

ABOUT THE ART

Classical Art
of Africa

Gallery 16

ACKLAND

QUESTIONS?

Contact us at acklandlearn@unc.edu

ACKLAND ART MUSEUM

The University of North Carolina
at Chapel Hill
101 S. Columbia Street
Chapel Hill, NC 27514
Phone: 919-966-5736

MUSEUM HOURS

Wed – Sat 10 a.m. – 5 p.m.

Sun 1 – 5 p.m.

Closed Mondays & Tuesdays.

Closed July 4th, Thanksgiving, Christmas Eve,
Christmas Day, & New Year's Day.

About About the Art

The Ackland's *About the Art* guides offer information about every work of art from the Museum's collection that is on view in galleries 2, 3, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, and 17. All of these galleries are marked on the Gallery Map available at the desk in the Lobby. In the bottom right corner of the label beside each object, there is an open book symbol with a number. You can find the same symbol and number on the top of the corresponding page in *About the Art*.

Within each entry, you can find the following information:

- At the top of the page, you'll see a thumbnail image, the title of the object, who made it and with what materials, and where and when it was made
- Next, you'll see bullet points with information or observations about the object (more or fewer, depending on how much we know about the object so far). There is no standard formula for what kinds of information appears, but you will often find comments on historical context, style, and materials.
- In keeping with the Ackland's tagline, "Look Close, Think Far," the first bullet point will often highlight something visible in the work of art itself.
- You will find names, phrases, and concepts that could be good internet search terms for those who want to learn more
- When specialized terms are used, you'll see a definition, helpful contextual information, or language suitable for an internet search.
- Whenever we know the artist's name, there will be some details about the artist's life, often under the heading "About the Artist," but sometimes as one of the bullet points.

For those visitors who want to engage further with an object, we also suggest other resources to investigate on our website: ackland.org/education/learning-resources.

The authors of *About the Art* include Ackland curators and educators who use a variety of sources. They consult museum records, art historical research, comments from outside specialists, and more.

About Gallery 16: Classical Art of Africa

The art in this gallery was made mainly in the west and the south of Africa and mostly during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The major materials used for this selection of African art are wood, metal, and beads. While the names of most of the artists are unknown to us today, in general, the sculptures were made by men and the beadwork was made by women. Some of the works were made for religious, spiritual, or civic use, for performances, for wearing or carrying, and other purposes. Many scholars of African art recommend using the term "classical" to distinguish art forms like these, established during past centuries, from the art that contemporary artists in Africa produce as participants in their local and global spheres. One wall in this gallery is dedicated to changing displays of art lent from a local private collection.



Possibly Ubah of Isuofia

Nigeria, Igbo culture

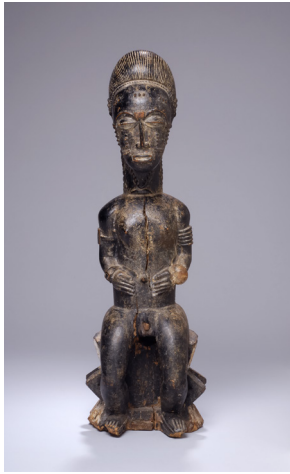
Shrine Figure, 1920s?

painted wood

Gift of Alfred Landau in honor of Arthur C. Forman,
2002.1.2

About the Art

- The frontal pose seen here is characteristic of Igbo figures. The figure's gesture, with arms extending forward and palms up, shows generosity on the part of the deity represented as well as a willingness to receive sacrifices and other gifts.
- Often shrine figures were clothed and painted when they were in use. On this figure, paint is still visible on the head.
- Shrine figures like this one were displayed together, in large groups, which were sometimes conceived of as families. They represent deities responsible for the community's well-being.
- This figure may have been carved by Ubah of Isuofia, who was active between about 1920 and 1945.



Unidentified artist, Ivory Coast, Baule culture

Seated Male Figure, c. 1930s–40s

wood

Gift of Marion and Stanley Robboy in memory of Anne-Marie and Victor Loeb, 2007.2

About the Art

- Balanced asymmetry is an important part of Baule aesthetics. Here, for example, the sculptor carved arm and wrist ornaments in the same place on each side of the figure but gave them different forms.
- In this figure, the detailed coiffure and scarification denote beauty. In both artistic and historical practices, scarification patterns are used to add texture to the body and to identify individuals.
- Figures like this one were often made to stand in for spirits — sometimes deities, sometimes deceased spouses. In order to please the spirits, the sculptures required care and attention, resulting in the kind of surface wear and patina that are evident on this figure.



Unidentified artist, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, or Mali,
Senufo culture

Standing Female Figure

wood

Gift of Dr. Harold J. Luria, 72.35.4

About the Art

- The angular forms of the belly, breasts, shoulders, and arms are characteristic of Senufo sculpture.
- The hairstyle — especially striking when the figure is viewed from the side — is a reference to the beak of a hornbill. Hornbill imagery appears often in Senufo art; it alludes to the birds' habit of forming pairs and to the devotion they show while hatching eggs and raising their young.
- The Senufo peoples, who occupy a large area of West Africa, form a complex network comprising more than thirty subgroups with many local variations of language and custom. Artistic styles moved and mixed across the area.



Unidentified artist, Ghana, Fante culture
Figure Group, early 20th century
wood
Ackland Fund, 2006.11

About the Art

- The larger of the two figures represents a person of high social status; he sits on a stool, holds a sword, and wears an elaborate headband. The snake he holds alludes to a proverb about leadership and problem solving: “without the head the snake is nothing but a rope.”
- The smaller figure wears a cap with a visor and holds a book, which has inscribed writing on its pages.
- Although the artist’s name has been lost, art historians have identified at least thirteen other works by the same hand, all of which include abundant surface decoration, as in this piece. Records accompanying these objects suggest he was working in and around the coastal area of Effutu in Ghana.



5,6

Unidentified artist, Nigerian,
Cham people

**Ritual Healing Vessels
(Itinate)**

clay

Gift of Charles Jones African
Art,

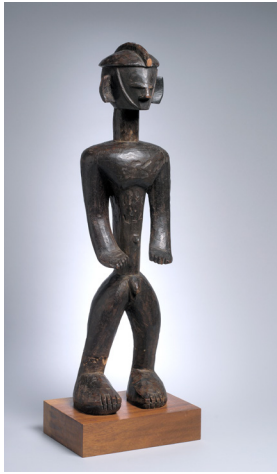
2006.35.1 (left) and

2006.35.3 (right)

About the Art

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

View 3D models of the Ritual Healing Vessels on the Ackland's Sketchfab page at <https://sketchfab.com/ackland>.



Unidentified artist
Nigeria, Montol culture

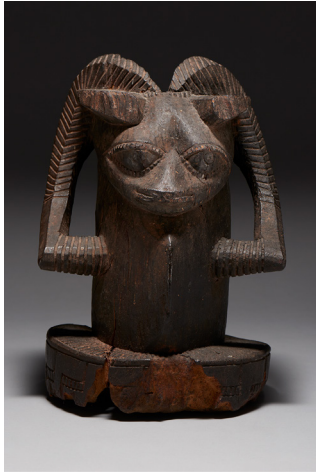
Figure

wood

Gift of Dorothy Mahan, 2003.31.2

About the Art

- Since Montol artists had considerable artistic freedom, there are a number of styles associated with Montol figures. In this case, the artist opted to represent the human form in an abstracted, geometric way, using a V-shape to frame the face, for example, and a disc to indicate the navel.
- This figure's right leg is longer than its left, making it appear to lean into its left hip. The torso tilts in the opposite direction, toward the right shoulder. The curve of the overall figure, however, is slight enough that it is almost unnoticeable.
- The figure may have been used by a men's secret society called Komtin. Society members used objects like this in divination rituals, to identify the causes of illnesses and to heal them.



Unidentified artist
Nigerian, Owo culture
Ram's Head, early to mid-20th century
wood
Gift of Rhonda Morgan Wilkerson, PhD., 2022.36.1

About the Art

- This powerfully compact sculpture's concentrated visual effect is unified by the consistent patterning of deep-cut striations that decorates the eyes, the base, the arm-like legs, and most dramatically the sweeping horns.
- The ram's head would have been placed on ancestral altars within a chief's shrine to aid in commemorating and honoring the deceased in the Owo culture of Yorubaland in south-central Nigeria.
- The image of a ram associates the ancestor with characteristics such as power, vigilance, and dedication.



Agbonbiofe Adeshina and assistants
Nigeria, Yoruba culture, Ekiti region, Efon-Alaye, c.1880 – 1945
Veranda Post from Palace Complex at Efon-Alaye, 1912-16
Iroko wood and paint
Ackland Fund, 91.174

About the Art

- 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.
- 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 the carvers in 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.

About the Artist

1900: Active as a carver

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

1945: Died

Chat with this work of art using ARTBOT. Instructions available in the Museum lobby.



Osei Bonsu
Ghana, Asante culture, 1900 – 1977
Ntan Drum, 1930s?
painted wood
Ackland Fund, 2000.6

About the Art

- 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. The tension sticks would have been used to tune the drum.
- Ntan bands played both for Asante rulers and for popular audiences at family celebrations and community festivals, particularly in the 1930s and 1940s. While performing, they displayed alongside their instruments sets of figures representing the chief, queen mother, and members of the court.
- Osei Bonsu was chief carver for several Asante rulers and 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.

About the Artist

1900: Born in Kumasi, Ghana

1925–40: Period of greatest activity as a carver

1930s?: Carved the Ackland's drum

1933–56: Held teaching positions at colonial schools in Kumasi, Accra, and Cape Coast, Ghana

1960–66: Detained as a political prisoner at Usher Fort, Accra

1966–76: Taught carving at the University of Science and Technology in Kumasi

1977: Died in Kumasi

Listen to music related to this work with the Look & Listen Gallery Sountrack.
Visit www.ackland.org/listen to access the playlist.



Unidentified artist, Sierra Leone or Liberia, Mende culture

Bundu Sande Society Helmet Mask, 20th century
wood, metal, and black raffia
Gift of Reginald and Celeste Hodges, 2018.34.2

About the Art

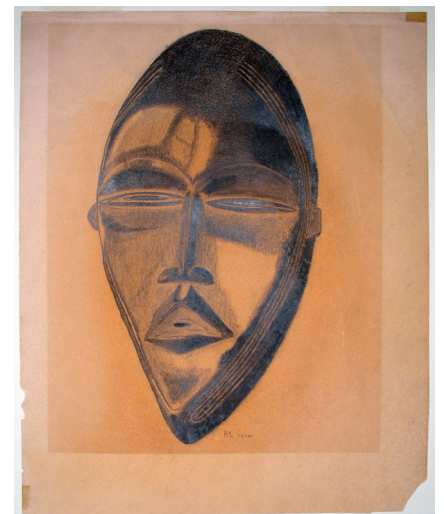
- Masks with faces on two sides, called Janus masks, are thought to be able to communicate with spirits of both the past and the future.
- This mask shows signs of use and likely dates from the early to mid-twentieth century. At the bottom of the carved helmet, raffia, or straw, remains attached through the holes that pierce the wood. When a dancer wore this mask, the raffia would have covered the entire body.
- The metal strips attached to the hair may indicate that this mask was a gift to a chief.



Unidentified artist, Liberia or Ivory Coast, Dan culture
Mask of the Poro Society, before 1932
 wood
 Burton Emmett Collection, 58.1.236

About the Art

- This is the most common form of Dan mask, called a smiling mask. Although worn by men, their calm expressions and smooth, graceful carving convey an ideal of feminine beauty and they are considered female masks.
- 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 type of mask is associated with boys' initiation camps located in the forest and with maskers who acted as messengers with the village, 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.



Burton Emmett, *African Mask*, 1932.
 Graphite. Burton Emmett Collection,
 58.1.2032. Ackland Art Museum



13

Zépé Coulibaly

Ivory Coast, Senufo, d. c. 1950

Face Mask, 1900-1950

wood

Gift of Rhonda Morgan Wilkerson PhD, 2020.31

About the Art

- This mask, called *kpeliy'e*, was designed to be worn on the face, as its shape and the slits cut for the eyes suggest. Other types of Senufo masks were made to cover the head, like helmets. Holes around the back edge of this one are for threading raffia through, so that the mask and the raffia together would cover the head and shoulders of the man wearing it.
- The female figure sitting on the forehead of the mask's face has scarification marks on her face that indicate she is a senior member of the women's association called the Tykpa Society; its counterpart for men is the Poro Society. At the funerals of senior members of both Poro and Tykpa Society members, dancers perform, wearing masks like this one.
- The lines across the mask's face also indicate scarification marks. They extend into the forms that project from the side and represent birds' wings. For the Senufo people, birds are important symbols representing fertility.
- Zépé Coulibaly was from Sienré in Ivory Coast. His family members had practiced wood carving for generations.



14

Unidentified artist, Nigeria, Idoma culture

Mask, 20th century

wood, pigment, and cloth

Gift of Dr. Harold J. Luria, 72.35.2

About the Art

- The wood surface of the face of this mask is colored white with kaolin, a type of clay, contrasting with the darker pigments on other parts of the head, including the hair, eyebrows, eyelids, and mouth.
- The mask was probably associated with an Idoma regulatory society. These organizations originated as warrior societies that displayed severed heads of defeated enemies at victory celebrations. During the twentieth century, artists began to create white-painted, human-faced masks to stand in for the actual heads.
- One important reason for this change in practice was British colonization of the area — the British objected to the earlier practice. And in more recent years, Idoma elders redirected the societies to perform a law enforcement role, in an effort to establish more control over the societies' potentially unruly actions.



15

Unidentified artist, Mali or West/Central Sudan, Bamana culture

Headdress (Sogoni koun), 19th–20th century
wood, fiber, beads, and cowrie shells
Ackland Fund, 2018.4.1

About the Art

- This abstracted form represents an antelope. The tall chevron-patterned projections in the middle are the antelope's horns. Male dancers wore masks like this on top of their heads, the sculpture affixed to a cap woven of raffia fibers. The rest of the dancers' bodies were covered with raffia.
- The headdress would have been worn by a member of a secular youth association among the Bamana peoples. The participants would gather for communal labor followed by performances of dance, song, and music. The style of this headdress is close to those worn by dancers from a religious association of initiated Bamana men, who represented Chi Wara, a mythological hero of the Bamana, closely associated with agriculture.
- The name *sogoni koun* means "little antelope head."



16

Unidentified artist, Liberia, Dan, N'Guere, or Grebo cultures

Mask, 20th century

wood with traces of red tukula and European pigments, brass tacks, buttons, tusks, human hair, fabric, and bells

Gift of Michael H. Glicker, 81.62.1

About the Art

- This mask's oval shape, its facial features, and the tacks and bells that adorn it, indicate that the mask is female.
- This kind of mask could be used for generations; each person who used it could add materials, so that it changed appearance and meaning over time. The back view below shows more layers of materials, some of which are also visible when you look at the mask from the side.



- There are many cultural links shared by the Dan, N'Guere, and Grebo peoples; masks of a similar type may be used by either people, making it difficult to determine definitively who used this mask. Styles are associated with particular carvers who might work for clients of multiple ethnic groups.



Unidentified artist
Nigeria, Yoruba culture
Ceremonial Stool, 1920s–30s
wood with metal spikes
Ackland Fund, 86.39

About the Art

- The ceremonial stand is made of three pieces of wood, joined with tenon joints and metal spikes, visible at the top in the center. There are two saucer-shaped pieces at the top and bottom and a central piece, carved with figures.
- 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.
- 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. When the Ackland acquired it, it was called 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 twentieth-century specialist in the art and religion of the Yoruba people.



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

About the Art

- The carving on this tapper is organized in thirds, with a kneeling nude woman in the middle. The pointed end has no carved decoration and the hollow end is ornamented with narrow bands, geometric patterns, and carvings that allow us to see through it.
- In Yoruba imagery, kneeling is a posture that suggests reverence and nudity is considered the appropriate state for communicating with the creator god.
- In Ifa divination, which is practiced among the Yoruba people, 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.
- Many tappers are made of ivory, though some are made of wood or brass.



19

Attributed to Areogun of Osi-Ilorin
Nigeria, Ekiti Region, Yoruba culture, c. 1880 – 1956
Divination Tray, 1930s
wood
Ackland Fund, 97.1

About the Art

- At the top of this tray is the face of Eshu, the god who mediates between the human and divine worlds in Yoruba culture. Other images relate to 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).
- This tray was made to be used in Ifa divination, practiced by Yoruba people in southwest Nigeria. The process involves tools that include 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 that indicate verses in the literature. Those verses suggest solutions to the problem at hand.
- A line from Areogun of Osi-Ilorin's *oríki*, or praise poem, calls to mind the ornate carved patterns typical of his style and visible across the human forms and linear patterns of this divination tray: "He carves hard wood as though he were carving a soft calabash," that is, a gourd.

About the Artist

c. 1880: Born in Osi-Ilorin, Nigeria
c. 1890s: Apprenticed to the carver Bamagbose
1920s: Began signing his work
1930s: Carved the Ackland's tray
1956: Died

View a 3D model of this object at <https://sketchfab.com/ackland>.



21

Unidentified artist, South Africa, Zulu culture

Snuff Bottle Holder and Necklace, 18th century

beads and wood

Ackland Fund and Gift of Norma Canelas Roth and William Roth, 2017.19.4

About the Art

- The central box, made of wood and covered in beads, held snuff, a preparation of powdered and processed tobacco. Snuff has been widely used in Africa since Europeans introduced tobacco in the sixteenth century.
- A single rolled band of red, black, white, and green beads, interspersed with white, links the stoppers at either end of the box, preventing the wearer from losing them. By adding beads to these strings, the functional element is made beautiful.



Unidentified artist, South Africa, Zulu culture

Necklace or Cache Sexe, 19th century

beads, fiber, and brass

Ackland Fund and Gift of Norma Canelas Roth and William Roth, 2017.19.10

About the Art

- The artist used different weaving patterns for each beaded panel. The larger panel links the beads in an X-shaped pattern, while the smaller one links them in a linear pattern. Multicolored strings of beads — in the same colors that appear in the object's other sections — hang down from buttons attached to the smaller back panel.
- It is not certain whether this piece was worn as a necklace or around the waist, with the panels hanging down in front and in back from the pair of pink-beaded bands on each side to cover the wearer's genitals.
- The brass buttons in the front served as clasps, while the ones in the back seem to have been simply decorative.



23

Unidentified artist, South Africa, Zulu culture

Hip Panel, 19th century
beads and fiber

Ackland Fund and Gift of Norma Canelas Roth and William Roth, 2017.19.8

About the Art

- The artist used a vertical weaving technique to make the chevrons on this panel. The vertical threads running through the beads may be visible if you look very closely. The metal button would have served as a clasp.
- This object could be a side panel worn at the hip, or a modesty garment — a so-called cache-sexe, as it shielded the pubic region. It is large enough to have been used by a girl or a grown woman. It is also possible the piece was worn as a necklace by a man.
- South African beadwork objects which, as seen in this work, demonstrate great technical skill and thoughtful color combinations, were made by women.



24

Unidentified artist, South Africa, Zulu culture

Young Person's Necklace (Love Letter), 19th century

glass beads and bead strap

Ackland Fund and Gift of Norma Canelas Roth and William Roth, 2017.19.1

About the Art

- Given their irregular nature, some of the glass beads used in this necklace may be older than the nineteenth century, when their manufacture became more uniform.
- Note the delicate touches of asymmetry in the placement of the single blue beads in the field of white and in the touch of red beads at the lower left and right. On the strap, the artist used different sized beads, giving the surface a varied texture. The strap is attached with a tight cluster of white seed beads.
- Pieces like this have popularly come to be known as “love letters,” reflecting the idea that the colors and patterns may be a nonverbal language that can be interpreted with close study. Recent research suggests that there was no consistent meaning, though beadwork items such as this were certainly given as tokens of affection and commitment.



 25

Unidentified artist, South Africa, Zulu culture

Necklace or Cache Sexe, 19th century

beads, fiber, and brass

Ackland Fund and Gift of Norma Canelas Roth and William Roth, 2017.19.9

About the Art

- The artist has used numerous techniques to create this piece. The red beads are coiled, the main body is woven in a vertical pattern, and it is fringed both on the edges of the strap and the lower border of the panel.
- The larger size of the black and white beads compared with that of the red and blue ones create a varied texture across the surfaces of the piece.
- The exact function of this piece is not certain. It might have been a neckpiece, a hip panel, or an apron.



Unidentified artist, South Africa, Zulu culture

Belt, 19th century
beads and leather
Ackland Fund and Gift of
Norma Canelas Roth and
William Roth, 2017.19.7

About the Art

- This strip of leather is fully beaded in classic Zulu colors on one side: red, green, and white.
- The object was probably used as a belt. There is a metal clasp on the short end at left, but none at the right end. Its leather backing provides stability for the delicate beadwork.
- In the nineteenth century, there were many Christian missionaries in southern Africa. This piece was likely collected by one of those missionaries.



27

Unidentified artist, South Africa, Zulu culture

Young Person's Necklace (Love Letter), 19th century

beads and fiber

Ackland Fund and Gift of Norma Canelas Roth and William Roth, 2017.19.5

About the Art

- This is a simple but elegant necklace. Its diminutive size indicates it was designed for a child.
- Differences between the weaving pattern of the blue square and the red border indicate that the artist likely wove the blue square first.
- The strand that was worn around the neck is woven with a bold striped pattern that is six beads thick, perhaps making it strong enough to be practical for a child to wear. When the clasp is closed, the two larger red beads are adjacent to each other.



28

Unidentified artist, South Africa, Zulu culture

Purse, 19th century
beads and reeds

Ackland Fund and Gift of Norma Canelas Roth and William Roth, 2017.19.6

About the Art

- This unusual piece is made of reeds bunched, sewn, and beaded together. Red and white beads strung around the reeds in a spiral pattern create a dense texture and hold the bag together.
- Note the two loops for a carrying strap at the opening along the top edge.
- Except for the side and top borders, the back panel of this piece is unadorned. At the top border there are green beads along the front side and red ones along the back.



Unidentified artist, South Africa, Zulu culture
Choker-Style Necklace or Armband, 19th century
 beads, fiber, and brass
 Ackland Fund and Gift of Norma Canelas Roth and William Roth, 2017.19.2

About the Art

- Notice the brass buttons in this piece, the use of which is evidence of contact with the British military forces and their uniforms. Here they function as a clasp.
- The colors of the beads in this Zulu piece (black, white, dark red) suggest a relatively early date.
- The six bands of very small beads are wrapped around fiber to make this object, which might have been either a choker-style necklace or an armband.



Unidentified artist
South Africa, Ndebele culture
New Bride's Ceremonial Apron, c. 1920-30
leather and glass beads
Ackland Fund and Gift of Norma Canelas Roth and
William Roth, 2017.19.13

About the Art

- The extensive use of white in this piece reflects the traditional Ndebele preference for that color.
- Many Ndebele motifs may have been adapted for use in beadwork from the colorful geometric motifs they used to paint houses and yard walls, a practice apparently begun as a way of asserting Ndebele identity when under threat.
- Aprons like this are constructed after a Ndebele woman's marriage; the groom's family provides the leather background, and the bride embroiders the design. The so-called five finger design is specific to married women — unmarried girls wear simpler rectangular beaded aprons. The lobes, or fingers may represent a woman's future children.



31

Unidentified artist

South Africa, Ndebele culture

Bridal Train (*Nyonga*), c. 1960s

beads and fiber

Ackland Fund and Gift of Norma Canelas Roth and William Roth,
2017.19.19

About the Art

- The color palette of this bridal train — in blue, green, and black — differs from that of similar objects from earlier in the twentieth century, which were made of designs in predominantly white beads.
- Some of the designs reference objects and architectural structures like the home.
- Ndebele women wore trains like this one on their wedding day, in one of several different ways, including attached to the head, fastened to the wedding cape, or positioned down the front of the body.



32

Baboon Master

South Africa, Tsonga culture, active late 19th/early 20th century

Staff with Finial of a Baboon on Two Male Heads, late 19th century

wood

The William A. Whitaker Foundation Art Fund, 2019.36

About the Art

- Scholarship has not yet settled on the function of staffs like this. They may have been made for indigenous use by persons of status, or they may have been made for commercial sale to Westerners (as walking sticks).
- The baboon has no strong iconographic identity in the art of southern Africa. It may symbolize mediation between animal and human worlds.
- The two male figures supporting the baboon both have the characteristically Zulu *isicoco* (head ring), a firm band of fiber or sinew woven into the hair and covered with a mixture of gum, oil, and charcoal. It is a mark of marriage, maturity, and status.
- The exquisitely fine and powerful carving on this staff makes it an outstanding example of its type.
- The oeuvre of the so-called Baboon Master is still being worked out — it may encompass a workshop or several related carvers in late nineteenth-century Pietermaritzburg in present-day KwaZulu Natal who were probably migrants from the Tsonga culture.



33

Unidentified artist, Nigeria, Yoruba culture
Pair of Authority Figure Staffs, late 19th century
copper alloy
Charles and Isabel Eaton Fund, 2020.24.1

About the Art

- This pair of staffs would probably have been placed in the ground on iron spikes, of which only short stumps have survived.
- A pair of staffs like this would have been given to an individual after initiation into the Ogboni/Osugbo society of male and female elders, which acts as a guardian of unity and harmony within the community. It functions as a town council, a court, and electoral college that selected kings and dethroned them when deemed unfit or corrupt.
- Many fundamental principles of Yoruba culture are expressed by the duality of male and female, represented here by pairs of figures. The figures hold ritual objects.
- Both sets of figures are flanked by birds (two additional birds are positioned between the legs of the lower figures), as birds were references to important female mystical presence and powers.
- The linking chain (shorter than expected and so maybe a replacement) alludes to the single-tier versions of these sculptures that could be worn around the neck.



34

Unidentified artist

Nigeria, Yoruba culture

Ogboni/Osugbo Rattle, late 19th century
copper alloy

Charles and Isabel Eaton Fund, 2020.24.2

About the Art

- This double-sided, hand-held rattle would have been used in the rituals of the Ogboni Society of male and female elders, dedicated to Onile, the Yoruba god of the earth and sea. Traditionally, these elders play important roles in matters of government.
- On top of the staff is an image of the serene, wise face of an elder. His headgear includes not only the canonical snail shell-like cap symbolic of transformation and renewal, but also what appears to be a European style crown and framed by serpentine forms.
- The base of the staff includes a composite figure that brings together a human head, a large bird (signifying metaphysical power to create) and a fishtail (alluding to Onile's dominion over the sea.)