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A HERITAGE *of* TEACHING

THE AFRICAN ART COLLECTION *of*
CATHERINE C. BLACKWELL





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FEBRUARY 21 - MARCH 30, 2003

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OAKLAND UNIVERSITY IS EXTRAORDINARILY PLEASED TO WELCOME THE CATHERINE C. BLACKWELL COLLECTION TO OUR CAMPUS. THE LEGACY EMBODIED IN THIS EXCEPTIONAL COLLECTION PROVIDES OUR STUDENTS WITH A UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY TO EXPERIENCE THE RICH RANGE AND DIVERSITY OF ARTISTIC EXPRESSION THROUGHOUT THE AFRICAN CONTINENT. THE COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES AND OAKLAND UNIVERSITY DIVERSITY PROGRAMMING ARE PROUD TO SUPPORT AND BE HOST TO THIS IMPORTANT SHOW. THIS MEMORABLE DISPLAY IS A MARVELOUS EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY, NOT JUST FOR OAKLAND UNIVERSITY, BUT ALSO FOR EVERYONE IN THE COMMUNITY.

THIS EXHIBITION WAS A MAJOR COLLABORATIVE EFFORT REFLECTING THE WORK OF A DIVERSE BODY OF ORGANIZATIONS FROM ACROSS THE COMMUNITY AND WE EXPRESS GREAT GRATITUDE TO THEM ALL. PARTICULARLY, THIS EVENT WOULD HAVE BEEN INCONCEIVABLE WERE IT NOT FOR THE VISIONARY EFFORTS OF THE CATHERINE C. BLACKWELL ADVISORY COMMITTEE AND THE CONSIDERABLE SUPPORT OF THE DETROIT PUBLIC SCHOOL PROGRAM MANAGER TEAM. LASTLY, WE THANK AND HONOR MRS. CATHERINE C. BLACKWELL FOR HER WILL AND DETERMINATION IN AMASSING SUCH AN EXTRAORDINARY AND INSPIRING COLLECTION OF AFRICAN ART.

DAVID DOWNING, DEAN
COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES
OAKLAND UNIVERSITY

THE FLINT PUBLIC LIBRARY WELCOMES THE OPPORTUNITY TO HOST IN ITS MAIN LIBRARY BUILDING THE CATHERINE C. BLACKWELL AFRICAN ART COLLECTION. THE COLLECTION INCLUDES UNUSUAL ARTIFACTS FROM THE MAJOR ETHNIC GROUPS OF THE CONTINENT OF AFRICA. ALL WHO VIEW THE EXHIBITION WILL GAIN GREATER UNDERSTANDING AND AWARENESS OF THE FUNCTION OF THE ARTIFACTS, AND OF THE VISION, BELIEFS AND VITALITY OF THE COMMUNITIES IN WHICH THE ARTISTS WORKED AND LIVED.

FOR THE LIBRARY, HOSTING THE EXHIBITION SUPPORTS OUR ON-GOING EFFORTS TO PROVIDE FOR AREA CITIZENS CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES THAT INFORM, ENGAGE AND HEIGHTEN AWARENESS OF THE WORLD'S CULTURES—PAST AND PRESENT. WE SALUTE MRS. CATHERINE C. BLACKWELL FOR HER TIMELESS WORK IN BRINGING THIS COLLECTION TO LIFE FOR THE ENRICHMENT OF OUR LIVES. WE COMMEND THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE FOR THEIR TREMENDOUS EFFORTS IN ORGANIZING AND PRESENTING THE EXHIBITION, FOR PREPARING THE SCHOLARLY CATALOGUE, AND FOR PROVIDING INTERNSHIPS FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS AT OAKLAND UNIVERSITY. WE APPLAUD, TOO, THE DETROIT PUBLIC SCHOOL PROGRAM MANAGER TEAM FOR ITS INSIGHTS IN SUPPORTING THE EXHIBITION. FINALLY, WE ARE INDEBTED TO THE RUTH MOTT FOUNDATION FOR PROVIDING THE SUPPORT NEEDED TO PRESENT THE COLLECTION TO THE PEOPLE OF THE GREATER FLINT AREA.

GLORIA COLES, DIRECTOR
FLINT PUBLIC LIBRARY

FUNDAMENTAL TO THIS UNIQUE COLLECTION OF AFRICAN ART IS THE EDUCATIONAL PERSPECTIVE OFFERED BY CATHERINE C. BLACKWELL'S OWN DETERMINATION TO INFORM US ABOUT THE RICHNESS OF AFRICA'S CULTURAL HERITAGE; THE VERY EXISTENCE OF THIS COLLECTION STEMS FROM MRS. BLACKWELL'S INSISTENCE THAT THE BEST WAY TO TEACH CHILDREN ABOUT AFRICA IS FOR THEM TO EXPERIENCE IT IN PERSON - THE OBJECTS BROUGHT BACK FROM HER TRAVELS WERE ALWAYS INTENDED FIRST AND FOREMOST TO BRING AFRICA TO LIFE IN THE CLASSROOM. FORTY YEARS AGO, IT WAS THIS COMPULSION THAT INSPIRED HER TRAVEL TO THE CONTINENT TO INVESTIGATE IT HERSELF. THIS INITIAL CURIOSITY TURNED INTO A LIFE-LONG ADVENTURE, OPENING THE DOOR TO AFRICA FOR ALL HER STUDENTS. AND SO IN EXPLORING THIS COLLECTION, ONE MUST ALWAYS BEAR IN MIND THAT IT WOULD NOT EXIST WERE IT NOT FOR MRS. BLACKWELL'S INTREPID RESOLVE TO BRING SOMETHING BACK TO INVIGORATE THE CLASSROOM. NOW, FOR THE FIRST TIME, EVERYONE IN THE COMMUNITY CAN ENJOY THIS INCOMPARABLE COLLECTION OF AFRICAN ART, AND EXPERIENCE FIRST HAND THE COMPELLING REASON FOR ITS EXISTENCE.

DICK GOODY, DIRECTOR
MEADOW BROOK ART GALLERY
OAKLAND UNIVERSITY



FIG.
1

INTRODUCTION

In the recent history of African art in the United States, names like Rockefeller, Tishman, Goldwater, Gross, Stanley, and White — all Caucasian Americans with neither genetic nor cultural ties to Africa — have occupied center stage. The world's prestigious auction houses as well as museums and scholars have almost instinctively privileged any nominal association of African artworks with such personalities. This is understandable for, following the late nineteenth century plundering of African royal kingdoms during the European colonial conquests, it was the enthusiastic collecting by Western white collectors and artists like Matisse and Picasso that helped to initiate African art studies. Certainly Africa's artistic traditions would have been better off without Western intervention. And the intensive anthropological studies of African cultures that began from the early 1900s on had largely been spurred by colonial expediency rather than a genuine scholarly concern. But the development of African art history as a discipline owes a lot to the interests of the early mostly white collectors. Western concerns to understand why and how Africans made these fantastic images has provided the foundation for the current academic study of African art. This does not deny that the other interest in African art is for its investment potential. Yet, since becoming an integral part of college curricula in the early '60s, African art has continued to be enriched by the exhibitions and scholarly writings stemming from a healthy collaboration between museums and some of these prominent private collections. White collectors, therefore, have impacted the intellectual direction and refinement in thought about African art.

By contrast, with only a handful of notable exceptions, few African American collectors of African art have had this much influence and fewer still have been similarly celebrated. This virtual anonymity of African American collectors today seems even more dumbfounding, considering that some prominent ones were among the earliest to collect African art. William Sheppard, an African American missionary, collected extensively throughout the Congo at the turn of the twentieth century. Decades before African art began inspiring European artists, renowned African American intellectual and activist Alain Locke owned and exhibited African works. Considering the recognition long accorded African culture in the formation of African American identity, the relative lack of enthusiasm of the latter for collecting African art is not only puzzling, it simply defies logic.

Early twentieth century African American collectors had to pursue their collecting in a society that had yet to rein in the shackles of racial discrimination and segregation. There is no question that the considerable constraints and impediments of being economically marginalized and politically disenfranchised have accounted for the absence of credible Black collectors of African art. But one might also blame the latter on an apparent lack of "a culture of collecting" art for the mere sake of collecting. Like their African forebears, whose appreciation for the visual arts was indivisible from its fundamental utility, African Americans have displayed a nonchalance about acquiring works of art that contrasts sharply with the seminal roles accorded the oral and performance arts, both of which have long been hallmarks of African American culture. Indeed, at the risk of overgeneralization without supporting concrete data, one can argue that art collecting as a vocation is still in its relative infancy.

While the number of African American collectors on record may have seemed few and far between during the first half of the 1900s, there appeared to have been a dramatic surge in African American interest in the arts and culture of the African continent from the 1960s. Although their numbers increased, it was nothing compared to trends among the dominant white American population. Still it represented a significant development because of the specific historical context: the highly charged period of the late 1950s and '60s, of racial disturbance that culminated in the Civil Rights Movement and subsequent empowerment of African Americans. Linked with this was the euphoria displayed by African Americans over the successes of the African liberation movement on the African continent; African struggles for, and achievement of political independence from their colonial masters energized African Americans on this side of the Atlantic Ocean. Collecting of African art objects was corollary, making this linkage more palpable, direct and meaningful.

Yet, as intriguing as the Pan-African connections may seem, not all African art collecting during the 1960s was politically driven. The factors underlying collecting interests of African Americans were as diverse as the many shades of blackness. For some, African art collecting was a passion that transcended ideological concerns. For those African Americans who participated in the U.S. Peace Corps, the journey to Africa afforded the opportunity to explore the "motherland" and establish new kinship ties with African peoples and cultures. Thus, for them, African art objects acquired during their trip took on special significance. Whether acquired as tokens of friendship or through purchase, some African pieces attained mnemonic value, prompting, encapsulating and enriching memories of Africa in unique ways. In this respect, the specific narratives woven around certain collections can be insightful, sometimes marking specific moments in their owners' lives as well as shaping what they ultimately became down the line. Thus African artworks might not only speak to historic cross-cultural interactions and interpersonal relations, but also might have left indelible consequences on careers and outlook.

For some African Americans, too, the passion for collecting African art represents a benign militancy, a compulsion to appropriate and own a piece of Africa, their ancestral homeland. Even today some collections continue to be built around these same idealistic goals, while tapping into contemporary notions of what precisely constitutes African American identity and what it means to be upwardly mobile and culturally savvy. Current Afrocentrist discourse, in particular, gives new meaning and interpretation to art collecting in the African American community. While ownership of art from sub-Saharan cultures may represent another dimension of an endemic materialism, it is also a sign of developing awareness among African Americans about what it means and who has the right to own a piece of African material culture. The whole notion of ownership is becoming a source of political empowerment. There is no question that all these factors have played varying roles in constituting this eclectic and yet meaningful collection of Catherine C. Blackwell.



EMBROIDERED BASKET
CULTURE UNKNOWN, AFRICA, LATE 20TH CENTURY
WICKER, COWRIES, PIGMENT



STOOL (*Egwa, edwa*)
AKAN CULTURE, GHANA, WEST AFRICA, 20TH CENTURY
WOOD

THE BLACKWELL COLLECTION

The exhibition, *A Heritage of Teaching: The African Art Collection of Catherine C. Blackwell*, serves a manifold purpose. First, it celebrates the world of a unique African American collector, reflecting on her valuable role as cultural agent and pioneer. Second, it seeks to educate the American public about the educational and historical importance of her collection. Third, it aims to enlighten the African American community about the cultural capital to be reaped from developing an appreciation for African art. And last, it aspires to building a sense of cultural pride in Africa that is deeper than the usual affinity forged with Egyptian civilization.

It is a collection of African art that boasts works in every conceivable medium: wood, stone, metal, as well as natural and synthetic fibers. In terms of quality and style, it ranges from exquisitely crafted "masterpieces" befitting museums to low-end so-called "tourist art" often seen in African airports and urban marketplaces. Yet, in charting the collector's personal histories, each takes on a significance all its own. Every object has a story to tell and thus embodies a specific memory that justifies its particular symbolic meaning to its owner. Thus, to view the collection is to read aspects of Catherine's biography as a passionate educator. To her, the artworks represent residues of memory, both good and bad, slices of a past that still possesses relevance in the present.

The celebration of African American collectors and other such pioneers in the African American community is long overdue because of their inherent strategic relevance. In terms of public education and community outreach, it is timely. Examining the biography of an African American collector of her stature sheds light on the ways in which knowledge about Africa is transmitted both within the African American community and the general American public. Understanding her particular relationship with a specific piece she owns could provide critical vistas into her personal history of contacts with Africa.

* * * * *

That Catherine takes enormous pride in her African heritage seems obvious. But sharing her rich knowledge and experiences of Africa with American children makes her the perfect cultural ambassador. And juxtaposing her biography with her collecting interest seems just as revealing and intellectually compelling. Every object, be it a simple carved wooden toy or an elaborately decorated chief's stool, bears a history, a unique experience with African culture here in the United States and abroad. In this exhibition, therefore, the spotlight is as much on the African artworks as it is on Mrs. Blackwell's personal life and motives behind her collection. While her life's adventures and work on and off the African continent come into sharp focus with each art object, the corpus assembled here can be particularly insightful in understanding her singular vision and philosophy about using art as a medium to educate the American child not only about Africa but also about life, in general.

However, in the same way that her life history may seem intricately intertwined with the collection, so her broad relationship with the issue of African American identity formation can also be posited; Catherine is not alone in forging this interconnection. Other surviving African American collectors speak not only about the value they attach to their personal collections but also, to the way individual acquisitions entwine with specific aspects of their past and ultimately with their life histories. These include meetings with African politicians, statesmen, chiefs, and musicians as well as with ordinary and little known persons.

In some cases, art objects may speak to historic interactions between the collector and African peoples, both important and ordinary. A fine royal Kuba *ngaadya muwash* mask exemplifies this class of artworks. It was a gift from former Zairian (D.R. Congo) ambassador to the United States on behalf of his president Mobutu Sese Seku, who presented an identical piece to President John F. Kennedy. Because African leaders are scrupulous in selecting gifts for foreign dignitaries, the official presentation to Catherine may have been stemmed not only from the Congolese national pride in its royal heritage, but also from its recognition of the central importance of women.

Ordinary Africans who interact with Catherine sometimes leave indelible marks on her and her outlook: the toy two-wheel car collected from an African boy on the streets of Accra (Ghana) represents more than a fleeting experience with contemporary African art; the recycled metal wire, rubber, and bottle caps that went into its manufacture suggests the fertile imagination of its young inventor (Fig. 17) and speaks to the creativity of the African child in the face of privation. The teacher in Catherine tells her that such an experience could help an American child understand and appreciate his or her privileged circumstances.

For many Africans, art is so intertwined with daily life as to make art collecting irrelevant. Many of the pieces that have come to define the canons of the sub-discipline were never displayed in living rooms and offices as we do here in the West. Rather, they once featured in ceremonies of critical importance to the way societies functioned and how people related to each other and to the world around them. Granted some African art was made to appeal to our sense of beauty and to entertain. In this class are numerous utilitarian forms and ornaments, but the vast majority comprised religious icons and diverse ritual paraphernalia, some of which were never to be touched or viewed by ordinary hands and eyes. And on occasions when they came into contact with people, the psychological impact was profound because they embodied qualities that, to their African owners, far outweighed their aesthetic appeal.

But discussions of function and use must not obscure the creativity of the African artist in articulating ideas through artistic innovation. There is no doubt that the African artist seeks to transform nature into objects of beauty and there is no shortage of examples of his or her fine handiwork in the sculptures, textiles, jewelry and other creations. The astonishing technical virtuosity of these products is indisputable. Still, carving a wood sculpture, weaving a fine textile and adorning one's self with painted designs and ornaments must be seen to be filling a void in daily life. Each serves any one or more of the following purposes: to elevate the self; to mark and define authority and status; to assert pedigree; to connect with otherworldly phenomena; to reflect on the past; to seek meaning in the mysteries of life; and to facilitate and overcome the difficulties inherent in life's transitions. Yet, above everything else, art objects serve as vehicles for storing and transmitting vital knowledge. As a didactic tool, a work of art can by itself embody knowledge that can be historical and philosophical, private and public. This broad characterization seems as true today as it was 25,000 years, when African peoples in the Sahara and Southern African deserts began painting and carving



FIG.
4

TWO PAIR OF TWIN IMAGES (ERE IBEJI)
YORUBA CULTURE, NIGERIA, WEST AFRICA, LATE 19TH/20TH CENTURY
WOOD AND PIGMENT

10

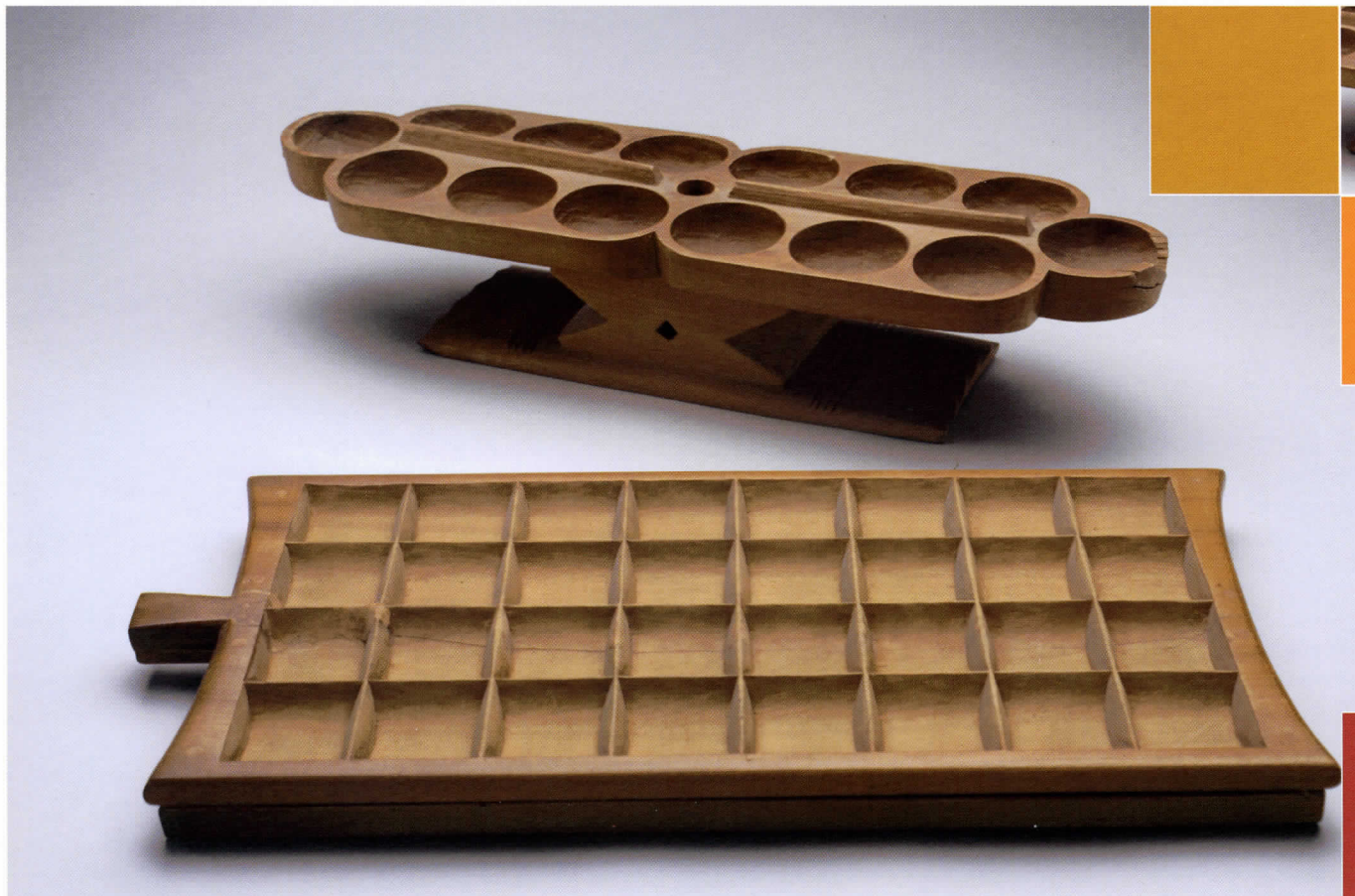


FIG.
5

TWO INDIGENOUS AFRICAN GAMES:
A) Oware GAME (TOP); AKAN CULTURE, GHANA, WEST AFRICA, 20TH CENTURY; WOOD
B) Mankala BOARD GAME (BOTTOM); CULTURE UNKNOWN, EAST AFRICAN, 20TH CENTURY; WOOD

images on rock surfaces. What has become apparent from decades of serious research is that Africa's cultures make up for the lack of writing by investing sculpture, textile design, bodily ornamentation, house decorations and other visually captivating forms with symbolic information. Thus, no matter how fleeting its appearance, an artwork becomes a potent source of knowledge. Although predominantly oral cultures, African societies have long challenged the notion that conventional writing systems should be the yardstick for defining great civilizations.

In indigenous African societies, when elders ponder history and philosophy, they always do so through verbal and visual means. Only with the introduction of western education in the last century have African societies resorted increasingly to written history. Catherine is aware that even the powerful modern information technology is shortchanging human ability to memorize ideas and sometimes depreciating memory itself. Using an approach similar to the African oral transmission of history, she has for years told stories, both invented and true, around her objects. This exhibition is thus the equivalent of a conversation between an African elder and her community. It brings together Catherine's recollections and insights, and in the process imparts essential knowledge to the young and adult alike. Her reflections on her many experiences can be enlightening from a variety of perspectives.

Catherine Blackwell recognizes the didactic potential of indigenous African art. That African art, from the simple toy to the most sacred emblems, is by nature, a teaching tool is what drives Catherine's particular approach to and interest in Africa. The consummate teacher, she wears her hat (I or 9), not only as an embodiment of her vast knowledge of African culture, but also as an indispensable teaching aid. The colorful wide-brimmed hat exudes a rich history of Catherine's contacts with countless African and American children both in formal and informal settings. Symbolism aside, it is invested with practical purpose and bespeaks its owner's intent and style. Whether a human or animal figure or an artifact, an object tied around the brim serves more to recall and prompt storytelling ideas than to decorate. In this approach, Catherine seems to be reaching into a long-cherished African tradition. Yet, like the African Griot, Catherine invents as much as simply narrates stories to serve a critical purpose.

She epitomizes an African ideal that views art not merely as a thing of beauty, but also one with enduring relevance to daily existence, aiding survival and facilitating material and spiritual sustenance. Above all, it is the role of art to reflect on and to disseminate knowledge as well as to enrich the intellect. Art objects may embody critical information about individuals, institutions and whole societies.

This last function rests at the core of Catherine's collecting interests. For Mrs. Blackwell, African art should be a teaching tool here in America, too, as it was in Africa. Most African societies were oral cultures, in that they lacked conventional writing systems. However, their visual traditions made up for this deficiency in an effective way for sculpture, textile design, bodily scars and markings, ornaments and even house decorations have long been part of an elaborate system of communication. Each encapsulates some vital knowledge. So that when any of these artistic forms are combined with rituals and other ceremonies, they become potent vehicles for transmitting knowledge.

It is this critical relationship between art and knowledge that continues to drive and inspire her collecting aspirations. Her passion for assembling these objects of African art extends well beyond an aesthetic interest and involves her concerted effort to understand all African art, not privileging some over others but developing an appreciation of how objects were made, why they were made and what roles they played in the lives of their owners.

Catherine C. Blackwell is no Afrocentrist in the right sense of the word for, instead of narrowly focusing on and privileging Egyptian civilization, she ponders the totality of African culture and history through the unique prism of art. As an African American educator, acquiring pieces from Africa is her way to understand and to develop a personal relationship with a vast continent and its diverse culture. Comprising over 2000 contiguous cultural groups in diverse shades of skin color, Africa is a mosaic of beliefs, values and practices, some shared some unique. There are differences in outlook, and certainly there exists many distinctive approaches to artistic production. Uniqueness of how a culture creates form and design and treats its surfaces, signals its responses to particular stimuli; moreover, the materials and colors employed can also reflect its worldview and history. So one's decision to collect art compels one to appreciate the African cultures that it produces. While individual artworks must be explained on their own terms, each work opens a new vista into a slice of a whole culture, its way of living and its environment.

In forging the links between the daily uses of art and the experience of living, Africans also recognize the crucial agency of women in this sphere. Women constitute the fulcrum upon which societies rest. Thus the fertility and fortitude of females in enduring and making possible the mysteries of birth become paramount. This critical role requires protection, enhancement and celebration, hence the pervasiveness of mother-and-child figures (12). The abiding relevance of maternity is also reflected in its multiple metaphorical associations such as nourishment, sustenance, fertility (in all its myriad manifestations) and continuity. Art production is thus geared toward achieving practical solutions to problems and providing necessities of life.

However, it is the fundamental African concern for the well being of the child that permeates much of Catherine's collection and that explains her array of fine dolls—both African and American. As the link between ancestors and the living, children represent the hope for continuity and survival. For many indigenous African peoples, therefore, birthing substantiates the belief in reincarnation, as some children may be ancestors reborn. Realizing the dangers of female barrenness to survival, many African communities invest a great deal into overcoming the problem. The Akan *akua'ma* doll serves both to induce pregnancy in a barren woman and to highlight essential physical attributes hoped for in the child-to-be-born by the mother-to-be. But its associated rituals are intended also to safeguard the transition, paving the way for the safe arrival of the newborn. Like other African fertility figures, the *akua'ma* can eventually become a plaything for the growing child. Yoruba Ibeji figures (Fig. 4), carved originally to pacify spirits of deceased twins, also become play dolls for the surviving sibling even though they remain religious sculptures. However, when it comes to play dolls, African cultures are not locked in a time warp nor are they insulated from external influences; today's African child is not stuck with only the indigenous wood-carved or bead-ornamented dolls, but is exposed to a diversity of invented and imported forms.

The early phase of life is critical for that ultimately shapes the future of a child. Although child development in African cultures is highly

gendered, meaning that a girl's upbringing is guided by a set of principles different from that of a boy's – the sexes are viewed more as complementary than as adversaries. Informal instruction provided by the family is vital, however, formal education is offered through recognized cultural institutions. Two African sculptural genres that illustrate the acculturative value placed on specialized and gender-specific training are the Mende *Sowie* (Fig. 13) and Bamana *Chiwara* masks (Fig. 6). The *Sowie* represents a protective water spirit actualized through the mask performance by a member of a women's Bundu or Sande society among the Mende people. The society is entrusted with supervising the proper training of adolescent girls to become responsible adults. Its male counterpart is the Poro association. The *Sowie* mask's exaggerated rings of fat around the neck, while suggestive of material well being, also mimic the ripples on water surfaces from whence come the spirits that protect the young female initiates. This mask is not only commissioned and owned by women but also danced solely by women, which is rare in sub-Saharan Africa. While the *Chiwara* mask is primarily connected to boys' initiation, it includes female elements that signal a genuine concern for balance in children's education. The mask performance always features a male-and-female pair, suggesting the interdependence of the sexes.

Reinforcing the key function of African art in facilitating the critical passages in life are three more fine objects connected to death in the Blackwell collection: a Dogon funerary *kanaga* mask (14), an Ogoni white-faced mask (Fig. 10) and a Kota reliquary figure (Fig. 20). All three exemplify an African view of death, not as an event, but as an ongoing experience in living. Although considered inevitable, death is patently upsetting to social equilibrium, so much so that it entails intervention and correction. The Dogon *kanaga* mask features in the *dama* ceremony after the burial to restore the social order. The Ogoni mask is said to depict ghosts of young women, a different manifestation, but nevertheless reflecting shared African beliefs about a vibrant afterlife that runs parallel to that of the living community. The distinctive Kota figure protects ancestral bones that harbor powers to protect living family members.

Not every African work of art is tied to teaching and critical changes in the cycle of life; indeed many serve in a range of other social, religious and political spheres. The Akan wood carved stool is a good example (Fig. 3). An essential piece of furniture in any Akan household, the wooden stool also can embody leadership and authority. This important emblem of chiefly office can be further amended into that of a repository for the ruler's soul when he or she dies, making it a highly revered religious artifact with periodic ritual ramifications. These manifold uses make the Akan stool a powerful tool for teaching.

The African approach to education also involves disseminating knowledge through informal means, which can include public entertainment. African drums are a case in point, but even so, they are more than mere musical instruments (22). Thus, while many still feature in public entertainment, some may also act as vehicles for communicating messages over long distances as well as become the focus of critical communal rituals. Drum language, communicated in percussive tones, can be honorific, repeating the voiced appellations for a ruler, local hero or foreign dignitary; it can also be used in religious worship serving an important sacred role. Similarly, the African harp or *kora* is not merely employed in musical performance. It is the quintessential tool or attribute of the West African Griot – an individual long recognized as a self-appointed custodian and narrator of history. In the hands of a Griot, the *kora* blends utility and symbolic communication in a profound way.

Frequently, knowledge is encapsulated in religious artifacts. Ethiopian crosses remind us that African societies have never lived in isolation and that external influences have played pivotal roles in shaping African cultures. African contacts with the outside world go back several centuries and suggest not one but multiple foreign sources for the ideas and forms that enriched African culture. Although many parts of Africa – West and Central Africa – encountered Europeans as recently as the fifteenth century, those of the eastern horn demonstrate contacts with the West that may be more than a thousand years old. These silver crosses indicate not only the strong roots of Christianity in this portion of Africa, but also the ability of African cultures to transform and indigenize what they appropriated. But some sacred forms themselves reflect historical knowledge.

But mundane forms, such as board games can also be particularly effective tools of instruction in spite of their rather casual contexts of use. While few board games have been documented archaeologically, they no doubt have a long history on the African continent, connecting them to important social, economic and political developments. In the annals of some societies, invention of game boards have turned metaphors for the dawn of civilizations, such as we learn of the Kuba Kingdom of the Democratic Republic of Congo, whose royal progenitor, Shyaam a Mbul, is credited with a game that signaled the superiority of the monarchy over every sphere of life. This king's portraits therefore include images of the game. The Akan *Oware* also represents more than intimate objects.

AFRICAN ART AT THE CROSSROADS: THE NEW AFRICAN COLLECTOR

Notwithstanding the phenomenal surge in interest in Africa among African Americans lately, there still is lacking a full appreciation of African material culture. To this day, the African American collector continues to be viewed as a distinct anomaly within his community; he or she is not the average person but one who not only possesses the requisite wealth but also the intellectual foresight and cultural savvy to recognize the value in collecting African works of art. The logical link between African-ness and African art collecting has yet to attain the same resonance as Egyptian civilization in Afrocentrist thinking. Indeed, the longstanding historical connection with the African continent is all the more reason why African Americans should be leaders rather than followers in collecting African art.

The relative anonymity and under-representation of African Americans must not be further ignored and perpetuated. To date, gift donations of African art by African Americans remain relatively uncelebrated by the scholarly community in a way that focuses national attention on this vital area of their heritage. Meaningful collections like Catherine's must make their way into museums and institutions of higher education across the United States. Historically Black colleges, such as Clarke, Fiske, Hampton, Spellman and Lincoln who boast such distinguished collections must lead the way in creatively exploiting their educational potential. Still, not all such collections have been and will be that fortunate to enter the protected bosom of an institution. That is why public education is critical so as to prevent the wanton disposal of art objects by heirs when their original owners die without making appropriate provisions for the future of their collections.

While it is true African Americans are latecomers in the ownership of African art, it is also obvious that this cultural awareness has always been

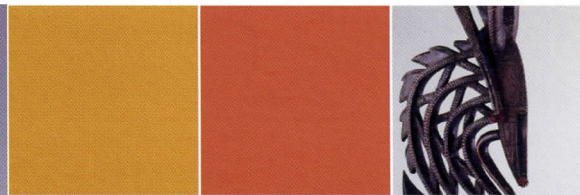


FIG.
6

PAIR OF CHIWARA MASKS
BAMANA CULTURE, MALI, WEST AFRICA, 20TH CENTURY
WOOD, NATURAL FIBER



FIG.
7

ASSORTED DOLLS (L-R):

A) PLAY DOLL, CULTURE UNKNOWN, GHANA, WEST AFRICA, LATE 20TH CENTURY; CLOTH-AND-WIRE

B) PAIR OF TWIN FIGURES (*Vanovi*); EWE CULTURE, GHANA, WEST AFRICA, EARLY 20TH CENTURY; WOOD AND PIGMENT

C) PLAY DOLL, ZULU CULTURE, REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA, 20TH CENTURY; CLOTH AND BEAD



FIG.
8

HELMET MASK (*Kponiugo*)

SENUFO CULTURE, COTE D'IVOIRE OR BURKINA FASO, WEST AFRICA, 20TH CENTURY

WOOD AND PAINT

there among a core group, even if it is only beginning to surface in recent years. Compared to their non-African counterparts, few have been courted by museums and the scholarly world or made the focus of major traveling exhibitions. Why early African American collectors of African art have neither been celebrated nor made the focus of serious intellectual debate should be a valid concern. There are those who may decry the dominant influence of Caucasians in the African art collecting, that is to say, individuals with no vested historical or cultural interests in Africa as satisfying a disguised form of neo-colonialism. But sadly, no real effort is being made to counteract this so-called "outsider" appropriation of Africa's material culture.

Rather than dwell on the lack of collecting enthusiasm in the past as another missed opportunity, it is critical to chart a way forward, to galvanize the community by sharing what it means to collect African art. An aggressive attempt from within the African American community to reclaim this heritage must be undertaken. The exhibition aspires to this ideal. A single collector of stature could help to bolster and generate additional ones, arousing unprecedented enthusiasm in the African American community for African art. This is why celebrating Catherine C. Blackwell as a collector cannot be taken lightly. As Catherine's generation ages or passes on, their collections must not be allowed to die. The frequency with which heirs to some luminaries have been quick to dispose of old collections of African art through unconventional means – wayside vendors and backdoor deals – paint a distasteful picture of a chronic lack of regard for these critical slices of their cultural heritage. This prevailing ignorance merits some intervention. Some concerted educational effort must be instituted; the community must be enlightened as to the historical significance of such issues. A broadly conceived exhibition that examines the totality of African art, particularly as it affects lives of African Americans is very much in order. The recent exhibition of Ghanaian kente textiles and its multiple manifestations in contemporary African American culture amply demonstrated how African art is fast becoming part of American popular culture. However, kente is only one of many such borrowed African elements that have been so transformed and given contemporary relevance.

There are others for whom art as commodity and cultural symbol will always remain somewhat conflated; collecting will be rooted as much in economics as in a notion of social mobility. Because of this bourgeois inclination, self-definition and commodification of African artifacts will seem just as intertwined. The conflation is not wholly spurious for art, like stocks, is increasingly becoming part of investment portfolios. African American living standards have improved considerably the last fifty years and the financial constraints on collecting have all but disappeared. Economic strides made by African Americans since the 1960s have given rise to a class of highly educated and nouveaux riches class that is beginning to show some interest in collecting African art. Consequently, the question is no longer whether there is the wherewithal to collect but instead whether African art can be made sufficiently accessible to heighten its educational potential.

Collectors of African art twenty years ago amazingly included only a few African Americans. This situation persists but is changing slowly. This augurs well for the art, for some young African Americans are already displaying the same passion and altruism of the previous generation. Clearly the decision to uphold one's African heritage as an integral aspect of one's identity must come naturally and not through inducement. However, considering the level of ignorance within the community, this exhibition must only be a first step in a journey through what remains a vast landscape in need of careful cultivating. Hopefully, Catherine C. Blackwell and many other yet to be discovered African American collectors will soon no longer represent a minority within the African American community.

NII OTOKUNOR QUARCOOPOME, PH.D.

CURATOR OF AFRICAN ART & HEAD

DEPARTMENT OF AFRICAN, OCEANIC AND NEW WORLD CULTURES

DETROIT INSTITUTE OF ARTS

FIG.
9

INSTITUTING A LEGACY

The Catherine C. Blackwell African Collection Advisory Committee is proud to be a participant in exhibiting the Collection of Catherine C. Blackwell. The focus of this article is to briefly set forth the history of the committee by describing the cohesiveness of the members, objectives of the organization, and future goals for the Collection. In so doing, a description of how an African-American legacy was instituted will emerge.

THE LEGACY OF CATHERINE C. BLACKWELL

Catherine C. Blackwell is a retired Detroit Public School teacher who has devoted her life to enhancing awareness of African cultures among K-12 students and to the larger community of southeastern Michigan. When she retired her official title was Instructional Specialist of African/African-American Studies with the primary role of developing a K-12 curriculum on African and African-American history and experiences. Her extensive collection of African artifacts supplemented and embellished her curriculum. Mrs. Blackwell is a native Detroit, the youngest child born to Burrell S. and Beulah D. Carter, and the wife of George W. Blackwell, a retired dentist of Detroit. Mrs. Blackwell was educated in the Detroit Public Schools and received a B.A. Degree from Howard University in Washington, D.C., a Social Work Certificate from Howard University School of Social Work, and M.A. Degree from the College of Education, Wayne State University in Detroit. From 1970 to 1977 she attended universities in both west and east Africa focusing on the culture and art history of the forty-one countries she visited. The courses of study were accredited by the University of Connecticut and Howard University and were offered at the following universities: University of Cape Coast, Ghana; University of Ghana, Accra, Ghana; University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana; Haile Selassie I University, Addis Abba, Ethiopia; University of Togo, Togo; University of Dahomey, Benin; University of Nigeria, Nigeria; University of Ibadan, Nigeria; University of Ibadan, Nigeria; Makerere University, Uganda; University of Nairobi, Kenya; and University of Dar es-Salaam, Tanzania.

Catherine Blackwell made her first trip to Africa in 1960 when Ghana obtained its independence; her husband was a student at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania when the new leader of the country, Kwame Nkrumah, was also there. She traveled with the avowed goal of bring back artifacts and stories as teaching tools for her classes. She realized that young students knew very little about the rich heritage of Africa. The majority of them had a comic view of the continent from movies like Tarzan and stories from earlier visits of Colonists. When she arrived, Mrs. Blackwell was so impressed with the warmth and friendliness of the people, the history and functions of the social organizations, and the beauty of the natural landscape that she began pursuing what has become her mission: to bring African art and culture to Detroit. While continuing her teaching career, Mrs. Blackwell became a director of study tours for educational and professional groups, scout troops, and those who wanted to learn about the continent of Africa. Over the last forty years Mrs. Blackwell established connections with public and private persons in Africa, which intensified opportunities to observe aspects of the culture available to very few outsiders. One of her most exciting travels was a trip to Ethiopia with Emperor Haile Selassie as her host.

During her travels, Mrs. Blackwell acquired artifacts by purchase or as gifts from indigenous people of the country. The objects were important to the functioning of the communities and illustrated the belief systems within the groups. Mrs. Blackwell used these objects in her teaching curricula and speaking engagements as illustrations of the material cultures that differentiate ethnic peoples of African heritage. The artifacts were selected for their inherent aesthetic value as well as their cultural relevance. The objects given to her as gifts during her travels represent the skills of noted local artists from the villages she visited.

As a reflection of her life's work, Mrs. Blackwell has been given numerous awards and honors; the late Mayor Coleman A. Young named her "Detroit's Ambassador to Africa," the Urban League honored her as one of its "Distinguished Warriors," and she is a member of "Michigan Women's Hall of Fame." The recognition that is dearest to her is having a new school named in her honor, The Catherine C. Blackwell Institute of International Studies, Commerce and Technology, for her pioneering work in the Detroit Public School System.

The culmination of the years in acquiring artifacts from a variety of countries results in a collection that yields an insightful and perceptive perspective of how some African peoples celebrate, worship, form social connections, and socialize children. These objects are affectionately known as the "Collection," which is the legacy of Catherine C. Blackwell.

COHESIVENESS OF MEMBERS

When I would see Catherine C. Blackwell attending events around the city of Detroit, I often asked what were her future plans for the Collection. One evening while she was seated at a lecture at the Detroit Institute of Arts near Dexter Fields and myself, the discussion arose again about the Collection and she replied, "Whatever you would like." Dexter and I promised her we would call and set up a meeting to discuss the issue. Books on preserving art from the continent of Africa and works of African American artists guided my thoughts and actions (Perry, 1992; Powell & Reynolds, 1999; Szalay, 1998). Dexter Fields, M. D. is a psychiatrist, an art collector, and active in the art community. He was very interested in working toward establishing plans for the Collection. I contacted Reverend Mangedwa C. Nythai who is from South Africa, a friend of Mrs. Blackwell, and assistant to the Pastor and Liturgist at Hartford Memorial Baptist Church. He had just completed a Summer Leadership Institute for Church-based Community Economic Development at Harvard Divinity School. As part of the Institute, steps for organizing community groups on how to move from an idea to an action plan were detailed.

Catherine C. Blackwell contacted her friend Paralee Day to join the group. Paralee Day is an Adjunct Instructor at Marygrove College, a former Reading Consultant for Highland Park Mich. schools, a collector of African-American art, and active in the art community. At the meeting it was decided to organize an Advisory Committee to assist Catherine Blackwell with plans for the future of the "Collection." The discussion also centered on the need for other Committee members and on the type of skills new members should bring to the project. The group decided to offer Committee membership to W. Rollin Henderson and Gregory Reed. W. Rollin Henderson, CPA, MBA, has a reputation for



FIG.
10

FACE MASK
OGONI CULTURE, NIGERIA, WEST AFRICA, 1950S
WOOD, KAOLIN

helping worthy causes in the community. Gregory Reed is a noted attorney whose firm has represented persons with intellectual properties and entertainers. Both agreed to join the Committee. Attorney Reed suggested the Committee accept Attorney Stephanie Hammond, also from his firm, as a member. Catherine C. Blackwell also suggested that Camille Brewer, Assistant Curator at the Detroit Institute of Arts, attend the meetings as a curator of the Collection. Two years after the Committee was established, Graham Beal, Director, President and CEO of The Detroit Institute of Arts, was offered and accepted a position with the Committee. Mrs. Nisah Tahara, a representative of Detroit Public Schools Program Manager Team, sponsors of the exhibition, also attended meetings to assist in organizing and planning events surrounding the exhibition.

The Advisory Committee has a limited number of members who work together effectively and efficiently. There are a number of reasons for the cohesiveness of the group: a) Each member brings a commitment and a specific talent to the Committee that is essential to its functioning, b) Members are all interested in preserving events of historical importance for the African American community, c) Members were introduced into the group by another member who knew their work habits and temperament, and d) Six members of the Committee attend the same church and communicate frequently about the progress of the project.

The Committee, at its monthly meetings, developed plans for instituting the "Collection." There were key elements in the plans for action (Hill, 1998). First, the group made an analysis of the situation and discussed thoroughly the need for immediate action (e.g., the age of Mrs. Blackwell, the recognition that artifacts were irreplaceable, etc.) and the consequences of inaction (e.g., possibility of artifacts being scattered among unknown persons in the future, security of artifacts, etc.). Second, the Committee identified likely outcomes (e.g. the Collection could continue to serve as an enriching tool to curricula, educational institutions could benefit from our efforts, etc.) and contingencies (what if there are legal snares to the Committee having control of the "Collection," or if Mrs. Blackwell was persuaded by individuals to make other plans? etc). These discussions of the "what ifs" helped to clarify the objectives and guide the action planning. Third, after each meeting action steps were outlined and each member was assigned a task to complete before the next meeting. The tasks were specifically stated and directed toward the project goals. And finally, the Committee developed strategies for completing the project goals, which were periodically reassessed. The group was flexible and altered plans when confronted with obstacles that delayed the project. For example, when the Committee was not successful in obtaining a large sum of funds from one agency, the grant writing shifted to requesting smaller sums from additional funding agencies. This increased the workload; however, it was a successful strategy for moving the project forward.

OBJECTIVES OF THE ORGANIZATION

The objectives of the Advisory Committee are:

Classify and catalogue the Collection according to the standards of international museums.

Sponsor exhibitions of the Collection.

Find permanent homes for selected pieces among the local art and educational institutions.

Write educational modules for parts of the Collection for students in middle and high schools.

Letters were written to the institutions Mrs. Blackwell selected to receive pieces from the Collection to ascertain if they were interested in the gifts. Letters were written to the following: Detroit Public School Children's Museum, Catherine C. Blackwell Institute of International Studies, Commerce, and Technology, African Heritage Cultural Center, all part of the Detroit Public School System. Other institutions contacted were The Detroit Institute of Arts and Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History, both of Detroit, Mich.; Howard University, Washington, D.C.; and the Newark Museum of Art, Newark, NJ. All the institutions sent letters stating their willingness to permanently house gifts from the Collection.

Financial support for these goals was to be obtained by submitting proposals for grants to Foundations and fund-raising activities.

GRANTS FROM FOUNDATIONS

Kellogg Foundation: A proposal for funding was submitted to Dr. Geraldine Brookins at Kellogg Foundation, Battle Creek, Mich., seeking funds to hire a Curator to catalog the Collection. The grant was funded and Camille Brewer was hired as Curator. The grant also provided funding for small stipends for students from Oakland University, Rochester Mich., to experience working with the Collection and obtaining academic credit. Camille Brewer and a professor at Oakland University supervised internships for students studying Art History, African Studies, African American History, or Anthropology. Students from Marygrove College, Detroit, Mich., also joined the project as interns and received academic credit.

Henry Ford Health Systems: A proposal was submitted to Dr. Marilyn Hubbard at Henry Ford Health Systems for financial assistance. The funds were used to fund the expenses for the Curator of the exhibition, Nii Quarcoopome Ph.D. Dr. Quarcoopome is an internationally recognized authority on African art and former consultive editor of a professional journal on the subject.

Detroit Public Schools Program Manager Team: A grant was submitted to Mrs. Nisah Tahara with the Detroit Public School Planning Project for an exhibition of the Collection at Meadow Brook Art Gallery at Oakland University. Mrs. Blackwell is a Detroitier and retired teacher from the Detroit System. Importantly, the majority of the "Collection" will be permanently housed at Children's Museum and the Catherine C. Blackwell Institute of International Studies, Commerce and Technology; both operated by the Detroit Public School System. The grant was funded.

Ruth Mott Foundation: A grant was submitted to Ms. Sharnita Johnson at the Ruth Mott Foundation for funding an exhibition of the Collection at the Flint Public Library in Flint Mich. The proposal was funded.

FUND RAISING EVENTS

The Advisory Committee planned events to obtain funds to reach its objectives. Also each member of the Committee was expected to contribute personal funds to assist in reaching set objectives and goals. The first event was to introduce the goals of the committee to select members of

the broader community and solicit financial support. The event was held on a Sunday afternoon and was a financial and social success. Items from the collection were auctioned and an invited Host Committee of notables contributed above the ticket price for the event. The Committee was assured of support from approximately 100 persons from the community.

The next event was an African Art Appraisal Fair at a local art establishment, the Scarab Club of Detroit. With the purchase of a ticket, attendees could have one African object appraised by an expert and a small fee was charged for each additional appraisal. Lectures were given by renowned African scholars, Dr. Nii Quarcoopome (mentioned above) and Michael Kan, Associate Curator of Oceanic and African Art at The Detroit Institute of Arts. Musical entertainment and refreshments were provided.

These two events provided the Committee with the financial base to conduct its activities. It also enabled the Committee to discuss its efforts in providing funding for reaching goals through grant applications.

FUTURE GOALS

Currently the Committee's future goal is to plan for subsequent exhibitions at small museums throughout the Midwest. The Committee also plans to obtain additional grants to complete the cataloguing of the "Collection." There are approximately 200 objects that still need to be classified.

The Committee is dedicated to preserving and exhibiting the Collection, and the legacy of Catherine C. Blackwell. It is important because not only this generation, but also future generations will be enriched by the knowledge and aesthetic value of the objects. The exploration of African cultures in all their complexities is a meaningful and commendable endeavor.

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FIG.
11

PAIR OF RELIGIOUS CROSSES
AMHARRIC CULTURE, ETHIOPIA, EAST AFRICA, PROBABLY LATE 19TH CENTURY



FIG.
12

MATERNAL FIGURE
ATTIE OR GURO CULTURE, CÔTE D'IVOIRE, WEST AFRICA, LATE 20TH CENTURY
WOOD, OIL PAINT



FIG.
13

MASK OF WOMEN'S BUNDU SOCIETY (*Sowie*)
MENDE CULTURE, SIERRA LEONE, WEST AFRICA, EARLY 20TH CENTURY
WOOD, NATURAL FIBER, PIGMENT



FUNERARY MASK (*Kanaga*)
DOGON CULTURE, MALI, WEST AFRICA, 1920S



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FIG.
15

CHIEF'S CEREMONIAL NECKLACE
AKAN CULTURE, GHANA, WEST AFRICA, 20TH CENTURY
GOLD



MASK (NGAADY A MWASH)
KUBA CULTURE, DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO, CENTRAL AFRICA, 20TH CENTURY
WOOD, PIGMENT, COWRIES, NATURAL FIBER AND BEADS



FIG.
17

BOY'S TOY
ACCRA, GHANA, WEST AFRICA, 20TH CENTURY
METAL WIRE, CLOTH



MASK
YAURE CULTURE, COTE D'IVOIRE, WEST AFRICA, 20TH CENTURY
WOOD, PAINT

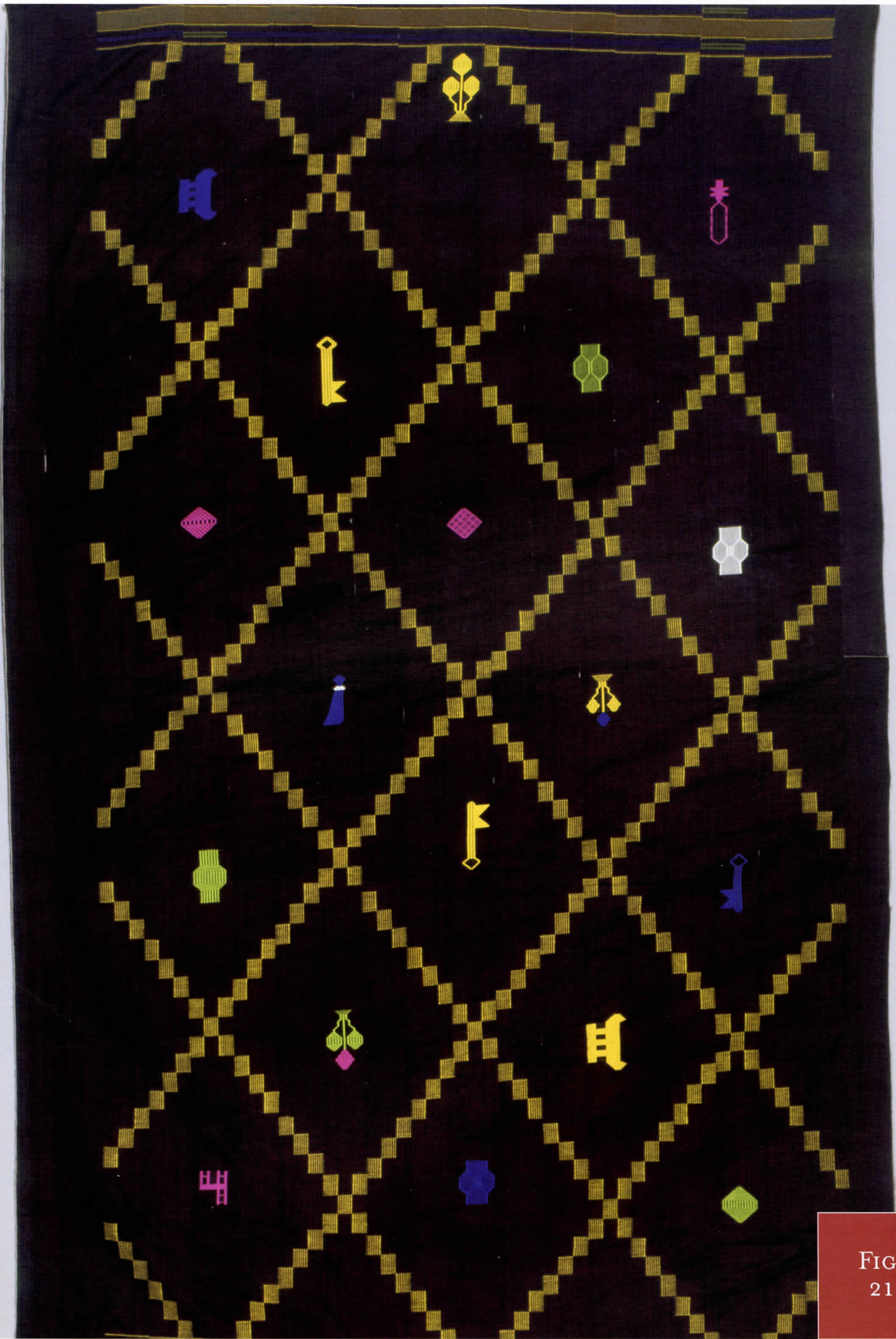


FIG.
19

WOMAN'S CEREMONIAL APRON
Ndebele PEOPLE, REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA, 1950S
BEAD EMBROIDERY



RELIQUARY GUARDIAN FIGURE (*Mbulu ngulu*)
KOTA PEOPLE OF GABON, CENTRAL AFRICA, EARLY 20TH CENTURY
WOOD AND BRASS SHEET



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FIG.
21

MAN'S CLOTH (*Adanuvor*)
EWE CULTURE, GHANA, WEST AFRICA, 20TH CENTURY
COTTON



AFRICAN MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS:

A) HARP, CULTURE UNKNOWN, WESTERN SUDANIC REGION, 20TH CENTURY; WOOD, GOURD AND ANIMAL SKIN

B) TWO DRUMS, CULTURE UNKNOWN, KENYA, EAST AFRICA, 20TH CENTURY; WOOD AND ANIMAL SKIN



THE CATHERINE C. BLACKWELL AFRICAN COLLECTION ADVISORY COMMITTEE

STANDING FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: GREGORY REED, W. ROLLIN HENDERSON AND DEXTER FIELDS

SEATED FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: TISAH TAHARA, PARALEE DAY, CATHERINE C. BLACKWELL, STEPHANIE HAMMONDS AND ALGEA O. HARRISON-HALE



REV. MANAGEDA NYATHI



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2003 Meadow Brook Art Gallery

ISBN 0-925859-19-2

Cover: Mask of Women's Bundu society (*Sowie*)
Mende culture, Sierra Leone, West Africa
Early 20th century
Wood, natural fiber, pigment

CURATOR

Nii Otokunor Quarcoopome, Ph.D.

THE GALLERY

Director: Dick Goody

Assistant to the Director: Jacqueline Leow

THE CATALOGUE

Catalogue Essays: Nii Otokunor Quarcoopome, Ph.D.

Algea Harrison-Hale, Ph.D.

Editor: Dick Goody

Catalogue Design: Pamela Terry-Duplacey

Oakland University

Communications & Marketing

Photography: Tim Thayer

Printed by: Graphic Enterprises, Inc.

THIS EXHIBITION IS SUPPORTED BY

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