





**Multiplicity, Connection and Divergence:**  
African Art from the John F. Korachis Collection

Oakland University Art Gallery





**Multiplicity, Connection and Divergence:**  
African Art from the John F. Korachis Collection

Curated by Andrea Eis

Oakland University Art Gallery



# Multiplicity, Connection and Divergence: African Art from the John F. Korachis Collection

## Preface

It is my distinct pleasure to welcome the John F. Korachis Collection of African Art to the Oakland University Art Gallery. The gallery has a long association with art from the African continent. In 1968 the Meadow Brook Art Gallery organized the exhibition *African Art from the G. Mennen Williams Collection* drawn from works gifted by Governor Williams to the Oakland University Art Collection. *A Heritage of Teaching: The African Art Collection of Catherine C. Blackwell*, curated in 2003, by Dr. Nii Otokunor Quarcoopome, Curator of African Art, Detroit Institute of Arts, once again underscored our commitment to the preservation and presentation of African art. Most recently, in 2009, we presented *Makonde Sculpture* curated by Andrea Eis, and this last year *Aesthetic Necessity* curated by Sabrina Nelson. Both projects drew African art from the Dr. Berton London Collection of Ethnographic Art, which itself became part of the permanent collection in 2007.

It has been my privilege to work with Andrea Eis, curator of *Multiplicity, Connection and Divergence: African Art from the John F. Korachis Collection*. Her unique vision has given us inclusive, inquisitive and diverse contexts, contributing significantly to the contemporary discourse of how we present and share African art. Above all, we are both immensely indebted to John F. Korachis for his tireless dedication in helping us bring this important exhibition to fruition. ♦

— **Dick Goody**, Director

## Collector's Statement

This exhibition and catalogue provide a rare opportunity to view and possibly come to understand the enlightening, creative, complex and culturally sophisticated characteristics of African art. Perhaps it may even answer the most commonly asked question as to why I have been motivated to collect this art form. The collection includes a variety of masks, numerous styles of sculptural figures, furnishings and forms of pottery.

Collectively, these figures are only a very small example of the cultural expressions of the diversified groups of people, consisting of thousands of societies and many nations, situated in the central western region of the African continent. Personally, I see these remarkable works of art as icons created to perpetuate the distinct cultural customs, traditions and identities of the various societies, some of which have produced such artworks for 2,000 years.

Unfortunately, due to the type of materials used to create these objects, the constantly hostile environmental conditions to which they are exposed, as well as their repeated ceremonial or other usages, it is extremely rare for these objects to survive for more than 20 to 30 years.

It is my hope that this exhibition and catalogue will serve to inform and enlighten, as well as enhance the enjoyment of this art. ♦

— **John F. Korachis**

*Verso*

### **Ram Mask**

19th-20th century

Artist Unknown

Origin Unknown

Wood, raffia, paint, cloth, fiber

h. 18.9" w. 14.2" d. 11.4"



# Multiplicity, Connection and Divergence: African Art from the John F. Korachis Collection

## Curator's Statement

A long-winded question to start: what do equestrian statues in Washington D.C., IBM's dress code, Agamemnon, the brain's visual cortex, Don Quixote, the World Health Organization and the Linked Ring Brotherhood have to do with African art? This exhibition creates this puzzle and explores it suggests answers, embraces ambiguity and attempts to simultaneously focus vision and expand awareness.

John Korachis's collection of African art is culturally, aesthetically and functionally diverse, a sign of John's expansive passion for dynamic works that speak to him in a range of voices. I am not an African art scholar myself, so I valued the research that Christina Gibbs had done to give cultural, religious and geographic context to the artworks, as it enriched my understanding of and appreciation for the works. However, when I first saw John's collection, my response was inflected more by my own background as an artist, by my personal aesthetic preferences and artistic knowledge base. In conversation with John, as we moved from one artwork to another, he and I found a multiplicity of ways to both connect and diverge over the collection.

This experience, along with the breadth of the Korachis collection of African art, drew me to take up an earlier suggestion from Oakland University art history professor John Corso. He had introduced me to the ongoing Williams College *Labeltalk* series, begun in 1995, which he thought would fit well into the interdisciplinary interests of the art and art history department at Oakland, as the basis for a future exhibition at our gallery. *Labeltalk* exhibitions feature a broad array of perspectives on art, through exhibition labels written by faculty from a variety of academic departments. This same structure forms the approach in *Multiplicity, Connections and Divergence*.

Art can seem separate from the intensely specific concentrations of many other academic disciplines, existing in its own aesthetic and conceptual bubble. The input into this exhibition from so many faculty, in such a wide range of academic fields, proved that this artistic bubble is far from impermeable. As each label came in, a new experience of another artwork was revealed, in unimagined or unexpected ways. Perceptions were upended; understanding enriched. I hope that viewers of the exhibition and readers of this catalog will experience this as well, and will then return to each individual artwork with a new awareness and be spurred to learn more.

African art's fusion with its cultural context makes it a particularly apt subject for an exhibition approach such as this. Perhaps our society could benefit from melding art more fully into our lives, finding connection with it, as well as divergence, and giving the intellectual capital of each person's perspective its value. ♦

My thanks go to John Korachis, for his vision, knowledge, enthusiasm and generosity of spirit; to Christina Gibbs, for her extensive research on the artworks; to Mark Gervasi for his careful conservation work on the artworks; to John Corso, for introducing me to *Labeltalk*; to all of the label-writers, for their willingness to engage with the unfamiliar as they brought their disciplinary knowledge to bear on an unaccustomed content, and for their ability to immerse themselves with seriousness and joy in the artistic and conceptual richness of these artworks.

But most of all, my thanks go to the artists, whose names we will never know, but whose excellence of vision and craft, of aesthetic energy and cultural purpose, have given us such compelling and powerful works of art.

— **Andrea Eis**, Associate Professor of Art and Chair, Department of Art and Art History

*Verso*

**Bwete** (Reliquary Figure)

19th-20th century

Artist Unknown

Gabon, The Ohe Ogooue Basin,

Mahongwe

Wood, metal, sand

h. 19.8" w. 8.1" d. 3.1"

## Equestrian Figure

How would a political scientist who studies American politics possibly interpret this stunning Dogon equestrian figure? There are more connections between the two than one might think. I am told that the use of horses in African sculpture is often interpreted as symbolizing power and wealth, and that the equestrian figure is probably a “Hogon” (a Dogon priest), who was likely one of the most powerful persons in his community. Power, for me, is the key connection to American politics.

As someone who has worked on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., I made a natural connection between this figure and our capital city on two intertwined levels. First, Washington is known not only as a power center, but it has more equestrian statues than any other city in the United States. Second, many of these statues are of powerful men, although in the more than 30 statues scattered across the city, military men are depicted rather than priests (this figure does seem to be holding a spear or weapon of some kind).

There is also a time link as well. This African piece dates to the 19th century; the first equestrian statue in Washington is also from that period — 1853 to be exact — and it depicts Major General Andrew Jackson’s victory over the British in the Battle of New Orleans. Lore surrounding the figures in D.C. is that the stance of the horse is linked to how the rider died. If one of the horse’s hooves is raised, the rider was allegedly wounded in battle or died of those wounds later; two raised hooves signifies that the rider died in battle; and if all four hooves are on the ground, the rider survived all battles unharmed and died of natural causes. I find this intriguing, but unfortunately there is no truth to this myth, although it does happen to hold true for many equestrian statues in the city. ♦

— **David Dulio**, Associate Professor of Political Science, Department of Political Science, College of Arts and Sciences

**Equestrian Figure**  
19th-20th century  
Artist Unknown  
Mali, Dogon  
Wood, metal  
h. 41.3" w. 19.5" d. 5.9"

*This equestrian figure, as found in many African cultures, utilizes elaborate design to create an object which expresses status, prestige and power.*



## Ibeji Twin Statuettes

The first time I saw a photo of the Ibeji twin statues, I immediately thought of IBM. You may think, “how strange,” how is IBM like Yoruba twin statues? For many years, people believed IBM had a very strict dress code for its employees (*Bloomberg Business News*, 1995, IBM Attire, 2011). The urban legend was that IBMers dressed in blue suits and white shirts, the color palette of the twins in this exhibition. Before I knew that the figures were twins, I thought of identically clad IBM salespeople.

Today, IBM's historical archives indicate that the dress code was not this strict; however, culturally appropriate dress is indicative of organizational culture. In my field, culture is a way to understand some of the reasons why people do the things they do at work. Trice and Beyer (1993) indicate that culture emerges to manage uncertainties and to create order. Culture helps to inculcate values and provide means for employees to interact. In many cases people work for organizations with cultural values that are congruent to their own. Sometimes these values are in conflict leading to countercultures within the organization working at cross-purposes.

Each of us can reflect on our work organizations and find cultural identifiers. These could be stories that are told and retold, such as the story of Matilda Dodge Wilson and John Alfred Hannah, co-founders of Oakland University; values that define behavior such as the honor code at West Point, and similar to the Yoruba community; sets of rituals, rites and ceremonials.

Just as the creation of the Ibeji is a ceremony linking several rites, an important ceremony in my personal organization is commencement. Commencement links rites of passage, enhancement and integration in a ceremony that reminds participants of the history of academia as well as repetitive behaviors unique to Oakland University. Every new class is a sign of good fortune for our community reminding us of the students we nurtured and the fortune of sending new alums into the world. ♦

— **Lizabeth A. Barclay**, Professor of Management, Department of Management and Marketing,  
School of Business Administration

Bloomberg Business News (1995). IBM to abandon old building, strict dress code. [http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1995-02-04/business/1995035056\\_1](http://articles.baltimoresun.com/1995-02-04/business/1995035056_1) [accessed June 13, 2011].

IBM Attire. IBM Archives. [www-03.ibm.com/ibm/history/exhibits/waywewore/waywewore](http://www-03.ibm.com/ibm/history/exhibits/waywewore/waywewore) [accessed June 13, 2011].

Trice, H.M. and Beyer, J. M. (1993). *The Cultures of Work Organizations*. Prentice Hall: Englewood Cliffs, NJ.

**Ibeji Twin Statuettes**

20th century  
Artist Unknown  
Nigeria, Yoruba  
Wood, pigment, cowrie shells,  
beads, cloth  
h. 12.2" w. 9.8" d. 4.7"

*The birth of twins in the Yoruba community is welcomed and considered a sign of good fortune. However, twins have a high mortality rate. If a twin dies, an Ibeji is created and subsequently nurtured like a child to appease the deceased twin.*



## Akua'ba (Fertility Doll with Child)

An unbroken circle held aloft; a sun, a moon, an ideal. Beginnings and endings and the promise they hold. Visual objects and symbols both. A depiction of feminine beauty developed within and still used to propagate a matrilineal clan society.

Carried as a fertility aid by women of a proud Ghanaian people, this painted wooden Akua'ba doll is traditionally displayed in a cloth wrap on an Ashanti (aka Asante) woman's back. Exhibited to the community, it may promote cohesion amongst a people who strive to bring beauty and beautiful children into the world. As a focus for positive energy and hope, the fetish may moderate stress and decrease glucocorticoid levels in the hoped-to-be-mother — biological responses linked to increased fertility.

A relatively unusual variant of a highly popular fetish object, this mid-20th century Akua'ba depicts the mother (vs the child) as a main figure, seated on a stool and breastfeeding an infant. One breast full, one depleted. Both figures possess long necks ringed with rolls of fat, physical attributes reflecting Ashanti notions of beauty, health, and prosperity. Interestingly, insufficient body fat is currently recognized as a cause for female infertility (although the same can be said for obesity).

What accounts for the popularity of this stereotypic doll form? Research over the past two decades has revealed specialized facial recognition circuitry within the brain's visual cortex — an area known as the fusiform gyrus. The most recent reports suggest that perception of face-like objects (and facially displayed emotions) by the fusiform gyrus is a neurologically early and holistic process. It seems, therefore, that we, like the Ashanti, may be programmed at a perceptual level to recognize the Akua'ba (and each other) in ways that signal both object and symbol. ♦

— **Andrew F.X. Goldberg**, Associate Professor of Biomedical Sciences, Eye Research Institute



## Shango on Horse

Two thoughts came to mind as I viewed this wooden figure mounted on his steed. The first was that this was an image of an African Don Quixote and his companion, Sancho Panza. There is an intent look on the rider's face, as though seeing windmills in the distance and contemplating whether to smite them with his sword, or, perhaps in this case, his spear. Sancho, indifferent to his master's ruminations, stands at Quixote's side, holding an object that clearly holds more fascination for him than his master's baleful stare into the far distance.

Even as these thoughts took form, another, parallel image emerged. In one of my classes I introduce the history of the Scythians of Central Eurasia. Their art includes images of mounted warriors, ready for battle, with much detail depicting a horse's equipage. Such is the case here, invoking a degree of belligerence in the threatening weapon and the mysterious head facing backwards, as if on watch for any enemy intent on attack. But the curves in the piece, including the saddle's back ridge, the arc of the reins, the hand-held object displayed by the standing figure, and, finally, the base on which the figures stand, soften the wooden sculpture's otherwise warlike demeanor. The two great warrior traditions of Africa and Asia seem somehow linked, despite the vast distances between them.

Whether this is an image of a warrior, or a symbolic god of war, or an eccentric knight-errant in African style, the piece intrigues and mystifies at the same time. ♦

— **Linda Benson**, Professor of History, Department of History



# Head of an Obe (Queen Mother)

*“Within the binary thinking that underpins intersecting oppressions, blue-eyed, blonde, thin White women could not be considered beautiful without the Other — Black women with African features of dark skin, broad noses, full lips and kinky hair” (Collins, 2009: 98).*

In early 19th century Europe, an African woman named Sarah Bartmann was displayed in public and at fashionable parties dressed in little clothing. The point of this “entertainment” was to confirm the deviancy of the black female body; making her a symbol of the “other” to the norm of whiteness and femaleness. On her death her genitals and buttocks were dissected and placed on display, reducing her to even more objectified and eroticized pieces of a whole.

The figure of the Queen Mother looks directly ahead, a royal gaze that allows no othering. Although she is fragmented, she is powerful, yet beautiful and gentle in her observation of the viewer. Legend tells us that as a queen, she had the ability to offer political refuge — the power over life and death.

Viewing her from the 21st century, we can see in the Queen Mother the foundation of a black feminist epistemology as conceptualized by sociologist Patricia Hill Collins. Collins argues that our knowledge is created from a white, male, Eurocentric viewpoint, a viewpoint that eroticized the oppression of Sarah Bartmann in the name of science. Rejecting this perspective as the source of all authoritative knowledge, black feminist epistemology draws on the life experiences of black women to create a collective standpoint that generates alternative ways of knowing. U.S. black women — in surviving the oppressions of slavery, poverty, rape and violence, racism, sexism, homophobia and hatred — create wisdom and much-needed knowledge about the world around us.

The image of the Queen Mother is a reminder of the strength of black women. Engaging with her figure allows the viewer to free Sarah Bartmann from the prison of those 19th century eyes and instead remember the dignity, power and intelligence of the black female experience throughout time. ♦

— **Jo Reger**, Associate Professor of Sociology and Women and Gender Studies, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, College of Arts and Sciences

Works cited: Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 2009, New York: Routledge.



# Kifwebe Mask

The autumn/spring of 1906/07 proved to be a defining moment for Pablo Picasso and for the development of modern art. During those months Picasso’s encounters with a collection of Iberian sculpture housed in the Louvre and with African art objects in the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro were catalysts for the transformative visual vocabulary of Picasso’s masterpiece, *Les Femmes d’Alger* (1907), arguably the most significant work of art produced in the first decade of the 20th century.

The visual power and formal excitement that non-western art generated among the vanguard of early modern European artists cannot be underestimated. For artists such as Henri Matisse, Andre Derain, Georges Braque, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Emil Nolde, and Constantin Brancusi, African art provided a dramatic new way of conceptualizing the human figure. For us, in the 21st century, it is difficult to appreciate fully how profoundly shocking the geometricized and abstracted body appeared to Europeans just over 100 years ago.

In February-March 1907, Picasso began sketches for what was to become his monumental work, *Les Femmes d’Alger*. After his first trip to the Trocadéro Museum in June, which Picasso described as a “shock” and “a revelation,” the composition underwent dramatic revision, and, in particular, included two female figures on the right with clear reference to African masks. The sharp, geometric features and bold scarification patterns (strong characteristics of Kifwebe and Luba masks of the Songye people) of those two faces not only represent the first instance of “Africanism” in Picasso’s works, but also served to emancipate modern artists from a traditional, perceptual approach to depicting the body. In other words, Picasso broke decisively from the past; in *Les Femmes d’Alger* the remnants of pictorial realism were swept away and the path cleared for abstraction through a new conceptual language. What followed revolutionized the history of art — cubism, futurism, suprematism, constructivism, and many more ‘isms’ that make up the modernist canon.

At the time Picasso visited the Trocadéro, anthropologists were only just beginning a systematic study of African objects. Picasso would not have known about the function of the Kifwebe mask on display here, but it is clear that what he intuitively experienced in seeing African art was transformative. Believing that masks were “magical things,” he described them as “mediators” and “intercessors” between humanity and the supernatural. In his mind they possessed a power and a mystery, and caused what can be characterized as a traumatic sort of epiphany. As such, in hindsight we can appreciate the pivotal role that African masks played in the evolution of *Les Femmes d’Alger*, a painting ultimately about death, and perhaps better understand the complex layers of what Picasso called his “first exorcism picture.” ♦

— **Tamara Jhashi**, Associate Professor of Art History, Department of Art and Art History, College of Arts and Sciences

**Kifwebe Mask** (0801)  
19th-20th century  
Artist Unknown  
Democratic Republic of  
Congo, Luba  
Wood  
h. 13.2" w. 13.0" d. 6.5"

*These masks are associated with the moon and are used for special rites. The work Kifwebe means “driving away death” and suggests a connection with the secret society that was responsible for warding off sorcery. In the Luba dance, these masks appeared as female-male pairs at the investiture or death of a chief or dignitary.*



# Nkonde (Fetish Figure)

## Power Figure

“He’s all open. He’s all gesture. He has a voice,”  
Marsha says. “God’s favorite, like Bhishma, the promise  
keeper and warrior,” Komal says. Their choice,  
  
to love him. So, encounters can come together  
like these friends at lunch, like the block of wood  
and the carver, artist and diviner, Nkonde to Nkisi  
  
Nkonde, to activate magic. If my eyes probe like blades,  
piercing arrows, or nails, let this poem not wield words  
to fasten you down. I want to come to you in a crowd,  
  
answering whatever calls to me from the medicine bundle,  
whatever my heart sees in your medicine box, be it bird beak,  
hunter’s net, testes, fingernails, grains, necklace beads, pebbles,  
  
or a European iron padlock. I’ll have a string in my hand to tie a nail.  
My enemies beside me, or in me, may they each have a string to entwine  
on a nail, that we can be reconciled; and my friends beside me,  
pledged, as you, Nkisi, fix us with your half-moon eyes. ♦

— Gladys Cardiff, Associate Professor of English, Department of English, College of Arts and Sciences

**Nkonde (Fetish Figure)**  
20th century  
Artist Unknown  
Democratic Republic of Congo  
Wood, nails, glass, sand, paint,  
mixed media, polychrome  
h. 16.9” w. 9.8” d. 8.7”

*These figures are used by the diviner to mediate between people and the powers of darkness, as well as serving as healers of illness. The figure is activated by driving nails or sharp iron pieces into it, for retaliation against those who have committed crimes, caused illness, or otherwise given serious offense to another. The cavity in the torso stores medicine and other natural substances such as grains, hair, teeth and fingernails.*



# Head of an Oni (King)

Any work of art should be approached with a sense of wonder. The questions we pose to ourselves in our wonderment are influenced by our experience and knowledge. For this particular sculpture, we can wonder who this person was or about the artist’s intentions. Someone with knowledge of aesthetics might wonder about the significance of the symmetry of the face or the relative smallness of the eyes. Someone with a sense of cultural diversity might wonder about the markings on the face or the bands on the neck. An expert in African history, I imagine, would try to determine the time and place of the subject.

Looking at the Oni, I find myself wondering who this person was. It is easy to notice the subject is African. To some, this would raise questions about the differences among people and historical ages. Here, we are brought face-to-face with different times and places, real and potential histories.

The social and cultural differences we see in the face of the subject should not be overshadowed by the human universals hidden in this work of art. The subject of this sculpture was also an individual: a human being with his own concerns, hopes, dreams and contributions to his society. However, everyone is unique in this way and as a result, the sculpture abstractly represents everyone.

As I begin to think of the subject as a person, I start to wonder which language he spoke. According to descriptions, he spoke Yoruba, a language spoken in present-day Nigeria. If it turns out he spoke some other language, my impressions looking at this piece would not change.

Superficially, Yoruba and English (or any two languages) appear to be vastly different. The words are clearly different, the sounds are different, and the grammar is different. There are thousands of languages on earth, and one can imagine that they differ in thousands of ways. However, the differences among languages, like cultural differences, overshadow the similarities between Yoruba and English, which can only be revealed by the methods of modern linguistic theory. All languages have, among other similarities, grammatical categories and ways for expressing relations and events in time and space. These common properties of language are not learned, but rather they are part of the cognitive toolkit present at birth. Language learning is best viewed as a behavior that is coaxed out of the child, rather something that involves direct teaching. Moreover, any child can learn any language. What adults might consider a hard language to learn is no problem for a two-year-old.

Looking at this piece, I cannot help feeling connected to the subject at the abstract level of shared linguistic knowledge. His voice might be different, but the mechanisms behind that voice are the same in all people. I cannot know what he is thinking, but I can guess how his thoughts are being processed in the brain.

All differences, whether social, cultural, linguistic or idiosyncratic, melt away while I contemplate the similarities hidden within us. I finally find myself wondering about the commonalities that unite us all, regardless of time and place. ♦

— **Sam Rosenthal**, Associate Professor of Linguistics, Department of Linguistics, College of Arts and Sciences



# Gwandusu (Mother and Child Figure)

Considering all the images one might capture for posterity, to hold in memorial, and to communicate to future generations, it is hard to imagine a vision more imbued with meaning than that of mother and child. Such an image is suggestive of women's life-giving force, signifying the gift of life, the perpetual rebirth of humanity, the loving sacrifice of motherhood. Certainly, not everyone enjoys fond memories of being mothered, but perhaps it is reasonable to suggest that even the most disappointing of mothers still has engaged in a meaningful sacrifice in the act of bringing forth life. We are literally nothing without this act.

Several pieces in this collection appear to reflect a cultural reverence for women and their life-giving capacity, including this piece, a Bamana religious icon whose purpose is to address issues of infertility. The statue is displayed on the day of Gwan, which occurs at the beginning of the rainy season, and women who hope to bear children anoint the statue with shea butter and dress it with beads (Ezra 134). Kate Ezra states that this figure represents the "importance of fertility and childbearing not just to the women but to the entire community" (131). Indeed, what is a community without future generations and those who would nurture, guide and lead them?

Considering the vital role that women play in bringing forth and shaping life, it is saddening to consider the diminutive role they are forced to play in present-day Mali. For example, in 2009, Mali's parliament considered a new family law to provide Mali women with slight, but meaningful, new rights. The proposed law promoted equality between husbands and wives, rather than forcing wives to unquestioningly obey their husbands: "Spouses owe each other fidelity, protection, relief, and assistance. They commit themselves to the community of life on the basis of affection and respect." Additionally, the law aimed to ameliorate the problem of child brides by raising the minimum age for marriage to 18, provided women with equal inheritance rights, and allowed women to work without securing their husbands' permission. The parliament approved the law, but before President Amadou Toumani Toure could sign it, tens of thousands of people turned out to protest, even threatening legislators, demonstrating that the population was not ready to support these slim rights. The law was never enacted.

This artwork, set in contrast with the contemporary situation of women in Mali, demonstrates the conflicted nature of women in the African imaginary: respected and honored on one hand, and subjected to varying degrees of repression and control on the other. But Africa is not the only nation with conflicted notions of women. For example, Americans still struggle with what it means to have women in leadership roles. Although numerous nations have had or currently have a female president or prime minister, the U.S. has yet to trust a woman with this role. The media coverage of women in politics has cast them as either ditzzy or villainous, while the notorious behavior of male leaders piles up, as people look away. Consequently, when I look at this simple, lovely and seemingly uncomplicated piece of art, I can't help but think of the conflicted nature of how women are perceived in Africa and, indeed, around the world. As I look at this sculpture, I think about the fate of this mother and the prospects for this child in a world that is hesitant to embrace all the gifts women have to offer. ♦

— **Valerie Palmer-Mehta**, Associate Professor of Communication, Department of Communication and Journalism,  
College of Arts and Sciences

References  
Ezra, Kate. "Art of the Jo Society." *Bamana: The Art of Existence in Mali*. Ed. Jean-Paul Colleyn. New York: Museum for African Art, 2001. 131-141.

**Gwandusu**  
(Mother and Child Figure)  
Early 20th century  
Artist Unknown  
Mali, Bamana  
Wood  
h. 25.6" w. 6.7" d. 6.5"

*This mother and child figure, Gwandusu, serves as an icon in the Gwan religious society for combating childlessness. During annual festivities, the figure is washed, anointed and decorated. Her headdress, usually worn by male warriors, signifies her eminence within the Bamana culture.*



## Female Figure

In this piece, we may have a glimpse into art as medicine, and the artist as healer, in this figure that appeases disruptive spirits. As a public health professional, I am particularly struck by this notion of disruption. What does it mean to disrupt an individual's life? What are the important social, environmental, behavioral, and genetic determinants that disrupt health? We do not know what particular disruption caused this figure to be carved about a century ago. We do know all too well the disruptions of our own time — war, collective violence, maltreatment, and neglect; economic uncertainty; natural disasters; resurgent and often drug-resistant infectious diseases; lifestyle and behavior choices leading to epidemics of chronic conditions; as well as mental health challenges and social disintegrations that too often go unrecognized, undiagnosed and untreated.

What are our individual and collective obligations — through art and action — to preserve, protect and promote the public's health and, thereby, alleviate these disruptions? The World Health Organization defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” This bold definition of health does not ignore morbidity or mortality; rather, it compels us to take decisive action to ensure both the *quantity* and *quality* of life. Public health is precisely this kind of decisive action. Public health is the provision of basic education and economic security to all persons, notably women and children. Public health focuses on the importance of the physical environment to maintain clean air, water and soil, yet also reminds us that the built environment can have tremendous impact on the human condition. Public health requires that infrastructure, information, and access to health care be evenly distributed in populations. Public health occurs at home, in schools, on the job, during our hobbies and pastimes, in our most intimate moments, and at the hour of our greatest need. There are now and have always been conditions and forces that disrupt individuals' lives. Thankfully, there are now and have always been artists, physicians, healers, midwives, nurses, teachers, epidemiologists and public health professionals committed to appeasing the spirit, healing the individual, and promoting the community's health. ♦

— **Patricia A. Wren**, Associate Professor of Health Sciences, School of Health Sciences

**Female Figure**

Early 20th century  
Artist Unknown  
Ivory Coast, Baoule  
Wood, fibers, beads  
h. 22.1" w. 5.7" d. 7.5"

*This figure represents a nature spirit made to appease the spirit who is disrupting an individual's life. The diviner is consulted on how the figure should be carved, decorated and cared for. The diviner may also recommend which tree in the forest should be used to carve the object.*



# Igbo Headdress

*She sometimes swings or slides. She sometimes sits on the steps of a climbing structure, or just watches the other kids. They don't watch her. I wonder what she's thinking. Her name is Hajni and she's 14.*

*This face is Hajni. These are her eyes. They are not sad, they are not lonely, but they are wise. Barely a teenager and she understands more than perhaps a parent would want.*

A few days ago, three little Gypsy girls played with my eight-month-old daughter at the park. We were in Romania, on the playground by my parents' apartment. They watched us for a while, waving and giggling, coming closer and closer. Could they hold her, they asked us. One of them did, to stares and gaping from other parents and kids. They wore long, colorful skirts, and played with loud laughs. Expected disapproval came later, from acquaintances: "What if they had lice? How do you know what you're bringing home?" I first answered defensively, then dropped it.

Today, we're back at the park. One of the Gypsy girls, the one that held my baby, is back. She's on the swing. She waves to us and smiles. I smile back. She makes her way toward us, but we're with a different family today and so she hangs at a distance. I talk to old friends and play with my kids. She suddenly asks me if I'm the baby's mom. I am, and so we talk for a while.

She tells me her name is Hajni. She lives nearby. She's in eighth grade and goes to school at my old alma mater's chief rival, which makes us both laugh. She tells me she's Hungarian and that she speaks three languages. "I can speak the Gypsy language, Romanian and Hungarian," she says. I think she's proud of herself. I tell her how cool that is.

My friend keeps trying to talk to me, in between exchanges I have with Hajni. I suspect she's trying to ignore the girl and "save" me from the burden of talking with her.

My son wants on the see-saw and it's a few minutes later that I notice Hajni watching us. She never wants to interrupt but she's genuinely curious. I wonder, are we the only family that talks to her ... Surely not, I hope.

My cousin, visiting from Germany, joins us. I think Hajni is excited. She asks us both how old we are. Her dad is my age, she says, and her mom a year older. They had her at 16 and 15, I realize. When she hears my cousin's 25, she says, "We usually get married after 12." I ask her if she's married. She's not. I ask her if she will be, soon. She says, "When my parents decide. They said they might wait until I'm 16." I ask if she'd stay in school once she's married. She is firm, "Oh, no."

I sit down to nurse my daughter, while my family waits a few yards away. Hajni comes to ask me my name again. She asks if I'm putting the baby to sleep. She asks if she can sit down. I almost gasp when she sits on the edge of the bench, on the small spot outside of the handle bar. I tell her we are leaving for the U.S. in a few days, and that I hope to see her again.

I don't look back as we finally walk away. But I wonder if she's still on the bench or if she's back to playing. I don't want to know, don't want to see her sitting at the foot of the slide, looking for playmates, without anyone looking back. I realize I wonder what it means that I may never see her again. I ache remembering her manner, her respect, her warmth and excitement to talk and play — and I question myself, was I nice, was I ok with her? I ache, wishing kids played with her, as I want kids to play with my own son and daughter. Maybe she'll grow stronger, because she is learning to be cautious, patient, guarded around people like me. I want to be positive. I want to hope. I want to trust. And yet I don't want to look back and find out. ♦

— **Adina Schneeweis**, Assistant Professor of Journalism, Department of Communication and Journalism,  
College of Arts and Sciences

**Igbo Headdress**  
20th century  
Artist Unknown  
Nigeria, Igbo  
Wood, paint  
h. 14.1" w. 5.9" d. 7.7"

*The Igbo live on both sides of the Niger River in scattered villages that have developed many of variations of artistic expression. Headdresses were used for many purposes including the commemorating of ancestors, for entertainment, agrarian celebrations, funerals, and as part of the society's judicial process.*



## Rhythmic Pounders

As an anatomist, I was struck by the forms of these two sculptures. The long slender statures of each body look poised and graceful, while their articulating heads present a seriousness in their stance. The mandible that protrudes distinctly and the outstretched belly create an image of pride. The upper extremities are markedly extended posteriorly in an awkward position that appears like a loyal soldier.

I can't help but notice that the normal anatomical relationships have been altered for effect. The longest bone in our human body is the femur, which is located in our thigh. It is known to make up a quarter to a third of our entire height. Our leg, which lies inferior to knee, contains two bones, the fibula and the tibia. The tibia is the second longest bone in the body, making up a quarter of our total height. In this artwork the length of the leg, is over four times longer than the thigh.

The result is a remarkable and beautiful piece of work that is full of expression. The impression is that the figures seem to rise up and tower over the imagined surroundings. The effect conveys the image that these individuals are leaders of the Senufo. To me, the taller carving depicts the great male warrior as he stands on a slightly higher pedestal emerging from the earth. The shorter carving represents the great wise and older female leader with larger thighs and thinner legs. Her work on this earth is coming to an end. Her lighter face shows decades of birthed babies and healed elders. She returns to earth bent and tired, to continue giving to the circle of life and renewal of the soil that lies beneath her feet. ♦

— **Mary Bee**, Associate Professor of Biomedical Sciences, School of Medicine



## Slit Gong

The Fang are a Bantu-speaking people who have long believed in the power of ancestors to control a person's fate. They have a tradition of carving beautiful wood reliquary figures to contain the bones of their ancestors. This wood carving skill is also present in the impish face of the man who rides astride this slit gong.

A slit gong resonates when struck, as does any gong. Resonation is simply a quivering of air molecules — if we could see as well as hear the molecules dance in rhythm, it would truly be a transcendent experience. It is no wonder that gongs and drums sustain the heart of many African ceremonies, including dance, rituals, story-telling and long distance communication.

Virtually every aspect of the slit gong reveals the rich importance of *symbolism* in the lives of the Fang people. Neuroscience is lending depth to our understanding of how symbolic thinking has evolved. Symbols may seem easy enough for us to understand — isn't it obvious that the head on this slit gong *symbolizes* someone with human character? But achieving symbolic thinking — that has been a tough evolutionary feat! Most other animals find it impossible to think in this way. Even our closest non-human relatives can only be taught to think symbolically in very simplistic ways, and with great difficulty.

Symbolic thinking has arisen out of the myriad of tiny genetic changes that have occurred over the last two million years or so of human development. These genetic changes built upon themselves — an ability to create tools allowing toolmakers to live longer and better lives. This in turn allowed the most effective toolmakers to pass along their genes, which ultimately coded for larger brains with increasingly complex structure. Some neurons within the newly developing humanoid brain were content to rest within their local neural communities, as they always had in the past. But others evolved to reach out and bring regions of the brain together that had never communicated before. The pulses arching through these richly connected neural nets, like fast drumbeats, helped us to form an utterly new way of thinking — a thinking rich in symbolism and metaphor, as with this lovely slit gong. ♦

— **Barbara Oakley**, Associate Professor of Engineering, Department of Industrial and Systems Engineering,  
School of Engineering and Computer Science



# Vessel with Equestrian Figure

*A work of art is a work of order, and if the artist is to put the stamp of his own mind on his work, he must arrange, modify, and dispose of his materials so that they may appear in a more agreeable and beautiful manner than they would have assumed without his interference. — Henry Peach Robinson<sup>1</sup>*

This lidded wooden bowl from Mali with its elaborate embellishments expresses ideas of status, prestige and power. The equestrian figure on top probably represents a “Hogon” (priest), who would have great power in the community, a semi-divine leader of great wisdom and maybe even considered a mythological emissary from a distant land. The position of the priest at the top of the vessel that held materials for rites communicates his supremacy and perpetuates the mythology, influence and power of this office. He sits above the layers of ritual embodied by the bowl: community represented by the layer of people holding the bowl itself, and then earth represented by the layer of horses which are considered the first animals on earth.

As with this style of woodcarving, photography can be utilized as a means to communicate ideas, concepts and themes beyond simple representation or documentation. Since the invention of photography, most photographers identify themselves with one of two main theoretical photographic camps: those interested in the technical aspects of the camera and its capacity for creating accurate reproductions, or those who are devoted to the artistic possibilities of the medium. This theoretical fragmentation was evidenced by the dramatic 1891 splintering of The Royal Photographic Society, which favored the reproductive image, and the creation of a new organization, The Linked Ring Brotherhood, dedicated to the development of the impressionistic and expressive potential of the medium of photography.

Frustrated with the refusal of The Royal Photographic Society to accept both the scientific and artistic sides to photography, Henry Peach Robinson was the force behind the foundation of The Linked Ring Brotherhood. Greatly influenced by the paintings of Turner, Robinson advocated the utilization of aesthetics and light like that used in pictorialist painting, and in “building” photographic images, to create greater meaning rather than simply representing what was in front of the camera. Though highly controversial at the time, Robinson believed that photographers could use any type of manipulation or trick to elevate the subject matter and correct for the un-picturesque. In his own photographic work, Robinson attempted to realize human experience, specifically moments of significance and sentimentality such as sickness, personal reflection, or death. He photographed the various parts of his images separately, usually at different times. Once he had each of the parts of his planned construction, he would composite them into the one image.

Over the years, many artist photographers have “built” images using materials or subject manipulation, sculpture, painting, digital compositing, and even aspects of theater or performance. While some photographers use these methods of collage/ montage and sculpture as a means of bridging the past with the future, others use it as a means of creating elaborate fantasies or to suggest alternative realities. In this way, both tangible and intangible ideas or concepts can be combined into one image, just as is evidenced in the complex structuring of this Dogon horseman lidded bowl. ♦

— **Susan Evans**, Associate Professor of Art, Department of Art and Art History, College of Arts and Sciences

<sup>1</sup> In “Picture Making by Photography,” reprint of the 5th edition of 1897, Arno Press, New York, 1973, p. 44 [cited in: “Pictorial Photography in Britain 1900 – 1920,” exhibition catalogue, Arts Council of Great Britain in association with The Royal Photographic Society, London 1978, p. 25]

**Vessel with Equestrian Figure**  
20th century  
Artist Unknown  
Mali, Dogon  
Wood  
h. 38.2" w. 13.0" d. 12.2"

*The elaborate embellishment of this ceremonial vessel indicates high status and wealth. It is also a reminder in the Dogon mythology that the horse was the first animal present on earth. The equestrian figure is probably a “Hogon,” a priest, one of the most powerful persons in the community and also most likely to be the owner of a horse. The lidded bowl contained the material used in rites of investiture.*



# Antelope Headdress

## Wearer of the Antelope

The weight of the wind as  
the antelope  
  
leaves it behind: I  
  
feel her body  
singing through my closed eyes; I  
  
sway to the song  
that knows her thirst; I  
  
move with her movements:  
stiff  
and stilted when in repose; but  
in fear  
  
blurred with the motion of longing  
  
to know  
  
wind,  
plain,  
the good mineral smell of water,  
the warning blare of blood.  
  
Beneath these, the scents  
of my kin: our bodies,  
furred, hot, rippling beneath  
  
the sun, the moon. Where we,  
furred, vanishing, leave ourselves, and we,  
adorned, appearing,  
  
find —  
(sun, moon, wind, water, fur, blood). ♦

— **Annette Gilson**, Associate Professor of English, Department of English, College of Arts and Sciences

**Antelope Headdress**  
Early 20th century  
Artist Unknown  
Bamana, Chi Wara  
Wood, cowrie shells, beads, fibers,  
burlap, leather, basketry  
h. 13.8" w. 18.5" d. 7.3"

*This headdress is different from most of the other Chi Wara figures because of its horizontal style (rather than the common vertical style). Although representative of an antelope, it also has some characteristics of an aardvark, an animal greatly admired by Bamana farmers. This object is commonly used in agricultural ceremonies.*



## Ceramic Vessel, Anthropomorphic Figure

Africa has a long and unique tradition of carving and modeling the human figure from a variety of natural materials. Countless representations of spirits and deities are anthropomorphized through vessels, figurines and masks for secular and non-secular purposes alike. In some traditional African cultures, the person wearing a ritual mask conceptually loses his or her identity and embodies the spirit of the mask until total transformation is achieved. Although *Ceramic Vessel* has no date of origin or documented tribal affiliation, I regard it with authenticity and revere its associated cultural symbolism. The open eyes represent alertness, the straight nose bravery, the protruding forehead is a sign of wisdom, and the open mouth is symbolic of authority.

In truth, *Ceramic Vessel* is a humble object with the semblance of a ventifact, a stone shaped by the erosive action of windblown sand. Despite the associations, it is unlikely that it would be mistaken for a natural object shaped by weather or a crafted magisterial deity, since atop the nearly continuous orange ceramic mass is a compact facial expression, with callow qualities akin to those of a newborn rather than an adult. Viewers are greeted with an open-mouthed and wide-eyed figure gazing back at them. Accordingly, *Ceramic Vessel* could easily be identified as primitive object, child's play, or contemporary sculpture.

Abstract forms (both natural or hand-made) and utilitarian objects gain elastic cultural identity when symbolic association is applied. There are many intellectual theories associated with abstraction that hold art as something to be experienced in and of itself, reinforcing the concept that art does not conform to just one single interpretive possibility but rather many. *Ceramic Vessel* is a rousing example of a form all but void of gesture but not expression, illustrating a moment of bliss when vague and expansive are one and the same. ♦

— **Cody VanderKaay**, Assistant Professor of Art, Department of Art and Art History, College of Arts and Sciences



## Seated Female Colonial Figure with Vessel

The legacy of pioneer minister and political activist, Sojourner Truth, comes to my mind when I view the strong facial characteristics of this African woman: the face is striking in its intensity and discernment. The urn in her lap reminds me of the nurturing and prophetic roles Truth played as a mother and an activist: she looks to be protective of her urn in the same way Sojourner was protective of her people.

A minister, mother and civil rights activist, Rev. Truth provided a role model for African American women long before our age of feminist leaders invented the concept of multi-tasking. In many ways, she also represents black leaders who do not (and will not) view their roles in the church, home or political arenas in Euro-centric terms, such as “separate spheres” of influence. Western culture rarely understands such leaders, because their historical backgrounds are rooted in an African epistemology, which is vastly different and far less compartmentalized.

The word *religion*, for instance, does not exist among African tribes. What Western cultures know as *religion* would be translated among Africans as the *spiritual realm from which no African is separated*. African American churches have thus been accused, by the small-minded and by main-line purist denominations, of having “borrowed spiritualities” as a result of their interaction with white churches in North America. In reality, however, their ideas regarding spiritual behavior and “religious” practice are integrative and holistic — hardly borrowed.

Sojourner Truth personified this type of integrative epistemology that, in many ways, we are only beginning to come to terms with, only beginning to understand as we discover and research African history. Truth — where is the truth, especially as we consider our nation’s mythologies about all of her people, including African American people and their contributions in building this country? The images of strong black African women portrayed in this exhibit presage both enslaved and freed African American women: both were forced to raise families on their own and to labor under apartheid conditions well into the 20th century.

The wisdom I find in the face of this particular woman, so evocative of Sojourner Truth, is consonant with the experiences of hundreds of black women who had to rely on their wits and courage in order for an entire race of people to survive America’s “original sin” of slavery. ♦

— **Louis B. Gallien, Jr.**, Dean and Professor of Education, School of Education and Human Services

**Seated Female Colonial Figure with Vessel**

Early 20th century

Artist Unknown

Origin Unknown

Wood

h. 15.4" w. 4.5" d. 5.0"

*The society of origin of this female colonial figure, who sits on a stool holding a vessel, has not been identified.*



## Male Blolo Bian (Spirit Figure)

In *Rhetorical Bodies*, Barbara Schneider describes material rhetoric as “a mode of interpretation that takes as its objects of study the significations of material things and corporal entities — objects that signify not through language but through their spatial organization, mobility, mass, utility, orality, and tactility” (297). Through this lens, the carved figure of the *blolo bian* performs as both a material object layered with social meaning and a symbolic object that represents historically situated meaning, particularly related to the corporeal body as a socially produced text. The wooden body illustrates ways in which the flesh is written to reflect ideologies of gender and power particular to late 19th century Baule (Baoule) culture of the Ivory Coast.

Wooden man in fibrous loincloth: erect, braced by a stool, shoulders back, neck elongated, eyes alert; hands clasping his long, braided beard; hair intricately plaited and back-swept into a braid. On close inspection, one can see the raised marks of scarification etched across his broad forehead, on his temples, under his eyes, down his cheeks, on either side of his square chin, on his tender neck, and across his hard ribs.

As material object, the *blolo bian* operates as a household artifact of practical purpose, of symbolic purpose, of spiritual purpose, and of aesthetic purpose. The object signifies a particular set of social relationships, in addition to being a material object of visual pleasure and sign of virility. Anthropologist Susan Vogel describes these spirit spouse sculptures as a representation of the idealized self as husband or wife that is animated in the spirit world. The totem has an aura of pride, strength, and attentiveness — those traits, according to Vogel, that the totem’s owner hopes will appease the spirit spouse to keep that spirit from interfering in the corporal marriage.

As symbol, the *blolo bian* operates as a reflection of the body as text, and just as advertisements reflect cultural values about bodies in Western culture, the *blolo bian* serves as a reflection of the body within African cultures, and its shifting significance when viewed in the context of Western culture as art and back again to its native contexts. Those multiple sites of scarification, for example, on both men and women in Baule culture denote experience, strength, perseverance, trustworthiness and courage. While Western eyes might view these scars as markers of savagery and barbarism, within Baule culture, according to Vogel, each set of scars represents an excruciating rite that the body has suffered in order to signify civilization — separating the civilized and disciplined Baule from the wild men and women of the bush.

Material rhetoric is particularly interested in the local context in which this object operates, and the ways meanings shift as the totem crosses borders and cultures as a de-contextualized object. Like the tattoo in Western culture, the *blolo bian* takes on multiple meanings crossing blurry boundaries between savage and civil, primitive and modern, tribal and global — often calling into question these very terms. ♦

— **Marshall Kitchens**, Associate Professor of Rhetoric, Department of Writing and Rhetoric, College of Arts and Sciences



# Female Figure with Bowl

## Work

I gaze at the image of this figure for a long time. My eyes linger on the intricate tool markings made to represent her hair and then settle on the large bowl sitting on top of her head. I am told that she originated from Nigeria, sometime in the 19th century, but every time I look at her, I cannot get the word *Work* out of my head. Various thermodynamic definitions of work come to my mind ...

- 1. **Work:** energy transfer associated with a force acting through a distance.
- 2. *Work* is done by a system on its surroundings if the sole effect on everything external to the system could have been the raising of a weight.
- 3. If the energy crossing the boundary of a closed system is not heat, then it must be work.

I look at the heavy bowl resting on her head and wonder how much it must weigh and how much energy it would take to move it from point A to point B. I look at her posture and think of how she must adjust her neck, her back, and the rest of her body to maintain the bowl in equilibrium on top of her head. I wonder about the sequence of movements that she will need to make in order to stand up without spilling the bowl's contents. More than anything else, I think of what I tell my engineering students every time that I introduce them to the concepts of *heat, work and the First Law of Thermodynamics*, namely that since the dawn of time, humans have sought ways to reduce the amount of physical work that they must do. Animals were domesticated, people were enslaved and machines were developed, often — though not always with the goal of helping people with their daily tasks. Water pumps, steam turbines, washing machines, microwaves, cars, computers, iPads — so many modern and not-so-modern conveniences that we now often take for granted. Yet, this figure of a woman kneeling with a large bowl on her head also reminds me of how far we still have to go. We have remote controls to control our TVs five to six feet away from our sofas, and I often balk at having to park five minutes away from my office, yet countless women and children across the world walk several miles each day just to obtain basic necessities such as water, food and fuel. I will often complain about how much work it is for us to keep up with the cleaning and maintenance of our house (after all, my husband and I are *so busy with work!*), yet myriad men and women continue to do backbreaking work every day to eke out a living and provide for their families.

More than a hundred years and an ocean separate me from the woman represented by this figure. Nonetheless, her message resonates with me. It may not be the message intended by the person who carved her out of wood and may not be the message that you, the audience, receive upon gazing at this figure, but that is one of the powers of art. Unlike energy which cannot be created or destroyed, the meaning of an art piece is fluid and malleable, and new interpretations are created all the time. Somewhat like the increasing entropy of the universe. ... So, what do YOU see as you gaze at this figure? ♦

— **Laila Guessous**, Associate Professor of Engineering, Department of Mechanical Engineering,  
School of Engineering and Computer Science



# Mankala Gameboard

Sigmund Freud observed a child playing a game called fort/da, a game later valued for its role in language acquisition. Taking a wooden reel, the child would throw the spindle away (fort, or “gone”) and then pull it back by its string (da, or “there”), a gesture which the psychoanalyst believed would teach the child to differentiate between self and m/other, presence and absence, pleasure and renunciation.

Games teach us some of the most fundamental lessons about being human — language rules, social mores, and ego identifications. But they have a sullen side, too, one that seems to flow counter to their pedagogical course. In this Mankala Gameboard, two figures bleed into each another, their hollow vacuoles temporary repositories for playing pieces fashioned from the kola nut. What a fascinating, terrible Janus this must appear to a child! The battlefield: a conjoined body, but one whose organs have been hollowed out, replaced by the momentary rest of egg-like tokens which mark the battle.

The Mankala thus stages a deep crisis, a theater of cruelty. A set of flows, affective bleeds, shifting voids, unstable selves: sensations that the juvenile more readily accepts than the restrained adult. Might the child find in such play a virtual self, a body-without-organs? Deleuze and Guattari might describe such a game board: “On it we sleep, live our waking lives, fight — fight and are fought — seek our place, experience untold happiness and fabulous defeats; on it we penetrate and are penetrated; on it we love.” ♦

— John Corso, Assistant Professor of Art History, Department of Art and Art History, College of Arts and Sciences

**Mankala Gameboard**  
19th-20th century  
Artist Unknown  
Gio, Liberia  
Wood  
h. 27.6" w. 7.3" d. 5.9"

*This object is used to play a game utilizing kola nuts. It also demonstrates the importance of presenting beautiful art objects in the everyday life of this community.*



# Head of Benin King

“What is Africa to me?” Countee Cullen asked in 1925, the opening line of his haunting poem “Heritage.” He was not alone in posing this question. Throughout the 1920s, the ambitious, race-proud writers of the Harlem Renaissance looked across the ocean and dreamed backward through time and into the spiritual heart of their cultural heritage. “So long,” lamented Langston Hughes, “So far away / Is Africa.”

Embracing Africa, these writers celebrated their own darkness, proudly beating the drum of their native land, joining past and present in a rousing affirmation. “Copper sun, a scarlet sea,” muses Cullen, “Jungle star and jungle track, / Strong bronzed men and regal black / Women from whose loins I sprung.” In Harlem of the early 20th century, African imagery became a source of race pride; its poignant beauty offered writers a usable past, teeming with inspiration and unexplored possibilities. I am a Negro,” writes Hughes, proudly, “Black as the night is black, / Black like the depths of my Africa.” *My Africa*. For these poets, African art countermanded the racist presumptions of Enlightenment, aesthetic beliefs that dismissed dark skin as a sign of intellectual inferiority. Africa was no heathen land — it was a land, as Langston Hughes tells us, of “rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.”

What is Africa to any of us? A point of origin, a spiritual motherland, the womb of civilization — lush, eloquent, fertile, demanding our attention. And African art makes no apologies, offers no explanations, it simply announces itself: strong, substantial, resonant celebrations of life and of possibility. ♦

— Kathleen Pfeiffer, Associate Professor of English, Department of English



# Male Figure Playing Instrument

## *Orpheus the Musician: A Myth in Context of its Cultural Environment*

Growing up in Greece I discovered that classical mythology became an everyday narrative in my early studies of literature, history, art, music and philosophy. Outside the classroom, mythology was reaffirmed by the artistic content of museums, the presence of archaeological sites and the natural environment as defined by its mountains, rivers and landscapes, particularly in that historic time period when people were aware that “everything is full of gods” and places have a sacred significance.

Later, during my university studies, I came to understand that for thousands of years myths had been created by peoples of all the earth’s continents in order to provide a language to explain the important human experiences in relationship to their particular world. In this respect, mythology combined elements of everyday life, gave meaning to traditional practices, explained the causes of natural phenomenon, interpreted unconscious fears and desires, and helped to explain birth, marriage and death.

It is now an accepted principle that there is an astonishing conformity between the mythological fables amongst the different societies that developed a tradition of mythical narrative. With this store of knowledge, I came to a deeper understanding of myths, rituals and customs in relationship to their cultural context. I was also better prepared to embrace the aesthetic beauty as well as the emotional and intellectual expressions of African art.

Despite my long journey to discover the wondrous artistic expression of African art, I still remember well the moment when I first looked upon this mythical African art object, which is the subject of my text. This powerful work depicts a supernatural figure performing magical music while proudly sitting on his royal stool. I was fully cognizant that I had arrived at the parallel universe of African mythology and in the process had also found its Orpheus. Not unlike the classical Orpheus, I was resolved that this Orpheus was also the son of a talented and artistic muse and of a noble king. That his music and poetry were so irresistible that every component of the universe was responding joyfully to his talents.

There was no doubt that the power of “my” Orpheus’ music had the ability to induce animals, rocks and trees to dance whilst the wild beasts were being tamed. That his song had the magnetism to cause rivers to flow in the opposite direction. And while on a journey with the Argonauts, his musical skills lulled the dragon guarding the Golden Fleece to fall asleep so the Argonauts could safely enter the cave and retrieve it. Perhaps his most extraordinary task occurred when his music charmed the gods of the underworld to permit him to descend into the world of the dead to rescue his wife.

This most ingenious musician continued to capture the admiration not only of the common man but also its deity. Unfortunately, such admiration may sometimes lead to detrimental results. Orpheus understood well that he should not antagonize the gods, especially the two who were the great patrons of the arts and who had continued to pay extraordinary attention to him, namely: Apollo, the god of light, logic, morality and rationality; and his half brother Dionysios, god of night, indulgence, emotionalism and ritualistic behavior. Each of them demanded Orpheus’ faithful obedience and respect. In this regard, Orpheus had to perpetually balance his activities and narratives to construct a coherent expression out of the complex and often contradictory natures found in these gods’ dichotomy.

Eventually, all the gods came to honor Orpheus’ incomparable musicianship by transforming his lyre into the constellation of Lyra and by granting his soul immortality. ♦

— **John F. Korachis**, John F. Korachis & Associates, PLC



# Nunuma (Buffalo Mask)

## Metamorphosis

During the days of change, when pheasants have taken over Chene and foxes run the Rouge, things begin to spark and evolve. Civilization is being handed back to nature. Nature gains energy as it takes back what once belonged to it. The energy flows and eddies around the things of man left in its way, fertilizing, budding, changing, transforming. Houses become trees. Cars become flowerbeds. Dogs become human.

These are always the moments in history that have bred hybrids. Sometimes an entire empire ebbs and the energy is so great it creates whole new communities of hybrids: centaurs, werewolves, mermaids. When a city contracts — Detroit is still a physical city, even if the metaphorical empire of Detroit stretches all over the globe, carried at miles per hour over newly paved roads — the energy is enough for one, maybe two, metamorphoses. A scattering. A woman with the body of a peacock who lives happily on Belle Isle. A girl, half bear, up north. And here: this man with the head of a buffalo. People always notice his head, only ever his head, and then they try quickly to look left, right, up, down, do anything but stare. Some are certainly scared; some are trying to be polite. Either way they don't want to look him in the eyes and are ashamed not to. It's okay; his soul is built as broad and placid as his face to take on their shame.

He had a girlfriend. She too looked away and then she didn't. She asked him, and no one ever asked him this, why he had the head of a bull; he told her it was actually a buffalo — look at the curved horns, he told her — and she seemed to accept this as an explanation. They dated for a long while and then they didn't. One day things were going well and then one day they weren't. He didn't know if it just became too much for her to take anymore. There are a million reasons things end, he realized. Like cities. Like empires. Everything ends.

And there is energy in the death of love as well. That too breeds change. The man with the buffalo head is thinking about leaving. He never thought of leaving before, but now he thinks about the woman and feels sad and wants to leave.

He has packed a bag with clothes and a few belongings. It sits on one side of his room, waiting. He doesn't know if the streets of Detroit that gave birth to him will let him go. He doesn't know where he would go, where a man with a buffalo head can do his thing. He doesn't know if perhaps he just has to wait out the end days, patient and placid. Maybe that is what he's born to do: wait alone. ♦

— Jeffrey S. Chapman, Assistant Professor of English, Department of English, College of Arts and Sciences



# Female and Male Figures

Who are these two solemn, yet stoic, figures? Husband and wife? A representative from each of the sexes? Why the elongated, ringed necks and exaggerated thick legs? Why do both the male and female figures bear matching scarification patterns? Traditional African art is usually made in forms and styles that have been carefully passed on through many generations, making the ethnic group that crafted an object readily identifiable. Sometimes we are confronted with a more obscure object and as we begin research, we embark on a fantastic journey. My travels with this intimate pair of figures lead me down the coast of West Africa, across the sub-Sahara to the depths of the Congo Basin and back again. Our ivory figures appear to portray attributes from more than one culture.

Protruding bellies and well-defined navels are common features found in sculptures throughout African cultures. These attributes speak to the value of fertility and therefore the continuity of culture. Ringed necks can be found in Mende sculptures of the Sierra Leone region. Soweï, the guardian spirit of the female secret society Sande (or Bundu), is depicted in a traditional helmet mask with voluptuous rings around the neck. As the initiation period comes to a close, the mask is worn with an elaborate costume by the society leader as the women emerge from the forest. The rings are thought to symbolize physical well-being or perhaps the ripples produced as the powerful spirit emerges from the water.

Scarification is also practiced in secret societies. The Sande and their male counter society, the Poro, hold separate initiation camps for children reaching puberty. For women, undergoing scarification proves they are ready to bear children. For men, it may impart that they are ready to defend their people, values and land. Markings may also signify religious affiliations, social and political statuses. Also, during the 16th century, the neighboring Sherbro craftsmen were commissioned by the Portuguese to carve elaborate sculptures and decorative objects in ivory. Many depicted Europeans and a western decorative aesthetic. The figures do not seem to belong uniquely to any certain group. Perhaps the artist personally expressed influence from multiple cultures and life experiences. Perhaps there is still an untold story waiting to be revealed.

While it is wonderful to travel vicariously through research, the bottom line is that these two objects, or any art for that matter, can be enjoyed on its own. To me, with their eyes closed, they seem peaceful, yet playful. Ivory is delicate, but the form emits strength and ability to produce healthy children; protecting their kin and securing the lineage. The elongated necks evoke a sense of importance or even regality.

We always have personal experience and imagination packed in our bags, ready for departure. ♦

— Christina Gibbs, Assistant Registrar, Detroit Institute of Arts and Researcher, John F. Korachis Collection of African Art

## Female and Male Figures

late 20th century  
Artist Unknown  
Possibly Luba, Congo Basin,  
Central Africa  
Carved ivory  
Female: h. 8.1" w. 1.9" d. 2.1"  
Male: h. 8.1" w. 1.9" d. 1.9"

*It is uncertain whether these represent twin deities or simply female and male figures in the society of origin. Although they contain similarities to the Ibeji twins of Nigeria, these objects could possibly be by Luba, from the Congo Basin of central Africa.*



## Female Figure with Barrel

When I teach the history of American women at the beginning of the 20th century, I must grapple with a very particular image of women in American culture. At that time women were defined by their reproductive role. First and foremost, women were measured by their capacity as mothers.

During the early 1900s, Henry Ford advocated a “family wage” that paid men enough so that their wives would not have to work. Legislators in Oregon argued that women should not work more than 10 hours a day, because it undermined their ability to raise children. School districts routinely fired female teachers when they got married, because mothers were supposed to stay at home with their own children. While all of this was happening, a West African artist carved “Female Figure with a Barrel.”

This small statue is an icon of women’s reproductive role. Used in ceremonies, it symbolized fertility. The woman sits, holding a barrel over her head, but it is not the barrel that attracts attention. It is the quizzical little face that peers out from her belly. Surprised, and perhaps a bit curious, the little face does not share the mother’s serene demeanor. The mother is confident and comfortable in her role. As a fertility symbol, she is subtle. Her breasts are not huge and her stomach is flat. Nonetheless, there is no mistaking that a human being waits inside her.

Yet, when I look at “Female Figure with a Barrel” I can’t help but think how it would have repelled most American women of the early 20th century. The woman’s nakedness is not muted by classical allegory. She doesn’t share the American sense of reserve, at that time, about being publically pregnant. To early 1900s American sensibilities, she would have seemed “primitive.” Despite the fact that she symbolizes what was the heart of an American woman’s identity in the early 20th century, her contemporaries in the United States would never have embraced this image. ♦

— **Karen Miller**, Associate Professor of History, Department of History, College of Arts and Sciences



Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's classic essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak," has been anthologized with canonical authority. Indeed, this essay has marked postcolonial theory and criticism throughout its development. What happens when one pokes at Spivak's conclusions, stretching the extra textual world of objects into the realm of artistic production? Does her complicated conclusion bear out in the realm of indigenous art, particularly those cultural forms produced in another continent, outside of colonial India? Can works of art speak? There is no denying public speech is the cultural practice through which communication tells its origin story. However, most of us do work that moves beyond this modality. Cultural and media studies are the sub-disciplines where one is most likely to find work that crosses into the arts. Here speech no longer assumes conversation. Instead, the context of production, the interests that move the art form's circulation, and the "eyes" that control possession and display, temper the terms of speech.

Early 20th century African art was produced at the same time that Western Europe was fighting over the last colonial land grabs — the grabbing of Africa. Only Ethiopia and Liberia escaped colonization. What may indigenous art mean, when so much of its production occurred not only "Under Western Eyes," but also by its geopolitical, colonial infrastructure? These questions are akin to those that led Spivak to conclude that the subaltern cannot speak; they are spoken over by elites who erase the possibility of representation at the moment of invocation. Is this the case of this object? Used in the "forces of female fertility," this wooden, beaded sculpture captures traditional, tribal practice, if only in the artist's imagination. By the early 20th century traditional tribal practices were devastated by an array of colonial practices and policies, including missionary education, housing changes, the lingering effects of the slave trade, and anxiety about native (indigenous) birth rates. Fertility became politically charged.

We know this sculpture comes from the Ivory Coast. In context, the French would have influenced not only trade, but they, too, would have had the power to judge what counted as art. Was "dark art" considered savage? Was it revered, or did it contain, for the French, that complex relation of disgust and desire that so many postcolonials contest? The forces of fertility offer us ambiguity. At once we see a traditional, African fertility icon, yet she smirks at us. Her lips pursed, gesturing toward a smile. She sits on a flat seat, plain in presence. She is cut in black and gold; smooth curves create her texture. Her arms extend above her head to embrace the barrel she supports on her head. Is she bearing a burden? Perhaps she is, though I see her holding resources that make survival a material and symbolic necessity. On her belly, one can make out a hint of a face. Is it a Janus-face? Is this a sign of what lies beneath the belly, a surface message, or still another face of our goddess? Is fertility a resistant practice when one's population is in jeopardy, when it is counted, divided, and re/con/figured? This sculpture may offer more irony than Spivak is willing to assign to indigenous, subaltern production. I see this artifact as wild, ironic and purposely mis/leading. It cannot be contained and controlled by an elite. It defies colonial grip. However, a reality exists that points back to Spivak. In less than 100 years, why are there so many artist unknowns when we take in the delights of early 20th century African art? ♦

— **Kellie Hay**, Associate Professor of Communication,  
Department of Communication & Journalism, College of Arts and Sciences





## Oba (Royal Figure/King) with Leopard

Our evolved psychology includes adaptations that motivate an interest in access to resources important for our ancestors' survival and reproduction. Kings such as this Benin Oba historically commanded a disproportionate store of these resources. Equally important, however, is that tribal leaders, chiefs and kings commanded the attention and respect of the peoples they ruled, often becoming the object of artwork such as this bronze figure.

Ancestral kings and leaders often achieved their positions of power and status through violence, killing would-be tribal rivals or by murderous success on the battlefield. The Oba is depicted here sporting likely weapons of war; the artist has depicted him as the great and mighty warrior he likely was. Alongside the Oba is a leopard, symbolizing his authority as king.

The artist depicts the King Benin Oba in his finest hour: mighty warrior, royalty, a man of great status and prestige; admired and envied by his male subjects. ♦

— **Todd K. Shackelford**, Professor of Psychology, Department of Psychology, College of Arts and Sciences

Oba (Royal Figure/King) with Leopard

Denounce these plans, Agamemnon.  
Reason tells you this price is not yours to pay.  
Every restless soldier  
Seems to beg this of you. But,  
Surely — family, children mean more ... mean something.  
Envy stirs Menelaus, but he must know her  
Death is too great a gift for this  
Incendiary wind. Why  
Not him, your brother? Is his wife not an  
Adulteress? Is she not  
Licentious, this Helen? Where are her children? Your  
Intuition screams that gusts bring no solutions.  
Troy will deliver a decade of loneliness —  
Trojan wives will dress Trojan wounds while Greek kings  
Live like  
Exiles.  
Blast not your country to pieces! Ten years of  
Retaliation lie in wait, pantherlike. And your lovely  
Iphigenia — her willowy frame, barely a woman.  
Each doorway will sigh her emptiness.  
Feel her eyes on you, the warmth of her breath. This fawn  
Adores you — father and king. Pull yourself from this nightmare.  
Unleash not this dark fate.  
Turn to your brother. Suspect him — the jilted  
Husband. Suspect the priest. Suspect the  
Oracle. Peel off this  
Regalia, this empty warrior.  
It holds not your heart. Be  
True. Reach back. She is  
Your daughter.

I was drawn to the Benin Oba while working on an adaptation of *Medea*. This stubborn, armored figure reminded me of two characters from dramatic literature immediately — one Greek (from *Iphigenia in Aulis* by Euripides), one Shakespearean (from *Measure for Measure*). While looking from one or the other as a leap-off point, I thought of e.e. cummings, who said about such choices, “... why not both?” He and acrostic gave me room for each. ♦

— Karen Sheridan, Professor of Theatre, Department of Music, Theatre and Dance, College of Arts and Sciences

Oba (Royal Figure/King)  
with Leopard  
16th-19th century  
Artist Unknown  
Benin Kingdom  
Bronze  
h. 15.7" w. 7.1" d. 5.5"

*This king figure is probably in the role of commander-in-chief. The leopard is a symbol of royal authority, and portrayal of this animal is also found on the altars of the king's ancestors.*





## Multiplicity, Connection and Divergence: African Art from the John F. Korachis Collection

September 10 – November 20, 2011



Curated by Andrea Eis

### Oakland University Art Gallery

Department of Art and Art History

College of Arts and Sciences

208 Wilson Hall

2200 North Squirrel Road

Rochester, MI 48309-4401

(248) 370-3005 | oakland.edu/ouag

Director, Dick Goody

Assistant to the Director & Registrar, Jacqueline Leow

Designed by Debra Lashbrook

Photography by Gregory Near

Printed by EPI Marketing Services

ISBN: 978-0-925859-54-9

Copyright 2011 Oakland University Art Gallery. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without the written permission of the Oakland University Art Gallery.

Oakland University Art Gallery exhibitions are made possible through the generous contribution of individuals, companies and foundations.

This exhibition was made possible in part by The Kresge Foundation, the Michigan Council for Arts and Cultural Affairs, National Endowment for the Arts and the College of Arts and Sciences, Oakland University.



NATIONAL  
ENDOWMENT  
FOR THE ARTS

A great nation  
deserves great art.



michigan council for  
arts and cultural affairs

*Left to right*

### Head Mask – Messenger of Olokun

16th century  
Artist Unknown  
Nigeria, Benin Kingdom  
Cast metal  
h. 8.8" w. 7" d. 8.1"

### Lukwakongo (Mask)

20th century  
Artist Unknown  
Democratic Republic of Congo,  
probably Lega  
Wood, raffia, paint  
h. 20.9" w. 17.7" d. 5.5"

### Janus Figure

19th century  
Artist Unknown  
Niger River Delta, Igbo  
Terracotta  
h. 12.2" w. 8.3" d. 8.7"

