind outside of the African continent. It is covered in multicolored beads in geometric decorations of alternating vertical panels of interwoven bands and chevron design. The complex patterns attest to the king's ability to solve difficult problems. Three-dimensional birds run down the seams of the





underarms and the front and back panel. Birds are symbolic of the king and were believed to act as “spies” by flying throughout the kingdom and then reporting back to their master. They also indicate his connection to the spiritual realm. A delicate beaded fringe extends along the garment’s hem.

***Egungun Masquerade Dance Costume (Ekuu Egungun), Yoruba Peoples, Nigeria, Oyo Region, Early 20<sup>th</sup> C., Cloth, metallic thread, glass beads, cowrie shells, Museum Purchase, 92.54***

**[Pictured page 1]**

Art is prominent in the daily customs and rituals of every African. This thorough integration of art and daily life is usually obtained through religion, the greatest force in African society. An important aspect of African religion is ancestor worship. Ancestors are believed to have access to the supernatural world as well as special insight into the natural world.

The *Egungun* performance represents an intersection between the world of the living and the universe of the departed. Egungun refers to the ancestral spirits known affectionately as *ara orun*, dwellers of the other world who periodically revisit the human community for remembrance, celebration, and blessings. These spirits watch over and protect their earthly descendents. The appearance of Egungun in a community is usually a source of joy and is accompanied by pomp and pageantry including singing, dancing and drumming that heralds a festival lasting several days.

The ancestral spirits embody the voluminous costume that a masked dancer wears during Egungun performances. Costumes vary, but are generally constructed of disparate fabrics both locally woven and imported in addition to beads, leather, bones and selected empowering materials. Today these fabrics might include damask, velvet, madras and cotton. The identity of the performer is concealed with layers of transparent fabric that overlay a wooden substructure. When the costume is worn, fabrics and colors swirl augmented by dance steps and body movement.

### **Questions**

- What do your clothes tell us about you?
- Do you wear symbols that tell others your hobbies and interests?
- What animal would you choose to represent you?

## ARCHITECTURAL ADORNMENT

Complex kingdoms in sub-Saharan Africa have used artworks to express the roles and ranks comprising their administrative and ritual hierarchies. Ceremonial objects, carved stools and thrones, staffs, crowns, scepters, and architecture are all status symbols. As in most communities, the size and architectural embellishment of a house indicates social standing. The elaborate carving of such prestige items signifies the status of the owner; the most magnificent objects are created for the royal strata.

***Leopard Plaque, Edo Peoples, Benin Kingdom, Nigeria, 16-17th century, copper alloy, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Frede3rick M. Stafford, 80.194***

The Benin Kingdom exists today as part of southern Nigeria (not to be confused with the Republic of Benin located to the west of Nigeria) and covers approximately 4,000 square miles. The Kingdom of Benin and the Edo peoples within the kingdom flourished until 1897 when the British army captured, burned and looted the cities of the Kingdom of Benin, destroying the Kingdom and the rule of the Oba. Considered divine by nature, the Oba, or king, was the supreme ruler over the kingdom and ruled as the final judge, chief executive and landlord. The Oba was deposed from rule when the British took over, but the Oba's position was restored years later with limited rule.



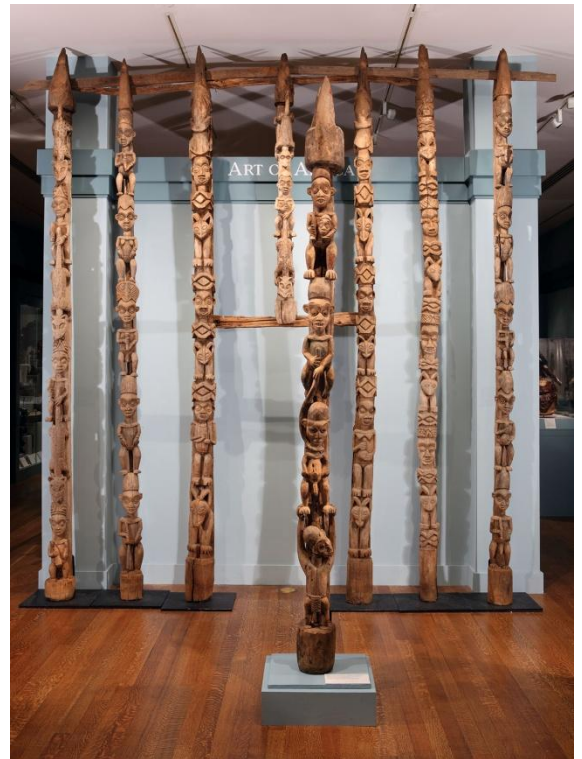
There is a long tradition of brass casting in the Benin Kingdom which developed its first brass center in the 14th century. For more than five hundred years, metal workers have been making objects that enhance the prestige of the king, or Oba. Wall plaques decorated the Oba's palace and were created to commemorate historical events, life at court and related matters. Wall plaques, such as the *Leopard Plaque*, have African and non-African influences, including an illustrated book first introduced to the culture by the Portuguese in 1485.

The image of the leopard was a common subject on regal art and body adornment in the Benin Kingdom. *Leopard Plaque* depicts a leopard in high relief. Symbolically the Oba related himself to the leopard because the large cats were considered kings of the forest and therefore the animal counterpart of the Oba. Leopards were captured and kept for royal sacrifice as well as paraded in the Oba's annual procession through town. This walk signified the domination of the Oba over the king of the forest. In low relief on the plaque is a floral decor representing the leaves of water plants. The four-leafed design represents the cosmological world of the Edo people: four directions of wind, four days of the Edo week, and four divisions of day (morning, afternoon, evening and night).

***Seven Exterior and One Interior Palace House Posts, Cameroon Grassfields, Tubah Subdivision, Kedjom Keku or Babanki-Daso, circa early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Workshop of Fon Phuonchu Aseh, Wood with traces of pigment, gift of Kent and Charles Davis, 2005.159 – 166***

The Grasslands of southwestern Cameroon are divided into many small kingdoms that share political structures. The ruler (*fon*) is at the top of the hierarchy of royals, subchiefs, and noblemen. Figurative sculpture from the region represents kings, queens, and other important members of the community. To enhance prestige and to demonstrate their ancestral right to rule, kings displayed carved portraits at major ceremonies and enhanced residences with carved adornments.

These seven posts were positioned on the façade of a king's palace in a village of Cameroon. The six tallest columns flanked the doorway, the slightly shorter post was placed just inside the main entrance, and the shortest post was placed above the entry. The sculpted pillars supported the structure's thatched roof. Behind the freestanding posts were walls made of interlaced lattice of wood and raffia. The building sat atop a rock platform with a seven-step stairway leading to the main entrance.

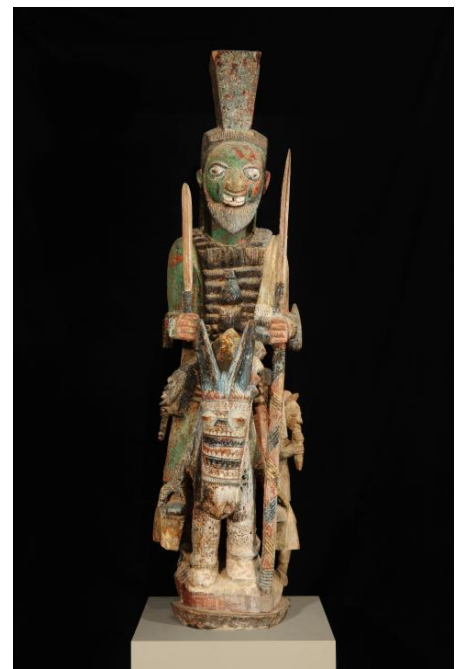


The figurative posts may represent a leopard hunt and the festival that would follow a successful hunt. The figures hold guns and knives and a leopard skin and are interspersed with heads and paws of the big cats. The interior post, however, appears to represent an execution and is a reminder of the power of the *fon*.

The posts are believed to have been carved in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the workshop of Fon Phuonchu Aseh. The carver was unusually a sculptor and a king, as was his father. They serve a didactic purpose relating to the unequivocal authority of the ruler, demonstrating his power and prestige.

***Mounted Warrior Veranda Post, 1910-1914, Olowe of Ise (circa 1875-1938), Yoruba Peoples, Ekiti Region, Nigeria, wood, polychrome, Ella West Freeman Foundation matching fund, 70.20***

Olowe of Ise was perhaps the greatest Yoruba carver of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although we cannot often identify African artists by name, Olowe of Ise was celebrated by his contemporaries in *Oriki*, traditional Yoruba poems of praise. Olowe of Ise was born in Efon-Alaye, but migrated to Ise at a young age. He served the king of Ise as a messenger and most likely apprenticed with another carver to learn the Yoruba canon and perfect his





carving skills. The extensive carving work he created at the Palace of the Ogoga of Ikere was one of his greatest accomplishments. Utilizing the help of as many as fifteen assistants, Olowe produced vast amounts of doors, chairs, ritual objects, and architectural posts for the Oba of Ikere, who had seen other palace courtyards and hoped to enhance his own palace.

The *Mounted Warrior Veranda Post* is one of a series of five posts present on the outer edge of the courtyard leading to the palace. Another post depicts the queen with twins and a third represents the royal family. The relatively short posts give the impression of height and power. The presence of a warrior at the palace entrance represents the honor and power ascribed to the king. Horses were rare among the Yoruba, and its inclusion in the palace architecture asserts military power. The mounted warrior appears ready for battle holding a long, pointed spear in his left hand and a short sword with a wide curved blade in his right. A pistol hangs on his hip and his feet are in the stirrups. The Yoruba deity Esu is depicted toward the back of the post. Esu is considered a spirit of trickery who may lead mortals to temptation. He is called upon to protect travelers.

The bold facial features, including bulging eyes and exposed teeth, are characteristic of Olowe of Ise's personal style and reveal the detailed attention the artist gave to these carvings. The figure's sharp beard, sweeping hairstyle, and detailed clothing allowed Olowe to indulge in surface ornamentation.

***Oshugbo Society Lodge Door Panel, 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century, Yoruba Peoples, Nigeria, Ijebu Region, wood, Museum Purchase, 89.283***

African art is identified by country, region, people and society. Societies are usually organized within African cultures as a means of stabilizing values. Art often plays a role in rites within these groups. Initiation rituals and other ceremonies are markers of the progress of group members. Ritual objects such as masks and carved figures may function as learning devices as well as symbols of knowledge. Likewise, the meeting place of certain societies may also be adorned to reflect their goals and ideology.

Members of the Ogboni society among the Yoruba are male and female elders from the community who serve crucial judicial, religious, and political functions. Society gatherings take place in their meeting house, called the "house with inner sanctum." The house is guarded by these commonly seen doors whose detailed carvings depict society secrets and beliefs.



Three veranda posts by Olowe of Ise installed in the reception courtyard of the palace of the ogoga (king) of Ikere. Photograph by William B. Fagg. The William B. Fagg Archives, Royal Anthorpological Institute, London, U.K. Gift of Paul and Ruth Tishman.





This door is divided into three panels which evoke themes of captives, victims and sacrifice. The top register depicts a coiled snake holding a human male victim in its mouth. A chameleon, a mounted warrior and a frog also appear in this register, and may signify the ability to make change occur. The Oshugbo Society held judicial authority within their community, and the snake panel may represent a condemned criminal receiving punishment.

In the middle, a figure on horseback holds two prisoners by the throat at arm's length. This composition is echoed in the bottom register, in which a fish-tailed figure displays mudfish sacrifices. The figures in the middle and lower registers have horizontal emanations across the forehead, which indicates supernatural power. The iconography presented in the door carving would have been easily understood by the Ogboni beholder.

## **MASKS**

Masks make up a large number of the artifacts in NOMA's African galleries. These objects are made of various materials, including leather, metal, fabric and various types of wood. Masking ceremonies in Africa have great cultural and traditional significance. African masks are worn by a chosen or initiated dancer during celebrations, initiations, crop harvesting, war preparation, peace and troubled times as part of a full-bodied costume. Rituals and ceremonies are always accompanied with song, dance and music played on traditional African musical instruments.

Masks can be worn in three different ways: vertically covering the face, as a helmet encasing the entire head, and as a crest resting upon the head. African masks often represent a spirit, and it is strongly believed that the spirit of the ancestor possesses the wearer during the ceremony. Dancers bring forth messages of wisdom from the ancestors.

***Shark Masquerade Headdress, Ijo Peoples, Niger Delta Region, Nigeria, wood, pigment, rope, mirrors, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Jay Matthew DeVoss, 2007.154***



The shark's intimidating appearance and predatory behavior accounts for its popularity as a masquerade character in the Niger Delta. For generations, fishermen have braved shark-infested water in dugout canoes. Hunting sharks requires immense courage thus Ijo communities often award warrior titles to men who succeed in killing their prey. Men who have survived an encounter entertain listeners with spellbinding tales. Ijo Peoples, the region's leading fishermen, probably originated masks representing such marine animals, but these particular

masks have spread far inland. Some shark masks are decorated with paint while some are identifiable as specific breeds of shark.

Though performances would vary from one group to another, this mask would typically be used to portray the shark as a fearsome foe. For example, the performance in Ondewari, an Ijo village, comically enacts a shark hunt. First, a masquerade participant wearing a mullet headpiece runs through town proclaiming, “Sharks are coming, so little fishes should run and hide.” On the water, a boat carrying energetic drummers tows a caged participant wearing the shark headdress upriver on a raft as he slashes at his cage with a machete. Simultaneously, a fisherman and his wife circle the raft in from a canoe. Each time the fisherman throws his spear, the canoe capsizes, and the couple falls into the water. The performance eventually comes to shore when the shark along with his son, and wife wearing similar headpieces dance and chase spectators. The masquerade concludes when the couple comes ashore and kills the shark after several failed attempts. The shark is hauled to their canoe and the couple celebrates their catch with the audience.

***Kòmò Association Helmet Mask, Bamana Peoples, Mali, Koulikoro Region, wood, porcupine quills, antelope horns, iron, sacrificial organic material, anonymous gift, 87.205***

The Bamana Peoples live in the Niger River Valley and are members of the Mande culture. They are primarily farmers. Some of their art, like the *Ciwara* antelope headdress, is related to celebrating and ensuring a successful harvest. Their more fearsome masks are kept secret from women and are related to an elaborate system of male initiation. Initiation societies influence the political and religious structures within each community and contribute to the continuation of moral and educational mores.



This horizontal helmet mask from the Kòmò Association would have been worn in private meetings of the Kòmò society, a group of men who act on behalf of the community especially in times of crisis or illness. Kòmò masks are created by blacksmith-sculptors who combine representations of various animals with herbal substances from the bush and mineral components in specialized recipes designed to channel spiritual energy. During a performance, the wearer of such a mask would charge out of the bush in an aggressive manor meant to frighten away ill spirits. Throughout its continued use, the mask is nourished with sacrificial offerings which add to its encrusted look. Each component of the mask is chosen for its metaphorical association and indigenous sources of power.

This helmet mask is a wood and iron sculpture entirely covered with an earth mixture. It consists of multiple bundles of quills, feathers, and pig hairs bound to the structure, projected vertically, and symbolic in nature.

Pigs or warthogs are symbolic of power and accomplishment and have the ability to ward off wicked forces. Bird feathers generally refer to divination – the ability to choose the right path for the future. Antelopes are classified by the Bamana as dark and powerful animals protected by wilderness spirits and are symbols of aggression. Porcupines’ quills are suggestive of weapons and the Kòmò’s capacity for violence. Porcupines are also considered to be wise creatures and protectors of knowledge.

Evidence suggests Mande blacksmiths used these masks to solidify control over metal resources, defend their monopoly on smith technologies, as well as exert controls over long-distance trade. While the mask is made to look like a combination of animals, it is a representation the power of the secret society.

***Ciwara Association Crest Masks, Bamana Peoples Region, wood, tin, iron, partial and promised gift of Barbara and Wayne Amedee, 2003.160.1-2***

*Ciwara Kunw*, antelope crest masks, are among the most recognizable African art forms. They are part of a large collection of objects, actions, songs, drumming, and oral narratives of the Ciwara Association of the Bamana Peoples who celebrate agriculture. In this region, working the soil is a grueling task. Individuals who excel are given the praise name *ciwara*—“farming beast.” These masks are worn to perform annual rites of renewal and purification in which masqueraders travel across the village to visit spiritually significant locations. At each point, the participants dance, sing, and perform sacrifices to recharge sacred spaces. Today, *Ciwara* masquerades frequently function as entertainment.

*Ciwara* are generally hybrid creatures, composed of animals associated with agriculture and its origins. Antelopes are considered to have a tremendous amount of spiritual energy exhibited by their grace and beauty, and they are represented stylistically in these masks worn on top of the head. Other aspects of these masks symbolize key components of agriculture. The zigzag pattern, which typically forms the neck, marks the sun’s path between the period of solstices and/or the bounding stride of the antelope.

*Ciwara* masks are classified as vertical, horizontal, or abstract, and may be identified as male or female. The vertical style, as seen here, is typical of the eastern Bamana region near Segou. Males are distinguished by sweeping bent horns and upstanding manes. Females have straight horns and are often accompanied by a baby antelope. A male and female pair of *Ciwara* may represent an ideal coupling resulting in offspring. The pair additionally attests to the complementary nature of the female and male realms in which the male represents the sun and the female represents



the earth. Each component is essential for the growth of crops and thus, the survival of humans.

***Poro society Horizontal Mask (Kpakalogi Sinei), Loma Peoples, Liberia/Guinea border, wood, cotton, feathers, monkey fur, leopard fur, cowrie shells, metal, seeds Ella West Freeman Foundtion Matching Fund, 72.40***

The Loma wear masks during men's initiation rituals as part of an ensemble of made of raffia, cloth, shells, and fibers. Loma masks are believed to bring individuals into contact with forces that provide spiritual protection. The Poro society is the principal men's initiation society of the Loma People (also called Toma, as they straddle the border of English speaking Liberia and French speaking Guinea). The *Kpakalogi Sinei* (Big Male) mask is performed during the initiation of Poro members, funerals of members, national holidays and other ceremonies.



NOMA's mask is the best known example of this type of mask in an American collection. The *Kpakalogi Sinei* is meant to convey danger, and frighten the uninitiated so that they keep a distance. The red teeth indicate the potential threat of being devoured which is accentuated by articulated jaw. Monkey fur surrounds the mouth creating a beard and moustache. The raptor feathers at the crown are another element of danger. The headband is made of cloth and includes leather, shells, leopard fur and sometimes amulet packages. When danced, the arms, legs and feet of the performer would be hidden under a large raffia skirt.

## RITUAL OBJECTS

***Fertility Figures (Akua'mma), Asante Peoples, Ghana, wood, glass beads, cloth, pigment.***

*Asante akua'mma*, fertility figures, are among the most iconic African sculptures. Key components of their attractiveness are the sculptural simplicity, subtle variations, and compelling history. The disk-shaped head is the most distinctive trait of these particular fertility figures. Asante carvers designate the lower half of the disk-shaped head for facial features thereby creating a high forehead in the upper half of the disk. Other traits of these fertility figures include the absence of ears (although beaded earrings are occasionally seen), tapered arms which project from the body at a right angle, and the indication of a ringed neck. The torsos are most commonly cylindrical and terminate below the navel with a base in the place





of hips. The base provides a shelf for waist beads which are often a gift to newly born infants.

The origin story of these figures is told through oral tradition. In the distant past, a young woman was struggling to conceive a child. The resident priest of a local shrine instructed her to commission the carving of a fertility figure and care for it as if it were her child. She was to bathe, dress, feed, and carry the figure on her back like an actual infant. Initially, the young woman was subject to scrutiny from the public; however, she eventually gave birth to a healthy and beautiful baby girl. Other young woman who had complications conceiving or other concerns regarding fertility continued the practice. Today, modern medicine and Christianity have impeded this tradition. Nevertheless, contemporary carvings are often found during Kwanza and used during rituals, given as gifts, or displayed in the home as a representation of African American cultural heritage.

***Three Standing Guardian Figures for Reliquaries (Eyema Bieri), Fang Peoples, Gabon, Africa, Wood, bone, 19th-early 20th century, Bequest of Victor Kiam, 77.209, 77.154, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Frederick M. Stafford, 79.338***

The Fang Peoples live in the dense rainforests of the Gabonese Republic in Central Africa. The Fang use ancestor worship, *Bieri*, as a way for men of the village to communicate with ancestors to receive protection for the community. Like many African cultures, the *Bieri* tradition required new male members to undergo initiation rites. Part of the tradition included paying homage to ancestors whose skulls or bones were stored in reliquary boxes and guarded by a carved wooden sculpture intended to ward off women and children. These reliquaries would have been the center of rituals and sacrifices of the *Bieri* society.

The three Guardian figures include two males and one female. These sculptures are cylindrical in shape with elongated bodies, long arms, and short legs. Their hair has been carefully carved into braids. The wood shines because it is saturated with palm oil, rubbed on the sculptures during rituals. The appendage that enables the figures to stand upright would have been attached to the reliquary boxes so the sculptures could sit on top and guard its contents.

The female figure stands out from the two male figures, serving as a symbol of fertility and continuation of the family. The male guardian figures appear imposing next to the maternal female figure. The slimmer male figure is one of the highlights of the African Art collection. Its style elegantly diverges from most guardian figures of this culture.



**Figurative Rice Ladle: Wunkirmian of Wa Ke Mia, Dan Peoples, Liberia/Cote d'Ivoire, Wood, fiber, and iron. 20<sup>th</sup> century.**

The Dan tribes live in both Liberia and Cote d'Ivoire on the western coast of Africa. They maintain oral histories of their villages and participate in elaborate feasts and ceremonies throughout the year. Their worldview holds that there is a dividing line between the village and the wild, separating what man has tamed and what he has not. In order to cross the line, the Dan people believe it necessary to appease the bush spirits. These spirits inhabit forests surrounding the villages and establish relationships with individual tribesmen in order to be manifested and honored through ceremonies.

For Dan tribes, rice ladles are ceremonial objects that show the rank of the first wife of the chief as well as other important tribeswomen. The creation myth of the Dan tells of how the Supreme Being created ladles as the female equivalent of masks, which are used exclusively by male members of society. The ladle symbolizes the female possessor's good fortune, generosity, and hospitality when used ceremonially to serve rice during harvest festivals. When in possession of the ladle, a tribeswoman is known as the mistress of the feast, an honor bestowed upon her by the previous mistress of the feast. Dan tribes believe a woman in possession of a ladle such as this to be the perfect woman, demonstrating good work ethic in the fields while also showing a hospitable nature in organizing large feasts for the village.

Beginning at the very top of the ladle, the wooden two-headed figure wears a crown with a string of fibers braided down to the top of its ears. The slightly domed foreheads on each side are decorated with an incised honeycomb motif. Meant to embody traits of female beauty, the heads have strip-shaved eyebrows, fine noses and eyes, emphasized jawbones, and protruding lips. The cylindrical handle is shaped like the neck of a human figure, and its thickness is meant to indicate health and energy. The horizontal grooves at the top of the neck and handle represent wrinkles common to people with more-than-ample nutrition, another sign of prosperity and high status. The etched decoration on the bowl of the ladle refers to the Dan myth of origin and the line between the village and the wild.

**Questions**

- Do you have any ancestors or relatives that you think are important to your family?
- What objects do you use to remind you of your family?
- What significant objects does your family use only on special occasions?

