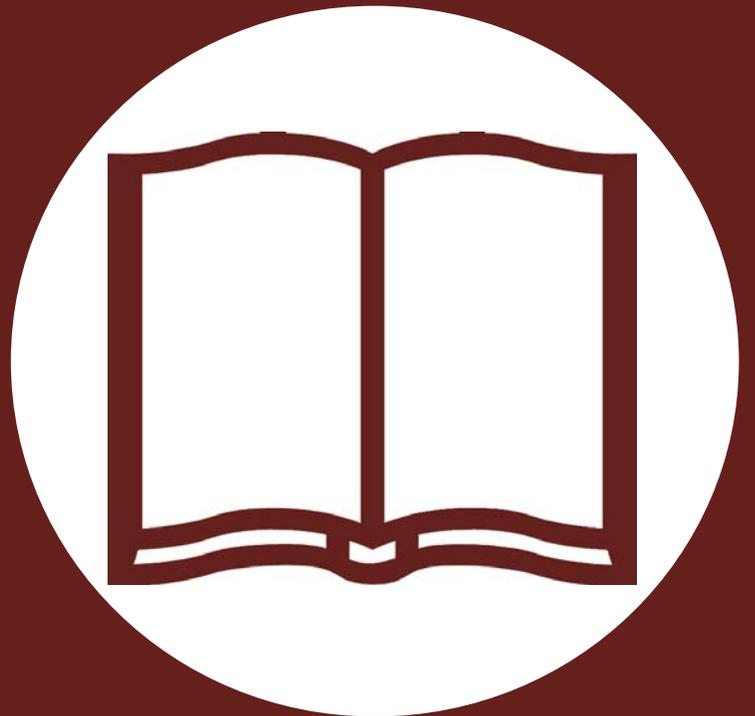


OBJECT GUIDE

Art from West Africa



ACKLANDARTMUSEUM

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Unidentified artist
Liberian and Sierra Leonean, Mende
culture

Figure

wood

Gift of Dorothy Mahan, 2003.31.1



- This figure's long ringed neck, delicate facial features, prominent forehead, and elegant hairstyle are ideals of feminine beauty traditionally prized in Mende culture.
- Some sculptures like this one – standing female figures with arms set apart from the torso – were placed in shrines belonging to societies involved in medicine and regulating social conduct. Others, however, were made for purely decorative purposes. Without knowing the history of this figure, we cannot say which type it is.

Osei Bonsu
Ghanaian, Asante culture, 1900 - 1977
Ntan Drum, 1930s or 1940s
painted wood
Ackland Fund, 2000.6



- Ntan bands played both for Asante rulers and for popular audiences at family celebrations and community festivals. While performing, alongside their instruments, they displayed sets of figures representing the chief, queen mother, and members of the court.
- Bonsu was chief carver for several Asante rulers and also attracted patronage from rulers of other Ghanaian cultures. In addition, Bonsu, whose father was a drummer and a carver, is well known for the drums and figures he made for Ntan bands.
- Ntan drums often feature elaborate reliefs. The largest drum in a set, referred to as the mother drum, has prominent breasts. Some of the motifs on this drum, like the rooster and hen and the woman bending over to pick up a crab, refer to proverbs. The man wearing a suit and tie alludes to the British colonial presence in Ghana.
- Most of the tension sticks holding the drumhead are replacements - only one or two may be original.

1900: Born in Kumasi, Ghana

1925 - 1940: Period of greatest activity as a carver

1933 - 1956: Held teaching positions at colonial schools in Kumasi, Accra, and Cape Coast

1960 - 1966: Detained as a political prisoner at Usher Fort, Accra

1966 - 1976: Taught carving at the University of Science and Technology in Kumasi

1977: Died in Kumasi

Unidentified artist
Liberian or Sierra Leonean, Mende culture
Sande Society Mask, 20th century
wood

Gift of Miriam E. Dixon, Judith D. Gooding
and Susan R. Dixon in memory of John W.
Dixon, Jr. and Vivian S. Dixon, 2009.19.2



- Sande is a women's association among the Mende people and neighboring peoples in Liberia and Sierra Leone; its counterpart for men is the Poro Society. At puberty, girls are initiated into the Sande Society and they remain members for life. It is one of very few masking traditions in Africa completely run by women.
- The dancer who commissioned and wore this mask was a woman of high status in the Sande Society. Wearing it and the rest of the costume, she embodied the water spirit known as *Sowei* that presides over the society.
- Sande masks present stylized characteristics of the ideal woman. The downcast eyes and delicate, regular features are indications of physical beauty; the smooth, high forehead indicates both beauty and wisdom. The hairstyles, which vary widely from mask to mask, derive from changing fashions and are a sign of wealth and status. This hairstyle was popular in the later twentieth century.

Unidentified artist
Eastern Nigerian
Figural Vessels, perhaps 10th or 11th
century CE
terracotta
Ackland Fund, 2001.24.1 (left) and
2001.24.2 (right)



- Terracotta forms of this kind have been excavated in recent times during construction work in eastern Nigeria. Some are objects that could function as jars, open at the top, and in others the jar shape has been transformed into a human figure.
- These two pieces may seem abstract, but each has elements that suggest human body parts, in the form and surface patterns. The Ackland has elected to describe these objects as figural vessels, but they are also known as pseudo-receptacles.
- The Qua people, with whom vessels like these are associated, have been living for centuries in the Cross River region of Nigeria. Thermoluminescence testing, a scientific process that measure the amount of time since a material was heated to a high temperature, has dated Qua vessels to the period between 900 and 1100 CE.

Unidentified artist
Northern Nigerian,
Cham people
Ritual Healing Vessels (*Itinate*)
terracotta
Gift of Charles Jones African Art,
2006.35.1 (left), 2006.35.2 (center),
and 2006.35.3 (right)



- In the language of the Cham people, these vessels are called *itinate*. They are made only by men, whereas other types of pots may be made by women.
- Based on advice from a diviner, a sick person requests a potter to make a specific type of vessel. The potter and diviner begin the process of symbolically transferring the illness to the pot. After the illness has been cured, the pot has served its purpose and the person discards it.
- Each vessel's shape corresponds to a particular type of ailment. The one on the left is a type used for rectal problems as well as for chicken pox and other childhood diseases. The one on the right is designed to heal back problems. We are less certain about the illness associated with the middle vessel.

Unidentified artist
Liberian or Ivorian, Dan people
Mask of the Poro Society, before 1932
wood
Burton Emmett Collection, 58.1.236



- Masks and masked performance are the dominant art form of the Dan people. The Poro Society is a men's association in this region of West Africa.
- This mask is the most common form of Dan mask, called a smiling mask. Although worn by men, these are female masks – the calm expression and smooth, graceful carving convey an ideal of female beauty.
- This type of mask is associated with boys' initiation camps located in the forest and with maskers who acted as messengers with the village, which was considered the women's domain.
- We assume that this mask was made for use, but it shows little sign of wear, suggesting that it was used for only a short time (if at all) before being sold as an art object. We know that by 1932 it was in the collection of Burton Emmett, who made a drawing of it in that year. The drawing is also in the Ackland's collection.

Unidentified artist
Liberian, probably Dan or We (Ngere)
people
Mask, 20th century
wood, with traces of red tukula
(camwood tree powder)
and European pigments; brass tacks;
buttons; tusks;
human hair; fabric; and bells
Gift of Michael H. Glicker, 81.62.1



- Although the Dan and We peoples belong to different linguistic groups, they have many cultural links; masks of a similar type may be used by either people, making it difficult to determine definitively whether this mask was used by the Dan or the We. Styles are associated with particular carvers who might work for clients of multiple ethnic groups.
- This mask's oval shape, facial features like the slit, oval eyes, and the tacks and bells that adorn it indicate that the mask is intended to be female.
- This kind of mask could be used for generations; each person who used a mask could add materials to it, so that it changed appearance and meaning over time.

Unidentified artist
Nigerian, Yoruba culture, 20th century
Ifa Divination Tapper
ivory
Gift of Michael H. Glicker, 82.46.1



- In Ifa divination, tappers are important tools. At the beginning of the process, the diviner attracts the attention of the gods by striking a divination tray with the tip of a tapper.
- The carving on this one is organized in thirds, as are many tappers, with a kneeling nude woman in the middle. The pointed end has no carved decoration and the hollow end is ornamented with narrow bands and geometric patterns.
- In Yoruba imagery, kneeling is a posture that suggests reverence and nudity is considered the appropriate state for communicating with the creator god.
- Many tappers are made of ivory, though some are made of wood or brass.

Areogun of Osi-Ilorin
Nigerian, Yoruba culture, 1880? - 1956
Ifa Divination Tray, 1930s
wood
Ackland Fund, 97.1



- A line from Areogun's *oriki*, or praise poem, calls to mind the ornate carved patterns typical of his style and visible across the surface of this divination tray: "He carves hard wood as though he were carving a soft calabash."
- This tray was made to be used in Ifa divination, practiced by Yoruba people in southwest Nigeria. The process involves tools including a tray, a tapper, palm nuts, wood powder, and a body of oral literature. In the center of the tray, the diviner traces patterns in the wood powder indicating verses in the literature. Those verses suggest solutions to the problem at hand.
- At the top of this tray is the face of Eshu, the god who mediates between the human and divine worlds. Other images relate to Yoruba thought about desirable things of this world: political life (a chief), wealth (cowry shells lining the tray's center), marriage (a couple making love), children (on the backs of kneeling women), and victory over one's enemies (a soldier with a crossbow).

c. 1880: Born in Osi-Ilorin
c. 1890s: Apprenticed to the carver Bamagbose
1920s: Began signing his work
1956: Died

Workshop of Agbonbiofe Adeshina
Nigerian, Yoruba culture, died 1945
**Veranda Post from the Palace Complex
at Efon-Alaye, 1912-16**
painted iroko wood
Ackland Fund, 91.174



- During the first quarter of the twentieth century in the Ekiti area of southwestern Nigeria, many Yoruba leaders commissioned palaces with architectural sculpture. This veranda post comes from the palace at Efon-Alaye, which was rebuilt after a fire in 1912.
- Scholars attribute this sculpture to Agbonbiofe Adeshina's workshop based on two important factors: its stylistic features and its connection to the palace at Efon-Alaye, for which they carved more than twenty veranda posts.
- Photographs taken of the palace in 1958 and 1970 show this veranda post among others in their original setting. Many of the posts represent male and female figures, expressing different types of power attributed to men and women.
- Iroko wood is hard and resistant to insects, making it a good choice for architectural construction. The wood at the bottom of this sculpture was nevertheless damaged by termites before the Museum acquired it. The block above the male figure's head attached to a cross beam that held the sculpture in place in the palace courtyard.

1900: Active as a carver

1912-16: With other carvers from the Adeshina family, made veranda posts for the palace at Efon-Alaye

1945: Died

Unidentified artist
Nigerian, Yoruba culture
Ceremonial Stand, 1920s-30s
wood with metal spikes
Ackland Fund, 86.39



- Scholarly opinions differ about this sculpture's original function. It is most likely a stand, perhaps for offerings at a shrine. Another suggestion is that it is a divination cup, but most such objects are not as tall and have a more distinctive bowl-like shape on top. The Ackland acquired it as a ceremonial stool, but it is significantly taller than other known stools.
- The ceremonial stand was most likely made in the 1920s or 1930s in Osi-Ilorin, a town in the northern Ekiti region of Nigeria, according to John Pemberton, a specialist in the art and religion of the Yoruba people.
- On the upper register of figures is a kneeling woman holding a calabash, a soldier with a sword, and a flute player, who may represent the god Eshu. On the lower register are two other musicians and a second kneeling woman.
- The ceremonial stand is made of three pieces of wood, joined with tenon joint and metal spikes. There are two saucer-shaped pieces at the top and bottom and a central piece, carved with figures.

Unidentified Artist
Nigerian, Nok culture, 100 BCE - 200 CE
Female Figure
terracotta
Ackland Fund, 97.15



- Since 1943, many terracotta figures like this one have been discovered in central Nigeria near the village of Nok, a name also given to an ancient African culture. Archeological evidence indicates that the Nok people grew crops and were skilled in working iron.
- This figure is hollow, like others from the Nok culture, and was constructed with coils of clay that were partially smoothed on the exterior then covered with a slip (clay diluted with water), some of which has eroded from the surface.
- Because Nok figures became so popular with collectors, many fakes have appeared in the market - some modern forgeries, some pastiches assembled from fragments of ancient figures. In 2008, scientific testing authenticated this figure as an ancient Nok terracotta.

Unidentified artist
Nigerian, Yoruba culture
Paired Male and Female Figures,
late 19th or early 20th century
bronze with clay core and possible iron
inclusion
Gift of David Joyner Haynes and his wife
Elizabeth Lynn Haynes, 2013.27.1 (left)
and 2013.27.2 (right)



- Pairs of male and female figures like these, cast in bronze over a clay core, are associated with the Ogboni Society in southwestern Nigeria. The Ogboni Society of male and female elders is dedicated to Onile, the Yoruba god of the earth. They play important roles in matters of traditional government.
- Because of their size, these figures were probably housed in a shrine. Each member of the society owned a pair of smaller figures, usually linked by a chain.
- The gestures that the male figure makes is a distinctive one to Ogboni Society sculptures, with the left hand over the right and thumbs hidden.