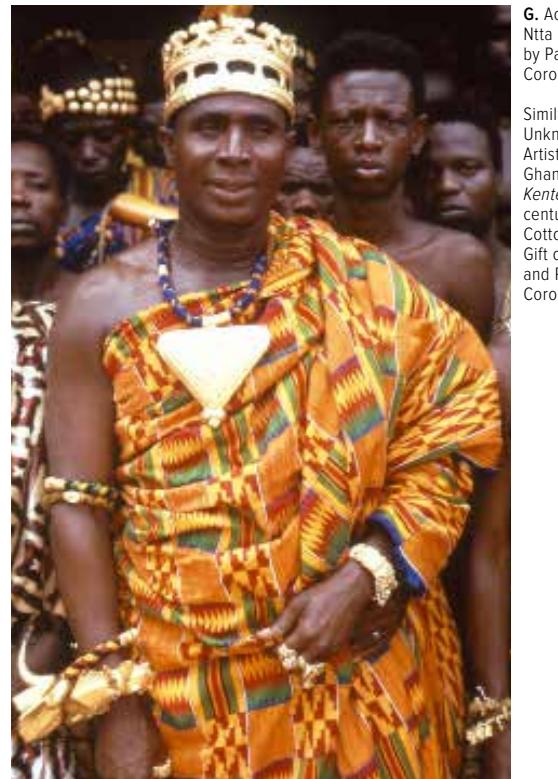


TEXTILES

Textile arts produced across the African continent reflect both a variety of production methods, and unique symbolism. Among the Ashanti of Ghana, *kente* cloth is woven in long, narrow strips by male artists who hand-sew the completed lengths together in order to create a large piece of fabric (Figure G).

Each of the vibrant patterns has a specific meaning and function, with some designs being reserved for royalty. In addition, *kente* cloth is worn differently according to one's gender, with men draping it over their left shoulder, and women wrapping it around their waists.

Other types of textiles equally maintain certain restrictions, and are worn during specific activities or events, such as the stamped *adinkra* cloth, which is typically reserved for funerary contexts. One also finds a wide array of commercially-produced printed textiles across the African continent, some of which refer to historical woven patterns, and others which incorporate contemporary expressions of popular culture.



G. Aowinhenne, Boafu Ntta III taken in 1972 by Patricia Crane Coronel.

Similar to Unknown Asante Artist Ghana *Kente Cloth*, 20th century, detail Cotton and rayon Gift of Michael and Patricia Crane Coronel, 2010.11.1

POTTERY

When viewing the wide variety of arts across the African continent, one may notice some broad conventions regarding gender and art production.

Historically, works in wood and metal were often created by male artists, while beaded objects and pottery were typically viewed as female arts. One often finds that pot-making techniques vary from region to region, with artists using direct-pull, coiling, concave and convex mold, and hammer-and-anvil methods. In the same manner, external patterns and designs are often culture-specific, and maintain local significance.

For example, the patterns found on the exterior of Makonde grain pots (Figure H) often mimic the decorative scarification patterns that were formerly applied to women's torsos. Earthenware vessels across the continent are used for a variety of functions, including water and grain storage, beer production, and religious practices. Because the porous surface of earthenware pots allows them to naturally cool any liquid contents, such vessels are both efficient in their function, and visually stunning.



H. Unknown Makonde artist Mozambique Grain pot, 20th century Clay Gift of Robert F. Bina – Spillville, Iowa and Delores De Wilde Bina – Charles City, Iowa in honor of David Riep.

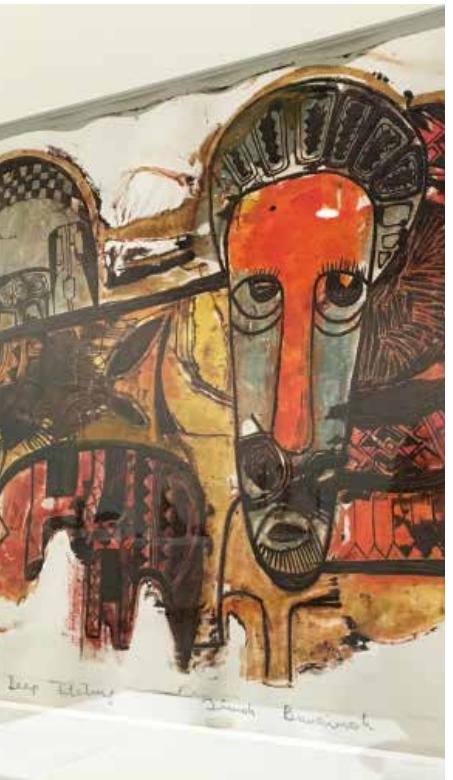
CONTEMPORARY ARTS OF AFRICA

While the classical arts of Africa often reflect cultural conventions and regional styles, the artists who have been making works of art have never existed in a vacuum.

Even the earliest examples of artistic production across the continent show evidence of exchange and interaction, often on an international scale. As participants in a global society, artists on the African continent have always engaged with new innovations while producing works that are locally relevant.

This notion of continuity and change continues into the present with contemporary artists from the African continent producing avant garde works for international audiences.

From the multicultural Osogbo contemporary arts movement in Nigeria to creatively unique commercial sign painters, postcolonial artists from Africa continue to be active participants in a global dialog, and push the limits of visual expression through artistic innovation, social commentary, and thematic range (Figure I).



I. Jimoh Adejunti Buraimoh Nigeria, born 1943 Untitled (an Animal), 1977, detail Drypoint etching with ink washes on paper Gift of James W. Young, 2003.600

POWER AND STATUS

With many Akan-speaking peoples, such as the Ashanti and the Fante, the visual arts are used to express power and status. Such notions are communicated through a wide variety of objects, including stools, staffs, and textiles, as well as precious materials, such as gold. In addition, Akan-speaking artists maintain a masterful use of symbolism, where visual forms often relate to specific axioms, proverbs, and idioms.

Stools are among the most important forms of political art, and are used by all titleholders and public officials as symbols of leadership. Although stools are also used by non-royal members of society as purely functional objects, their specific shape and design serve as an indicator of an owner's position and rank. Within this context, one can often identify the status of an individual based on his or her stool, which is reserved only for its owner, and is stored on its side when not in use. In addition to stools, Akan-speaking cultures maintain a wide array of other royal regalia to communicate status and power, all of which fall under the domain of the State. One such item is the *okyoma poma*, or linguist's staff (Figure J), which is held by royal spokesmen who serve as translators, advisors, judges, and ambassadors.

The finials of such staffs are topped with a figural sculpture that elicits one or more proverbs, allowing the linguist to visually communicate wisdom and wit for any given situation.



J. Unknown Fante Artist Ghana *Okyeame poma* (linguist staff finial), 20th century Wood with silver and gold leaf Gift of Richard and Jan De Vore, 1999.1.46

AFRICA GALLERY PERMANENT COLLECTION

GALLERY GUIDE



Map of the African Continent

The continent of Africa is home to an amazing wealth of artistic traditions. With over 50 countries and an area that measures five-times the size of the continental United States, it hosts a spectacular diversity of artistic production. Although initially admired in the West for its influence on 20th century modernism, African art, and the artists who create it, have maintained sophisticated aesthetic approaches to visual production for centuries. While many classical works of African art lie outside the naturalistic renderings of form, it's important to note that such approaches are not the result of a lack of artistic skill, but rather are examples of abstract form being used to express abstract ideas. Artists across the African continent have engaged with conceptual approaches to the visual arts for centuries, and continue to do so through the use of kinetic art, assemblage, process art, and positioning objects within sophisticated intellectual frameworks. The diversity of the visual arts point toward a continent-wide concern with innovation and creativity that reflect both local expressions of self, as well as one's standing within a global society.

David Riep and Lauren Karpula, Curators

BEADWORK OF SOUTHEAST AFRICA

FIGURAL SCULPTURE

When visitors enter a museum space, there is often a very specific way that works of art are contemplated and approached. Even calling an object "art" changes its status. While works of art in the Western perspective are often appreciated foremost for their visual aspects, this is not always the primary function of objects created across the African continent. In contrast, the beaded arts that you see in this display are not only fascinating visual objects, but they serve a far broader purpose beyond visual aesthetics. When placed in their original context, these arts of adornment tell a complex story about the status and identity of the wearer, and maintain an equally powerful history as markers of global interaction.

Aspects like color and form have a long history of communicating highly specific meanings in local contexts, and have been used to convey a wearer's marital status, genealogical affiliation, and social standing. In addition, materials and motifs originating from beyond the African continent have equally impacted the beaded arts, bringing new artistic developments through trade and interaction. For example, locally sourced materials, such as shell, bone, wood, and seeds, are often replaced with glass and plastic beads that have become widely available through commercial means (Figure A). With these global transformations in mind, one may view the beadwork of Southeast Africa not only as beautiful works of art, but also as pieces that reflect both international and local markers of identity.



A. Unknown Pokot Artist
Kenya
Sanai-yan (Woman's necklace), 20th century
Glass beads, rawhide and fibrous string
Gift of the estate of Rob and Dorothy Udall, 2002.1.95



B. Unknown Yaka Artist
Democratic Republic of the Congo
Mbwoolo Nkisi, 20th century
Wood with cloth, string and encrustation from medicinal substances
Gift of John A. and Mary Pat Carlen, 2008.2.286

C. X-Ray of *Mbwoolo Nkisi*

MASKING

Artists across the African continent have used the human form as inspiration for centuries. Just as we see across Western traditions, African sculptors often rely on local conventions and ideals to depict the body and promote culturally shaped notions of beauty, status, and power. While all of the figures that you see here reflect a variety of unique visual expressions, artists also use form and context to promote the meaning and significance of such objects.

For example, among the Baule peoples of Côte d'Ivoire, figures are sculpted to give physical form to "other-world spouses," spiritual entities who can bring balance to one's life in the physical realm. Because these figures maintain intimate relationships with their earthly counterparts, it is not uncommon to find them covered with a cloth, which protects them from the wayward glances of passersby. In contrast, the Yaka peoples of the Democratic Republic of the Congo commission *ibejii* figures as a way to maintain contact with the spirit of a deceased twin. Because twin siblings are believed to maintain a special connection, the untimely death of a child may cause the deceased to call its living counterpart to join it in the afterlife. In order to nurture this relationship, and remember the life of a sibling, "twin figures" are often commissioned and cared for in the same manner as a living child. Finally, the human form is often used to create expressions of otherworldly power.

So-called "power figures," or *nkisi* (Figure B), are found among many cultures throughout Central Africa, and are used to approach or engage with a spiritual entity. The specific function of an *nkisi* varies according to its form, as well as the materials used to construct it. For example, the figure that you see here from the Yaka culture is encased in a variety of powerful substances, each of which prescribes a specific aspect to the unseen being. An X-Ray of the figure (Figure C) reveals a variety of ingredients, some of which appear to be metal.



D. Unknown Yaka Artist
Democratic Republic of the Congo
Tsekedi mask, 20th century
Wood with cloth, pigment and raffia
Gift of John A. and Mary Pat Carlen, 2008.2.281

ART OF THE LOBI

While many works of art across the African continent reflect culture-based stylistic conventions, sculptures created by Lobi artists from Burkina Faso are wonderful examples of the creative variety found among individual artists within a single culture or community.

Historically, Lobi settlements were organized under the rules and protection of a regional deity, or *thila*, which was associated with the land. Such entities are believed to have the ability to bring prosperity or misfortune, and rely on sculptural forms to engage with the physical realm.

These objects, known as *bateba*, serve as intermediaries between the spiritual entity and the community, and are considered living beings that are able to communicate and intervene on behalf of its *thila*. As can be seen in these examples, *bateba* figures are highly variable in style, as any men in the community may carve them. While the style of the figures do not impact their effectiveness, the specific features reflect specific powers.

For example, large hands can be seen as having the ability to fight for the community, while upraised arms symbolize the blocking of harmful forces. *Bateba* with two faces (Figure E), such as the example seen below, have the ability to see in multiple directions at once, which makes them both powerful and dangerous.



E. Unknown Lobi Artist
Burkina Faso
Thil dokra/Bateba/ti bala (Janus head figure), 20th century
Wood with encrustation
Gift of Richard and Jan De Vore, 2001.19



F. Unknown Mangbetu Artist
Democratic Republic of the Congo
Ngata/Ngala (knife), 20th century
Iron with wood and brass
Gift of John A. and Mary Pat Carlen, 2008.2.18