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Africa in Repose: Stools and Headrests

MARGARET ROSE VENDRYES

The Art Museum at Princeton University boasts a small but fine collection of objects from Africa. Among these are a number of elegant stools and headrests, many of which were made for everyday, practical use. Skillfully and aesthetically realized, works such as these are celebrated by many connoisseurs as equal in quality to the figural sculpture of sub-Saharan artists. All too often, however, in museum catalogues and exhibitions, they receive less attention than anthropomorphic or zoomorphic statuary. By focusing exclusively on a cluster of stools and headrests in the collection of The Art Museum, the present essay seeks in part to redress this imbalance. The essay is in three sections. In the first two, I offer a description and general survey of the objects under consideration. In the third, I address a question of fundamental importance to the study and display of African art at the turn of the millennium: what constitutes “authentic” African art? The goal of this article is not by any means to be exhaustive; I seek, rather, to provide the reader with a broad overview of forms and issues and, thereby, to focus attention on the wealth and beauty of the Museum’s collection of African headrests and stools.

AFRICAN STOOLS, A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Most of the stools on view in The Art Museum were probably carved in the first half of the twentieth century. In many instances, the tools used to make these refined objects were relatively simple. Typically, the wood-carver’s kit contained no more than a half dozen implements. Some of these were adapted for more than one function. For example, the axe blade employed to fell and divide a tree into blocks for various projects was usually later removed, reoriented, and fastened in an adze. The latter, a somewhat clumsy looking tool with a blade placed at a right angle to the handle, served to rough out the form from a carefully chosen section of wood. Chisels and knives were used thereafter, and they grew progressively smaller as the piece neared completion (fig. 1).

The wood chosen varied from community to community and artist to artist. In some instances, a particular species was preferred for its durability, its luster, or its ease in carving. In others, a particular tree was chosen for its age or because it was considered to house powerful spirit forces.

Among the Ashanti peoples of Ghana, to cite but one example, the *csese* tree (*futumia* species) was favored in the making of stools because it yields a pale and malleable wood. Its softness allows for ease in the production of intricate detailing; its whiteness, associated with the spirit world, is linked to ideas of purity. A stool made of *csese*, today still, is seen as an allusion to its owner’s probity and moral worth. To further this sense of goodness, the stool is regularly whitewashed throughout its lifetime so that it always appears in pristine condition. Many Ashanti believe that all living things have immortal spirits. *Csese*, they hold, contain



Figure 1. Senufo carver applying details with a chisel to a carving. Korhogo region, northern Côte d'Ivoire.



Figure 2. Chair. Chokwe peoples, Angola or Democratic Republic of the Congo, late 19th–20th centuries. Wood and metal; h. 60.0 cm. The Art Museum, Princeton University, gift of Perry E.H. Smith, Class of 1957 (y1980–23).

Figure 3. Woman's combination stool and washstand. Senufo peoples, Côte d'Ivoire, late 19th–20th centuries. Wood; h. 47.7 cm., w. 69.8 cm., d. 43.7 cm. The Art Museum, Princeton University, bequest of John B. Elliott, Class of 1951 (1998–912).



powerful spirits that allow the trees to move or become invisible if threatened.¹

When a *cse* is felled sacrifices are made to propitiate the spirit and rites are performed over the carver's tools to ensure a successful and safely executed piece. Once the stool is finished and has become the property of an individual, all other people are forbidden to sit on it. To keep stray spirits from seeking refuge within it, the stool is placed on its side when not in use.²

Backless, armless stools are the most common African seats. Their simple forms are practical, designed with the day's activities in mind. Such stools are rarely elevated more than a foot off the ground, unlike the average Western chair, which can be as much as twenty inches high. Although chairs were introduced into Africa by Portuguese traders during the seventeenth century (fig. 2), for everyday use, in the homes of ordinary women and men, the lovely, lowly stool, carved from a single block of lightweight wood so as to be easily portable, remained the seat of choice. Present in

even the most modest home, it spoke—as it continues to speak today in many regions of Africa—to the agency of the individual: to his or her decisionmaking power in commissioning or perhaps even designing his or her own seat.

Some African peoples approached stools as purely utilitarian objects. In such settings, stability and durability were highly prized. A stool well made and well adapted to its use was perceived as both good and beautiful. For other peoples, stools had important political and ritual functions. Discussions of aesthetic quality in settings such as these were intimately linked to questions of religious and secular power, socioeconomic status, social values, and moral ideals.³ Though the term “art” as defined in the West may not exist in the majority of Africa's myriad and diverse languages, the appreciation of beauty in this as in other sub-Saharan contexts was (and remains) a fundamental concern.

A woman's stool and washstand. Our first example from The Art Museum collection is a simple yet arresting carving: a combination seat and washstand created for a woman



Figure 4. Woman's stool (*hegba*). Bongo peoples, Sudan, 19th–20th centuries. Wood; h. 10.3 cm., l. 24.9 cm., d. 10.4 cm. Fowler Museum of Cultural History, University of California, Los Angeles.

by a Senufo sculptor of northern Côte d'Ivoire (fig. 3). Imposing size, clarity of form, and simplicity of composition draw the eye to this piece. Its bulk suggests a breathing, organic structure. A well-worn piece of essential furniture that proudly carries the scars of daily use, this was a truly utilitarian object.

Seats of this kind are carried upside down on the head of the bearer. On wash days in rural communities laundry bundles are placed between the upturned legs of such stools and brought to the river. Upright, the stool stands firm in shallow, gently moving water while fabrics are rubbed and pounded clean on its seat. So that they can fulfill their role as washstands, stools of this kind are carved from very dense, hard woods.⁴

The Senufo are not alone in carving stools for women's use, their seats distinct in form and function from those used by male members of the community. The Bongo peoples of Sudan, for instance, also produced highly distinctive stools for women alone (fig. 4). Seats carved for Senufo men typ-

ically incorporate a backrest, which allows the sitter to recline.

Two metal-studded stools. As Sandro Bocola, a collector and the author of a lavishly illustrated text on African seats, has noted, semireclining stools are more commonly encountered in West Africa than in other regions of the continent. There are exceptions, however, as is suggested by an example in the collection of The Art Museum, that is thought to have been carved by a Ngala, a Poto, or a Ngombe sculptor in what is today the Democratic Republic of the Congo (fig. 5).⁵ The Ngala, Poto, and Ngombe belong to the family of Kongo peoples, members of a rich and complex group of coastal civilizations linked to one another through language, culture, history, and trade. Seats speckled with brass tacks, resembling shimmering raindrops—works like the two stools illustrated here (figs. 5 and 6)—are most commonly attributed to the Ngombe, “the water people” in local parlance.

The lavish ornamentation of these seats alluded to ideas

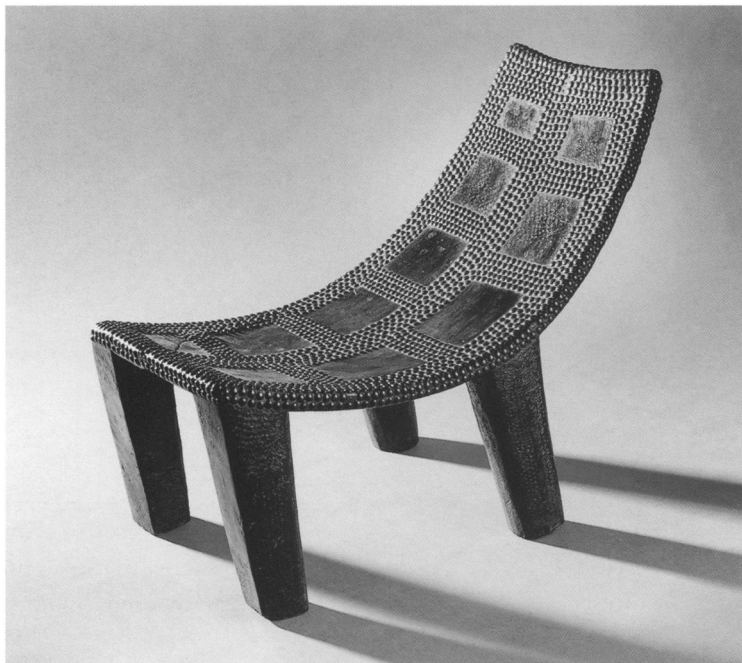


Figure 5. Stool. Ngombe, Ngala, or Poto peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo, late 19th–20th centuries. Wood and brass; h. 43.0 cm., l. 53.8 cm., d. 27.7 cm. The Art Museum, Princeton University, bequest of John B. Elliott, Class of 1951 (1998–547).

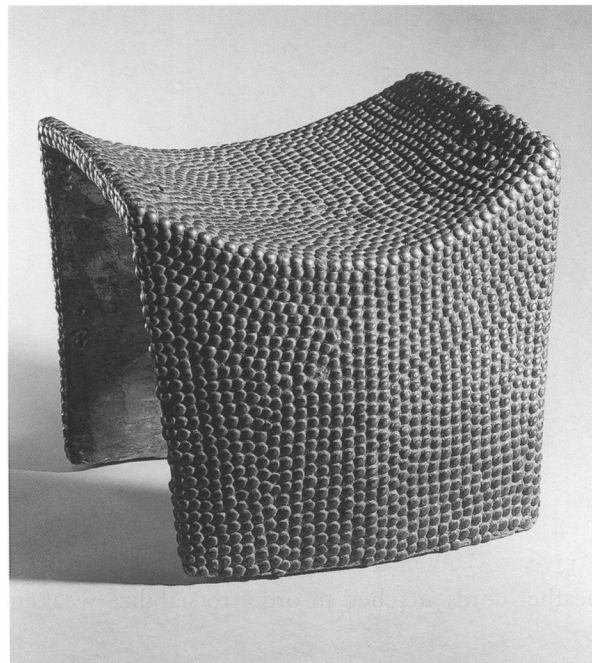


Figure 6. Stool. Ngombe, Ngala, or Poto peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo, late 19th–20th centuries. Wood, brass; h. 27.3 cm., w. 29.9 cm., d. 27.3 cm. The Art Museum, Princeton University, bequest of John B. Elliott, Class of 1951 (1998–546).



Figure 7. Stool. Democratic Republic of the Congo, late 19th–20th centuries. Wood, iron; h. 34.8 cm., l. 88.5 cm., d. 24.0 cm. The Art Museum, Princeton University, bequest of John B. Elliott, Class of 1951 (1998–543).



Figure 8. Stool. Kamba peoples, Kenya, late 19th–20th centuries. Wood, leather, brass or copper; h. 13.0 cm., diam. 23.2 cm. The Art Museum, Princeton University, bequest of John B. Elliott, Class of 1951 (1998–544).

of wealth and well-being. Throughout sub-Saharan Africa, copper and copper-based alloys have historically played a prominent role as prestige materials. Covering a personal yet publicly displayed item with an array of copper studs effectively conveyed the wealth and standing of the owner. In the larger of the two stools shown here (fig. 5), this statement of status was stronger still. Designed to cradle the torso while its owner leaned leisurely back, the seat transmitted a message about its occupant that would have been clear to all community members who came across it.

A stool precious to its owner. A second semireclining stool in the collection, though less lavish in its ornamentation, shows distinct signs of having been a cherished object (fig. 7). As a general proposition, stools and headrests were valued possessions, carefully patched when their wood began to wear. Many examples reveal handcrafted metal staples or leather cords attached in order to stabilize weakened areas in decorative ways. Several repairs of this kind were effected on the well-worn latticework of the stool at hand.

Little is known of this stool, which may have originated in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Possibly it was crafted for a woman. This is suggested by the number of feet it incorporates. In many sub-Saharan communities, the number four is associated with women, the number three with men. This is not, however, a fixed concept. In the Baringo district of Kenya, three-legged stools are a sign of status among older Njemps men, who have earned the privilege of extended leisure.⁶ Yet among the Kenyan Teso, women use three-legged stools and only a man who heads a household after having parented a child may own a four-legged seat, which, at his death, is passed on to his son.⁷

In many rural communities, even the simplest stools are prized because of their connection with an individual. They are proudly inherited through generations until they are worn beyond use. In Nuna villages of Burkina Faso, as in villages of the neighboring Lobi peoples, sculptors do not carve ancestral figures to honor the dead. Personal items, such as stools, become emblems of those who have died and are often preserved and revered in their memory.⁸

A stool in the image of its owner. Among the Kamba of Kenya, a seminomadic people, body ornamentation both permanent and temporary once played a central role in the construction of personal and group identity. Styles changed

as a result of interaction between communities over long periods and vast distances, but at one time scarification marks on the upper chest and arms of young men displayed concentric circles as a favored design. Similar motifs, rendered in copper, define the seat of a round Kamba stool in the collection of The Art Museum, indicating that such forms of ornamentation were transferable from one medium to another (fig. 8). A more modest Kamba stool, with similar circular legs, a carrying chain, and a small area of inlaid copper and brass wire is in the collection of the American Museum of Natural History, New York.⁹

Stools of this kind were slung around the waist or the neck on fiber cords or chains. The more elaborate the piece, the more it said about the person to whom it belonged. Nomadic and seminomadic peoples necessarily carried with them only essential items. As a consequence, stools and headrests, which traveled everywhere with their owners, played a major role as symbols of status. This was so not only among the Kamba but also in nomadic and seminomadic communities throughout vast regions of Kenya, Uganda, and Somalia.

AFRICAN HEADRESTS, A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Headrests have been described as “one of the strongest forms of evidence for the commonality of African traditions, from antiquity to the present, and from one end of the continent to another.”¹⁰ Scholars have traced interactions between peoples within Africa by studying and comparing extant styles of headrests. Also referred to as pillows, neckrests, or bolsters, these items cradle and support the head at the jawline. One rests against them while lying on one’s side. To Westerners, they may not seem particularly comfortable, but it should be noted that headrests promote proper spinal alignment. In many communities south of the Sahara, they were widely used until recent times.

In Africa, body adornment often indicated status. Elaborate coiffures in which the hair was dressed with braided fibers, clay, beads, feathers, and other decorative or symbolic materials were carefully protected during sleep by equally elaborate headrests that could preserve a hairdo, sometimes for months. Among many peoples in what is



Figure 9. Caryatid headrest. Northern Mbala peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo, 19th–20th centuries. Wood; h. 14.0 cm., l. 18.5 cm. Fowler Museum of Cultural History, University of California, Los Angeles.

today Somalia, coiffure and headrest design denoted key differences in age, status, and gender. Although headrests were commissioned from professional carvers, individuals in several groups commonly designed or embellished their headrests and stools themselves with references to their ancestors or specific spirits and deities. Certain designs or types of images were reserved for specific individuals. Among the Mbala peoples of the present-day Democratic Republic of the Congo, for example, chiefs alone could possess headrests incorporating depictions of human beings (fig. 9).

The earliest known African headrests were discovered in Egypt (fig. 10). This is not necessarily an indication that Egyptians were the first to use them, but suggests that in the dry and sealed environment of an Egyptian tomb examples survived longer than they would have in damp regions south of the Sahara, where termites flourish. Some of the earliest datable sub-Saharan headrests were found in burial

caves of the Tellem peoples, who lived in what is today Mali from the eleventh to the fourteenth century. The Dogon peoples, who today make their home where the Tellem once lived, are also known for their elegant headrests (fig. 11).

In several areas of Africa the human head, as the seat of wisdom and knowledge, is associated with concepts of power. Objects created to support this precious part of the body were consequently revered. The ancient Nubians customarily cradled the head of the deceased on a support. Among the Luba of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, when the body of the deceased was unavailable for burial, his or her headrest was interred instead." Although wooden headrests are no longer in use in most areas of Africa, in many regions great importance continues to be attributed to support of the head. In contemporary Tanzanian Ngoni culture, the modern, feather-stuffed pillow is considered to be an extremely personal item and is



Figure 10. Headrest. Egypt, Old Kingdom, ca. 2600 B.C. Alabaster; 22.5 x 21.6 cm. Fowler Museum of Cultural History, University of California, Los Angeles.



Figure 11. Headrest. Dogon peoples, Mali, 19th–20th centuries. Wood; h. 16.6 cm., l. 39.0 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, gift of Lester Wunderman, 1977 (1977.394.66).



Figure 12. Caryatid headrest. Chokwe peoples, Angola or Democratic Republic of the Congo, before 1923. Wood and brass; h. 13.0 cm., l. 16.3 cm. The Art Museum, Princeton University, gift of Mrs. Donald B. Doyle in memory of her husband, Class of 1905 (Y1953-147).

often buried with its owner.¹² For the Baule of Côte d'Ivoire, among whom headrests were in use until the 1970s, carvings made to support the head were associated with powerful beings called *blolo bian* and *blolo bla*, male and female spirits described in Africanist literature as “other-world spouses.”¹³ After their owner’s death, these headrests were sometimes placed on ancestral altars, beside the owner’s stool.¹⁴

A ruler’s caryatid headrest. Images of human beings commonly appear on stools and headrests created for African rulers. Such figures may, in many instances, have been seen as metaphorical representations of a population supporting its leader. A caryatid headrest in the collection of The Art



Figure 13. Caryatid stool. Chokwe peoples, Angola or southern Democratic Republic of the Congo, late 19th–early 20th centuries. Wood and brass; h. 30.0 cm., diam. 25.0 cm. Buffalo Museum of Science (C12715).

Museum offers an excellent example of this type of carving (fig. 12). Made before 1923 by a Chokwe sculptor of Angola, it shows two figures seated back to back who support a small platform on which the owner would have placed his head. A stunning Chokwe stool in which a single caryatid figure is carved in the identical pose can be seen in the collection of the Buffalo Museum of Science (fig. 13). Africanist art historian Sarah Brett-Smith has described the Princeton headrest figures as positioned in “a traditional posture of lamentation.”¹⁵ In the region from which the headrest comes, however, the pose is not necessarily limited to one of mourning, and in sub-Saharan Africa generally, crouching or kneeling figures often reflect humility



Figure 14. Headrest. Luba peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo, before 1923. Wood; h. 15.5 cm. The Art Museum, Princeton University, gift of Mrs. Donald B. Doyle in memory of her husband, Class of 1905 (y1953-182).



Figure 15. Master of the Cascade Coiffure, Democratic Republic of the Congo, 19th century: neckrest, Luba peoples. Wood, beads; h. 16.2 cm., w. 13.0 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, gift of Margaret Barton Plass, in honor of William Fagg, C.M.G., 1981 (1981.399).

toward and respect for special members of society.¹⁶ This is particularly true among the Chokwe and related peoples, such as the Luba and Kuba of the Democratic Republic of the Congo—a matter of some interest as, stylistically, this headrest bears a strong resemblance to Luba carvings.

The handling of the figures evokes ideas of well-being, spiritual power, and rulership. Their robust bodies speak of a strong, healthy, and prosperous people. The brass tacks that adorn their limbs—a form of ornamentation made of metal imported from Europe and used in a wide range of Chokwe prestige objects, such as chairs, stools, and snuff mortars—were probably read as allusions to wealth. The cowrie-shaped eyes recall the widespread use of these shells

as currency from the fourteenth through the eighteenth centuries in parts of West and Central Africa, as well as the spiritual properties that were attributed to cowries by some African peoples. The combination of what appears to be a casual crouching position with the formality of brass and the intricate detailing of the figures' features produces a delightful effect. Its symmetry associates the headrest with sovereignty. One of the key characteristics of elite art throughout the continent, notes Reinhild Kauenhoven-Janzen in an essay on Chokwe thrones, is a balance of parts, which visually denotes order and leadership skills.¹⁷

A Luba headrest. Very different in its stark simplicity from the intricately detailed Chokwe carving discussed above is a



Figure 16. Double headrest with snuff containers. Nguni/Zulu peoples, Republic of South Africa, or Tsonga peoples, Mozambique, late 19th–20th centuries. Wood; h. 15.0 cm., l. 75.0 cm., d. 4.8 cm. The Art Museum, Princeton University, bequest of John B. Elliott, Class of 1951 (1998–539 a-c).

Luba headrest from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (fig. 14). In its form, the piece is reminiscent of ancient Egyptian headrests carved of stone or wood, with one delicate upright supporting a small platform. Headrests were items of great importance in Luba culture, as coiffures among members of the elite were often elaborate and heavy with decorative inserted objects, such as polished nails. A lovely headrest in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, illustrates one such coiffure (fig. 15). Carved in the nineteenth century, it is the work of a sculptor known today as the Master of the Cascade Coiffure because the elegant hairstyles that characterize many of his figures resemble water cascading down a hill or mountain side. Nonfigurative headrests such as the example in The Art Museum are of uncertain origin within the Luba community and have been something of a puzzle for schol-

ars since it is rich figurative carving for which these peoples are most celebrated.¹⁸

As a general proposition, however, it can prove difficult to pinpoint the exact origins of any Luba carving, in part because works of art traveled extensively within and along the periphery of the Luba region before the colonial period. At that time, important objects were presented as gifts by one ruler to another to cement political bonds, and neighboring groups would often copy the styles created by Luba carvers to share vicariously in their prestige.¹⁹ Further complicating the picture is the fact that during a war between the Luba and Yeke peoples at the end of the nineteenth century, a great many Luba headrests were burned.

Headrests for a married couple. Clean lines and multiple uses are characteristic of the headrests made by Tsonga and Shona carvers of Mozambique and northeast Transvaal, in

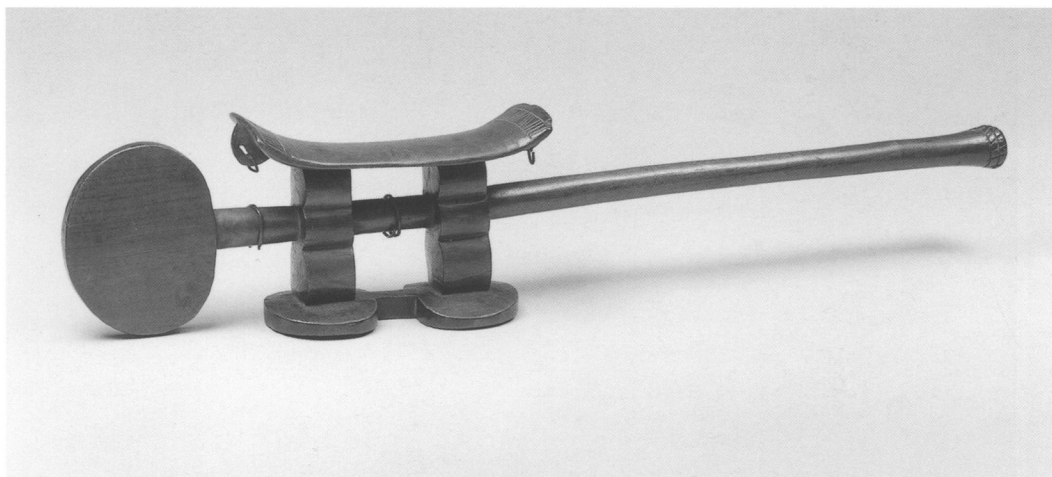


Figure 17. Headrest and staff. Tsonga or Shona peoples, Mozambique or Zimbabwe, or Nguni/Zulu peoples, Republic of South Africa, late 19th–20th centuries. Wood and metal; h. 12.4 cm., w. 61.7 cm., d. 7.3 cm. The Art Museum, Princeton University, bequest of John B. Elliott, Class of 1951 (1998–542).

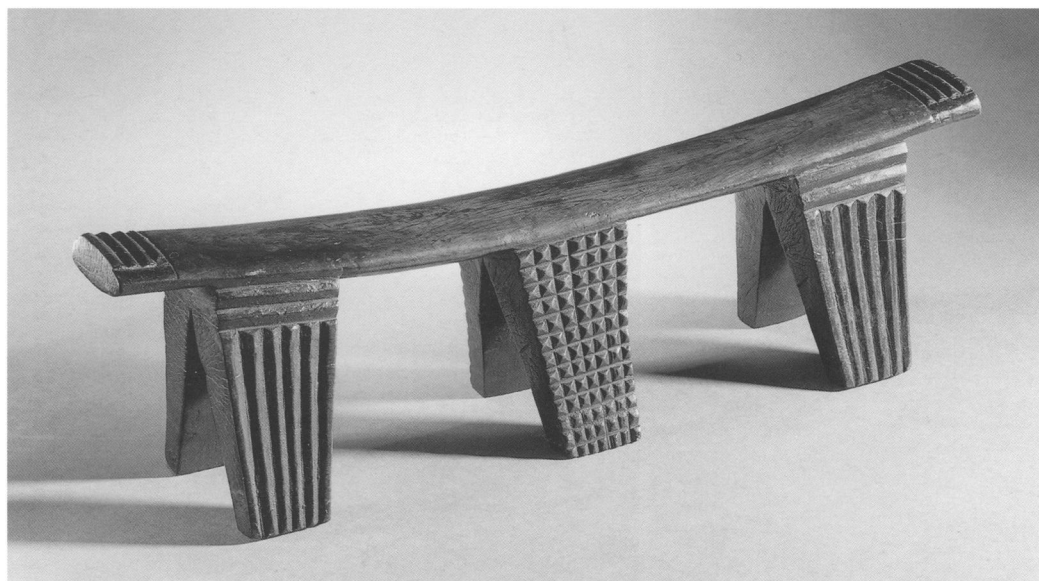
present-day South Africa. The Museum's two Tsonga examples are virtuoso accomplishments that must have been greatly admired. The linked double headrest (fig. 16) was deftly carved from one piece of wood, and snuff containers were seductively attached to each end. Perhaps a bit of snuff before retiring would bring sweet dreams? Many Tsonga and Shona believe that dreams make possible important contacts with the ancestors.

Snuff, a mild hallucinogen, is a preparation of powdered and processed tobacco. Often shared when friends gather for

social occasions, snuff has been widely used in Africa since the introduction of tobacco to the continent in the sixteenth century. Snuff containers can also be found in this region carved from horn or ivory and with elaborate ornamentation or sculpted in human or animal form from a mixture of hide scrapings, blood, and clay. More common examples are made from a simple gourd or fruit shell.

Double headrests were found in a number of regions of Africa. Among the Tsonga, they were made for a man and his wife. Nuna mediums in Burkina Faso used such carvings

Figure 18. Double headrest. Nguni/Zulu peoples, Republic of South Africa, late 19th–20th centuries. Wood; h. 15.2 cm., l. 51.5 cm., d. 10.9 cm. The Art Museum, Princeton University, bequest of John B. Elliott, Class of 1951 (1998–538).



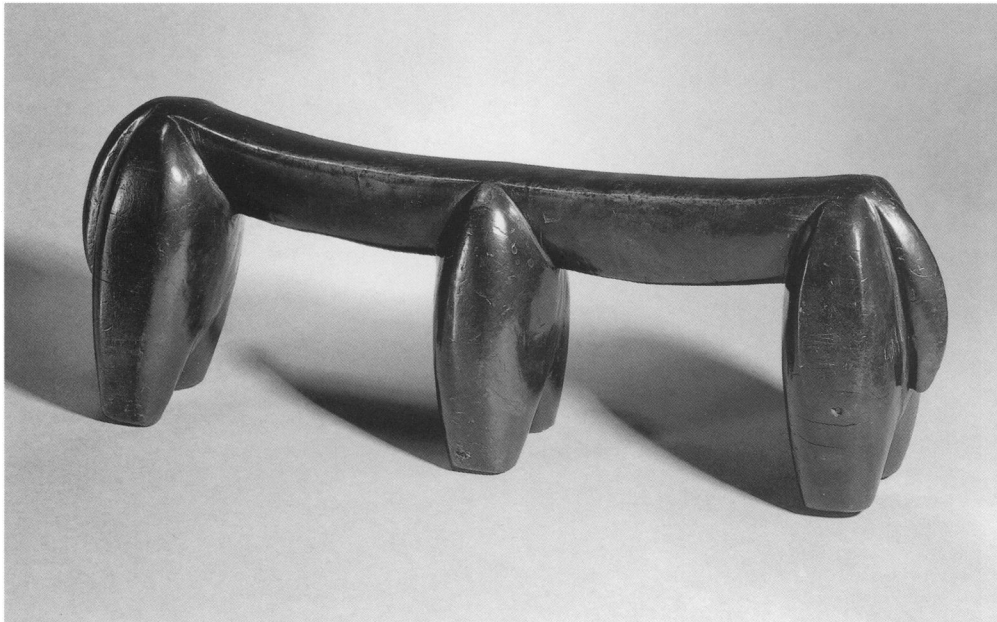


Figure 19. Double headrest. Swazi peoples, Swaziland, or Zulu peoples, Republic of South Africa, or Swazi peoples, Swaziland, late 19th–20th centuries. Wood; h. 15.7 cm., l. 44.3 cm., d. 9.0 cm. The Art Museum, Princeton University, bequest of John B. Elliott, Class of 1951 (1998–541).

as conduits to establish contact with nature spirits. In Ngombe communities of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the use to which double headrests were put linked the spirit realm and the secular world of marriage. Shared by a couple in life, headrests played an important role in death as well. During the period of mourning (or viewing) a deceased partner, the bereaved spouse slept next to the deceased in order to ease his or her passage into the afterlife.²⁰

The best-known Tsonga headrests have two identical legs on flat bases that are lobed, as in a combination headrest and staff in the collection of The Art Museum (fig. 17), or shaped, raised, or chamfered. The staff-cum-headrest seen here is cleverly designed so that, when traveling, the owner could attach a bundle and use the pole for carrying; at day's end the carved shelf and sturdy legs would support a weary head in sleep.²¹ One can only imagine how much time gifted and visionary artists devoted to creating such elaborate objects.

Two headrests in the shape of a cow. Art historians hesitate to depend on motifs and designs alone to trace the provenance of Zulu carvings. Simple one-to-one stylistic correlations are not particularly useful here for, as Sandra Klopper has noted, “Zulu identity was in part forged by inventing fictitious genealogies to broaden the political base of the rul-

ing elite.”²² This practice resulted in extensive exchanges with other groups, many of which are reflected in Zulu art forms. Nevertheless, some features—particularly those having to do with the design of headrests—may safely be identified as Zulu in origin. These include a head support in the shape of a long platform and multiple prominent legs. A six-legged headrest in the Museum’s collection displays both of these characteristics (fig. 18). The vertical ridges and square motifs that adorn its legs (often referred to as warts or, in the Zulu language, *amusumpa*) are embellishments that appear on household implements and jewelry as well. Tactile ornamentation of this kind is associated with cattle, a key source and symbol of wealth in Zulu communities. In the past, *amusumpa* designs were applied to the bodies of cattle; loose sections of an animal’s hide were tied in small, regular bunches to produce a decorative gridlike effect similar to that seen in the Museum’s six-legged stool.²³

The Swazi are a people of southern Africa who share close historical and cultural ties with the Zulu. The fundamental role cattle play in their lives is reflected in an imaginatively designed, swaybacked headrest also in the Museum (fig. 19). Here, the allusion to cattle is even more striking than in the Zulu example. Such a form, one imagines, might well invoke dreams of a large herd and, in so doing, make for a

good night's sleep. The warm brown luster of the headrest suggests that the item was much-used and appreciated.

*TOWARD A NEW CONCEPTION OF AFRICAN
FUNCTIONAL AND DECORATIVE ART*

Objects like the African stools and headrests described above, once used and much admired by Africans, today are acquired, displayed, and marketed as fine art by Westerners enchanted with what they perceive to be their "otherness." Although myths concerning the "primitive," "naïve," and "intuitive" nature of African art have been thoroughly condemned by many Western scholars and collectors, in fundamental ways they still hold sway. Their persistence is fostered by two other ideas: only older works, created before the demise of important religious and social practices, are considered "authentic" and therefore worthy of acquisition, and only objects with a history of use are prized, a rejection of the notion that beauty alone should suffice (as it does in collecting works of Western art).²⁴ Art in Africa, however, has never been restricted to the realm of the utilitarian, nor is it, by any stretch of the imagination, a thing of the past. It continues to be a lived and vibrant experience.

True, only a few scattered seminomadic groups in East and Southern Africa still use headrests in their day-to-day lives, and stools like those discussed in this article are often created today in an assembly-line fashion rather than by a craftsperson working on commission for a specific individual. Many types of stools, moreover, are made for foreign trade, to be acquired by Westerners visiting African countries or for sale abroad. Carvings of this genre tend to be looked down upon by Western museums and collectors, who consider them to be mere "tourist art." This negative attitude is unfortunate, for it depreciates the value of what are often high-quality contemporary articulations of African art. As far as can be determined, throughout sub-Saharan history, culturally determined aesthetic principles have been established not only by artists but also by those who support them and put their work to use, and this has been true across the continent. Preconceptions about "authenticity" and insistence that works collected should be of a certain age fail to take into consideration this fundamental fact. As a result, a rich body of contemporary works is being undervalued or

ignored altogether.

Problematic also are preconceptions about "contact." Many collectors look askance at works of African art that draw upon Western forms, ideas, or materials. Dogon architectural pillars adorned with images of airplanes or buses, masks painted with bright, store-bought acrylic paints, dance costumes made of mass-produced synthetic fibers, or coffins carved in the shape of expensive Western cars (fig. 20) in their eyes, are inferior. They see in them the result of an unfortunate contact between their world and a mythical "pristine," "untouched" Africa they would prefer to imagine.

But what of "contact" in the opposite direction? Much has been written about the influence of African figural sculpture and masks on artists such as Picasso, Braque,



Figure 20. Kane Kwei, Ghanaian, born 1924: Mercedes-Benz shaped coffin, 1989. Wood and enamel paint; l. 219 cm. Wereldmuseum, Rotterdam (70936).



Figure 21. Pierre-Emile Legrain, French, 1889-1929: *tabouret* (stool), ca. 1923. Lacquered wood, horn, gilding; h. 52.0 cm., w. 26.6 cm., d. 64.1 cm. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, the Sydney and Frances Lewis Endowment Fund.

Brauner, and Miró. Significantly less has been said about the impact of functional, everyday African objects on the work of European creators. A case in point is the influence of certain Central African stools on furniture designers in the West during the 1920s and 1930s.

The lavish details of tack-studded seats like the two Ngombe examples in the collection of The Art Museum (figs. 5 and 6) were an inspiration to one of the most celebrated Art Deco designers, Pierre-Emile Legrain. With carvings of this kind as his model, Legrain created a sumptuous stool of lacquered wood with inlaid horn (fig. 21). This work is an unabashed copy of an African design. More attracted to African furniture than any other designer of the

1920s and 1930s, Legrain borrowed extensively from sub-Saharan examples, many of which he encountered in the collections of his wealthy patrons. He designed stools inspired by headrests and coffee tables based on stools (fig. 22), while the original African headrests and stools themselves became occasional tables and footrests in fashionable homes, where a touch of the “Dark Continent” lent a much sought-after charged aura to domestic spaces. Legrain’s more than passing interest in the work of Africa’s talented carvers is a genuine testament to their importance as contributors to the world’s store of beautiful functional objects. This kind of reverse borrowing, however, is not referred to as “contact art” in the manner that African objects derivative of European design have been for generations. Quite the contrary, in fact. In the words of his biographer Jacques de Vos, Legrain “wrote poetry in forms and materials.”²⁵ This is also true of the “anonymous” African carvers upon whose work Legrain’s was based. Few in Legrain’s time, however, would have recognized that this was so; few, indeed, would recognize it even today. For what made (and continues to make) Legrain an artist in the eyes of his Western admirers was the fact that, in contrast to his African counterparts, he was not producing functional objects. Since Westerners are not given to resting so close to the



Figure 22. Pierre-Emile Legrain, French, 1889-1929: coffee table, 1925. Rosewood; h. 30.5 cm., w. 73.6 cm., d. 24.8 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Fletcher Fund, 1972 (1972.283.1).

ground, it was unlikely that Legrain's stools were used at all, much less in the manner of their prototypes. Writing about the demise of utility in the face of designers' efforts toward self-definition as artists, the art critic Arthur Danto has noted, "The furniture maker who aspired to the higher calling might produce objects of beautiful material, exquisitely crafted, but almost flagrantly nonutilitarian."²⁶

The challenge for Western viewers of African art is

twofold: to recognize the importance of functional objects, such as stools and headrests, as works of beauty, sophistication, and art and, in tandem with a school of scholars and connoisseurs that began to emerge in the late 1980s, to do away once and for all with preconceptions about age, "authenticity," and "worth" in the appreciation of sub-Saharan art.

NOTES

- Peter Sarpong, *The Sacred Stools of the Akan* (Ghana, 1971), 9.
- Every Asante can own a stool, regardless of age, gender, or station in the community. One fundamental characteristic, however, differentiates the stools of common folk from those of high-ranking individuals. As a sign of respect, the latter are blackened following their owner's death. A mixture of kitchen soot, spider's web (symbolic of wisdom and power), and egg (an allusion to peace) is rubbed into the surface of the stool to darken the wood. This is done to preserve the stool, to differentiate it from others still in use, and to mourn the passing of its owner. A utilitarian object is in this way transformed into an honored shrine of ancestral remembrance. Not all notables, however, are honored in this fashion. The stools of persons deemed to have discredited their family or community are not treated thus. The seat of a "destooled" ruler, for instance—one who was made to resign in shame—is neither blackened nor placed in the ancestral stoolhouse of his lineage.
- William J. Dewey, *Sleeping Beauties: The Jerome L. Joss Collection of African Headrests at UCLA* (Los Angeles, 1993), 24; and Susan Mullin Vogel, *For Spirits and Kings: African Art from the Paul and Ruth Tishman Collection* (New York, 1981), 9.
- Roy Sieber, *African Furniture and Household Objects* (Bloomington, 1980), 76–77.
- Although he illustrates stools of this kind, Roy Sieber (*African Furniture*, figs. 150, 163) considers them "unusual" examples of Ngala or Ngombe craftsmanship. Sandro Boccia (*African Seats* [New York and Munich, 1997]) mentions but does not illustrate the genre.
- Dewey, *Sleeping Beauties*, 51.
- The only time a woman may be seated on a man's stool is as his widow at his funeral (*ibid.*, 35).
- Tom Phillips, *Africa: Art of a Continent* (New York, 1995), 522.
- Sieber, *African Furniture*, 107.
- Rebecca L. Green and Frank J. Yurco, "Headrests," in Theodore Celenko, ed., *Egypt in Africa* (Indianapolis, 1996), 49.
- Sieber, *African Furniture*, 107.
- Dewey, *Sleeping Beauties*, 83.
- Drawing upon research conducted in Baule communities by Philip L. Ravenhill (*Baule Statuary Art: Meaning and Modernization* [Philadelphia, 1980]) and Susan Mullin Vogel "People of Wood: Baule Figure Sculpture," *Art Journal* 23, no. 1: 23–26 [1973], William J. Dewey (*Sleeping Beauties*, 87) describes these spirits as follows: "*Blolo bian* and *blolo bla* are other-world lovers (male and female respectively) that are believed by the Baule to be able to manifest their feelings on their real-world counterparts. When these spirits are jealous or angry they may cause their worldly partners problems. . . . Divination will reveal that in order to alleviate these problems it is necessary to have a statue carved to which offerings can be made . . . and devote one night a week to the spirit lover. During this night, which is spent alone away from your spouse, it is expected that knowledge will be gained through dreams."
- Dewey (*ibid.*) also observes that headrests may have played an important part in *blolo bian* and *blolo bla* dream sessions.
- Sarah Brett-Smith, "The Doyle Collection of African Art," *Record of the Art Museum* 42, no. 2 (1983): 30.
- Bennetta Jules-Rosette, *The Messages of Tourist Art: An African Semiotic System in Comparative Perspective* (New York, 1984), 41.
- Reinhild Kauenhoven-Janzen, "Chokwe Thrones," *African Arts* 14, no. 3 (1981): 72.
- Dewey, *Sleeping Beauties*, 66.
- Mary Nooter Roberts and Allen F. Roberts, *Memory: Luba Art and the Making of History* (New York, 1996).
- Phillips, *Africa*, 306.
- Dewey, *Sleeping Beauties*, 80.
- Ibid.*, 19.
- Henry Francis Fynn (*The Diary of Henry Francis Fynn*, [Pietermaritzburg, 1950]), cited in Dewey, *Sleeping Beauties*, 82.
- Much precolonial African art reveals the spiritual impetus behind its creation, but utilitarian objects, such as cooking implements, dishes, drinking vessels, and furniture, were frequently embellished for beauty's sake alone. This practice is not unique to Africa. Displaying lavishly fashioned personal items announces the owner's taste and station in the community. In the West, clothes and houses reflect their owner's position in the status-hungry and consumer-driven societies located in areas once considered the most "civilized" on the globe.
- Jacques de Vos, *Pierre-Emile Legrain* (Paris, 1996), foreword. It should be noted that the Union des Artistes Modernes (UAM), of which Legrain was a prominent member, boasted a geometric logo based on African textiles.
- Arthur C. Danto, *Embodied Meanings: Critical Essays and Aesthetic Meditations* (New York, 1994), 77.