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SLEEPING BEAUTIES
African Headrests and Other
Highlights from the Jerome L. Joss
Collection at UCLA

UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History
 Los Angeles, California
 February 28, 1993–May 15, 1994

Reviewed by Rosalinde G. Wilcox

Recent visitors to UCLA's Fowler Museum of Cultural History were treated to an exhibition that not only honored the gift of the Jerome L. Joss Collection to the museum but also celebrated the astonishing diversity of African art. "Sleeping Beauties: African Headrests and Other Highlights from the Jerome L. Joss Collection at UCLA" actually comprised three exhibits featuring 106 objects from different parts of sub-Saharan Africa, 187 neckrests from Africa, Asia, and Oceania, and 48 contemporary headrests that resulted from a juried art exhibition sponsored by Mr. Joss. Set against a large wall photograph of the tomb of former Yoruba Chief Lisa of Ondo (Nigeria), an entrance display of three headrests—from nineteenth-century Japan, the Kali of Tonga, and the Shona of Zimbabwe—gave only the merest hint of the riches contained within the gallery. Curatorial responsibilities were performed by William Dewey, an art historian at the University of Iowa, for the "Sleeping Beauties" section, and Doran Ross, Deputy director of the Fowler Museum, for the "Other Highlights."

The exhibition began with the "Other Highlights." Artworks were organized into five groupings around the gallery perimeter: three broad categories of figural sculpture, masks, and handheld regalia, bracketed by two displays of selected objects produced by the Yoruba and Swahili (Kenya) peoples. Each group was divided into smaller arrangements of several pieces, thereby encouraging the viewer to study a few works at a time. An emerald-green background and large cutout wall photographs relating to an object or an ensemble of exhibited works enhanced each section. A number of small objects displayed in pedestal cases permitted the viewer to circulate freely around the pieces and transformed the large gallery space into a more intimate setting.

In selecting the "Highlights" on display, Ross showcased the familiar with the unusual, challenging the viewer to contrast the myriad styles and forms characteristic of sub-Saharan artistic enterprise. Visitors found themselves among quality examples of figurative sculpture, such as a wooden Tiv (Nigeria) female figure with elaborately carved facial and abdominal scarification, its neck, knees, and hips adorned with beads. Invited to contemplate the spiritual dimensions of African figural sculpture, viewers were informed that this category of Tiv female pedestal figure, known as a *mtam*, is associated with good marriage and success-

Headrest. Hemba, Zaire. Wood, metal; 16cm (6.3"). UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 91.67.

Female figure (*mtam*). Tiv, central Nigeria. Wood, beads, ivory, glass; 89.5cm (35.2"). UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 86.1725.

ful hunting and farming. Another contrast that distinguished this exhibition demonstrated the various types of materials sub-Saharan artists may use in creating figural sculpture: for example, a modeled terracotta female figure produced by Dakakari women (northwestern Nigeria) was juxtaposed between the more typical carved wooden versions.

A Kongo (Zaire) *mintadi* nursing an infant represented the mother-and-child sculptural genre. The gem in this grouping, however, was an unusual and exquisite Nsapo Nsapo (south central Zaire) elaborately coiffed and bearded male figure with a much smaller backward-facing female figure on its back. Stylistically both figures are similarly visualized: downcast eyes, prominent foreheads, extravagantly sized feet, and flexed knees that suggest imminent movement. The male figure grasps his extended abdomen with both hands; the female echoes the gesture. Besides beard and genitalia, an iron blade piercing the head through the coiffure distinguishes the male. Interpretation of the two images remains inconclusive, but museum notes suggested that the female subsidiary figure represents a guardian spirit or ancestor.

No less diverse in form, size, and texture, the masks presented ranged from the familiar Bamana (Mali) roan antelope *ciwara* headdress, poised as if ready to spring, to a smoothly polished Bassa (Liberia) Naw mask with an elaborate coiffure and idealized feminine facial features; then to a huge, brightly painted Banda (Guinea/Guinea Bissau) headdress composed of selective carved anthropomorphic and zoomorphic elements, and a Sapo (Liberia) judicial mask whose carved wooden core is hidden by an accumulation of tusks, teeth, vegetal and raffia fibers, animal hair, cowrie shells,



PHOTO: DENIS NERVIG. COURTESY OF THE UCLA FOWLER MUSEUM OF CULTURAL HISTORY



PHOTO: RICHARD TODD. COURTESY OF THE UCLA FOWLER MUSEUM OF CULTURAL HISTORY

and cloth-covered packets containing herbal medicines. Intended to terrorize, this mask's power is made manifest not only by its accreted visage but also, no doubt, by its aroma.

"Other Highlights" also provoked comparisons of the numerous types of objects that denote high status and social prestige among cultures across the sub-Saharan landscape such as adzes, staffs, and large carved household utensils. A wooden *pindi* charm figure from the Mbala (Zaire) representing a female diviner, replete with a prestigious adze slung over her left shoulder, and playing her slit drum, commanded my attention. A wall photograph depicted a northern Yaka female diviner similarly posed, playing a slit drum. This mirroring made both figures all the more compelling, each documenting the other as a viable portrait image. The diviner is the principal problem solver among the Mbala peoples. *Pindi* charms acquire their power and significance as part of a Mbala lineage chief's sacred regalia.

The Yoruba and east African Swahili displays occasioned the most reflection. The obvious contrast was the emphasis on figural representation in the former and its virtual absence in the latter, notably demonstrated in architectural carvings: two Yoruba houseposts by master carver Obembe Alaye, dating from the nineteenth century, and eighteenth-century Swahili door posts from Siyu and lintels from Lamu Island. The Yoruba sculptures portray ordinary Ekiti-Yoruba men and women in

a series of activities and gestures, while the Swahili are covered with intricately carved interlacing designs and curvilinear floral patterns. Both types marked the owner's social status. The most striking comparison was the cultural significance of sacred wisdom and the devotion given to its visual presentation. A Siyu Koran from the early nineteenth century, written in flowing calligraphy, had brightly colored medallions and floral borders that lavishly illuminated its pages. But to the Swahili scribes and illuminators, decorative programs extended beyond the purely aesthetic and assisted the reader by highlighting particular texts and stressing correct rhythm, pauses, and phrases. A Yoruba Ifa divination tray resembling a tray on a stand was equally impressive. Its carefully carved and conceived images, designed to receive the words of the gods and ancestors, evoke the Yoruba world view. Birds, interlace patterns, bows and arrows, and male and female figures, among others, flank a face that is often interpreted as Esu/Elegba, and ornament the tray's raised edge. The stand consists of openwork carving of fish-legged figures, interlace patterns, and male and female figures relating to the Yoruba cosmos. The ornamented surfaces of both the Siyu Koran and the Yoruba divination tray become vehicles that not only receive and present sacred text but also grace and honor it.

From the Islamic east African display, the visitor then passed through a large portal shaped like a headrest and entered the "Sleeping Beauties" space. There Dewey arranged the headrests, most of which originated from east, central, and southern Africa, geographically in wall cases, with smaller displays for Oceanic and Asian examples. The azure blue walls complemented the warm wood tones of the headrests, and large wall photographs contextualized their use. Two freestanding cases permitted close-up inspection.

Headrests are small objects of domestic furniture that have endured for centuries. To illustrate this point, the exhibit commenced with two elegant wooden examples from ancient Egypt dating from the Old (ca. 2600 B.C.) and New (ca. 1500 B.C.) Kingdoms. Three Joss collection headrests from sub-Saharan Africa, believed to have been in use between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, conform to those excavated from Tellem culture burial sites in the caves of Mali's Bandiagara escarpment.

In his catalogue Dewey sets the record straight by using the nomenclature "headrest" rather than the more familiar "neckrest," citing as his reason the manner in which these objects are used by their creators (p. 16). He tells us that rather than supporting the back of the head at the base of the neck, the rest, according to the majority of his informants, was placed under one ear and along the side of the chin to support the head. This seems to have been the preferred manner of using the headrest throughout sub-Saharan Africa.

These "rigid pillows" generally follow a basic shape: two horizontal pieces—one curved to cradle the head, the other flat for a base—separated by a vertical support and typically carved from a single piece of wood. Yet they

exhibit amazing variety within this form. Some, such as the smoothly polished Ethiopian versions, are exquisite in their stark simplicity. Others are carefully ornamented with beads, woven raffia, reptile leather, and upholstery tacks; or embellished with carved geometric patterns and figurative sculpture. The Rendille peoples (Kenya), however, make headrests that defy the generic label. Preferring headrests of zoomorphic shapes, they select branches that exhibit the potential for such forms.

As the wall and display texts acknowledged, sub-Saharan headrests appear to have been restricted by gender early in their history. Tellem headrests found in conjunction with male skeletons have been associated with male status. East African examples are also primarily



Judicial mask. Sapu, Liberia. Wood, cloth, pigment, cowrie shells, animal teeth, metal, animal horn, rope, vegetal fiber, hair(?). 71.5cm (28.1"). UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 87.1506.

ly signifiers of male status. They support elaborate coiffures that indicate age and gender. A mud cap of the Rendille or Pokot people and a photograph illustrating their appearance demonstrated this functional necessity. In Kenya and Uganda, elegant headrests with precariously thin legs remain unadorned for the uninitiated, but are enhanced with beads for initiated males.

According to Dewey, headrests are invitations to the spirits to enter into dreams and operate as conduits to the ancestors. Unlike American insomniacs who ingest their sleeping potions, their Zairian counterparts often

attach apotropaic and medicinal substances to their headrests. Elaborated headrests are conducive to dreams of wealth, others serve as guardians watching over their owners, and some perform double duty as strongboxes. Longer than most, Swazi and Zulu (South Africa) headrests allude to cattle, important to economic, political, and cosmological systems; the carved projections represent heads, horns, and tails. Among the Shona (Zimbabwe), important men are buried "sleeping" on carvings. Today, ancestral communication is best received by chiefs and diviners while dreaming on a headrest, which assists in acquiring specialized knowledge for settling disputes and determining where animals can be hunted.

There is something appealingly intimate about these objects. Perhaps it is their size and the miniaturization of forms usually seen in larger scale. This is most obvious in Zairian headrests which frequently have carved female supports depicted with elaborate scarification patterns and coiffures. A Hembra headrest was one outstanding example.

Asian headrests are correlated with prestige and protection, like the blue and white porcelain "pillow" from China produced between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Animal motifs, such as the lion, that ward off dangerous spirits are associated with distinguished careers and high social status. Melanesian headrests are also status markers and bring their owners in closer contact with spiritual beliefs.

Recognizing the tactile quality of the headrests and anticipating viewer curiosity about their comfort index, the co-curators constructed a demonstration area including two beds and several headrests where visitors could conduct their own "heads-on" experiments. I did not observe any converts from our soft pillow equivalents, but a few expressed surprise that a headrest could be quite comfortable.

The third gallery space contained the results of the Fowler-Joss challenge to create an original headrest constructed of any material "that is both artistically compelling and functional" and also "reflects the artist's personal aesthetic or cultural background." The competition comprised four divisions—middle school, high school, college, and open (adult). Remarkably, there were over 600 entries, the most distant being a copper-wire chameleon headrest from South Africa.

The materials and designs ranged from the whimsical—a soft-form headrest of stuffed bears evoking the artist's childhood—to the nostalgic—a rigid-pillow acrylic house for treasured memories. Others displayed an elegant use of everyday materials; for example, one was made of a steel rod with the center area wrapped in colored rubber bands.

Several designs contained literary and musical references. One was *Gulliver's Pillow*, obviously slept on judging by the indentation in this glazed clay form. The impression was that of a Gulliver long gone, leaving a pillow that continues to overwhelm the surrounding little people struggling to capture it. Another piece, a jazzy *Mr. Joplin Takes Five*, its surface curved to accommodate repose between rags,

was constructed of piano keys and supported by piano stool feet.

Responding to the request to conceptualize their own identities and realities, one entrant submitted a clay replica of a graffitied wall called *My Reality*, which boldly exhorted the nappers/passersby to "relax." *We Sisters Three*, composed of two plaster female faces in red and gold separated by a curved area for the head, derived inspiration from the Edgar Allen Poe short story "The Masque of the Red Death." The artist commemorated in her headrest the oldest of three sisters who died of complications from AIDS.

More than the sum of its parts, "Sleeping Beauties" demonstrated the diversity of form and materials within a single type, made the connection between artifact and context, and illuminated significant ideas about the objects predicated on informed scholarship. The exhibition demonstrated the Fowler's continuing commitment and accessibility to a broad public, this time in visual terms. Not only did the competition inspire the creativity of the entrant-artists, but their efforts touched our imaginations. Lastly, "Sleeping Beauties" publicly acknowledged the energetic force and generous presence of Jerome L. Joss, a successful advertising executive from Chicago now living in Los Angeles, who unselfishly tailored most of his collection with the museum's needs in mind. He has enriched all of us. □

The companion catalogues *Sleeping Beauties: The Jerome L. Joss Collection of African Headrests at UCLA* by William J. Dewey with contributions by Toshiko M. McCallum, Jerome Feldman, and Henrietta Cosentino (216 pp., 106 b/w & 96 color illustrations; \$40 hardcover, \$27 softcover), and *Visions of Africa: The Jerome L. Joss Collection of African Art at UCLA*, edited by Doran H. Ross (164 pp., 90 b/w & 84 color photos; \$40 hardcover, \$27 softcover), are available from the UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History.



ANCIENT NUBIA Egypt's Rival in Africa

The Newark Museum
Newark, New Jersey
January 27–April 17, 1994

THE GOLD OF MEROE

The Metropolitan Museum of Art
New York City
November 23, 1993–April 3, 1994

Reviewed by Bojana Mojsov

Two recent exhibitions brought the fascinating culture of ancient Sudan to the American public: "Ancient Nubia: Egypt's Rival in Africa," organized by the Education Department of the University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Philadelphia; and "The Gold of Meroe," organized by the Department of Egyptian Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, which marked the first time the objects from the splendid collection of the

Below: Funerary Ba-Bird statue depicting a prince or governor of Meroitic Lower Nubia, from the site of Karonog (Meroitic Period, 100 B.C.–A.D. 300). The University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

Right: Ceramic jar from the site of Karonog in Lower Nubia (Meroitic Period). The University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.



PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE NEWARK MUSEUM

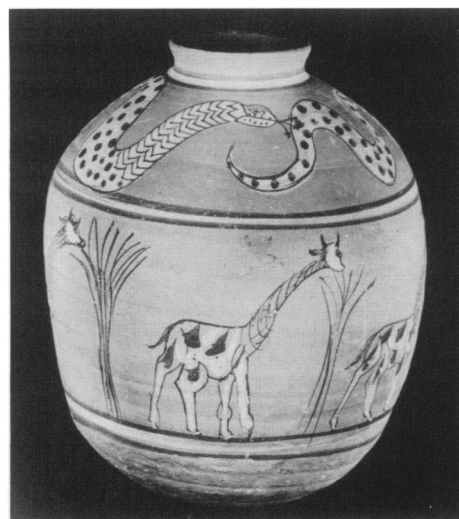


PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE NEWARK MUSEUM

Staatliche Museen in Berlin have been seen in this country. Although conceived independently, each with a different focus, the exhibitions were complementary in many ways.

"Ancient Nubia: Egypt's Rival in Africa" was essentially an educational exhibition about the archaeology and history of the area. The numerous artifacts were thoughtfully presented within their cultural context and in chronological order. Much of the displayed material came from the Archaeological Survey of the University of Pennsylvania, which worked at various sites in Nubia from 1907 to 1910. Finds from other expeditions were also included: the joint expedition launched in 1913 by Harvard University and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, which worked in northern Sudan for eighteen years, and the joint project of the University Museum and Yale University in 1961–1962, which excavated the tomb of a Nubian prince at Toshka. The University Museum owns many important objects from these excavations. In fact, it is mainly due to these expeditions that the culture of ancient Nubia was discovered in all its complexity; much of what we know about it today was defined to a great extent by this pioneering work.

Strictly speaking, there is no political entity called Nubia. The area described by this term, coined in the Middle Ages, is partly in Egypt and partly in Sudan. Moreover, a portion of it is now submerged under the waters of Lake Nasser, a reservoir formed by the construction of the High Dam at Aswan. As in Egypt, the habitable area of Nubia is restricted to the banks of the Nile River. Its northern border is naturally defined by the First Cataract at Aswan, an area where the outcropping of

granite rocks prevents navigation on the river. Five more cataracts, formed of granite and sandstone, present the main feature of Nubian geography. The Sixth Cataract, just north of modern Khartoum, defines the country's southern border. The cataracts also divide Nubia into different zones; the three major parts are Lower, Upper, and Southern Nubia. In ancient times the most important materials commonly exported through this area included gold, ivory, and ebony. It was a corridor for trade that was sometimes controlled by the Egyptians and sometimes by the Nubians.

The sites of ancient Nubia that first received the attention of the Archaeological Survey were those threatened by the enlargement of the Aswan Dam. Essentially a salvage project, the Survey was designed to explore systematically all the sites in the area that would be flooded, the majority being cemeteries dated to the earliest periods of Nubian history. The material obtained during the surveys enabled archaeologists to define the so-called A-, C-, and X-group periods in Nubian history. Following the chronological development of Nubian culture, the first part of the exhibition focused on the Bronze Age. The reconstruction of the C-group village at Areika provided a unique picture of a settlement from this period. Some of the exhibited items included pottery for daily use, such as cooking pots and jars for storing food. Some imported Egyptian pottery was also found in the village as well as figurines connected with religious practices.

Particularly impressive were the finds from the tomb of a warrior at Buhen, dated to the Kerma culture (2500–1500 B.C.). They included red pottery beakers with black tops, a short sword, and some jewelry buried with the warrior. The necklace with its gold and ivory pendant in the form of a fly suggests that he was an important military officer, since the fly was a sign of high military rank in Egypt and Nubia.

The subsequent periods, although not as richly illustrated by original material, were explained in great detail, providing a sense of cultural development and continuity. In post-Bronze Age Nubia a kind of "dark age" was