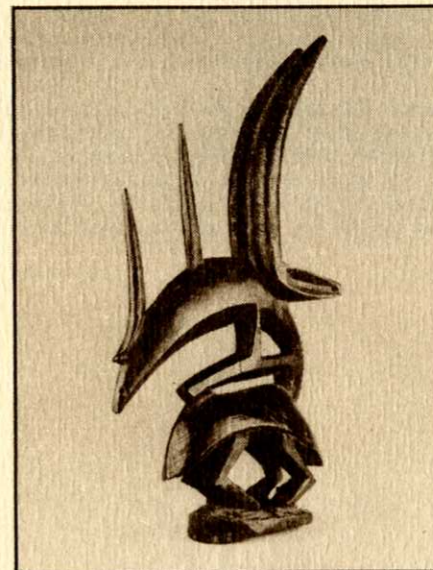


**Art for Life's Sake:
African Art from the Stanley Collection**



**Christopher D. Roy
Muscatine Art Center
Muscatine, Iowa
April 1 - July 9, 1984**

Art for Life's Sake:
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African images were not created for Western eyes or, as a matter of fact, were often not seen by the general populace in the country of their origin, except by participants in religious rituals who revered the images as icons or religious relics. It is, therefore, especially important to recognize the significant role anthropologists, ethnologists, art historians and collectors have played in preserving important specimens.

Today such images are avidly sought by museums and collectors not only as "documents" of time and place, but also for their aesthetic merit. The Muscatine Art Center is pleased to present this exhibition from the Stanley Collection. We particularly wish to thank Mr. and Mrs. C. Maxwell Stanley for their interest and support, and Christopher D. Roy, Assistant Professor, University of Iowa, who so ably served as curator of this exhibition.

William A. McGonagle
Director
Muscatine Art Center

COVER:
Headdress
Bambara
Wood, H. 18-3/8"
C. Maxwell Stanley Collection

Art for Life's Sake:
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You may have heard someone say, "I don't know much about art, but I know what I like." The truth is that most people LIKE WHAT THEY KNOW. People enjoy what they can understand. People are comfortable with things that are familiar. That is why so many people enjoy the paintings of artists like Norman Rockwell -- the scenes he paints are clear, familiar and represent ideas and situations which we have all experienced or considered. The more we know about an artist, a painting or sculpture and the ideas or story they represent, the more we enjoy the work of art.

African art is certainly strange to us, and is often difficult to understand. What could have the artist who created the Bete mask (#14) in this exhibition have been thinking when he assembled such a bizarre and outlandish combination of forms? If we are to enjoy and become comfortable with these objects from Africa, we must learn to understand them. We must learn that most African art is not representational -- it is not intended to look LIKE someone or something. Instead, it is representative -- African art makes abstract ideas, spirits, forces real and tangible. If we are to understand, and therefore enjoy, this sculpture, we must realize that African art was not made to hang on the walls of a museum, but was used, handled, worn on many occasions throughout the lives of African villagers. In Africa there is little "art for art's sake" but a great deal of "art for life's sake".

It is my hope that, as you look at the wonderful objects from Africa in this exhibition from the Stanley Collection, you will read the accompanying notes about how these objects were used by the people who made them and what they meant, and that you will then become more familiar with the art and lives of Africans.

Christopher D. Roy
Assistant Professor
University of Iowa

Art for Religion and Magic

Religion has been described as a means for ensuring success in life. The forces of nature -- rain, wind, fire, disease -- could be controlled by the use of magic and by communicating with ancestral spirits. Magic provided answers to otherwise unsolvable problems and helped Africans deal with the unknown. Art objects often helped by making intangible forces concrete and forming a means of communicating with them.

1 Yoruba, Nigeria

Epa Mask

Heavy masks like this one appear in athletic dances in which the strongest young man in the community must leap, without faltering, onto a high earthen mound while wearing the mask. His success or failure is a harbinger of the health and well-being of the community. If he fails, sacrifices must be made to restore the balance of natural and spiritual forces which caused him to stumble.

2 Yoruba, Nigeria

Ere Ibeji, images of twins who have died

The Yoruba bear more twins than any other people in the world. If one or both twins die, wooden figures are carved which are treated like living children -- fed, washed, dressed -- in the hope that they will bring good fortune to the parents.

3 Yoruba, Nigeria

Bowl for a diviner

The Yoruba practice the art of divination, in which an expert called babalawo (father of secrets) casts palm nuts to provide answers and solutions to the client's problems. Bowls like this are used to store the sixteen sacred palm nuts when they are not in use.

4 Yoruba, Nigeria

Dance Wands for the Priests of Eshu

A pair of these wands may be carried or worn around the neck in dances in which the priests of Eshu, the trickster god, are possessed by the spirit of the god.

5 Baule, Ivory Coast

Mask

This mask is held firmly against the wearer's face by a bar of wood which he clamps between his teeth. It is worn with a raphia cape and skirt. An animal skin is attached to the top of the mask and hangs down the wearer's back.

6 Yaka, Zaire

Gong

These musical instruments are carried by diviners to mark the rhythm of their chants in rituals specifically intended to deal with the harmful effects of evil curses.

7 Kuba, Zaire

Itombwa, divination instrument

The diviner sits on one side of the object opposite the client. They each join two fingers of one hand astride the small disc on the animal's back, and slide it back and forth while reciting solutions to the client's problem. When the correct solution is spoken, the small disk sticks in place.

8 Songye, Zaire

Magical figure called nkisi

Across the southern area of Zaire, figures similar to this are given magical powers by the addition of magical ingredients to a cavity in the head or abdomen.

9 Bembe, Zaire

Magical figures

Each of these small figures is provided with an anal orifice filled with white clay, called mukuya, the "spirits of the ancestors." When consecrated in this way, the object has the power to provide for the health and well-being of the owner and his family.

10 Songye, Zaire

Mask called kifwebe

When the German scholar Leo Frobenius visited Zaire in 1906-1907 he collected information that such masks were used in a cult of the dead, to expel spirits of the deceased from the village. The decorative stripes are probably intended to represent scarification patterns the Songye once wore.

11 Luba, Zaire

Kifwebe mask

Many collectors who travel through Africa have been attracted by masks of this type and style, which evoke feelings of African "primitiveness" and "superstitions". As a result, enormous numbers of fakes or copies have been produced, which cannot compare with this superb piece in quality and skill of carving.

12 Urhobo, Nigeria

Mask

Once every decade, when the creeks and rivers of the steamy Niger River delta are at their highest, the Urhobo stage performances which honor the spirits (edjo) which are responsible for the well-being of the community.

13 Punu, Gabon

Mask representing a beautiful young woman

Among a number of ethnic groups in the region of the Ogowe River in Gabon such masks represent the spirits of beautiful young women who have returned from the world of the dead.

14 Bèté, Ivory Coast

Mask

This is particularly clear evidence that most African art is not representational: it is not intended to look like anyone or anything living or real. Instead, it is representative: it makes tangible and concrete the otherwise ephemeral spirits of nature and the afterworld.

15 Bambara, Mali

Dance crest for the Chi Wara association

The being Chi Wara, which these crests honor, combined human, antelope, and anteater characteristics and used his strong claws to open the earth and plant the first cultivated seeds.

16 Bambara, Mali

Dance crest for the Chi Wara association

Crests such as this are worn in pairs by two performers who honor the mythical being Chi Wara -- part animal, part human -- who first taught the Bambara to farm.

17 Senufo, Ivory Coast

Figures of a horseman and his wife

Such objects were placed on family shrines where they represented the primordial ancestors, who had first settled in the region and from whom everyone in the lineage descended. The male is represented riding a horse, a symbol of strength and power, while the woman bears all of the marks of beauty and fecundity which the Senufo value so highly.

18 Ndengese, Zaire

Pipe

Among many groups throughout Africa, and especially in southern Zaire, hemp (marijuana) was smoked to induce a hallucinatory state during religious rituals.

Art for the Dead

Much of the art produced throughout Africa, especially in the Western Sudan areas of Mali, Upper Volta, and northern Nigeria, is an art for the dead. It is intended to honor the spirit of a deceased elder man or woman at funeral celebrations which permit the soul to leave the world of the living -- the family home -- and travel to the world of ancestral spirits. In many areas, the living frequently consult the spirits of the dead for advice and blessings for any important task.

19 Dogon, Mali

Throughout West Africa, animal masks represent animal characters which appear in the myths telling of the founding of the family. The performances in such masks often recreate the characteristic movements of the animal, which is never killed or eaten by members of the family.

20 Dogon, Mali

Figure from a family shrine

Such figures are placed next to the corpse of a family member at death to absorb some of the nyama, or spiritual force. They are then offered sacrifices of chickens and beer on family shrines.

21 Senufo, Ivory Coast

Animal mask

The mask is worn horizontally over the head so that the performer looks out through a large hole between the jaws. The broad, flat horns of a bush buffalo are combined with a hyena's powerful jaws and a warthog's tusks. Such masks were worn at funerals.

22 Senufo, Ivory Coast

Mask called kpelie

At the funerals of important members of village society, both male and female, masks of this type appear to free the spirit of the deceased to travel to the world of the ancestors.

23 Grasslands area, Cameroon

Elephant mask

The most important occasions for the appearance of masks like this are formal funerals ("cry die") of adult men. The funeral is the final summing up of a man's existence in which all that was his due in life is recalled and celebrated in a public spectacle.

24 Bidyogo, Guinea Bissau

Ancestor spirit figure

These figures, called iran, are carved as memorials to the deceased and as dwelling places for the soul which, the Bidyogo believe, survives as long as it is remembered by the living.

25 Mumuye, Nigeria and Cameroon

Figure

The limits of the log from which this figure was carved can be discerned in the concave curve at the ends of the arms and the inward curving toes. The wrap-around arms emphasize the pole shape of the torso. The rectangular form at each side of the head represents the earlobes of Mumuye women, stretched by wearing heavy earrings.

Art for the Leaders

Although many of us have been led to believe that African communities were small and that leadership did not extend beyond the level of a local village chief, there were, in fact, important well-structured and sophisticated kingdoms and empires with a central leadership and a government bureaucracy. Important examples were the city-state of Benin, the kingdom of Kongo, and the Ashanti confederacy which flourished in the 19th century. In these states and elsewhere art objects often were used to reflect the power and important position of the owners.

26 Kuba, Zaire

Mask representing the king

Covered with precious beads and cowrie shells which were once used as currency, the mask represents the wealth and power of the king in plays which recount the founding of the royal lineage.

27 Kuba, Zaire

Cup

Chiefs and other people of high rank in the Kuba court at Mushenge drink mildly alcoholic palm wine from cups decorated to reflect the user's political position.

28 Kuba, Zaire

Box

Boxes which are decorated with patterns based on basketry forms are used to store a red cosmetic powder made from the pounded pith of a small tree. This powder, mixed with oil, is applied all over the body before important political and religious events.

- 29 Grasslands area, Cameroon
Throne
Elaborate beaded chairs like this have served as thrones for kings throughout the Grasslands area of Cameroon. The multiple heads on the throne back represent the king's royal ancestors. In the past, the beads were so valuable that they were sometimes stripped off before the object was sold.
- 30 BaMum, Cameroon
Stool
Throughout the Cameroon Grasslands stools like this were carried from place to place by the attendants of a high-ranking person. Most are decorated with the stylized figures of bats, spiders, and animals which serve as symbols of religious and political ideals in the region.
- 31 BaBanki, Cameroon
Buffalo horn cups
Palm wine cups of buffalo horn are carried everywhere by chiefs and are displayed as symbols of their authority and political office. The small flower shapes on the side represent trap-door spiders which are believed to be a link with the underworld and ancestral spirits.
- 32 Mangbetu, Zaire
Side-blown trumpet
Such beautifully carved ivory trumpets were used in the court of the Mangbetu kings until the end of the nineteenth century as symbols of prestige. The deformed skull and elegant hairstyle accurately reflect contemporary Mangbetu fashion.
- 33 Yoruba, Nigeria
Box in the form of a rabbit
The Yoruba use boxes in the forms of animals to hold jewelry, cosmetics, snuff, or medicine or serve as prestigious containers of gifts from chiefs. Rabbits, which move through the night, are especially important for Eshu, the Yoruba trickster god, who always spoils things when everything is going well.
- 34 Mbole, Zaire
Figure of a person executed by hanging
Among the Mbole, a number of heinous crimes are punished by hanging. A figure is carved to represent the corpse and to serve as a lesson to the living to abide by the laws established by the community elders.

- 35 Lobi, Upper Volta, Ghana
Stool
Lobi men carry stools like this from bar to bar to provide portable seating and to serve as handy weapons when they get into a fight.
- 36 Chokwe, Angola and Zaire
Mask chihongo representing an old man
Male dancers wear male and female mask pairs to represent the essential contrasts in Chokwe life: male/female, strong/weak, wise/foolish, ugly/beautiful, powerful/powerless. The shape which projects from the chin is a spade-shaped beard.
- 37 Kongo, Zaire
Ladle
Utilitarian objects like this spoon are decorated with beautiful and elaborate patterns to reflect the warmth and power of the owner, probably a Kongo chief.
- 38 Baule, Ivory Coast
Hair comb
Elaborately carved wooden combs are presented to Baule women by their male relatives or friends to commemorate important events, including puberty rites, weddings, and births.

Art for New Life

Like other agricultural peoples throughout the world, Africans are concerned with the fertility of fields and livestock as well as new generations of sons and daughters to help in the fields. Art objects may symbolize the dependence of humans on the forces of nature to provide new life. Sculpture may be used in sympathetic magic to encourage birth, growth, and well-being in plants and humans alike.

- 39 Ashanti, Ghana
Doll, called Akuaba
According to Ashanti stories, a woman named Akua, unable to bear a child, carried a carved image in the waistband of her skirt. People laughed and called the object Akua ba, or "Akua's child". When she finally bore a beautiful baby, they stopped laughing.
- 40 Ashanti, Ghana
Shrine figure of a mother and child
Many peoples throughout Africa place similar figures on family shrines, not to represent a particular, identifiable mother and child, but to illustrate the general idea of human fertility and dependence on women for new life.

