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Art of the Guro, Ivory Coast

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ures were made larger and more ornate; high-backed thrones, scepter staffs, whisks, and other regalia were produced.

Tabwa visited by early European explorers were masters of scarification, hairdressing, and other body arts that both beautified and communicated. These are represented in the plastic arts of the times. Such objects were decorated with motifs that expressed the fundamentals of Tabwa philosophy, in order to associate the chiefs with all that is wise and powerful. The most common motif, a series of isosceles triangles often juxtaposed in divided diamonds, is called "the rising of the new moon" (*balamwezi*). Like any symbol, *balamwezi* is multireferential. The rising of a new moon represents the triumph of light over dark, wisdom over ignorance, good over evil. The triangle may symbolize the most important positions of the moon, near western and eastern horizons and at the zenith; it also stands for social triangles, when a person (the

apex of the triangle) is pulled by opposing forces and loyalties (the basal points). The moon, for instance, is anthropomorphized as an archetypal male married to two wives, the Morning and Evening Stars (Venus in the east and west). Tabwa tell humorous tales of how the moon is drawn between the domestic skills and nurturing of his first wife, and the sexiness of his second; the stories and the triangular motif are means to contemplate conjugal politics. There are other important dilemmas in Tabwa social life, always mediated by a person whose attention is pulled both ways at once. Motifs on ancestral figures (and other objects), such as the body midline so often elaborated by a line of scarification, reflect this duality. Left and Right are defined by these lines as symmetrical, yet opposite in the qualities associated with them (receptivity, decline, and femaleness versus action, initiative, and maleness, respectively). The midline divides these, but also connects head and loins, hence wisdom and sexuality, which each, in turn, mediates such differences. These complexities of thought are rendered in Tabwa art with great economy, through the simplest motifs.

The flowering of the arts ended as suddenly as it began. Tabwa were prohibited from public celebration of their religion by zealous colonizers who sought to bring them "civilization." Their lands were at the heart of a "Christian Kingdom" founded by Catholic missionaries, separating the Tabwa from the rest of the Congo Free State in ways that even now have ramifications in modern Zaire. The traditional forms were no longer appropriate in the colonial economy based upon personal initiative and accumulation of wealth. New ones would assist Tabwa in an ontological shift of focus from community to the individual. Although "statement art" had ceased being produced, art was given forms that could be "hidden in plain sight"—that is, seen but probably not understood by colonizers. Tabwa creativity did not stop, then, but was redirected.

"The rising of the new moon" motif and the ideas it represents, however, remained important. In a new religious movement based upon individual catharsis rather than community cooperation, possession by an earth spirit is a personal triumph. Entering such a trance is referred to by the same verb used to describe the rising of a new moon. The most important object used in this movement is a basket decorated with the *balamwezi* motif. The enlightenment and courage to overcome adversity in these new circumstances are therefore linked to past trials and triumphs of the Tabwa, as represented in their arts.

After closing at the University of Michigan Museum of Art on July 17, the exhibition is scheduled to appear at the Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, Tervuren, in September and October. The catalogue (300 pp., over 600 illustrations, \$39.95 cloth) is available from the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC 20560.

Allen F. Roberts and Evan M. Maurer
The University of Michigan

ART OF THE GURO, IVORY COAST
The Center for African Art, New York City
January 8 - April 6, 1986

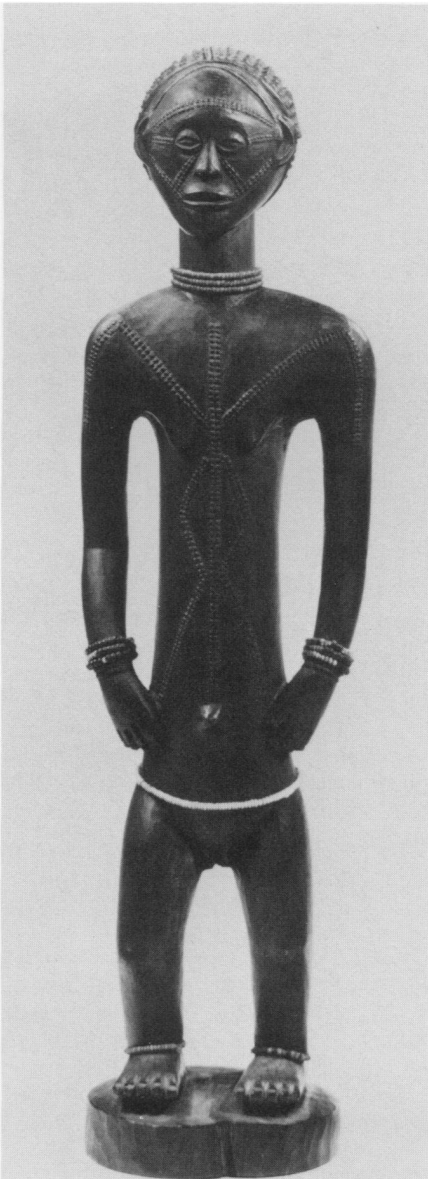
Organized by Eberhard Fischer, Director of the Museum Rietberg in Zurich, this first comprehensive exhibition devoted to the Guro brought together 150 works belonging not only to the Rietberg but also to museums and private collectors in Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, England, France, Czechoslovakia, Switzerland, Italy, and the United States. Conceived in 1974 by Fischer, it was based on field trips he conducted in 1975 and 1984 with Lorenz Homberger.

It is always a treat to see an exhibit that focuses on a single ethnic group, as it provides the opportunity for intensive study. The "Art of the Guro" allowed the viewer to ponder the essence of an artistic tradition as well as to explore regional variations, particular artists' styles, and the range in interpretation of a single type of object, such as the Zamble mask.

According to Susan Vogel, Executive Director of the Center, the exhibit was organized to present both how the Guro see their work and how Westerners are accustomed to viewing it. In 1934 Hans Himmelheber recorded a weaver's comment, "One cannot live without beautiful things"; another has remarked, "It is pleasing to see something of beauty before you as you work." To Westerners these statements seem self-evident, accustomed as we are to approaching African art without reference to its context, but they reveal a facet of the Guro aesthetic that is unusual: an appreciation of beauty for its own sake. There was much to be learned from this exhibition, in terms of the objects' context as well as our own appreciation of the nuances of this remarkable artistic tradition.

The sheer diversity within the mask genre was impressive. The first room presented twenty-eight animal and human faces varying in size, coiffure, facial scarification, and color. Some were old, others were modern, like Mamy Wata or an example depicting a man wearing an army cap and glasses, and smoking a pipe. Making sense of this array in terms of their meaning for the Guro was facilitated by the seven costumed figures seen next to photo enlargements of these masked dancers in action, and by the accompanying text. We learned that the Guro have a group of sacred masks as well as ones worn solely for entertainment. Sacred dances may consist of Gye and the mask family of Zamble, Zauli, and Gu in the north, or the Dye ensemble among the western and southern Guro. The mannequins illustrated Zamble and Gu, both wearing costumes combining animal skin and plant fibers (of the bush or forest) and woven cloth (of the civilized world). A mannequin of Gye, most powerful of all masks, and four of Dye were also clothed in fiber.

The heddle pulleys in the same room, adorned with sensitively carved human and animal heads, exerted a more subtle attraction. As the accompanying label explained, the Guro value the elegant profile, especially



FEMALE FIGURE (ONE OF A PAIR). WOOD, BEADS,
46.3cm. METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART



noteworthy in the female heads, with their arching brows and finely sculpted coiffures. As one progressed through the exhibit, the focus turned to the object as art. The much less abundant carved figures, "small wooden people" as the Guro call them, shared many of the same traits as the pulleys, especially their strong profiles. Figures by the neighboring Baule, Bete, and Senufo enabled the viewer to observe stylistic similarities and differences among these groups.

Regional similarities and variations could be further studied in the next room, containing mask treasures. Some affinities were more apparent than others. For example, in the southwest where the Guro and Bete overlap, a hybrid Guro style prevails. Two masks, one from the Art Institute of Chicago and the other from the Naprstek Museum in Prague, were reminiscent of the Bete style. The first, a large, extremely powerful mask, had a flat, high forehead bisected by a vertical ridge, brooding eyes, and fur-rimmed face; the second example, though with a smaller, more compressed and rounded face, had a similar forehead and was also outlined with fur. From the southwest, too, was a quite different mask, carved by the Masters of Bouaflé, that seemed quintessentially Guro. The face was exaggerated in length and framed by curving horns. The forehead was extremely high, the ears tiny, and the features seemed to be drawn toward the small mouth.

Another room allowed the viewer to pursue the visions of particular artists or schools. In addition to other examples by the Masters of Bouaflé were masks by three other workshops. One group—by the Masters of Duonu—had a Senufo-like quality. Two masks, each topped by a bird's head with curving neck, seemed to explore to the fullest the possibilities of curves and counter-curves as well as surface embellishments, seen on the heads and birds' necks.

In a gallery focusing on cult masks, examples of Zamble masks clearly demonstrated the Guro love of the sweeping curve. The

arched profile of the face, the bands on the horns as well as the horns themselves, the eyes, angle of the mouth, and the treatment of the hairline also elaborated on this theme. Horns were common to other masks as well. Several Dye masks were striking, especially a delicate antelope mask from the Musée Barbier-Müller whose finely grooved horns curved gracefully inward, all but touching.

The final room contained a mixture of interpretive materials: carvers' tools and two masks in progress; a men's horizontal loom and examples of cloth; a fake mask and a description of the process of manufacturing fakes; and a case devoted to divination, complete with an African field mouse. Here we came full circle. A video of a Zamble dance performance completed the effects of the Zamble mask and the masked figures encountered at the start of the exhibit. These masks seemed strikingly small in relation to the total costume, as if the scale were deliberately distorted in order to heighten a feeling of otherworldliness. The dancers appeared from the bush, isolated and larger than life, thereby increasing a sense of the theatrical. The opposite was true of the heddle pulley and its context. The thought of the weaver pausing in his work to look up at this beautiful object, tilted downward to face him, increased the sense of intimacy projected by these small masterpieces. In many cases the eyes and the angle of their gaze seemed to rivet the viewer just as they would have on a loom.

A dark blue background was used throughout the installation with varying degrees of success. It was most effective in setting off the masked figures in their huge fiber costumes and as a backdrop for the colorful photo blowups. On the other hand, the fine detail in the carving of dark wood heddle pulleys and spoons was hard to discern. Text panels provided an overview for each room. In some cases labels were placed not with the objects but on an adjacent wall, making identification more difficult. The strategic placement of excellent enlargements of field

photographs added immeasurably to a sense of immediacy.

Two publications accompanied the exhibition: *Masks in Guro Culture, Ivory Coast*, by Eberhard Fischer and Lorenz Homberger, published jointly by the Center and the Museum Rietberg, Zurich (text in English, 32 pp., 1 b/w & 27 color photos, \$4.95); and *Die Kunst der Guro, Elfenbeinküste*, by the same authors, published by the Museum Rietberg (in German, 312 pp., 483 b/w photos, \$16.50 paper). Both catalogues are available from the Center for African Art, 54 E. 68 St., New York, NY 10021.

Anne M. Spencer
The Newark Museum

apropos ---

TO BERNARD FAGG
ON HIS SEVENTIETH BIRTHDAY

Dear Bernard,

Jos is about 600 miles from Ife as the crow flies, but we saw more of each other when we were in Nigeria than we do now that we are 250 miles closer, so I do not expect to be able to call on you to greet you on your seventieth birthday. Your brother evidently enjoyed my public greeting on his seventieth birthday, so I am greeting you in the same way, through the columns of *African Arts*.

I don't suppose you remember how we first met. It was at a meeting of the Royal Anthropological Institute in London where I walked up to you and said, "What are you doing here? I had no idea you were interested in anthropology." Not an auspicious start to mistake you for the Director of the Department of Extra-Mural Studies of Leeds (or was it Sheffield?) University! How could there be two identically handsome men? However, you told me your name, which I recognized at once as the Government Archaeologist in Nigeria who had written a number of articles I had read in *Man*. At that time I was working at