

ARTS 2J Project 1

Frank Yung-fong Tang

Date: October 22, 2023

Design Proposal for African Art Exhibition

Exhibit Theme: “Arts in Kingdoms of West & Central Africa”

Introduction

From the bustling marketplaces of Yoruba Kingdoms to the sacred groves of the Kongo, and from the savannas of Central Africa to the rainforests of the Congo Basin, West and Central Africa's artistic heritage is a symphony of creativity and spirituality. Yoruba sculptures decorated with intricate beadwork embody oracle power, while Benin bronzes commend royal power. Bamana masks mingle humor and burlesque with profound supersubstantial undertones. These arts are not merely aesthetic adornments, but vital expressions of the rich cultural mixtures that have blended together the diverse peoples of West and Central Africa for centuries.

Room 1

Room 1 Theme: Yoruba Kingdoms

Yoruba people find a profound association of civilization and legend that gathers and recognizes their cultural identity. There are sixteen established states, kingdoms that are stated to have been the posterity of Oduduwa, the divine king, legendary founder of the Ife Empire. Yoruba believe Oduduwa was a creator deity (orisha) in their religion. There are also other chiefdoms that are second order branches of these original sixteen kingdoms.” (Akintoye; Murrell; Smith)

Exhibition 1A: Ifa Divination boards

Ifa divination is a Yoruba faith ritual around south-western Nigeria. The word Ifa indicates the supernatural character Orunmila or Ifa, treated by the Yoruba as the god of intellectual and wisdom cultivation. It depends on a complex hierarchy of symbols, which originated from casting a bunch of palm nuts, and then illustrated on a divination board; followed by the Ifa priest deciphering these symbols.” (Johnson; Karade; Owumi and Okewole)

Display Design:

In this exhibition, we will include the Ifa Divination board from the PDF as well as some photos from Vogel. We will also include some other Ifa Divination boards through Inter-Museum Loan:

- Divination Tray, Opon Ifa, from Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University. 1994.004.559
- Ifa divination tray (apon Ifa), from Dallas Museum of Art. 5327077
- Two Ifa Divination Tray (Opon Ifa), from Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art
- Divination Tray, 1900s, from Cleveland Museum of Art. 1993.235

Exhibition 1B: Ibeji "twin"

Twins commonly dominate the Yoruba ethnic group in Nigeria. According to a 1970s study, around 50 sets of twins were born out of every 1,000 births in the southwest of Nigeria and made Yoruba one of the highest rates of twin births in the world. Because of this, twins are considered as superb beings defended by Sango, the god of thunder. Yoruba people believed they have the ability to confer extensive abundance toward their families or adversity to those who disrespect them. Twins are dignified with engraved memorial figures when they pass away. These carved figures, known as ere ibeji, preserve a contact point to the spirit of the deceased individual. (Akwagyiram)

Display Design:

In this exhibition, we will include the Ibeji "twin" from the PDF and also two other Ibeji pairs through Inter-Museum Loan:

- Ere ibeji twin figures, from Royal Ontario Museum.
- Twin Figures (ere ibeji), from The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. 998.30.13

Exhibition 1C: Shango

The Yoruba god Shango is an Orisha associated primarily with thunder, virility, dance, and lightning. He is also known as Xango or Chango. He is also known as Esango, being a part of the religion of the Edo people of southeastern Nigeria. The ancestral Shango was the fourth king of the town of Oyo. He has a voice like thunder and speaks with gushing fire. A group of chief challenged his ruling and many townspeople deserted Shango. Shango departed Oyo and killed himself after the defeat. His followers asserted that he was promoted to the heavens on a chain. They stated that his disappearance was his transformation into an orisha. (Scranton; Beier 23-35)

Display Design:

In this exhibition, we will include the Shango from the PDF and also another staff of Shango through Inter-Museum Loan:

- Staff of Sango, Late 19th to early 20th century, Nigeria. National Museum of African Art. 88-1-1.

Room Room 2

Room 2 Theme: Kingdom of Benin

The ancient kingdom of Benin was founded inside the beautiful West Africa forest around 1200 C.E. The Edo people of southern Nigeria established Benin. Because they did not want to be governed by their kings, ogisos, they asked an Ife prince to take control instead. Their first Benin king, known as oba, was Eweka. Eweka was the son of the Ife prince. Benin Kingdom artists were well known for working in brass, ivory, and wood. They were renowned for their life-size head sculptures, and bas-relief sculptures, particularly plaques. The heads were often naturalistic and life size. The plaques usually illustrated historical events. Artisans also carved ivory objects, including masks and salt cellars for their European trade partners. (Leavitt)

Exhibition 2A: Two Ivory Masks of Queen Idia

Here we see two ivory pendant masks from the Kingdom of Benin produced in the early sixteenth century for the King or Oba Esigie, the king of Benin, to depict his mother, Idia. One of them was hosted in the British Museum in London and the other in the Metropolitan museum in New York City. Through our collaboration with the Inter-Museum Loan program, this exhibition displays both of them side-by-side to present us a rare view of the realistic beauty of Benin arts. Images of women are actually very rare in Benin's courtly tradition. However, these two works symbolized the heritage of a dynasty that continues to the modern day. The oba may have put it on at a ceremony to commemorate his mother. Today, these pendants are worn at rites ceremonies of spiritual instauration and purification. (“Queen Mother Pendant Mask: Iyoba.”)

Display Design:

In this exhibition, we will include two Ivory Masks of Queen Idia. One of them is the one hosted in the British Museum mentioned the PDF and another one through the Inter-Museum Loan:

- Queen Mother Pendant Mask: Iyoba, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York city.
1978.412.323.

Exhibition 2B: Commemorative head of a Queen Mother

The iyoba, or mother of the oba (king), was a critical and historically significant figure in Benin's political system. This title was first dedicated to Idia, the mother of king Esigie. She utilized her political capability to preserve her son's kingdom from destruction in the late fifteenth century. Starting from that time, queen mothers in the Benin Kingdom have been considered formidable guardians of their sons and the kingdom itself. Due to their gigantic homage, iyobas bear powers second to the oba. They resided in a ghettoized royal court, accompanied by a group of female attendants, and had the privilege to commission cast brass sculptures for personal or religious use. (“Head of a Queen Mother (Iyoba): Edo Peoples.”)

Exhibition 2C: Ivory Leopard and Figure of a Mudfish

Leopard “was once the emblem of power for the exclusive use of the Oba or king of Benin” (“Benin Leopard.”). It denotes the victory of human beings over the wild. Leopards are the leaders in the animal kingdom and also embrace the concept of “fear”. The Benin Kingdom uses this idea to represent the Oba of Benin as king of the towns and the countryside, where his citizens dwell. It shows that the king dominates the jungle. Mudfish symbolize “peace, prosperity, and fertility” (Peck and Reid). The mudfish dwells around the riverside. Riverside is a location between the land and the water; therefore, it represents the location between men, live on the land, and the spirit world of Olokun, god of the water. The mudfish usually bounce in and out of the water in the seaboard mangrove grassy marsh, and habitat in the sea and on land at the same time. Therefore, it shows that their king reigns over both the men and the spirit. From these images, we see both leopards and mudfish are abundant in the art of Benin Kingdom to represent the political power and force of the Oba of Benin Kingdom.

Room 3

Room 3 Theme: Bamana Empire

From the depths of the Bamana Empire emerged a vibrant tapestry of artistic expressions, woven with threads of social and spirituality association. Chi Wara dances beautifully to communicate benedictions upon the land, while N'tomo masks blend humor and satire with abstruse spiritual connotations. Bogolan mud cloth, adorned with interlocked and jagged symbols, speaks volumes about identity, position, and spiritual beliefs. These arts serve as powerful embodiments of Bamana culture, their lasting legacy continuing to inspire and amaze. (Brett-Smith)

Exhibition 3A: Chi Wara Headdresses and Dance

Chi Wara is a revered antelope figure among the Bambara people of Mali to embody the essence of agriculture. Its stylized form embellished with symbolic motifs functions as an overbearing reminder of the mythical being who conducted farming knowledge to human beings. Through charming dances that mimic the grace of the antelope, Chi Wara headdresses convert conduits for benevolence upon the land, guaranteeing ample harvests. Chi Wara transcends its representation of agriculture and becomes a beacon of cultural identity and respect for the interconnectedness between human civilization and the natural world. (Wooten)

Display Design:

This is a two parts exhibit. In the first part of the exhibit, we will exhibit several Chi Wara headdresses on top of models who dress with traditional dance cloth to give the viewers a realistic perspective of how tall these headdresses are in the dance performance as well as how colorful the dress of the dancers are. In the second part of the exhibit, we will project the following videos to a large screen showing the dancer in similar size as normal human being to create an immersion view of the dance:

- “Ci Wara Dance Ceremony” (7:24) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6LYIdhPbWBw>
- “Bambara Bamana headrest Chiwara Ciwara” (1:13)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bt3Mkzv2Ot0>
- “The people of Chiwara and #ChiwaraMask. watch out for more.... African Arts, history and culture.” (7:25) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kEpM2re_xU8
- “Chiwara @ Kulu Mele” (6:35) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q2fYZL1Zh2k>

Exhibition 3B: N'tomo Masks and Dance

N'tomo masks, garnished with multiple horns, are central to clever Bamana dances that blend humor and satire with profound spiritual undertones. Dancers clad in white or ochre-colored garments move with grace and agility, mimicking the naughty spirits that N'tomo masks represent. Through their dances, N'tomo dancers act as social commentators, reminding people about issues related to authority, morality, and social norms. These masks and dances are powerful articulations of Bamana culture, serving as a way for transmitting values, knowledge, and faiths from one generation to the next. (Imperato)

Display Design:

This is a two parts exhibit. In the first part of the exhibit, we will exhibit two N'tomo Masks on top of models which are cloth with traditional dance cloth to give the viewers a true perspective of how these masks are used in the dance performance. we will showcase two N'tomo Masks, one from the PDF and also another through Inter-Museum Loan:

- N'tomo Mask, Bamana (Bambara), 19th–20th century, 34 × 9 × 8 in. (86.36 × 22.86 × 20.32 cm), Wood, cowry shells. Loan from Dallas Museum of Art. 5158441.

In the second part of the exhibit, we will project the following video to a large screen showing the dancer in similar size as normal human being to create an immersion view of the dance:

- La danse traditionnelle de N'tomo (1:14) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PsLBybCh53s>

Exhibition 3C: “Bogolan” The Bamana textiles

The word bogolan means “something made by using mud”. In this Malian tradition, men weave the cotton cloth strips that are sewn together to produce the canvas. Then women render them through a complex resist procedure which uses plant extracts and mud. Usually black or dark color patterns were part of the design. (“Wrapper (Bogolanfini): Bamana Peoples.”)

Display Design:

This is a three parts exhibition. In part 1, we show the photo and real cloth of the “Bogolan” as seen in the PDF. In part 2, we project a life size video to show how the Bamana people make the Bogolan. In Part 3, we project another life size video to show how we could make Bogolan style cloth at home in USA:

- Part 2 Video: “How to make West African mudcloth (bogolan)” (3:12)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IdWoWzLLJxw>
- Part 3 Video: “How to create a DIY Malian-inspired mud cloth” (4:22)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Acy5e6WjI5Q>

Room 4

Room 4 Theme: Kongo Kingdom

The Kongo Kingdom, flourishing in west-central Africa, created an abundant and multiplex artistic heritage. Their sculptures, carvings, and textiles were eminent for their mazy designs, expressional appearances, and spiritual significance. Nkisi power figures, imbued with sacred potency, attended as intermediaries between the living and the spirit realm. Ivories, such as oliphants and tusk carvings, showcased the Kongo mastery of this precious material. Kongo art was not only decorative, but also served as a vital means of expressing social status, cultural identity, and spiritual beliefs. (Bostoen and Brinkman)

Exhibition 4A: Sharpen Teeth in Two Carved Cane Finials

Human tooth sharpening is the exercise of manually grinding the teeth, often the foretooth. Filed teeth are customs observed in many cultures. Historically it was performed for spiritual or identification objectives. Among the Upoto tribespeople in central Congo, the teeth sharpening ritual was completed

according to sexes. Men filed only one tooth while women filed more than one, especially before marriage. In these two carved finals of cane, we can see both figures opening their mouths and showing their sharpened teeth. ("The Teeth Sharpening Culture in Africa: Hadithi Africa.")

Display Design:

In this exhibition, we will include a carved ivory cane final from the PDF and also another one through Inter-Museum Loan:

- Staff (mvwala amfumu), 19th century, Kongo artist, Kongo Central Province, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ivory, wood, metal, ceramic. National Museum of African Art in Washington DC. 2005-6-32

Exhibition 4B: Sharpen Teeth in Five Mother / Child Sculptures

These seated women sculptures looking forward with their open mouths showing filed teeth, while on they all wear a mpu on their head. Mpu is the cap of leadership. They also wear upper-arm bands, anklets, bracelets, and a rectangular panel to cover their buttocks. Their other parts of the body are bare. Some of them expose a network of lozenge cicatrization that spans her chest and covers her entire back. The seated female and the child she holds in her arms were distanced and separate instead of emphasizing the connectedness between the mother and her child. Same as the rendering in the previous exhibit, their mouths are open and their teeth are sharpened. (LaGamma)

Display Design:

In this exhibition, we will include the mother / child sculptures from the PDF and also the following four other similar figures through Inter-Museum Loan:

- Seated Female Nursing Child, 19th–early 20th century, inventoried 1913. Kongo peoples; Yombe group. Wood, kaolin; H. 9 3/8 in. (23.7 cm), W. 3 1/4 in. (8.2 cm), D. 4 in. (10.1 cm). MIBACT—Polo Museale del Lazio, Museo Preistorico Etnografico Luigi Pigorini, Rome.
- Seated Female Nursing Child (Nkisi), 19th–early 20th century. Kongo peoples; Yombe group. Wood, metal, kaolin, glass, resin, pigment; H. 11 1/8 in. (28.3 cm), W. 4 1/4 in. (10.8 cm), D. 4 1/4 in. (10.8 cm). Steven Kossak, The Kronos Collections, New York.
- Seated Female Supporting Figure with Clasped Hands, 19th century, inventoried 1898. Kongo peoples, Yombe group. Wood, metal, glass, kaolin, pigment; H. 10 7/8 in. (27.5 cm), W. 4 1/2 in. (11.4 cm), D. 4 5/8 in. (11.7 cm). Ross Art Management, LLC, New York. Right: Master of Kasadi.
- Seated Female Supporting Figure Clasping Her Breast, 19th–early 20th century. Kongo peoples; Yombe group. Wood, glass, kaolin; H. 10 3/4 in. (27.3 cm), W. 5 3/4 in. (14.6 cm), D. 5 in. (12.7 cm). Collection of Drs. Daniel and Marian Malcolm, Tenafly, New Jersey.

Exhibition 4C: Two "Power Figures" (Nkisi Nkondi)

"Power Figures", as known as minkisi (singular nkisi), were art objects created by people in the Kongo Kingdom, located in the present day countries Democratic Republic of Congo and Republic of the Congo. These figures are, in effect, receptacles of spiritual strength. When brought to life, Kongo people believe they have the magic power to expose origins of anguish, to convalesce, to guard, and to castigate. It is a collaborative effort to make a nkisi: An artist first carves a wooden sculpture, often looking like a

human or an animal. Then it is passed to a nganga, a ritual specialist, to brisk the figure by filling special cavities in the sculpture, in the head and stomach region generally, with soil, herbs, ash, soil, and animal portions that are redounded imaginary and medicinal properties. (“Art: Power Figure (Nkisi nkondi).”)

Display Design:

In this exhibition, we will include a "Power Figure" from the PDF and also another "Power Figure" through Inter-Museum Loan:

- Power figure (nkisi nkondi), Kongo artist, Kongo Central Province, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Late 19th century to mid-20th century. Wood, glass, iron, pigment, cloth, plant fiber, horn, nails. National Museum of African Art in Washington DC. 91-22-1.

Conclusion

This exhibit has taken us on a journey through the artistic traditions of West and Central Africa. Each piece on display is a testament to the creativity, spirituality, and cultural significance of art in this region. From the sacred Ifa Divination boards to the captivating Chi Wara Headresses, these works of art are not merely objects of beauty, but also powerful expressions of cultural identity, spiritual beliefs, and social values. They serve as bridges between the past and the present, reminding us of the enduring power of art to inspire, amaze, and connect us to one another. (Bard)

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ARTS 2J Project 1
African Art Exhibition

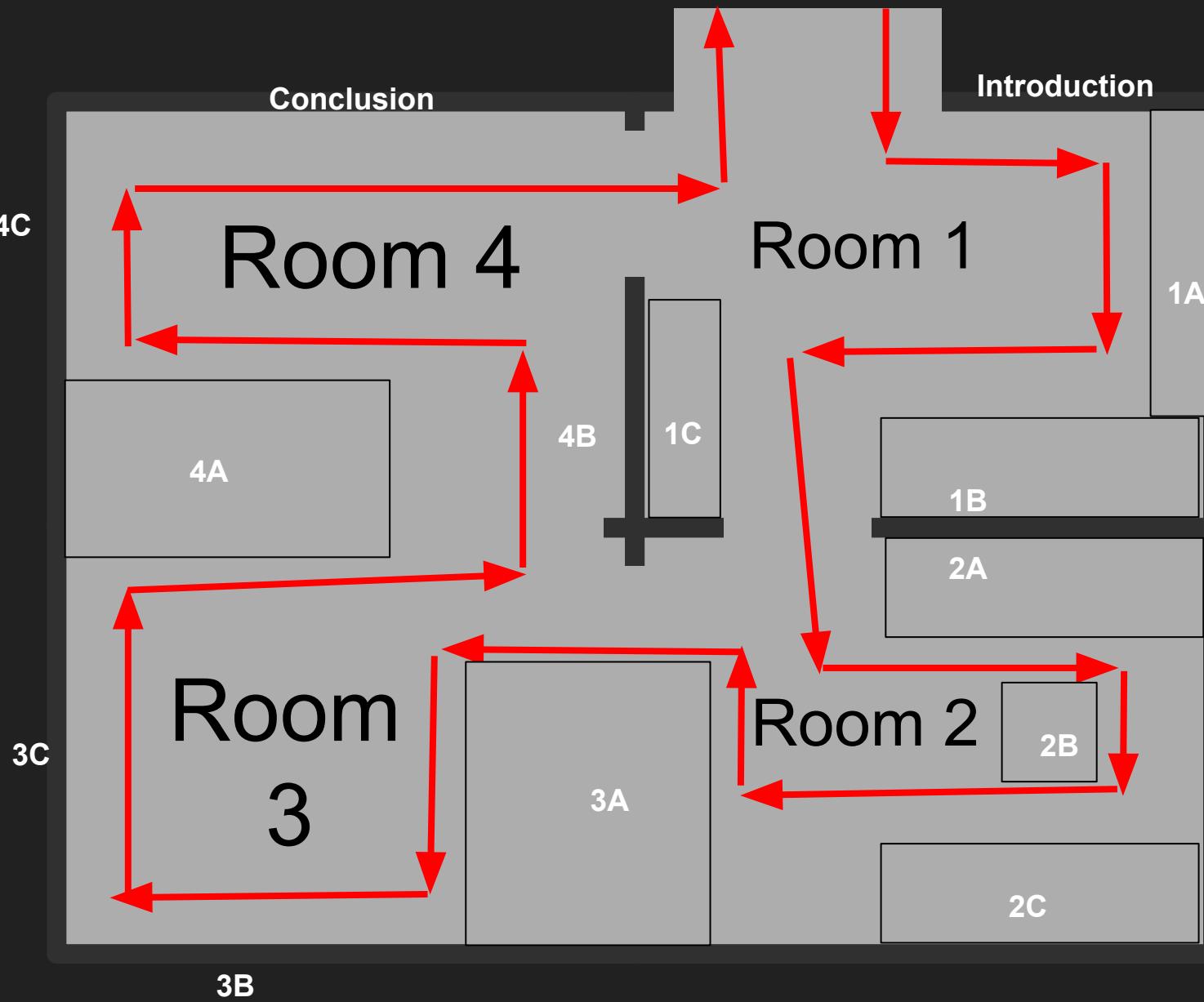
Arts in Kingdoms of West & Central Africa

Frank Yung-Fong Tang
Oct 24, 2023

- Introduction
 - Room 1: Yoruba Kingdoms
 - Room 2: Kingdom of Benin
 - Room 3: Bamana Empire
 - Room 4: Kongo Kingdom
- Conclusion



Map of the “Arts in Kingdoms of West & Central Africa” Exhibition



Introduction

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(Bard)

Room 1

Yoruba Kingdoms



Yoruba Kingdoms

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(Akintoye; Murrell; Smith)

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(Johnson; Karade; Owumi and Okewole)

Ifa Divination boards

Images of Ifa Division Boards

(Vogel 95)





Divination Tray, Opon Ifa
Africa, Nigeria
14 15/16 x 2 3/4 x 14 15/16 in. (37.9 x 7 x 38 cm)
Loan from Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University.



Ifa divination tray (opon Ifa)
20th–mid 20th century
18 1/2 x 18 3/4 x 1 3/4 in. (46.99 x 47.63 x 4.45 cm)
Loan from Dallas Museum of Art



Ifa Divination Traies (Opon Ifa)
Nigerian
Loan from Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art



Divination Tray, 1900s

42 cm (16 9/16 in.); Overall: 3.2 cm (1 1/4 in.)

Africa, West Africa, Nigeria, Yorùbá-style maker

Loan from Cleveland Museum of Art

Exhibit 1B- Ibeji "Twin"

Twins commonly dominate the Yoruba ethnic group in Nigeria. According to a 1970s study, around 50 sets of twins were born out of every 1,000 births in the southwest of Nigeria and made Yoruba one of the highest rates of twin births in the world. Because of this, twins are considered as superb beings defended by Sango, the god of thunder. Yoruba people believed they have the ability to confer extensive abundance toward their families or adversity to those who disrespect them. Twins are dignified with engraved memorial figures when they pass away. These carved figures, known as ere ibeji, preserve a contact point to the spirit of the deceased individual.

(Akwagyiram)

Exhibit 1B- Ibeji "Twin"



Up: Ere ibeji twin figures, Yoruba
By unknown Yoruba artist
19th century - mid-20th century
h27 cm, Wood, metal, beads, string
Loan from Royal Ontario Museum



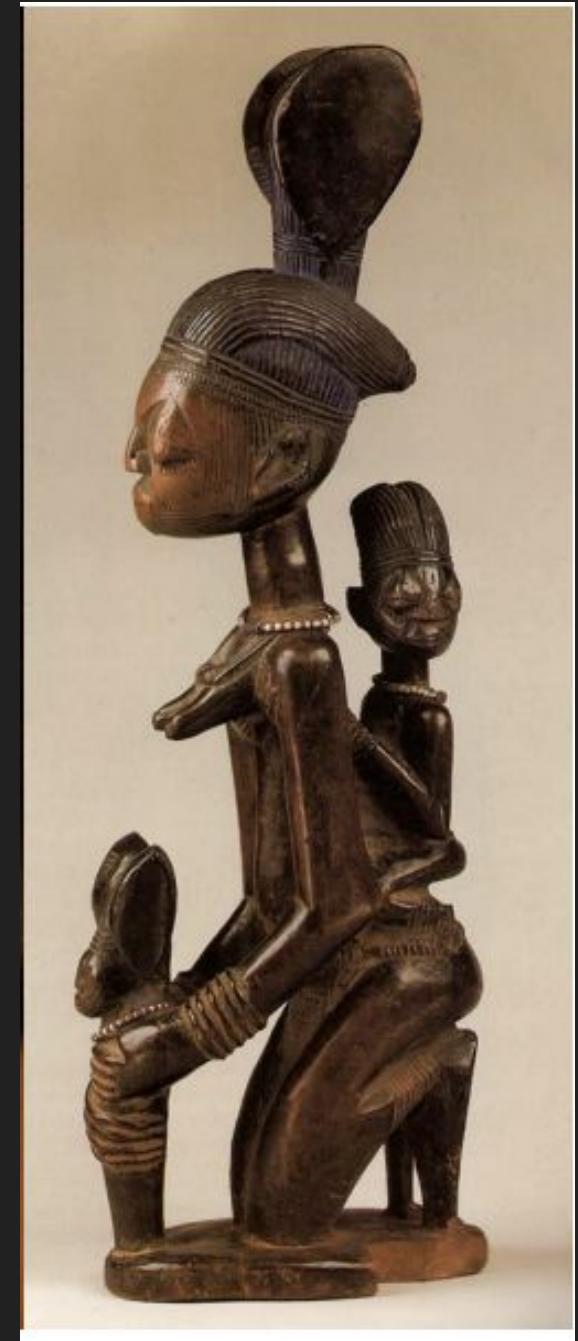
Left: Twin Figures (ere ibeji), Yoruba
Second quarter of 20th century
w7.6 x h22.2 x d7.6 cm (overall, each)
Wood, and traces of indigo and tukula
Loan from The Museum of Fine Arts,
Houston

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Exhibit 1C- Shango



Staff of Sango, Late 19th to early 20th century, Nigeria. Loan from National Museum of African Art. 88-1-1.

Room 2

Kingdom of Benin



Kingdom of Benin

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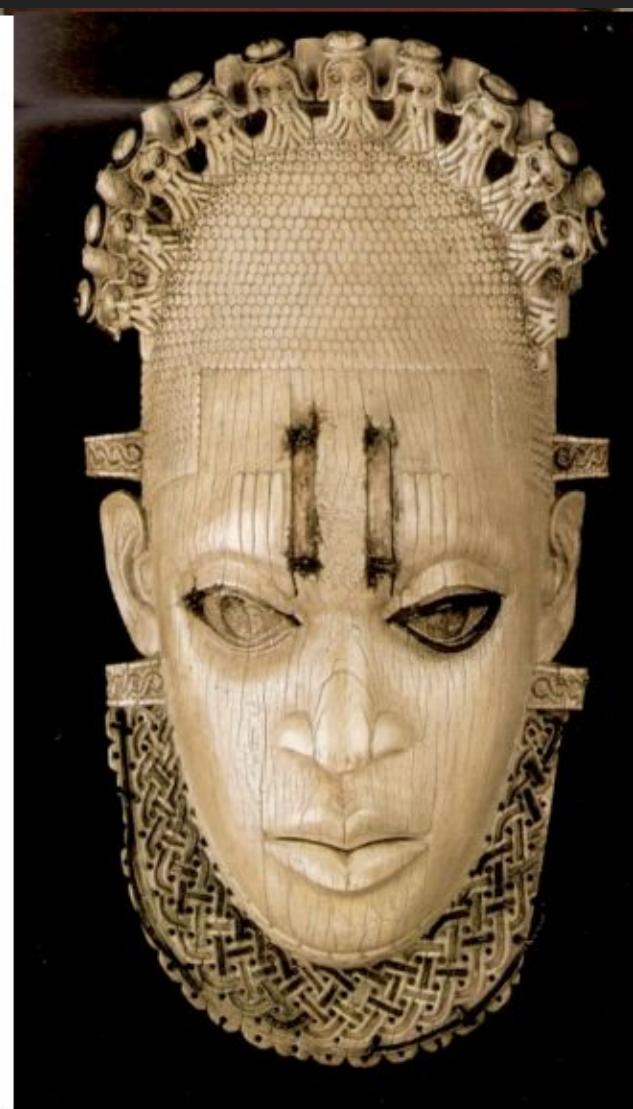


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("Head of a Queen Mother (iyoba): Edo Peoples.")

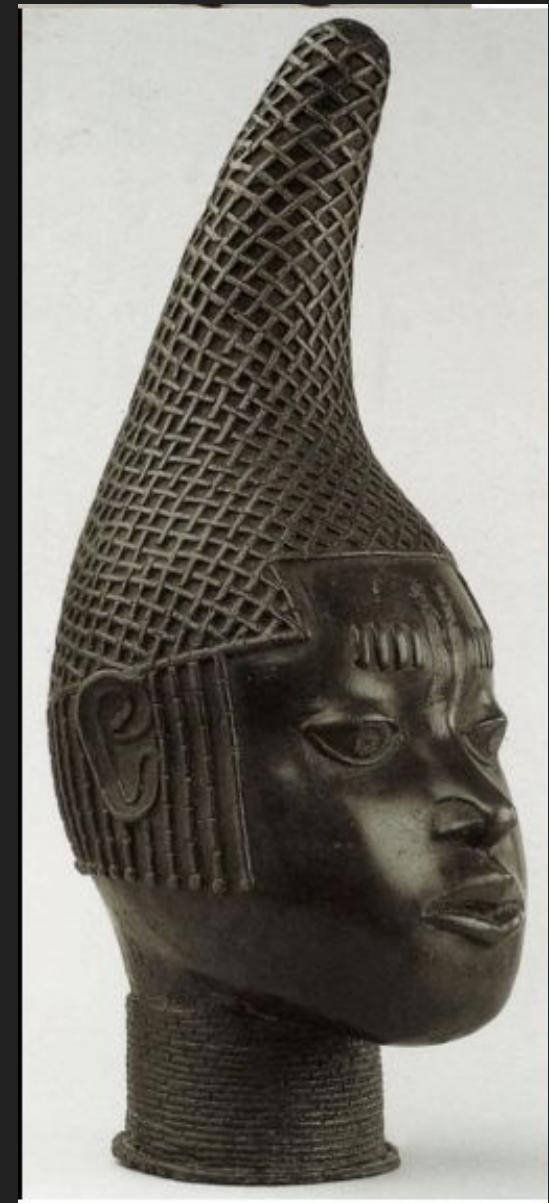
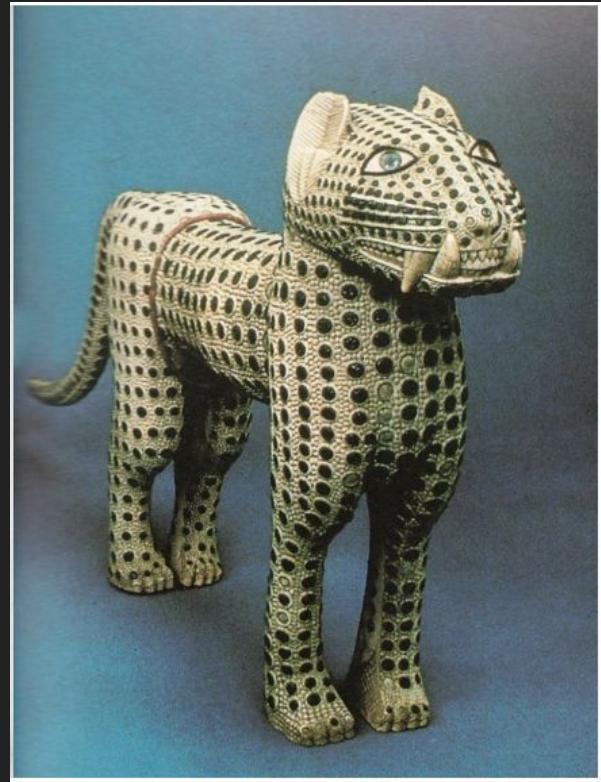


Exhibit 2C- Ivory Leopard and Figure of a Mudfish

Leopard “was once the emblem of power for the exclusive use of the Oba or king of Benin” (“Benin Leopard.”). It denotes the victory of human beings over the wild. Leopards are the leaders in the animal kingdom and also embrace the concept of “fear”. The Benin Kingdom uses this idea to represent the Oba of Benin as king of the towns and the countryside, where his citizens dwell. It shows that the king dominates the jungle. Mudfish symbolize “peace, prosperity, and fertility” (Peck and Reid). The mudfish dwells around the riverside. Riverside is a location between the land and the water; therefore, it represents the location between men, live on the land, and the spirit world of Olokun, god of the water. The mudfish usually bounce in and out of the water in the seaboard mangrove grassy marsh, and habitat in the sea and on land at the same time. Therefore, it shows that their king reigns over both the men and the spirit. From these images, we see both leopards and mudfish are abundant in the art of Benin Kingdom to represent the political power and force of the Oba of Benin Kingdom.

Exhibit 2C- Ivory leopard and Figure of a mudfish



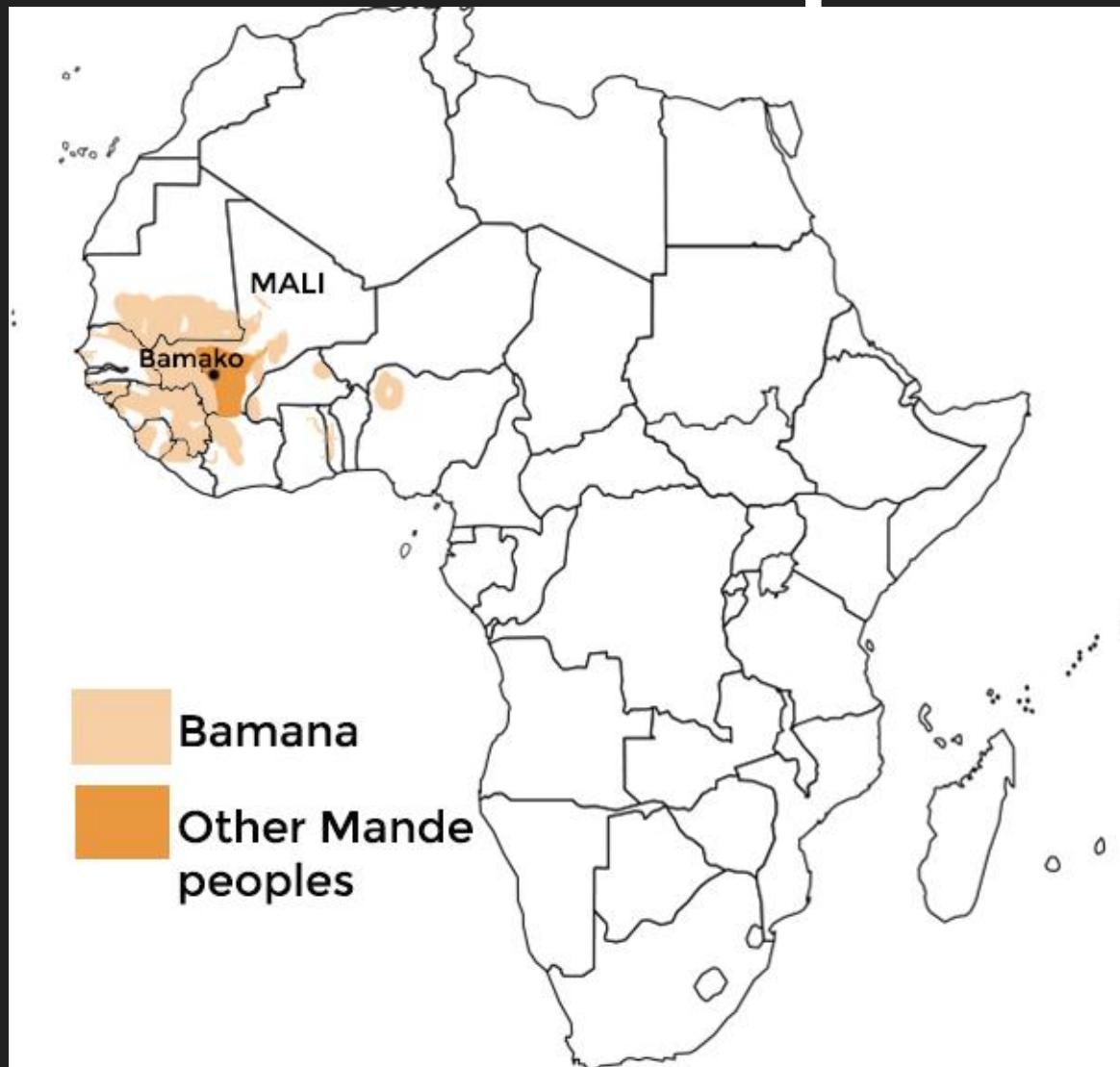
Top: Ivory leopard from Benin, 19th Century AD, Nigeria. Loan from British Museum.

Right: Figure of a mudfish, Benin kingdom court style, Edo peoples, Nigeria, Mid-16th century, Copper alloy, copper ("Mudfish, Waterspirits and Snails.")



Room 3

Bamana Empire



Bamana Empire

From the depths of the Bamana Empire emerged a vibrant tapestry of artistic expressions, woven with threads of social and spirituality association. Chi Wara dances beautifully to communicate benedictions upon the land, while N'tomo masks blend humor and satire with abstruse spiritual connotations. Bogolan mud cloth, adorned with interlocked and jagged symbols, speaks volumes about identity, position, and spiritual beliefs. These arts serve as powerful embodiments of Bamana culture, their lasting legacy continuing to inspire and amaze.

(Brett-Smith)

Exhibit 3A Chi Wara Masks and Dance

Chi Wara is a revered antelope figure among the Bambara people of Mali to embody the essence of agriculture. Its stylized form embellished with symbolic motifs functions as an overbearing reminder of the mythical being who conducted farming knowledge to human beings. Through charming dances that mimic the grace of the antelope, Chi Wara headdresses convert conduits for benevolence upon the land, guaranteeing ample harvests. Chi Wara transcends its representation of agriculture and becomes a beacon of cultural identity and respect for the interconnectedness between human civilization and the natural world.

(Wooten)

Exhibit 3A Part 1 - Chi Wara Masks and Dance



Chi Wara
Bamana people, Mali
Headdress, part of ceremony
with music and dance. Creature.
Farming- fundamentals of
agriculture

Exhibit 3A Part 2 - Chi Wara Masks and Dance Videos



Exhibit 3A Part 2 - Chi Wara Masks and Dance Videos

- Ci Wara Dance Ceremony (7:24)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6LYIdhPbWBw>
- Bambara Bamana headrest Chiwara Ciwara (1:13)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bt3Mkzv2Ot0>
- The people of Chiwara and #ChiwaraMask. watch out for more.... African Arts, history and culture. (7:25)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kEpM2re_xU8
- Chiwara @ Kulu Mele (6:35)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q2fYZL1Zh2k>

Exhibit 3B - N'tomo Masks and Dance

N'tomo masks, garnished with multiple horns, are central to clever Bamana dances that blend humor and satire with profound spiritual undertones. Dancers clad in white or ochre-colored garments move with grace and agility, mimicking the naughty spirits that N'tomo masks represent. Through their dances, N'tomo dancers act as social commentators, reminding people about issues related to authority, morality, and social norms. These masks and dances are powerful articulations of Bamana culture, serving as a way for transmitting values, knowledge, and faiths from one generation to the next.

(Imperato)

Exhibit 3B- Part 1 N'tomo Masks



Left: N'tomo Mask, Bamana
(Bambara)

Right: N'tomo Mask, Bamana
(Bambara), 19th–20th century, 34 ×
9 × 8 in. (86.36 × 22.86 × 20.32 cm),
Wood, cowry shells. Loan from
Dallas Museum of Art. 5158441.

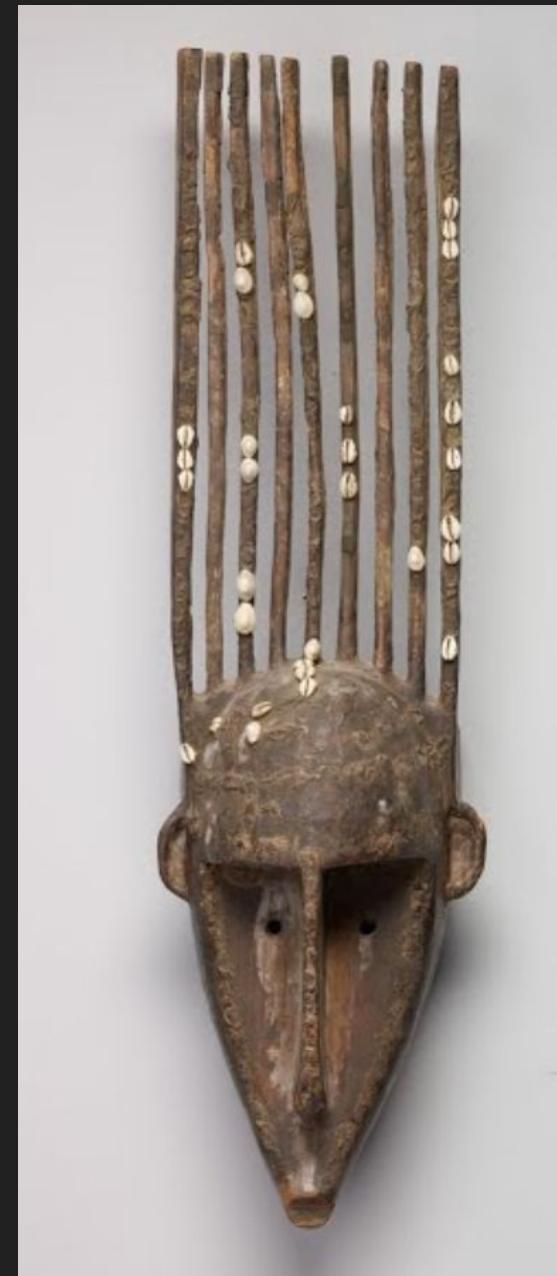


Exhibit 3B Part 2 - N'tomo Masks and Dance Video



La danse traditionnelle de N'tomo (1:14)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PsLBybCh53s>

Exhibit 3C- The Bamana Textiles "Bogolan"

The word bogolan means “something made by using mud”. In this Malian tradition, men weave the cotton cloth strips that are sewn together to produce the canvas. Then women render them through a complex resist procedure which uses plant extracts and mud. Usually black or dark color patterns were part of the design.

(“Wrapper (Bogolanfini): Bamana Peoples.”)

Exhibit 3C- Part 1 The Bamana Textiles "Bogolan"

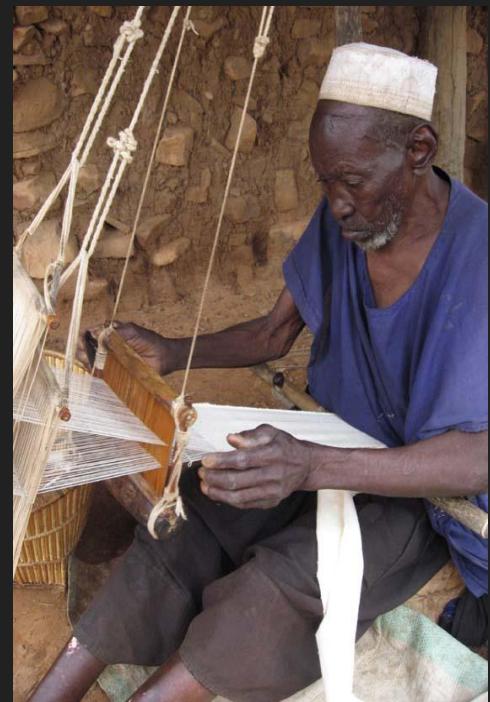


Exhibit 3C- Part 2 “How to make West African mudcloth (bogolan)” video (3:12)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IdWoWzLLJxw>



Exhibit 3C- Part 3 “How to create a DIY Malian-inspired mud cloth” (4:22)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Acy5e6Wjl5Q>



Room 4

Kongo Kingdom



Kongo Kingdom

The Kongo Kingdom, flourishing in west-central Africa, created an abundant and multiplex artistic heritage.

Their sculptures, carvings, and textiles were eminent for their mazy designs, expressional appearances, and spiritual significance. Nkisi power figures, imbued with sacred potency, attended as intermediaries between the living and the spirit realm. Ivories, such as oliphants and tusk carvings, showcased the Kongo mastery of this precious material. Kongo art was not only decorative, but also served as a vital means of expressing social status, cultural identity, and spiritual beliefs.

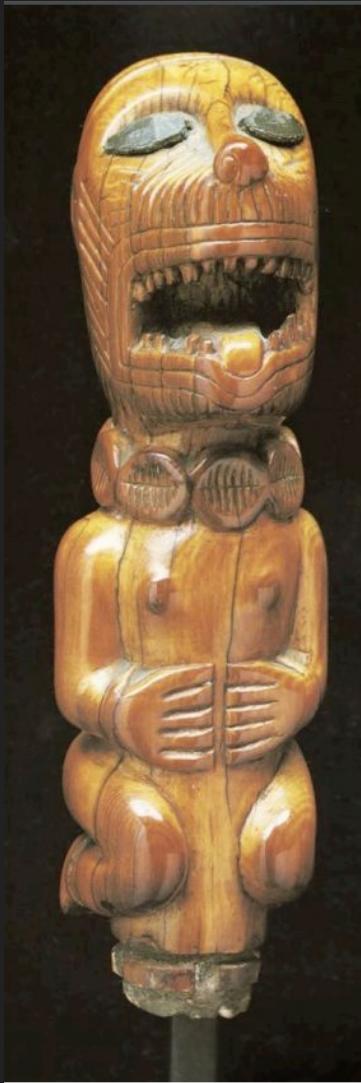
(Bostoen and Brinkman)

Exhibit 4A - Two Carved Cane Finials

Human tooth sharpening is the exercise of manually grinding the teeth, often the foretooth. Filed teeth are customs observed in many cultures. Historically it was performed for spiritual or identification objectives. Among the Upoto tribespeople in central Congo, the teeth sharpening ritual was completed according to sexes. Men filed only one tooth while women filed more than one, especially before marriage. In these two carved finals for cane, we can see both figures opening their mouths and showing their sharpened teeth.

(“The Teeth Sharpening Culture in Africa: Hadithi Africa.”)

Exhibit 4A - Two Carved Cane Finials



Left: A carved finial from a cane, Kongo artist.

Right: Staff (mvwala amfumu), 19th century, Kongo artist, Kongo Central Province, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ivory, wood, metal, ceramic. National Museum of African Art in Washington DC.



Exhibit 4B Sharpen Teeth in Five Mother / Child Sculptures

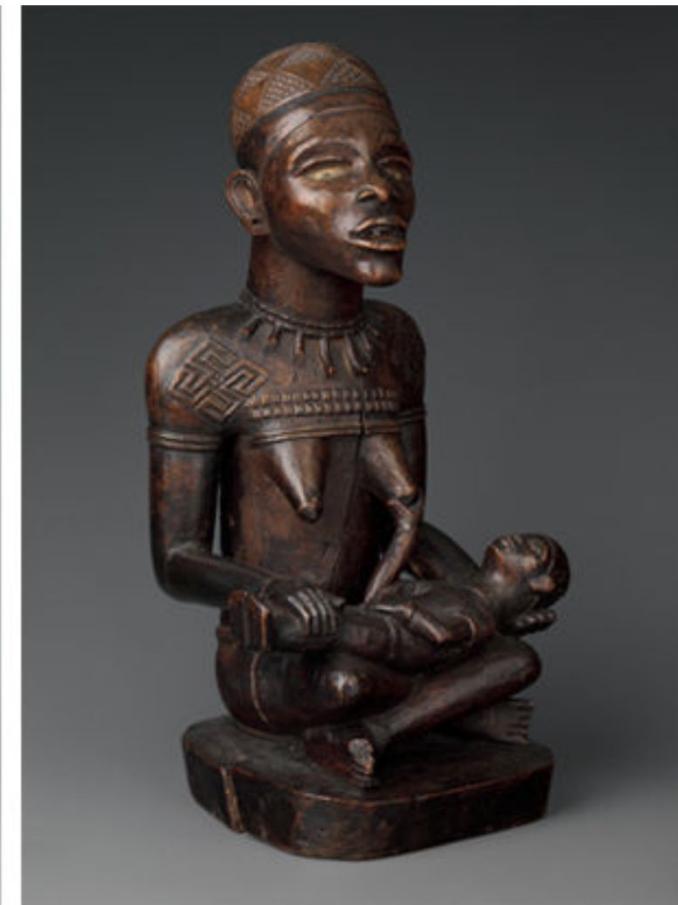
These seated women sculptures looking forward with their open mouths showing filed teeth, while on they all wear a mpu on their head. Mpu is the cap of leadership. They also wear upper-arm bands, anklets, bracelets, and a rectangular panel to cover their buttocks. Their other parts of the body are bare. Some of them expose a network of lozenge cicatrization that spans her chest and covers her entire back. The seated female and the child she holds in her arms were distanced and separate instead of emphasizing the connectedness between the mother and her child. Same as the rendering in the previous exhibit, their mouths are open and their teeth are sharpened. (LaGamma)

Left: Seated Female Supporting Figure with Clasped Hands. Kongo peoples, Yombe group.



Middle: Seated Female Supporting Figure with Clasped Hands, 19th century, inventoried 1898. Kongo peoples, Yombe group. Wood, metal, glass, kaolin, pigment; H. 10 7/8 in. (27.5 cm), W. 4 1/2 in. (11.4 cm), D. 4 5/8 in. (11.7 cm). Loan from Ross Art Management, LLC, New York. Right: Master of Kasadi.

Right: Seated Female Supporting Figure Clasping Her Breast, 19th–early 20th century. Kongo peoples; Yombe group. Wood, glass, kaolin; H. 10 3/4 in. (27.3 cm), W. 5 3/4 in. (14.6 cm), D. 5 in. (12.7 cm). Loan from Collection of Drs. Daniel and Marian Malcolm, Tenafly, New Jersey.



Left: Seated Female Nursing Child,
19th–early 20th century, inventoried 1913.
Kongo peoples; Yombe group. Wood,
kaolin; H. 9 3/8 in. (23.7 cm), W. 3 1/4 in.
(8.2 cm), D. 4 in. (10.1 cm). Loan from
MIBACT—Polo Museale del Lazio, Museo
Preistorico Etnografico Luigi Pigorini,
Rome.



Right: Seated Female Nursing Child
(Nkisi), 19th–early 20th century. Kongo
peoples; Yombe group. Wood, metal,
kaolin, glass, resin, pigment; H. 11 1/8 in.
(28.3 cm), W. 4 1/4 in. (10.8 cm), D. 4 1/4
in. (10.8 cm). Loan from Steven Kossak,
The Kronos Collections, New York.



Exhibit 4C - "Power Figures" (Nkisi Nkondi)

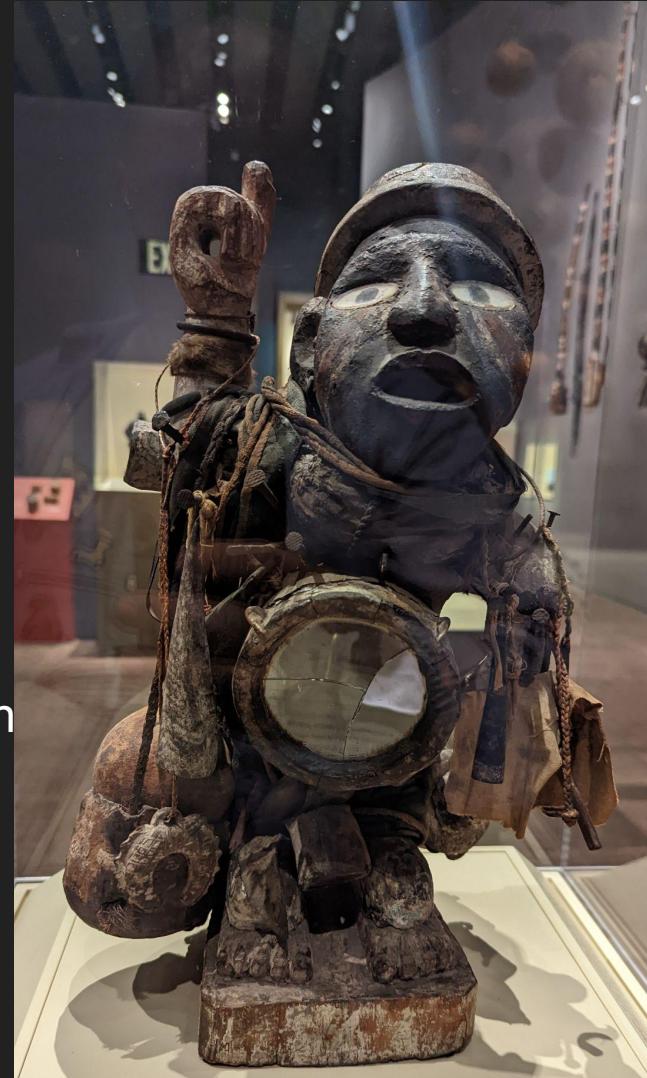
“Power Figures”, as known as minkisi (singular nkisi), were art objects created by people in the Kongo Kingdom, located in the present day countries Democratic Republic of Congo and Republic of the Congo. These figures are, in effect, receptacles of spiritual strength. When brought to life, Kongo people believe they have the magic power to expose origins of anguish, to convalesce, to guard, and to castigate. It is a collaborative effort to make a nkisi: An artist first carves a wooden sculpture, often looking like a human or an animal. Then it is passed to a nganga, a ritual specialist, to brisk the figure by filling special cavities in the sculpture, in the head and stomach region generally, with soil, herbs, ash, soil, and animal portions that are redounded imaginary and medicinal properties. (“Art: Power Figure (Nkisi nkondi).”)

Exhibit 4C - "Power Figures" (Nkisi Nkondi)



Left: Nkisi Nkondi /
"Power figures", Yombe
artist.

Right: Nkisi Nkondi /
"Power figures", late 19th
century to mid-20th
century Kongo.
Wood, glass, iron,
pigment, cloth, plant
fiber, horn, and nails.



Conclusion

This exhibit has taken us on a journey through the artistic traditions of West and Central Africa. Each piece on display is a testament to the creativity, spirituality, and cultural significance of art in this region. From the sacred Ifa Divination boards to the captivating Chi Wara Headdresses, these works of art are not merely objects of beauty, but also powerful expressions of cultural identity, spiritual beliefs, and social values. They serve as bridges between the past and the present, reminding us of the enduring power of art to inspire, amaze, and connect us to one another. (Bard)