THE MINNEAPOLIS INSTITUTE OF ARTS

INFORMATION SHEET 1

Nigeria, Ife City

Shrine head, 12th–14th century
Terra-cotta; 12¼ inches high, 5¾ inches wide, 7¼ inches deep

Why do we take pictures of our friends and family? One reason is to remember an event or a person, even after the event is over or the person has died.

The people of ancient Ife (EE-fay), an important city in what is today the West African country of Nigeria, wanted to remember their friends and family too. A person who died became an "ancestor," someone to be honored by the family and community. The ancestors were closer to the powerful spirit world than the living and were able to affect daily life on earth. They might help or harm, depending on how well they were treated.

The most influential people in life became the most powerful ancestors and were honored with sculptures like this shrine head. Such sculptures were kept in shrines, sacred places where living family members held ceremonies to keep the ancestors happy and feeling honored.

We do not know this woman's name, but we can tell she belonged to the royal family of Ife. Various details show her high status—her elaborate hairstyle, the patterns cut into the skin of her face (called scarification), and the rings of skin around her neck. These features, perfectly spaced and balanced, show the ideal of beauty in ancient Ife. At the same time, her faintly turned-up mouth and the slightly lopsided placement of her eyes give the sense that she was a real person.

Nigeria, Ife City

Shrine head, 12th–14th century
Terra-cotta

What does it look like?

This nearly life-sized head probably represents a woman of the royal court of Ife (EE-fay). Located in what is today Nigeria, Ife was a powerful religious and political center from the 12th through the 14th century. This royal woman wears her hair in several ridges, a style that proclaims her high status. The delicate vertical lines that cover her face are a pattern of scarification. Like tattooing, the cutting of patterns into the skin is a way of beautifying the human body and also of marking a person's identity, age, or status. Today, scarification is not as prevalent in West Africa as it once was. Another type of beautification seen on this woman is neck rings or coils. Throughout West Africa, binding the neck to create rings has been a means of creating beauty. Neck rings can also be a symbol of wealth and status, since prosperous, well-fed people tend to develop rings naturally. Some West African women still bind their necks to create rings.

In modeling, or shaping, the face, the artist took great care to convincingly portray human flesh and underlying muscles and bone structure. But other features are somewhat exaggerated and abstract, for example, the raised edge of the lips, the upper eyelid overhanging the lower lid at the corners, and the rings of flesh around the neck. The elegant line of a perfectly proportioned, deeply ringed neck combined with the vertical scarification pattern on the face captures the essence of an ancient West African ideal of beauty.

The combination of realism and abstraction in Ife shrine heads has led scholars to speculate that the heads were meant to commemorate real people rather than serve as true portraits. Despite their elements of abstraction, Ife commemorative portraits like this one are generally much more realistic than other West African images of human beings. Even today, West African artists tend to abstract the human form in order to emphasize important spiritual and social concepts.

How was it used?

Sculptures like this one were made to honor the memory of Ife's royalty and other important people. They were usually placed in shrines for use in religious ceremonies. Honoring the ancestors was an important part of Ife religion. Ancestors were believed to have power to affect the well-being of their descendants in both helpful and harmful ways, depending on how the living treated them.

By the early 20th century, sculpted heads such as this were considered too precious to be left out in the open. They were buried at the foot of giant trees, dug up when needed for rituals, and afterward reburied. Much of the art of ancient Ife that is in museums today has been unearthed by people digging for other reasons, such as construction or agriculture.

How was it made?

The shrine head is made of terra-cotta, a naturally occurring clay that is easily shaped and hardens when dry. Iron oxide present in terra-cotta produces a characteristic reddish brown color when the clay is fired in an oxygen-rich atmosphere. Ife terra-cottas were most likely fired in an open wood fire. Great skill was needed to control the temperature so that the firing would be even, without dark, discolored patches on the object's surface.

Ife shrine heads were usually painted. Traces of red and white pigments have been found on the eyeballs, between the scarification lines, and on the necks of some shrine heads. On this shrine head, however, it is difficult to tell whether the numerous small areas of color on the face and neck are traces of pigment or impurities in the clay.

INFORMATION SHEET 2

Chuck Close
American, born 1940

Frank, 1969
Acrylic on canvas;
9 feet high, 7 feet wide

Hairs on a chin. A lip. A nostril. A nose. And finally, dark eyes behind thick glasses. It takes time to see the whole of this larger-than-life portrait of Chuck Close's friend Frank. This image is one in a series of giant paintings that Close calls "heads."

Close did not use the real Frank as a model. Instead, he worked from a photograph. He divided the photograph into hundreds of small squares, making a grid. He penciled a much larger grid onto a huge canvas. Then he copied what he saw in the photograph onto the canvas, square by square.

Why does Close work this way? He explains: "How do you make a big head? How do you make a nose? I'm not sure! But by breaking the image down into small units, I make each decision into a bite-sized decision."

This picture shows us exactly how Frank looks—every detail of his face. But what is Frank like as a person? There is no hint of a smile—or a frown—on his lips. He keeps his distance behind the shadows of his glasses. The artist is interested in recording what the eye sees, not how he feels about his friend.

In any case, the portrait wasn't for Frank. Chuck Close sells large works like this one to art collectors through New York art galleries, for high prices. His giant heads have made him one of America's most famous contemporary artists.

INFORMATION SHEET 3

Papua New Guinea
(Epagau Village)

Gope board, 18th century
Wood; 50 inches high, 22 inches wide

Take a look at this gope (GO-pay) board, made on the Pacific island of New Guinea sometime in the 1700s. Does its shape remind you of a shield? In a way, the gope board *is* a shield. Its makers believed it held a spirit with the power to protect them from harm.

In New Guinea, harm might come in the form of tropical storms, tidal waves, or starvation. People believed they could influence nature with help from their ancestors' spirits. They created objects like this gope board as homes for the spirits. Like tools, gope boards were made to be useful, not for decoration.

The figure on this gope board represents an ancestor spirit. The head is far bigger than the body. The people of New Guinea believed a person's spirit was located in the head. An image with a big head made a good "container" for the protective spirit. It was not important that the face be lifelike. This one is simply a pair of eyes, a nose, a mouth, and a beard. These shapes were enough to suggest the ancestor described in the words of the village elders.

Most villagers never saw the gope board. It was stored out of sight under the roof of the "men's house," the social and spiritual center of the village. But everyone knew it was there, and the community took comfort in knowing the spirit of their ancestor was protecting them.

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INFORMATION SHEET 4

Raffaelo Monti
Italian, 1818–81

Veiled Lady, about 1860
Marble; 21 inches high,
11 inches wide, 9 inches deep

When you look at this sculpture from a distance, you believe you are seeing a woman's face through a thin fabric veil. It is all an illusion. You are in fact looking at solid marble. With this piece of *trompe l'oeil* (tromp LOY)—French for "fool the eye"—Raffaelo Monti makes you think you can see through stone.

How has he done this? Monti was a keen and careful observer and a master with his chisel and mallet, the tools of a stone carver. He also knew a few tricks. For example, the top of the head and the shoulders are polished smooth, to reflect light. But where the veil falls across the face, the marble is less polished. It reflects less light, suggesting the texture of fabric.

Veiled ladies were Monti's specialty. His workshop produced many sculptures like this one. They were extremely popular at a time when more and more people could afford to buy art for their homes. Other artists copied Monti's technique, but few created such convincing illusions.

Who exactly is this woman? What do we know about her from this sculpture? It is easy to think she must be very beautiful. The veil reveals the curve of a delicate brow. It drapes over the bridge of a dainty nose. But the veiled lady will always remain a mystery, teasing us with what we cannot know.

INFORMATION SHEET 5

Edgar Degas
French, 1834–1917

Portrait of Miss Hortense Valpinçon, 1871
Oil on canvas; 30 inches high, 44 inches wide

Spunky. Curious. Self-confident. How else might you describe this girl? We can tell a lot about Hortense Valpinçon (val-pin-SOHN) from this portrait painted by her parents' friend Edgar Degas (deh-GAH).

Many French artists in the 19th century painted portraits to make money. Degas, however, usually painted portraits only of his family and close friends. He made this one as a gift for his friends Paul and Claire while staying at their country home. He decided to paint their daughter Hortense on the spur of the moment.

You can tell that Degas knew Hortense's quirks well. Notice the tilt of her head, her slightly parted lips, her bright-eyed gaze, and the arch of her eyebrows. She looks as if she is about to say something or run off to play. Degas carefully drew the shape of Hortense's face and other details. But he also left out things that simply weren't needed to show her personality.

Degas painted and reworked the picture for days. Hortense had to pose for endless hours. Nevertheless, the portrait has the look of a snapshot. Some areas are less in focus than others—just as in a snapshot.

In Degas's time, people thought his pictures looked unfinished. Today, he is considered a great painter because he could reveal so much about the people he painted. What do you think?