



The Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas

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A F R I C A N A R T

Plaque with Chief, Warriors, and Attendants

Nigeria (Court of Benin), mid-16th–17th century
Brass

Height, 18 $\frac{7}{8}$ in. (47.9 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1990

1990.332



The most significant additions to the Museum's collection of African art in the past decade are the 163 objects from the Court of Benin donated by Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls. Primarily of brass and ivory, they represent the full range of Benin art, with special emphasis on the Middle and Late periods (mid-sixteenth–end of the nineteenth century). The collection also includes extraordinary objects from the Yoruba kingdoms of Owo and Ijebu, which reflect the powerful influence of Benin artistic traditions.

By the end of the fifteenth century Benin was a vast state based upon divine kingship, military power, and trade with the newly arrived Europeans. In 1897 a British naval expedition conquered the capital and seized thousands of objects as booty. Fortunately, the reinstatement of the Oba, or king, of Benin in 1914 and the subsequent revival of the complex court rituals have preserved the context of Benin royal arts.

This plaque is one of about 900 that decorated wooden pillars in a large audience hall in the Oba's palace. In typical Benin fashion the plaque combines a disregard for naturalistic proportions with meticulous depictions of dress, insignia, and other indicators of status. Figures have enlarged heads and shortened legs, and their size depends upon their importance within the court hierarchy. The central figure is a chief, as is shown by his coral-bead collar, bandolier, anklets, coral-studded hat, and brass hip ornament in the form of a human face. He wears the leopard-tooth necklace of warriors. The two flanking warriors wear similar necklaces, as well as other military gear—pyramidal bells and tunics with leopard faces. They carry shields and spears, and the chief carries a ceremonial sword, which chiefs twirl to honor the king and their superiors. The four small figures are attendants.

KE

Ex coll.: Paul Rose; Robert Owen Lehman, New York.

Bibliography: *Catalogue of African, Oceanic, Pre-Columbian and Indian Art* (sale cat.), Sotheby's, London, May 20, 1964, lot 114; Ezio Bassani and William Fagg, *Africa and the Renaissance: Art in Ivory* (exhib. cat.), New York, The Center for African Art, 1988, no. 188.

Entries by Julie Jones, *Curator*; Kate Ezra, *Associate Curator*; Phillip Guddemi, *Andrew W. Mellon Fellow*.

Court Official with Cross Pendant

Nigeria (Court of Benin), mid-16th–17th century

Brass

Height, 25¼ in. (62.9 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991

1991.17.32

This figure once stood upon an altar dedicated to a deceased Benin king. It depicts a court official, identified by his dress and the objects he holds. The most distinctive feature is the cross pendant. Also distinguishing this official are the narrow-brimmed hat, openwork tunic, “cat’s-whisker” scars at the mouth, and L-shaped hammer, now broken, that he once held in his left hand. In addition he wears a wrap skirt, made of cloth reserved for palace use and decorated with profile heads of Portuguese traders, a frontal African head, and other common Benin motifs, such as river leaves, mudfish, and interlace patterns.

Three possible identifications have been suggested. The official may be a messenger from the ruler Ogane, who today is identified as the Oni of Ife, the Yoruba kingdom from which the present Benin dynasty claims descent. According to a sixteenth-century Portuguese text, each new Oba, or king, of Benin had to be confirmed by the Ogane, whose messenger presented the Oba with a brass hat, staff, and cross necklace. The messenger also received a cross. Another view is that he represents a priest of Osanobua, the Benin Creator God, who also wears a cross. Finally, the figure may depict a member of Ewua, a group of palace officials who wake the Oba each morning and perform a ceremony recalling the origin of the Benin dynasty. Placed on a royal ancestral altar, such a figure would have stood witness to the legacy of divine kingship. The cross and hammer are also associated with Esigie, the sixteenth-century king to whom subsequent Benin Obas often liken themselves. In so doing they confirm the legitimacy of their rule and glorify their own reigns. Like this figure, Benin art is often many-layered in its references to the past, with each layer reinforcing the primary meaning: the power of the kingdom and its divine rulers.

KE

Ex coll.: Colonel Le-Poer-O’Shea.

Bibliography: *Oriental and European Rugs and Carpets; Textiles and Tapestries; English and Continental Clocks; Fine French and English Furniture* (sale cat.), Sotheby’s, London, March 8, 1957, lot 197; *Important Tribal Art* (sale cat.), Sotheby’s, New York, November 18, 1986, lot 96.

Related references: Paula Ben-Amos, *The Art of Benin*, London, 1980, p. 40; Ekpo Eyo and Frank Willett, *Treasures of Ancient Nigeria* (exhib. cat.), Detroit Institute of Arts, 1980, p. 133; Barbara Blackmun, “From Trader to Priest in Two Hundred Years: The Transformation of a Foreign Figure on Benin Ivories,” *Art Journal*, 47, no. 2 (1988), pp. 131–132.





Lidded Bowl

Nigeria (Yoruba, Owo), 18th century
 Ivory
 Height, 8¼ in. (21 cm)
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991
 1991.17.126a,b

Owo is located halfway between Benin and Ife, the ancient Yoruba capital. Excavations at Owo have revealed fifteenth-century terracotta figures that closely resemble the naturalistic brass and terracotta sculptures of Ife. Many other objects from Owo, such as this ivory bowl and lid, reflect the equally powerful influence of Benin.

The vessel is egg-shaped, but surrounding the lid are four groups of figures, with spaces pierced between them, creating a cylindrical openwork frieze through which the dome of the lid is visible. The figures are connected at the top by a ring formed by the body of a snake. The figures on the lid and the four smaller motifs on the bowl express the mystical powers possessed by the king.

This side depicts a king flanked by attendants and wearing the feathered crown and crossed baldrics still worn by Owo's rulers. His legs have been transformed into mudfish, recogniz-

able by their catfishlike barbels. The king with mudfish legs is a Benin motif that refers to the king's intimate association with Olokun, the god of the sea, to his ability to bridge the realms of earth and water and of man and god, and—because of an oral tradition concerning a king with deformed legs that he hid from his subjects—to the king's duty to respect the needs and wishes of his people. On the bowl is a complex interlace, in which a mudfish, two other fish, and possibly a horse's head can be identified. The crisp carving of these figures, the contrast between richly textured areas and creamy smooth surfaces, the intricate interlace patterns, and the deft incorporation of open space are among the features that earned the ivory carvers of Owo great renown in Benin and throughout southern Nigeria.

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Bibliography: *Ashanti Gold and Goldweights, Art and Ethnography from Africa, the Americas, and the Pacific* (sale cat.), Christie's, London, April 3, 1981, lot 334; Ezio Bassani and William Fagg, *Africa and the Renaissance: Art in Ivory* (exhib. cat.), New York, The Center for African Art, 1988, figs. 236, 259; Henry Drewal, John Pemberton III, and Rowland Abiodun, *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought* (exhib. cat.), New York, The Center for African Art, 1989, fig. 110.

Related reference: Robin Poynor, "Edo Influence on the Arts of Owo," *African Arts*, 9, no. 4 (1976), pp. 40–45, 60.

Power Figure

Zaire (Kongo, Yombe), 19th century
Wood, iron, glass, pottery, shells, cloth, fiber, pigment, seeds,
and glass beads
Height, 28½ in. (72.4 cm)
Gift of Muriel Kallis Newman, in honor of
Douglas Newton, 1990
1990.334

Kongo power figures such as this are the result of collaboration between a sculptor, who carved the wooden image, and a ritual expert, who transformed it into an object capable of healing illness, settling disputes, safeguarding the peace, and punishing wrongdoers. This transformation is achieved through the insertion of spiritually charged ingredients, such as sacred herbs and earths. The rectangular mirror-covered box protruding from the abdomen and the overturned pottery bowl pierced with nails covering the head are the primary receptacles for these potent materials. The variously shaped blades inserted into the body are added by the priest, each time the figure's powers are called upon, to activate its forces. Many of these blades are of a type known as *baaku*, which are in the form of a knife used to extract palm wine. They create a visual pun with the Kikongo word *baaka*, which means "to demolish or destroy." Such a figure would be responsible for destroying evil in its community.

Although its body is sheathed in iron, this figure has a particularly expressive face. The eyes are inlaid with glass, giving it an eerie, distant gaze, and the mouth is open, as if the forces that animate it need to breathe. The protruding tongue refers to another Kikongo word, *venda*, which means "to lick in order to activate medicines," suggesting that the figure's powerful ingredients are perpetually activated. The white clay covering the face is known as *mpemba*, which also refers to the land of the dead, the realm of ancestral spirits that is the source of much of the figure's powers.

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Provenance: Collected in Chiloango, Cabinda.

Ex coll.: Robert Visser (until 1904); Linden-Museum, Stuttgart (until 1957).

Bibliography: William S. Lieberman, ed., *An American Choice, the Muriel Kallis Steinberg Newman Collection* (exhib. cat.), New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1980, pp. 150–151.

Related reference: Robert Farris Thompson, "The Grand Detroit N'Kondi," *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts*, 56, no. 4 (1978), pp. 206–221.



Mask for Gelede Festival

Republic of Benin (Yoruba), 20th century

Wood

Height, 24 in. (61 cm)

Gift of Paul and Ruth W. Tishman, 1990

1990.336

One of the most vibrant arenas for the arts among the western Yoruba people is the Gelede festival. Gelede honors women elders, known affectionately as “our mothers,” who are believed to possess spiritual powers that can either help or harm their community. Festivals featuring sculpture, dance, music, and song pay homage to these women and their view of the world, and encourage them to use their powers positively.

Gelede masks consist of a head, worn at an angle over the dancer's, surmounted by a superstructure depicting subjects drawn from Yoruba life that please and entertain “our mothers.” This mask's superstructure comprises two snakes circling in a daringly open composition. They bite into the hind legs of a quadruped, probably a porcupine, whose body is carved with holes for the insertion of quills. Scenes of animal aggression are often used in Gelede masks to illustrate the natural hierarchy of the universe, an orderly vision of nature and society that is meant to appeal to “our mothers.” This image has an additional level of meaning, since snakes are a metaphor for the women, whose spiritual powers, like snakes, are nocturnal. The awesome powers of “our mothers” enables these snakes to overcome the porcupine's bristling natural defenses.

The Gelede masquerade is believed to have originated in the late eighteenth century in the far-western Yoruba kingdom of Ketu, located in the Republic of Benin close to its border with Nigeria. This mask has been attributed to a Ketu artist.

KE

Bibliography: *Arts connus et méconnus de l'Afrique noire: Collection Paul Tishman* (exhib. cat.), Paris, Musée de l'Homme, 1966, no. 64; *Masterpieces of African Art, Tishman Collection* (exhib. cat.), Jerusalem, Israel Museum, Spertus Gallery, 1967, no. 108; Roy Sieber and Arnold Rubin, *Sculpture of Black Africa: The Paul Tishman Collection* (exhib. cat.), Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1968, no. 85; Georges Balandier and Jacques Macquet, *Dictionnaire des civilisations africaines*, Paris, 1968, p. 441; Susan Vogel, ed., *For Spirits and Kings, African Art from the Paul and Ruth Tishman Collection* (exhib. cat.), New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1981, no. 62.



ART OF OCEANIA

Ceremonial Hanging (*Palepai*)

Sumatra (Lampung), 18th century (?)
Cotton, beads, rattan, and nassa shells
48½ × 162 in. (123.2 × 411.4 cm)
Gift of Anita E. Spertus and Robert J. Holmgren, in honor of
Douglas Newton, 1990
1990.335.28

In Indonesia textiles have great value as ritual objects and as a form of wealth. Consequently, they show a high degree of symbolic meaning and decorative elaboration. This ceremonial hanging from Lampung, a region in the far south of Sumatra known for dense and colorful figural work, is a case in point.

The dimensions and design of this textile relate to wall hangings called *palepai* that were hung behind aristocrats and kings on ceremonial occasions. In *palepai* fashion, this piece is dominated by two ships. The ship on the left, set in a night

sky, holds a pyramidal shrine of a type called *kayon*, representing a holy mountain or tree of life. The ship on the right, in a dawning sky, carries what may be a throne (*pepadon*, or seat of merit). Small human figures can be seen on the gable and rooftop of the shrine, on the ships, and in the edges of the design. The ships are separated by a ship-borne mountain shaped as a variant of the *kayon*. The iconography of this piece seems to be deeply religious, uniting, by the device of the *kayon*-mountain, the duality of night and day, sky and earth, good and evil.

The intricate beadwork is unusual in hangings this large. Ceramic and glass beads were costly and most often applied to belts and small rattan boxes. The probable eighteenth-century date makes it unusually old for an Indonesian textile. When discovered it was being scavenged for its beads. The original nassa-shell border has been almost completely removed except for a small section at the lower left.

PG

Bibliography: Robert J. Holmgren and Anita E. Spertus, *Early Indonesian Textiles from Three Island Cultures* (exhib. cat.), New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989, pp. 86–87, no. 38.



**Grave Marker**

Philippines (Sulu Archipelago), mid-19th or early 20th century
Wood
Height, 28 in. (71.1 cm)
Gift of Charles and Harriet Edwards, 1990
1990.338

Wooden grave markers constitute a form of artistic expression characteristic of the Sulu Archipelago of the Philippines. The grave markers vary from representational to abstract and geometric. A tendency toward abstraction may have its origin in the Islamic character of the islands.

This grave marker consists of a detachable standing anthropomorphic figure on top of a canoe-shaped horizontal element, or boat form. The boat form is engraved with curvilinear and floral designs on two sides; two flat openwork wooden projections, carved with similar floral and curvilinear designs, extend from its front and back. The slightly representational human figure indicates this was a marker for a male grave. Male grave figures in parts of Sulu show a tendency toward a plain, geometric style that is carved simply or not at all; some religious Muslims of the area seem to find even the most rudimentary carving of the human form to be unacceptably animist. Female grave markers, in contrast to the rounded and often plain male markers, are flat and have ornate comb-shaped central elements.

Although this piece represents a localized tradition, it demonstrates the stylistic and iconographic affinities of Philippine sculpture with other artistic traditions of Southeast Asia.

PG

Bibliography: Irwin Hersey, *Indonesian Primitive Art*, Oxford (in press).

Related reference: David Szanton, "Art in Sulu: A Survey," *Philippine Studies*, 11, no. 3, pp. 465-502.

Jar

Arkansas (Caddoan), 11th-14th century
Ceramic
Height, 8 in. (20.3 cm)
Gift of Dr. Rushton Eugene Patterson, Jr., 1991
1991.69

Ceramic traditions of considerable individuality flourished along the great rivers of the American southeast during the late centuries of the precontact era. So important were rivers to the cultural development of the time that the era takes its name from the greatest of them, the Mississippi. Many of the ceramic objects of the Mississippian period were severe in design and restrained in surface treatment. Judicious use of shape, color, and elaborative patterning contributed to the measured simplicity of these vessels, the most eloquently plain of which are those known as seed jars. Apparently intended as storage containers, the seed jars were made in tall, ovoid, neckless shapes, as in the present example. Dark gray fire clouds produced during the firing process are the only embellishment on its surface.

This seed jar is said to have been found in east-central Arkansas, an unusual source for its type, as most similar works have been found in the great bend area of the Red River in southwest Arkansas and adjoining portions of Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas.

JJ

