



THE AFRICAN ORIGIN OF CIVILIZATION

The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin Spring 2022



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Diana Craig Patch and Alisa LaGamma

THE
MET

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

etres
reunites
Egypt

2000 B.C.
Migrations of Bantu
speakers across
Saharan Africa begin

1478-1479 B.C.
Joint reign of
Kings Hatshepsut
and Thutmose III

1349-1351 B.C.
King Akhenaten
builds capital
city at Amarna

1250 B.C.
Ramses II
builds temples
at Abydos and
Siwa

1180-1184 B.C.
Tomb of
Hunefer

1180-1184 B.C.
Tomb of
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1180-1184 B.C.
Tomb of
Hunefer

30 B.C.
Death of
Cleopatra VII

A.D. 193-211
Reign of Roman
Emperor Septimius
Severus

A.D. 200
Amphitheatre
of El Jem

A.D.
St
Ta
Ga





Director's Note

This *Bulletin* and the exhibition it accompanies bring together highlights from the Museum's collection of West and Central African art with equally majestic works from ancient Egypt. Considering these two African collections together reveals the brilliance of artists—working thousands of years apart—who were born on the continent where our earliest visual creations developed and whose dynamic achievements remain a source of innovation and inspiration. What emerges is a fascinating dialogue, full of surprising visual similarities and sometimes fundamental differences, that celebrates more than five millennia of creative thought and exceptional artistry. Visitors and readers alike will be able to delve into the rich histories and diverse artistic traditions of Africa while considering these poetic cross-cultural comparisons.

The exhibition was organized by Diana Craig Patch, Lila Acheson Wallace Curator in Charge, Department of Egyptian Art, and Alisa LaGamma, Ceil and Michael E. Pulitzer Curator in Charge of The Michael C. Rockefeller Wing. Together, they selected more than forty great works of art to juxtapose in visually striking pairings based on shared themes or universal motifs. This renewed focus on Africa at The Met coincides with the temporary closure of The Michael C. Rockefeller Wing, which will reopen in 2024 after an extensive reenvisioning that will refresh our displays and better frame discussions of those beloved works of art for generations to come. As always, we deeply appreciate those who make such exhibitions possible and thank The Daniel P. Davison Fund and Louise Grunwald for their generosity, as well as the Lila Acheson Wallace Fund for The Metropolitan Museum of Art, established by the cofounder of *Reader's Digest*, for its longstanding support of the *Bulletin* series.

Max Hollein
Marina Kellen French *Director*
The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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The African continent, the birthplace of modern humanity, was the locus from which the earliest migrations of people moved across the globe. It was also the stage upon which our ancestors first expressed abstract thought in visual terms and deliberately imbued their material creations with beauty. Home to only a seventh of the world's population, but to a third of the world's languages, Africa represents an especially rich concentration of cultural diversity, a direct outcome of the unparalleled longevity of its settlement. That pluralism is manifest in an array of complex worldviews that, over millennia, have encompassed the sun cult, ancestral veneration, and divine kingship as well as Christianity and Islam.

Some of the earliest evidence of ideas expressed visually survives in the form of ochre tablets engraved in southern Africa some 80,000 years ago. The myriad developments and creative innovations that followed within this vast geographic expanse are physically evident in two areas of The Met collection whose histories are separated by several thousand years. In different ways, they both fueled "quantum leaps" in visual representation that influenced artists well beyond the borders of the African continent. One is the canon of human proportions developed by Egyptian sculptors and demonstrated in the grids they employed when carving sculpture and reliefs (fig. 1). Close study of that tradition by the ancient Greeks was the catalyst by about 600 B.C. for their own development of lifesize, freestanding figures seemingly released from blocks of stone. These statues, considered a paradigm of "classical" antiquity, became one of the cornerstones of Western visual art. That approach to representation remained dominant in the West until artists in European capitals at the start of the last century—inspired by the creations of Dogon, Baule, Baga,

1 Striding figure. Egypt (possibly Elkab), Old Kingdom, Dynasty 4, ca. 2575–2465 B.C. Painted quartzite, H. 35 1/4 in. (89.5 cm). Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1962 (62.200)

“The history of Black Africa will remain suspended in air and cannot be written correctly until African historians dare to connect it with the history of Egypt.”

—Cheikh Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality* (1974)

Dan, Fang, and Pende sculptors active in centers across West and Central Africa—foregrounded conceptual ideas in a deliberate departure from an illusionistic depiction of observed reality (fig. 2). Once again, artistic creativity originating in Africa presented a new way forward.

Despite their creators' shared African origins, the landmark cultural achievements by ancient Egyptians and by artists from an array of traditions that flourished to the south have, for the most part, long been categorized by the West as unrelated bodies of work. This historic disassociation is ironic given that the very idea of “Africa” as a descriptive category, as discussed by the philosophers Valentin-Yves Mudimbe and Kwame Anthony Appiah, is a reductive notion that derives from European culture and has only recently come to figure in the thinking of many of those identified as Africans.¹ Such external framing has selectively and inaccurately portrayed Africa as a monolithic sociocultural continuum concentrated south of the Sahara.

In the New World, that conceptual homogenization and collapsing of cultures was imposed on the millions of individuals forcibly uprooted from communities across the African continent, sometimes thousands of miles apart, between the sixteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries. The dehumanization of bondage deprived the enslaved and their descendants of specific cultural knowledge concerning their distinct ancestries.² The historian Mamadou Diouf has noted that as early as the late eighteenth century ancient Ethiopian and Egyptian civilizations became critical references to a reconstruction of the gifts of Black humanity, an idea promulgated through sources such as W. E. B. Du Bois's *Star of Ethiopia* (1913) and the NAACP's publication *The Crisis*.³ Paradoxically, although ancient Egypt

² Alberto Giacometti (1901–1966). *Spoon Woman*, 1926–27 (cast 1954). Bronze, H. 56 7/8 in. (143.8 cm). Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (55.1414)



is one of the earliest known African civilizations, its significant triumphs were rarely recognized as African, and its potential connections to neighboring cultures to its south were largely unacknowledged for much of modern history. At The Met, that legacy is evident in the independent histories of its collections of ancient Egyptian and sub-Saharan African art.

Cheikh Anta Diop and *The African Origin of Civilization*

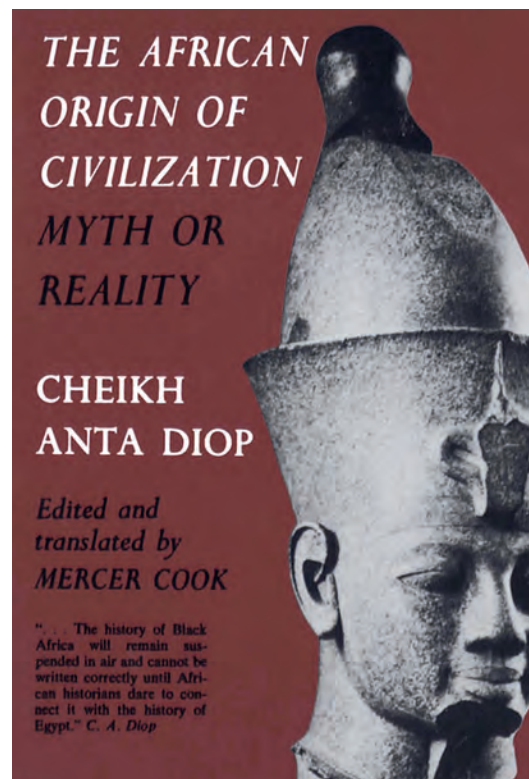
Born in Diourbel, Senegal, Cheikh Anta Diop (1923–1986) was an Egyptologist, linguist, anthropologist, scientist, and historian of the modern era who emphasized Egypt’s foundational role in the development of global traditions and its inextricably deep cultural connections with the African continent at large (figs. 3, 4). During the 1950s, as self-determination for new nation-states across Africa exposed the need to reassess Africa’s contributions to humanity, Diop focused on establishing the anteriority of its civilizations. His transformational scholarship, together with that of Dubois, was celebrated at the *1er Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres* (First World Festival of Negro Arts) held in Dakar in 1966. Diop’s interdisciplinary approach challenged prevailing attitudes about Africa’s place in history and advocated for recentering the continent as the source of both our earliest ancestors and widespread cultural practices. The title of this *Bulletin* and the exhibition it accompanies, which pairs iconic works from ancient Egypt with those from some of the major African cultural traditions that followed, pays homage to Diop’s influential 1974 publication *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality*.

Diop was among the members of an international scientific committee that in 1964 prompted the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to launch a thirty-five-year collaborative project to produce, with the contributions of some 230 historians, an eight-volume *General History of Africa*, covering prehistory to the present.⁴ As part of UNESCO’s ongoing effort to educate the world about Africa’s deep and complex past, in 1960 the organization rallied support for the International Campaign to Save the Monuments of Nubia. This rescue effort responded to the planned construction of the Aswan High Dam and the subsequent creation of Lake Nasser, which flooded a portion of the Nile Valley and forced the relocation of the Nubian peoples who lived along the river as well as the now famous temples at Abu Simbel and other monuments (fig. 5).

The need for collaborative stewardship of the world’s cultural patrimony, addressed by the 1972 UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, is more relevant today than ever before as poverty, political repression, conflict, and climate change drive the



3 Cheikh Anta Diop (1923–1986)



4 Cover of *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality* (1974)

global displacement of populations on an unprecedented scale. At the same time, the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic has made evident our basic and abiding interconnectedness. Contemporary Africa is a multifaceted and powerful influence throughout the world, as the forthcoming volume of UNESCO



5 Conservation efforts to save the Ramesses II temple at Abu Simbel, part of UNESCO's International Campaign to Save the Monuments of Nubia, 1960–64

history makes clear, one whose critical role in shaping American society—which began in 1619, with the arrival of the first enslaved Africans in colonial Virginia—demands that we must recognize the enduring significance of that legacy not only at its source but also in all major cultural venues, from concert halls and performing-arts centers to museums of fine art.

A Tale of Two African Collections

Works from ancient Egypt have been a focus of The Met's collecting activities since the Museum's founding, in 1870. In 1906, the Department of Egyptian Art was established with a mandate to gain a better understanding of the culture and history of this very early civilization and to develop an important collection through excavation. At that time, the Egyptian government awarded excavators a portion of finds—a practice known as *partage*—at the end of each excavation season. By 1937, as fieldwork was put on hold amid the Depression, more than 27,000 artifacts from excavation had been acquired by The Met, and today some 60 percent of the collection has a history directly associated with an archaeological context (fig. 6).

By 1913, an entire wing was added to the north side of the Central Park building to house the growing Egyptian collection, including the mastaba chapel of Perneb (an Old Kingdom

administrator), which was purchased from the Egyptian government and installed at its entrance. The Met's most monumental gift from Egypt, however, and its most famous, is the Temple of Dendur, a Roman Period cult temple dedicated to the goddess Isis and two Nubian saints, which was moved from its Nubian setting before Lake Nasser flooded it and is today housed in a spectacular gallery designed by Kevin Roche John Dinkeloo and Associates to evoke the landscape in which the monument originally stood.

As of 2022, The Met's Egyptian collection includes some 30,000 works, most created between 4,500 B.C. and A.D. 400, but also represented are flint tools dating as early as 300,000 B.C., which document the material culture of the Nile Valley's early inhabitants. The strengths of the collection reflect the major sites excavated by the Museum during the first four decades of the twentieth century, namely, the pyramid complexes at Lisht, in Egypt's north, and Thebes in the south. As a result, the collection sheds light mostly on the periods during which those two locations were principally occupied in antiquity, that is, from the Middle Kingdom through the early Third Intermediate Period (ca. 2050–950 B.C.). Owing to the focus of that archaeological work, for many years significant historical and regional gaps remained. In order to address these,

some voids were partially filled by gifts and purchases, whose acquisitions adhered to the 1970 UNESCO convention on cultural property, which was ratified by Egypt in 1983.⁵ Although The Met never excavated in Nubia, for example, the Museum was able to acquire from another institution a small group of Meroitic objects (1st–3rd century A.D.) excavated from the Egyptian site of Faras, in Lower Nubia. These pieces—pots, beads, and anklets (fig. 7)—are representative but small and do not convey the Meroitic civilization's greatest achievements in ceramics, metalworking, and architecture, as known from the Sudan. In order to establish unequivocally the impressive nature of those traditions, an exhibition on royal jewelry, *The Gold of Meroe*, was held at The Met in 1993. Since 1996, other landmark exhibitions inaugurated at The Met have placed

amazing works of art from the Museum alongside those from other collections with the purpose of exploring various chronological periods and themes in ancient Egypt, such as the art of Predynastic Egypt, the Old Kingdom, the Middle Kingdom, the reign of Hatshepsut, and the artistry of metal statuary donated to temples in the Third Intermediate Period.

Scholarly and popular interest in contacts between ancient Egypt and its contemporaneous neighbors in north-east Africa has grown significantly over the past fifty years. The field of Egyptology has acknowledged and is dispensing with its earlier, often racist assumptions about these relationships, and groundbreaking fieldwork is taking place in specific areas of contact, such as between the Second and the Sixth Nile Cataracts, along the Red Sea coast, and within the Nile



6 Workers clearing the ravine outside the Hatshepsut temple wall, part of The Met's Egyptian Expedition in Thebes, 1928–29

Valley inhabited by the ancient Egyptians. No longer are these relationships viewed as one of conqueror and foe, and the relevant cultures—including Nubian kingdoms south of the Second Cataract; the Pan Grave culture, whose distinctive burials are well known; and the region of Punt, the source of incense for Egyptian temples—are being studied on their own merits. More nuanced questions are being asked about how peoples from these diverse regions interacted with the ancient Egyptians, manifesting their various roles as immigrants, traders, subjects, competitors, or invaders.

Compared with the foundational place occupied by ancient Egypt in The Met's history, the absence of works from sub-Saharan Africa in the Museum until 1982 reflected a profound bias in the Western art world. Edward Robinson, director of The Met from 1910 to 1931, insisted on the centrality and primacy of classically based Western traditions and their ancient antecedents. He and his counterpart at the American Museum of Natural History, Henry Fairfield Osborn, shared a conviction that the rest of the world's cultures lacked history and were, therefore, the purview of the natural sciences and anthropology. According to that inaccurate and racist perspective, the immensely diverse historical and living cultural traditions that developed across the continent, both parallel to ancient Egypt and in subsequent millennia, were reduced to the Western construct of a monolithic, ahistorical sub-Saharan Africa. Deemed unworthy of being viewed among the fine arts at The Met, they were, it was believed, best relegated to the natural history collections on the other side of Central Park.

In contrast to collections of ancient Egyptian art assembled during the nineteenth century, the material culture today conserved and identified as "African" in the West is defined by a marked heterogeneity and eclecticism, encompassing hundreds of distinct artistic traditions. Western understanding of this broad region, among the most culturally diverse in the world, was informed almost from the very beginning by the nature of the initial contacts between Europe and West and Central Africa. As early as the sixteenth century, European traders who traveled by sea to Africa's Atlantic coast commissioned artifacts from local artisans as presentation pieces for their sponsors. Envoys from some of the courts in the region also traveled to Europe and were received there as equals. Together, they served as emissaries for the exchange of gifts between European leaders and their counterparts in several different African states. Notable among these were the so-called Afro-Portuguese ivories, produced by master African carvers specifically for display in European princely collections. These exports, created during the earliest period of direct exchange between Africa and Europe, do not relate to a single



7 Jug with painted decoration. Lower Nubia (Faras, Cemetery 1, Grave 1007), Meroitic Period, 30 B.C.–A.D. 364. Painted pottery, H. 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (24.7 cm). Rogers Fund, 1913 (13.125.43)

tradition but rather to those of an array of culturally distinct centers, including that of the Sapi (Sierra Leone), the Edo and Owo (Nigeria), and the Kongo (Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo).

No society stands still. Over many centuries, major cultural and political developments in Africa, ranging from the adoption of new faiths to the rise and fall of states, ushered in near continual change across the continent. The presence of European traders remained mostly limited to Africa's coastline until the nineteenth century, by which time the horror of the Atlantic slave trade and the ambition of rival European powers to compete for colonial territories had fundamentally redefined the nature of the earlier, more egalitarian power dynamics. Following the expanded European presence in the interior, the collecting of material culture gradually intensified during the early twentieth century. With a few major exceptions, the majority of the artifacts created in Africa south of the Sahara and now conserved in the West date to no earlier than the eighteenth century. Composed of perishable media such as wood and other organic materials, they were likely no more than a century old when acquired in the region in the 1800s. Given the limited archaeological record, and in the absence of documentation, one can only speculate about the longevity of any of the

remarkable array of wood sculptural genres that today are so closely identified with cultures south of the Sahara, or what is so often imagined in the West to constitute “African art.”

The visual traditions in fired clay, cast metal, and carved ivory that developed in present-day Nigeria as early as 500 B.C. represent one notable exception to that narrative. Official patronage of works in these durable media from the fifteenth century into the present by the court of Benin, a military and commercial power that emerged in southern Nigeria as early as the thirteenth century, is a rare instance in sub-Saharan Africa of continuous production in a single artistic center over such a long period of time. Indeed, these majestic works remained in use by the Oranmiyan dynasty of kings until the infamous sacking of Benin City by British invaders in 1897. That violent act of aggression resulted in the invasion and overnight plunder of the royal palace. Benin’s monarch, Oba Ovonramwen (r. 1888–97), was tragically deposed, imprisoned, and exiled to Calabar, where he died, while a concentration of his patrimony subsequently became part of the holdings of the British Museum. Thousands of other Benin works removed by members of the British forces were dispersed through private sale and auctions. Germany’s newly established museums of ethnography were among the major clientele for Benin art, and today the largest group of these works, some 520 artifacts, remains in Berlin.

Emblematic of Benin artistic majesty is a series of five sixteenth-century ivory masks seized from the king’s bed-chamber. Two were retained by Sir Ralph Moor, Commissioner and Consul-General of the Niger Coast Protectorate, who launched the Benin palace invasion. Following Moor’s suicide, in 1909, both ivories in his possession were sold by his widow. They entered the market through a dealer of Chinese art, who sold them to British anthropologist C. J. Seligman. Seligman, in turn, sold one to the British Museum at that time but kept the other, which is now in The Met collection (see discussion below).⁶ In 1977, the Benin ivory mask in the British Museum was selected as the symbol for what became the largest pan-African cultural gathering to date, *The Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC ’77)*, held in Lagos, Nigeria. The denial of the mask as a loan to its source country for that exhibition focused attention on calls for its repatriation and the commissioning of a replica in bronze by Nigerian artist Erhabor Emokpae (1934–1984). In 2007, the Benin Dialogue Group—which includes directors of European institutions with Benin collections, representatives of the Royal Court of Benin, and Nigeria’s National Commission for Museums and Monuments—was convened to address the status of such works. The group’s vision is to establish a new

museum in Benin City—the Edo Museum of West African Art (EMOWAA), designed by Sir David Adjaye—that would reunite the most significant of these artworks through loans and repatriations. In the fall of 2021, the German government announced a plan to return the Benin art in its national collections in 2022. Digital Benin, an international inventory of Benin art whose survey will include The Met, among scores of other participants, is scheduled to launch later this year.

New “African” Idioms in the West

Some of the earliest African artifacts that caught the attention of European avant-garde artists in urban centers such as Paris at the start of the twentieth century initially surfaced in flea markets. The histories and original contexts of these varied works—from West African masks originally danced in operatic theatrical performance to decommissioned sculptural instruments deployed by priests in Central Africa—were largely unrecorded, as were the circumstances of their removal and transfer from West and Central Africa. Interest in such “exotic” creations, as they were perceived to be at the time, prompted a growing network of traders, missionaries, and colonial officials to acquire more of these decontextualized pieces. Manifestations of vibrant living cultures, the masks and ceremonial instruments that reached the West through these avenues came with few details concerning their original significance, allowing Western viewers to impose their own self-reflective interpretations on them. Newly established ethnographic museums such as the Musée d’Ethnographie at the Trocadero Palace in Paris, founded in 1878—often the beneficiaries of collecting campaigns by colonial governments or other official sponsors—became major consumers of such works. In some instances, the artifacts exported and assembled in Western collections were replaced by their original owners or relinquished as emblematic of discarded, retrograde practices, while in other cases their absence constituted a profound loss that was never addressed. As with the example of the Afro-Portuguese ivories in the sixteenth century, generations of artists living and working in West and Central Africa from the nineteenth century on have supplied works to satisfy the demands of markets outside the continent while also continuing to respond to local patrons.

Comparatively little African material culture was accessible in American public institutions at the start of the twentieth century. These limited displays included a modest inaugural exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum, mostly of works from Central Africa, and decorative arts by the Mangbetu and Azande peoples collected by Herbert Lang and James P. Chapin as part of the American Museum of Natural History’s Congo

Expedition (1909–15). Most fine-art venues for African works were private initiatives, organized by well-connected art world elites, such as Albert Barnes and Alfred Stieglitz, who saw them through the lens of the modernist paradigm.

Alain Locke (1885–1954), the philosopher, influential educator, and public intellectual often considered the father of the Harlem Renaissance, was an early advocate for repositioning Africa as the source of the cultural ancestry of millions of Americans. In 1922, Locke traveled to Egypt on “a quest to learn concretely how cultural exchange created civilization” and to view the newly discovered tomb of Tutankhamun as a representative of the African American scholarly community.⁷ He arrived during the second season of excavations, but Howard Carter, the tomb’s excavator, denied him access, as he did others. Locke subsequently directed much of his energies to publishing and exhibiting the historical achievements of what remained of the more esoteric visual traditions from West and Central Africa—by that time a transformative influence on modernist art—in order to instill in Americans a greater appreciation for the “art of the ancestors.” It became Locke’s personal imperative to redress the omission of African art from the public arena, beginning in 1927 with an exhibition at the New Art Circle Gallery, New York, of a collection of one thousand Central African artifacts assembled by the Brussels-based photographer Raoul Blondiau. Reviewing the exhibition in the *New York Times*, Sheldon Cheney wrote, “For however rich the other treasures of the past that our collectors and institutions have acquired, African art has remained neglected and practically unknown except to that small group that has rallied around the ‘modernist’ painters and sculptors.”⁸ Locke sought funding to acquire the Blondiau collection for permanent display in Harlem, the center of Black culture in America, as the Harlem Museum of African Art.⁹ The works that Locke managed to obtain were eventually bequeathed to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at the New York Public Library and to Howard University, but his ambitions for a museum went unrealized owing to financial constraints (it was the beginning of the Great Depression) and a lack of more widespread community support.¹⁰

As late as the mid-twentieth century, historical works from sub-Saharan Africa were still deliberately excluded from all major institutions of fine art in the United States, and the unfulfilled promise of Locke’s Harlem museum loomed as a prominent missed opportunity. Instead, a private initiative led by Nelson Aldrich Rockefeller (1908–1979)—later governor of the State of New York and vice president of the United States—pioneered the programmatic display of African art in New York City. Founded in the 1950s as the Museum of

Primitive Art (MPA), Rockefeller’s museum emphasized the aesthetic beauty of works from Africa, Oceania, and the ancient Americas. The collection was assembled from auctions and galleries in New York, London, and Paris using Rockefeller’s own funds and on the advice of Robert Goldwater, an art historian and the MPA’s first director. Its focus was on sculpture from West and Central Africa from the sixteenth to the early twentieth century.

Rockefeller, an ardent internationalist, sponsored the MPA in parallel to the independence movements and optimism then sweeping across Africa in anticipation of the region’s increased representation in organizations ranging from the United Nations to The Metropolitan Museum of Art, to which he long (but fruitlessly) sought to donate his collection. In 1966, highlights of the MPA traveled to Dakar as loans to the landmark *1er Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres* (*First World Festival of Negro Arts*), organized by the poet Léopold Sédar Senghor, Senegal’s first head of state and a founder of the Négritude cultural and political movement (fig. 8). The festival brought together more than 2,000 writers, artists, and musicians from across the African diaspora, including renowned Americans such as Langston Hughes, Duke Ellington, Josephine Baker, Arthur Mitchell, and Alvin Ailey, to celebrate the continent’s vast cultural diversity.



8 President Léopold Sédar Senghor of Senegal on the cover of *Bingo: Le Mensuel du Monde Noir* (April 1966)

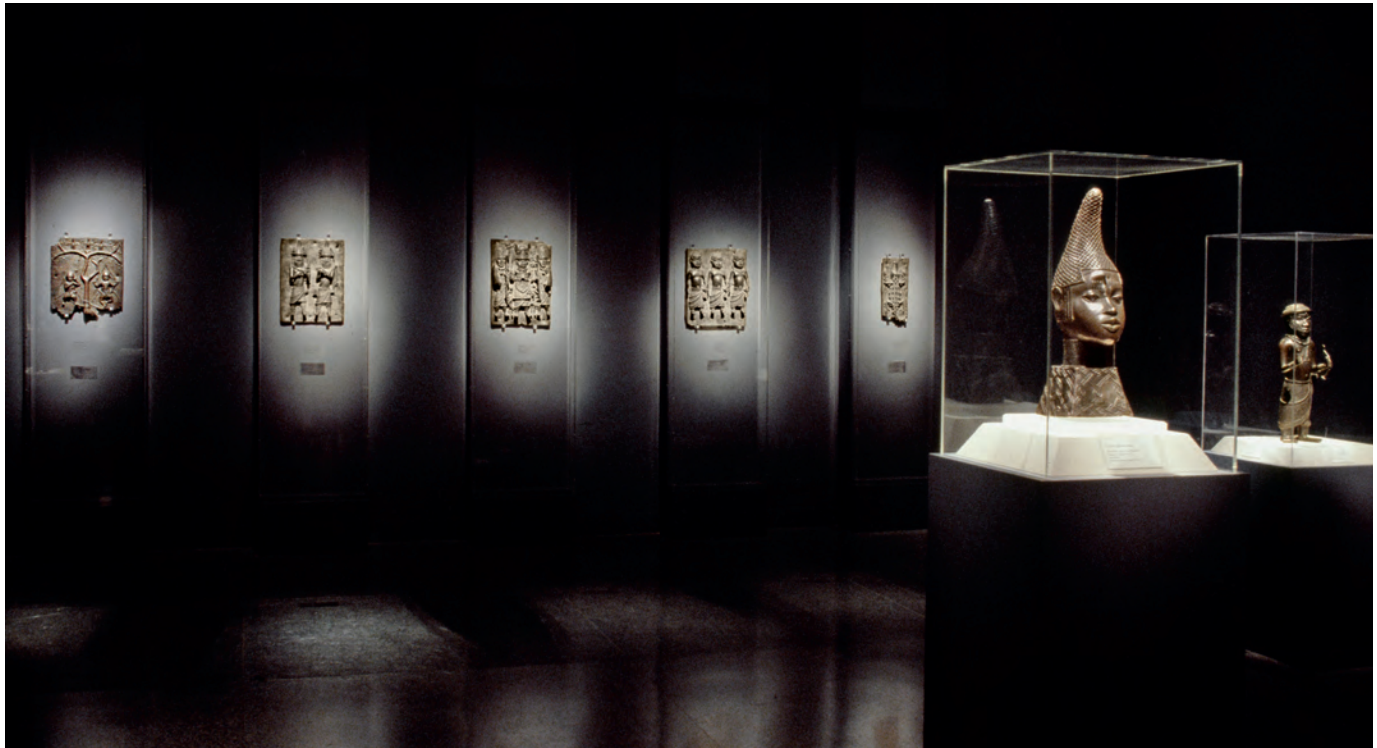
At the same time the MPA was founded in America, new arts institutions were being built in Africa. Kenneth Murray (1903–1972), Nigeria's founding director of antiquities, led a campaign within the colonial government beginning in the 1950s to acquire dispersed Nigerian works sold at auctions in order to establish a network of national museum collections, including a local history museum in Benin City initiated by the Edo historian Chief Jacob Egharevba. Murray also enacted measures to ensure that artifacts excavated at new sites in Nigeria would be retained by those institutions. In addition, acquisitions were made on the international art market by a network of museum professionals both in the United Kingdom and on the ground in Nigeria. Among these was a cast-brass portrait of Queen Mother Idia, one of the most outstanding works of Benin art, which was acquired in 1953 along with all the Benin bronzes in the collection of the medical officer affiliated with the British invasion of Benin City, Dr. Richard Allman.¹¹ By the time the National Museum opened in Lagos in 1957, on the eve of Nigeria's independence, it had the third most comprehensive collection of Benin art in the world after the Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, and the British Museum. In 1980, a major traveling exhibition of one hundred masterpieces from the Nigerian National Museum introduced American audiences to what for many were unfamiliar traditions (fig. 9). Ekpo Eyo, then head of the National Museum, lauded the presentation for fostering broader knowledge of Nigeria's past and present. A generation later, in 2021, officials from The Metropolitan Museum of Art joined representatives from Nigeria's National Commission for Museums and Monuments in New York to transfer back several accessioned works that had not been reported missing from the Nigerian national collection, including two Benin plaques, given to The Met in 1991 by Klaus Perls, that subsequent provenance research revealed had been among twenty-three transferred from the British Museum through sale and donation to the National Museum in 1950 and 1951.

In 1957, the year Nigeria's National Museum was established, C. J. Seligman's widow put up for sale the second of the Benin ivory masks removed from the Benin palace by Sir Ralph Moor and acquired by her husband on the art market. Nearly a decade earlier, Kenneth Murray had initiated a campaign to raise funds to acquire the mask for the nascent Nigerian collections but was unsuccessful. Instead, given the record asking price, and on the advice of Goldwater, Rockefeller acquired the mask with the explicit intention that it form the centerpiece of a major public collection in New York. On September 17, 1958, Rockefeller's purchase of the mask was reported on the front page of the *New York Times* alongside an image and its full history.

The generational shift in social consciousness during the late 1960s helped expand the visibility of the achievements of African artists in many American fine-arts institutions. In 1969, The Met announced the gift of Rockefeller's works from sub-Saharan Africa, which would at long last be accepted and exhibited within an expanded Met campus. Completed in 1982, that transformational addition, The Michael C. Rockefeller Wing, has come to encompass some 4,000 works, produced in Africa between the twelfth century and the recent past, related to 206 distinct cultures and 39 nations. Designed by Roche and Dinkeloo, the original galleries sought to celebrate the aesthetic dynamism and visual power of works from sub-Saharan Africa. In the years since, an ongoing program of exhibitions has presented new scholarship addressing their cultural significance, from questions about the authorship of major regional traditions to examining how different genres, such as portraiture or representations of the ideas of human origins, have been given visual expression by African artists in distinct cultural contexts.

More than a half-century after its inauguration, the Rockefeller Wing is now being renovated by WHY Architecture, in partnership with Beyer Blinder Belle and The Met's curatorial team. This major reenvisioning, scheduled for completion in 2024, will allow distinct cultural landscapes and worldviews to be more fully evoked both in the galleries and through associated digital content alongside the historical contexts in which these works originated and functioned over time. This period of transition affords the Department of Egyptian Art and The Michael C. Rockefeller Wing the opportunity to fulfill an aspiration of many of our visitors to unite works from these two African collections. Although the sheer size of each collection makes a permanent physical merger impractical, we hope that showing these landmark works together will invite reflection on the layered, multicultural nature of the visual traditions that flourished across Africa and profoundly informed a global history of art.

In the pages that follow, we present pairs of masterpieces from The Met collection shoulder to shoulder, bringing together parallel subject matter or iconography that bridges enormous cultural and temporal divides. Against an incomparably expansive timeline of watershed developments, these juxtapositions and themes speak to shared human concerns and universal motifs. We consider each work in terms of what is known about its specific cultural significance as well as what documentation exists of its excavation or provenance history. The objects in each pairing are direct points of contact with their respective authors, individuals who lived in very different social contexts but whose independent visions



9 *Treasures of Ancient Nigeria* at The Met, including the 16th-century portrait of Queen Idia, at right, August 11–October 12, 1980

explored shared subject matter and circulated far beyond their places of origin. As we voice our profound respect for their achievements, we pledge not to obscure the histories that led to their convergence in New York City but rather to let them be told, as forthrightly as possible, as narratives of highly consequential human interactions.

Despite formal and conceptual resonances across time and culture, the specific connections that unfolded between ancient Egypt and precursors of the traditions represented in The Michael C. Rockefeller Wing remain to be investigated by future generations. As foreseen by Diop, this will doubtless require not only expanded archaeological excavation across Africa, but also interdisciplinary approaches by scholars across the humanities. At The Met, this renewed focus on the African continent marks a process in which we are creating a foundation for new approaches to how we frame our respective permanent galleries in relation to those of the Museum at large. For example, we have the privilege—not unlike the Greeks—of being able to study first hand the genius of ancient Egypt. On the same campus, we can further experience how the absorption of that encounter with ancient Egypt was translated into the form of the great kouros figure in the Greek and Roman galleries. Nowhere else under the same roof can you then be introduced to masterpieces of sculpture from sub-Saharan Africa that were primary sources of inspiration for the revolution in Western art led by Picasso, Matisse, Brancusi, and others. While those connections are a basic part of any survey of The Met collection, this initiative inaugurates a bridge

between works of ancient Egyptian art and those concentrated in The Michael C. Rockefeller Wing that we hope will spark new questions about the yet unexplored history that separates them.

1. V[alentin]-Y[ves] Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988) and Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Why Africa? Why Art?," in *Africa: The Art of a Continent*, by Tom Phillips et al., exh. cat. (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1995), p. 23.
2. Appiah, "Why Africa? Why Art?," p. 23.
3. Mamadou Diouf to Alisa LaGamma, personal communication by email, April 4, 2022.
4. UNESCO International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a General History of Africa, *General History of Africa*, 8 vols. (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1981–93).
5. UNESCO, Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property (Paris, November 14, 1970); http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13039&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html.
6. Of the other three masks, two are in public collections (the Seattle Art Museum and the Linden-Museum Stuttgart) and one is in private hands (currently collection of Sheikh Al-Thani of Qatar).
7. Jeffrey C. Stewart, *The New Negro: The Life of Alain Locke* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 376, 390.
8. Sheldon Cheney, "Darkest Africa Sends Us Art," *New York Times*, February 13, 1927, section SM, pp. 7, 22.
9. Stewart, *New Negro*, p. 717.
10. Ibid.
11. See Ekpo Eyo and Frank Willett, *Treasures of Ancient Nigeria*, exh. cat. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), and Barnaby Phillips, *Loot: Britain and the Benin Bronzes* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2021).

PRIMARY PARTNERSHIP



THE KING'S ACQUAINTANCES MEMI AND SABU

Egypt, probably Giza, Western Cemetery
Old Kingdom, Dynasty 4 (ca. 2575–2465 B.C.)
Painted limestone, H. 24½ in. (62 cm)

Provenance: collection of Louis Stern, by 1948; acquired
from Louis Stern, 1948
Rogers Fund, 1948 (48.111)

This pair of figures represents Memi and Sabu, who are generally understood to be husband and wife, although the position of their names in the inscription does not clearly identify each person. Their common title, “King’s Acquaintance,” is an honorary one, entailing no specific responsibilities, but connecting them to the royal court. The man’s position and greater height would normally indicate that he is the sculpture’s focus, but the woman’s sideways gaze, focusing elsewhere within the tomb chapel where this statue would have been installed, suggests that she is equally important. Whatever the original intention, the work conveys an unusually strong sense of intimacy.

A close family relationship, such as that of husband and wife, mother and daughter, or two siblings, can be acknowledged in ancient Egyptian sculpture and relief by an intimate gesture. With paired spouses, the woman is often the one who reaches out, placing her arm around her spouse’s waist or shoulder. Only in rare cases such as this one does the man return this affectionate embrace. The placement of his hand over his wife’s breast is unusual but is known from another sculpture of paired spouses as well as a representation of a queen embracing her adult daughter.

SEATED COUPLE

Dogon artist, Mali
18th–early 19th century
Wood and metal, H. 28¾ in. (73 cm)

Provenance: Henri Kamer, Paris and New York;
Lester Wunderman, New York, until 1977
Gift of Lester Wunderman, 1977 (1977.394.15)

On a metaphysical level, Dogon thought has conceived of the soul as male and female twins. The master sculptor who released this pair from a solid block of wood evokes that human duality in a concise unit of being. The union of their parallel, elongated bodies, signaled by the horizontal gesture of the male’s proper right arm, is one of exacting bilateral symmetry. They are essential counterparts in procreation and sustenance, and a strategic variation of attributes distinguishes their roles. The equilibrium denoted by these complementary visual elements—his beard and her lip ornament; his nipples and her breasts; the quiver slung across his back and the infant carried on hers—suggests the rigor of a series of mathematical equations.

A Dogon account traces the origins of this tradition to the first human death and a subsequent desire to support the soul. The imposing scale of this tribute suggests that it was likely placed on a family altar to venerate a notable elder. Of the prayers and offerings directed toward influential ancestors, the most important were petitions for the introduction of new life into the community. Over the course of the last millennium, amid the diffusion of Islam across the Sahel region south of the Sahara, local Muslim belief also came to incorporate such worldviews. In the mid-twentieth century, French ethnographers began to publish their understanding of the complex cosmology and mythology of the Dogon and to collect related artifacts to record what they perceived to be a disappearing culture. A more widespread admiration for the spare elegance of the Dogon sculptural aesthetic followed, occurring in parallel to an increasing prioritization of the Islamic faith in Dogon communities. This particular sculpture likely remained in use in Mali until the 1960s.



MASTERY OF METALS

HORN PLAYER

Edo artist, Igun-Eronmwen guild, Court of Benin, Nigeria
1550–1680

Brass, H. 24 ¾ in. (62.9 cm)

Provenance: Court of Benin, removed from the Royal Palace in 1897 during the British military occupation of Benin City; J. Young, Glasgow, until 1899; Augustus Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers, Farnham, Dorset; an anonymous source, until 1957; K. John Hewett, London, until 1957; Nelson A. Rockefeller, New York, on loan to the MPA, New York, 1957–72; MPA, New York, 1972–78 The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1972 (1978.412.310)

This musician sounding a side-blown trumpet invokes the majestic pageantry that accompanies the *oba*'s public appearances at the court of Benin. Within the palace, royal altars that commemorate past *obas* and serve as the site of communication between the living sovereign and his predecessor are the focus of annual worship. Notable among these ceremonies are *Igue*, which fortifies the *oba*'s power, and *Ugie Erha Oba*, in which chiefs pay homage to him as his father's successor. Artists belonging to royal guilds of brass casters and ivory carvers produced an array of artifacts, ranging from bells to freestanding figures, that were placed on the altars. The lost-wax process deployed to produce this figure yielded a single original. Minute details in his distinctive lower garment, composed of a leopard pelt and feather-work, include an elaborate tie at the waist.



STATUE OF THE GOD PTAH

Egypt

Third Intermediate Period (ca. 1070–712 B.C.)

Leaded bronze, gold leaf, and glass inlays, H. with tang 12 ½ in. (31.9 cm)

Provenance: collection of Raymond Gabrielle Baptiste

Sabatier, by 1864; acquired from R. Wace, 2009

Purchase, Gift in memory of Manuel Schnitzer, 2009 (2009.175)

This spectacular statuette is remarkable for both its scale and quality of preservation, as many such sculptures were melted down in antiquity for their metal. It was likely made for a temple, given its size and the precious materials employed in its manufacture, such as the glass inlaid eyes and gold leaf, traces of which are still visible on the surface. Cult temples during the Third Intermediate Period were centers of royal patronage, and pharaohs lavished them with high-quality images in gold, silver, and bronze manufactured using creative techniques.

This statue of Ptah, a god known to listen to everyone's prayers, probably allowed the deity to do so from a shrine within a temple. He is one of the earliest known Egyptian gods and is easily identifiable by his shrouded form, smooth cap, and distinctive scepter. He held multiple roles over three millennia of ancient Egyptian history, including "one who created through speech," the "great leader of the craftsmen," and the "lord of Memphis," Egypt's traditional capital city and Ptah's principal residence. His charming visage here may also reflect another of his well-known characterizations: "benevolent of face."



COMMEMORATING BEAUTY



MEMORIAL HEAD (NSODIE)

Akan artist, Ghana

Ca. 1800

Terracotta, h. 7 ¾ in. (19.7 cm)

Provenance: Pace Primitive and Ancient Art, New York, early 1980s; Evelyn Kossak, New York, 1980s–2015
Gift of Evelyn Kranes Kossak, The Kronos Collections, 2015 (2015.790)

Terracotta effigies were the focus of lavish postburial send-offs for senior chiefs, priests, and queen mothers in southern and southwestern Akan centers as early as the seventeenth century. This process of commemoration, which could take place up to two years after the subject's death, began with a female author carefully capturing the honoree's essence in modeled clay. While the idealized facial expression depicted is invariably one of supreme calm and serenity, the individual's personal style emerges through distinctive facial markings and elaborate hair arrangements. Prayers ensured that the rendering truly represented the deceased and invoked their spirit within the portrait. The work was often painted and clothed in advance of being paraded on a palanquin through the community. Such public salutes to esteemed leaders culminated in the deposition of their likeness, along with food and drink, at the site of their new "residence" outside the community, now as venerated ancestors. Following their "planting" at a ceremonial site, they might be visited with annual offerings until they were subsumed back into the landscape.



LID TO A CANOPIC JAR DEPICTING A QUEEN

Egypt, Thebes, Valley of the Kings, Tomb KV 55

New Kingdom, Amarna Period, Dynasty 18, reign of Akhenaten or shortly thereafter (ca. 1349–1330 B.C.)

Travertine (Egyptian alabaster), blue glass, and obsidian, H. 7 ¼ in. (18.2 cm)

Provenance: Davis/Ayrton excavations, 1907, T. Davis received in the division of finds; acquired from the T. Davis estate, 1930

Theodore M. Davis Collection, Bequest of Theodore M. Davis, 1915 (30.8.54)

The identity of this striking woman, whose name remains uncertain, has intrigued Egyptologists since the object's discovery in 1907. The lid and its container, together with three similar vessels, formed a set of canopic jars, designed to protect the internal organs of a mummified woman. All were excavated in a badly looted tomb in the Valley of the Kings that dates to the reign of Akhenaten. In addition to the container's discovery in a royal tomb, there are several indications that this serene face—with its narrowed eyes, pointed chin, and full, sensuous lips—represents a queen, including its superb quality, the faint remains of a royal name on the jar, and the presence of a uraeus, or aroused cobra, on the forehead. Moreover, short hair in the form of an elaborately coiffed wig, which came into vogue on women during the reign of Amenhotep III (ca. 1390–1352 B.C.), is worn by only a few royal women.

VISUALIZING HIERARCHY

PLAQUE: WARRIOR AND ATTENDANTS

Edo artist, Igun-Eronmwon guild, Court of Benin, Nigeria
16th–17th century

Brass, H. 18 ¾ in. (47.6 cm)

Provenance: Court of Benin, removed from the palace in 1897 during the British military occupation of Benin City; Sotheby's, London, 1964; Paul Rose; Robert Owen Lehman, New York; Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, New York, until 1990; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1990 (1990.332)

This brass panel is one of nearly a thousand created over a century by members of the Igun-Eronmwon, the Benin court's guild of royal brass casters who worked for the *oba*. According to oral histories, the series was designed to be affixed to columns along the palace facade, spanning a surface area of more than 1,130 square feet. The scenes depicted, intended to inspire awe and fear, immortalized Oba Esigie's (1504–1550) triumphs over internal and external threats. The center of the present scene features a regally attired warrior chief, who raises his sword in a gesture of fealty to the *oba*. A hierarchical arrangement of flanking soldiers and attendants signals his preeminence. They engage in acts of offering, fanning, and trumpeting that

augment the chief's standing as a figure of invincibility. Esigie's reign was defined by not only martial victory but also unprecedented prosperity, owing to expanded trade with Portugal. Prisoners of his wars were among the goods exchanged for brass currency in the form of manillas, which were melted down to produce the expansive repertoire of court arts that he sponsored.

The palace plaques were transferred to storage at some undocumented time by the end of the nineteenth century, and in 1897, during the British invasion, they were removed by the British and sent to London. There is no record of this work between that time and 1964, when it was auctioned in London. It subsequently was acquired by three different individuals and might have remained in private hands if its third owner, Klaus Perls, a dealer of modern art, had not been persuaded by his friend William Lieberman, then chair of modern art at The Met, to give it to the Museum. Its 1991 transfer as a gift into The Met's collection followed intensive review, analysis, and treatment as well as publication by Museum curators and conservators in consultation with Benin specialists. That process culminated in a traveling exhibition whose publication was shared with the late Oba Erediauwa (1923–2016) at an official palace audience.



KING SAHURE ACCOMPANIED BY A DIVINE FIGURE

Egypt

Old Kingdom, Dynasty 5, reign of Sahure (ca. 2458–2446 B.C.)

Gneiss, H. 25 1/4 in. (64 cm)

Provenance: purchased from Y. Hassan in Egypt, 1918

Rogers Fund, 1918 (18.2.4)

The king commands attention as the central figure of this sculpture. We know he is the Pharaoh Sahure from the inscription below his throne, and his rank is easily identifiable by his *nemes*-headdress and false beard. Reinforcing his representation as a powerful man in his prime are his broad, well-defined shoulders, narrow waist, and solid but shapely lower legs. His clenched right hand implies strength, as well.

In ancient Egypt, the relative sizes of the figures in a group statue reflect their importance in life. The king is the clear focus of this statue, which probably was intended to grace either a temple near Cairo, where Sahure's pyramid and sun temple are located, or one in Coptos. The headdress on the second figure indicates that he symbolizes the region in which Coptos is located. That he touches the king with an *ankh*, the hieroglyph meaning "life," attests to his divine nature. One would expect a god to be of equal or greater size than the king, but because the second figure is not a deity but a geographic location given a human form, King Sahure remains the highest-ranking individual in the composition.





ETERNAL GUARDIANS

GUARDIAN FIGURE WEARING THE RED CROWN

Egypt, Memphite Region, Lisht South, Tomb of Imhotep, chamber inside the south enclosure wall

Middle Kingdom, Dynasty 12, reign of Amenemhat II (ca. 1919–1885 B.C.)

Painted and plastered cedarwood, H. 22 ¾ in. (57.6 cm)

Provenance: MMA excavations, 1913–14, received in division of finds

Rogers Fund and Edward S. Harkness Gift, 1914 (14.3.17)

In Egyptian representation, a crown can signal either a divine being or a royal person, and the type of crown generally identifies their role or responsibility. Although this male figure wears the red crown of Lower Egypt—that is, the Delta region—and displays the facial features of King Amenemhet II, it does not represent the king, for only divine beings wear this type of kilt. The setting in which the statuette was found further reinforces our understanding that he is a divinity. It was cached alongside a counterpart displaying the white crown of Upper Egypt, now in the collection of the Egyptian Museum, Cairo, within the enclosure wall of a private tomb, probably deposited there after use in a funerary ritual. The two types of crowns stood for the two regions of Egypt that were united by a king about 3100 B.C. When used together, or merged, as they were later into the double crown, they represented Egypt.

In the Middle Kingdom, beginning around 2050 B.C., funerary ritual appears to have become increasingly complex as regalia that was once a royal prerogative became available to a wider public. This statuette and its partner were found with a fetish, or magical symbol, connected with Anubis, a god intimately associated with the afterlife. It thus seems likely that the pair of figures represented Egypt and functioned as divine guardians for Anubis and probably, by extension, for the tomb's owner, Imhotep, as well.

COMMEMORATIVE PORTRAIT OF A CHIEF (SINGITI)

Hemba artist, Upper Congo River, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Late 19th–early 20th century

Wood, H. 30 ¾ in. (78 cm)

Provenance: purchased by Pierre Darteville, Lubumbashi, before 1977; Jacques Blanckaert, Brussels, before 1977–87; Dr. Luciano Lanfranchi, Celerina, Switzerland, 1987–2004; [Entwistle Gallery, London and Paris, 2004]; Jane Katcher; New York, 2004–14

Purchase, Jane and Gerald Katcher, Lila Acheson Wallace, Daniel and Marian Malcolm, Hamilton E. James, Anonymous and Steven Kossak Gifts, 2015 (2015.119)

Hemba chiefs were the patrons and caretakers of idealized portraits of selected predecessors. A multigenerational ensemble of such effigies attested to their owner's kinship and ties to a particular territory. The enclosure within which the portraits were conserved was a prominent feature of the chiefly compound, inaccessible to most. The catalyst for creating such a regal tribute might be the subject's visitation from the ancestral realm in a dream. To evoke an individual sometimes several generations removed, the sculptor relied on recollections or familial resemblances. Two centers of the subject's being were emphasized: the stomach and the head. Here, the pronounced navel, highlighted by the hands placed to either side, is the site of genealogical connection between a chiefly forebear and his living constituents. The elegant, labor-intensive hairstyle, meanwhile,

underscores the subject's cultivated refinement, while the contemplative expression denotes ongoing engagement in judicious reflection with the affairs of the community.

The advent of colonization by Belgium in 1885 brought radical change to this region of Central Africa, dismantling the long-standing role of Hemba leaders as traditional guardians of their communities. At the same time, the dissemination of Christianity challenged practices of ancestral veneration. By the 1970s, when Zairean society experienced a severe political and economic crisis, heirlooms such as this one had become increasingly disconnected from local contexts yet prized in the West for their sublime beauty.



POSTHUMOUS TRIBUTES



STRIDING NUDE MAN

Egypt, possibly Lisht South
Old Kingdom, Dynasty 6, reign of Merenre or Pepy II
(ca. 2255–2152 B.C.)

Wood, H. 18 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. (46.6 cm)

Provenance: purchased from M. Samedá and E. Kofler,
Cairo and Lucerne, 1959

Purchase, Frederick P. Huntley Bequest, 1959 (59.50.2)

Ka-statues, created for use in the funerary cult, rendered the deceased present after death to accept offerings from the living. These statues typically depict their owners in their best dress: a pleated kilt, jewelry, and styled hair. The man shown here, however, wears only a short wig of tightly layered curls. His large head, long body and limbs, and narrow waist date him to the late Old Kingdom, when male nudity in ka-statues became more common. Why this happened is not clearly understood but is thought to have been one way of readying the deceased for rebirth into the next life, his nudity mimicking the way a baby arrives into the world.

Based on rare depictions and written records, Egyptian men are understood to have been circumcised when they reached puberty, although a specific age is unknown. Interestingly, as some nude male statues make clear, circumcision is not consistently represented in statuary, possibly owing to different beliefs about how one should be shown when preparing for the journey into the next world. As the present statue is not well preserved, it is difficult to tell how this official was readied for the afterlife.

MALE COMMEMORATIVE POST (NGYA)

Bongo artist, Tonj, western South Sudan

Late 19th century

Mahogany, H. 75 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (191.8 cm)

Provenance: collected in South Sudan by Christian
Duponcheel, Brussels, 1972; Alan Brandt, New York,
until 1973

Purchase, Louis V. Bell and Harris Brisbane Dick Funds
and Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, 1973 (1973.264)

High-ranking hunters and warriors in Bongo communities were honored posthumously by their families through imposing, larger-than-life memorials. Carved from the trunk of a mahogany tree, the towering, elongated body of this monument is framed by a knoblike head and long legs with slightly flexed knees. Originally, the figure had arms; beads accented the now-empty eye cavities; and the vertical plinth extending below the feet was planted in the earth. Its installation at the honoree's grave site a year after his death accompanied a feast at which relatives and other guests recited his genealogy and achievements. In some instances, the sculpture was inscribed with notches to denote the subject's victories in battle or over prey, and additional depictions of wives and offspring might be added to his burial plot.

With its capital, Khartoum, centrally located at the junction of the Blue Nile and White Nile Rivers, Sudan was established in 1956 as one of the largest and most culturally diverse nations in Africa, encompassing a populace related to nineteen major linguistic groups and a Muslim majority in the north. Following a series of devastating civil wars, South Sudan achieved its independence in 2011. This work arrived in the West at the end of the first of those conflicts, which spanned 1955 to 1972.





SIGNALING AUTHORITY

STATUE OF THE OFFICIAL MERTI

Egypt, Saqqara, Tomb of Merti
Old Kingdom, Dynasty 5, reign of Isesi-Unis (ca. 2381–2323 B.C.)
Painted and gessoed acacia wood, H. 39 ¾ in. (101 cm)

Provenance: Egyptian Antiquities Service excavations,
1924–25; purchased from the Egyptian government, 1926
Rogers Fund, 1926 (26.2.4a–c)

Men who served in the king's administration often were able to build and decorate their own large tombs and to furnish them with the equipment needed to create a secure afterlife for themselves, their wives, and other family members. Merti, the man depicted in this almost lifesize statue, recorded a long and significant career in his mastaba tomb at the royal cemetery of Saqqara, including serving as a provincial governor. His elite status is reflected not only in the eleven wood statues of himself and his wife hidden in the *serdab*-chamber of his tomb (where *ka*-statues are generally housed), but also in the elaborately pleated kilt he wears and the staff and *sekhem*-scepter he holds. Writing was integrated into many funerary objects, and the *sekhem*-scepter in his right hand incorporates the hieroglyph representing the concept "to have power" in its design. Authority is something an important official would have wanted acknowledged for eternity.

STAFF OF OFFICE: CEREMONIAL STOOL, CHAIN, AND SWORDS MOTIF (ÓKYEAME POMA)

Asante artist, southern Ghana

Ca. 1930

Wood and gold foil, 63 ⅞ in. (162.2 cm)

Provenance: Joint Provincial Council of Chiefs,
Ghana, 1957; William Wright, Belle Mead, New Jersey,
until 1986; Drs. Herbert F. and Teruko S. Neuwalder,
Englewood, New Jersey
Gift of Drs. Herbert F. and Teruko S. Neuwalder, 1987
(1987.452.2a–c)

Locally mined gold has been conceived of in West Africa as the materialization of the sun and life force. It was the resource most sought after by traders crossing the Sahara as early as the eighth century, and early commentators relate accounts of glittering West African courts. Gold was cast into regalia for local elites, but few pre-nineteenth-century examples survive.

The sale of gold to European merchants along the Atlantic coast from the end of the fifteenth century led to the rise of a succession of powerful centralized Akan polities. Across these centers, an equivalency developed between rich visual motifs and elegant spoken language. Adansi, founded about 1550, is where the institution of *ókyeame*, or court linguist, is said to have emerged. This erudite master of oratory served as the formal spokesman and lead adviser to a chief. The imagery crowning the gilded insignia of office he carries at major public events visualizes hundreds of Akan proverbs. The specific proverb (or its equivalent) depicted in this finial is not recorded. The work was likely sponsored by the British colonial government of the Gold Coast to be awarded to a chief. A photograph documents the staff being used by a titleholder in 1957 at the festivities marking Ghana's independence. The imagery of the finial features the celebrated Golden Stool, which descended from the heavens when Osei Tutu, chief of Kumasi, unified the Akan people about 1670. The three Akan swords chained to that seat of power relate to the Joint Provincial Council of Chiefs, a body whose head oversaw the governance of three distinct provinces in the years preceding independence.



CELEBRATING FEMALE POWER

GELEDE SCULPTURAL ELEMENT FROM A MASQUERADE ENSEMBLE

Yoruba artist, Ketu region, southwestern Nigeria or Republic of Benin

Mid-20th century

Wood, H. 22 ½ in. (57.2 cm)

Provenance: Paul and Ruth W. Tishman, New York, until 1990
Gift of Paul and Ruth W. Tishman, 1990 (1990.336)

Yoruba society venerates *awon iya wa*, or “our mothers,” through the spectacle of Gelede performances, a tradition that pays homage to their specifically female powers. Gelede, which originated in the city-state of Ketu in the eighteenth century, deploys masquerades as a sacrificial offering, theatrical entertainment, and form of explicit commentary on matters that affect social harmony.

A pangolin suspended between two serpents that devour its hindquarters defines the summit of this dynamic sculptural element. Both creatures are popular in Gelede imagery for their use in protective herbal remedies and charms that shield individuals from witchcraft. Pythons relate to Osumere, the rainbow deity associated with fertility, regeneration, and prosperity. While feared for their poisonous bite, snakes are admired for the dynamism of their spiral movements and the renewal implicit in the shedding of their skin. The crescendo of the swirling reptilian bands evokes the decorative flair of the *gele*, or fabric head wrap, that crowns Yoruba women’s fashion and is integrated into the Gelede dancer’s costume.

BES-IMAGE RATTLE

Egypt

Third Intermediate Period, Dynasty 22–25 (ca. 945–664 B.C.)
Faience, H. 8 ½ in. (21.6 cm)

Provenance: collection of Omar Sultan Pasha (d. 1917);
acquired from the Harer Family Trust, 2015

Purchase, 2007 Benefit Fund and Lila Acheson Wallace
and Diane Carol Brandt Gifts, 2015 (2015.11)

An important Egyptian myth recounts how a major goddess—different records name different deities—once abandoned the Nile Valley in anger for the desert, leaving vulnerable both her father, the sun god Re, and all of Egypt. Re sent the ibis-headed god Thoth, represented on this rattle by the monkeys, to encourage her to return. Thoth told the goddess that her homecoming would be celebrated for returning the world to harmony. Among the many gods that accompanied Thoth on this journey was one known by several names, of which Bes is the most common.

Here, a monstrous-looking Bes-image, displaying the body of a dwarf enhanced by numerous leonine characteristics, wears a tall-feathered crown. His frightening appearance makes him a powerful subject for the rattle. It is thought that the Egyptians believed the sweet sound that emanated from rings attached to the feathers (now missing) pacified the furious goddess and encouraged her return. In addition to recording this important myth, the rattle could have been used in other rituals, as the Bes-image is generally understood to have represented a beneficial deity, one who protects women and young children and participates in celebrations where he dances and plays instruments.



PERSONIFYING FORCES



KNEELING FIGURE

Egypt

Late Period or early Ptolemaic Period, Dynasty 30 or later (380–246 B.C.)

Wood, formerly clad in lead sheet, H. 8 ¼ in. (20.8 cm)

Provenance: Peytel Collection, Paris, by 1922; acquired from J. Josephson, 2003

Purchase, Anne and John V. Hansen Egyptian Purchase Fund, and Magda Saleh and Jack Josephson Gift, 2003 (2003.154)

This magnificent statue was assembled from eight pieces of wood, sensitively carved and carefully fitted together. The result is a graceful man shown in the act of praising a deity by beating his chest. Attendants of the sun god's barque, a type of boat known from rituals depicted in temple and tomb scenes, are known to pose like this. Although this figure looks to be a kneeling king, based on the presence of the *nemes*-headdress, this statuette's identity is far more enigmatic. The snake on his headgear is not, in fact, the uraeus, or aroused cobra—the snake associated with kingship—and his kneeling stance is one used by divine beings, not kings.

The man is certainly an important divine figure, possibly an ancestral ruler from Egypt's distant past. However, as the statue lacks a known findspot or an accompanying inscription, the identity of the subject remains unconfirmed. What is certain is that the figure served a significant ritual purpose, as a thin cladding of lead once hid the beautifully carved body. The lead sheath was no doubt meaningful, but its significance remains uncertain.



POWER FIGURE (NKISI)

Kongo artist and *nganga*, Democratic Republic of the Congo
Late 19th–mid-20th century

Wood, pigment, nails, cloth, beads, shells, arrows, leather, nuts, and twine, H. 23 ½ in. (58.8 cm)

Provenance: Donald H. Peters; Samuel M. Kootz Gallery, New York, until 1952; Nelson A. Rockefeller, New York, 1952, on loan to the MPA, New York, 1959–78
The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979 (1979.206.127)

An *nganga* is a ritual specialist who defends his clientele against mystical predations manifest through maladies or other misfortunes. An *nkisi* (plural *minkisi*) is the instrument and related songs and ritual actions he deploys to diagnose and remedy the problem. The medicines, or *bilongo*, he uses to engage the help of an animating spirit comprise animal, vegetable, and mineral elements. That matter is combined within a portable shrine that may take the form of a clay vessel or an elaborate sculptural receptacle commissioned from a professional carver. Through additions and offerings, an *nganga* might periodically reinvigorate this instrument linking him and his clientele to its empowering force and the ancestral realm. While many figurative *minkisi* feature cavities within which the *bilongo* is incorporated, in this unusual example it engulfs the figure in a formidable power cloak augmented by ancillary miniature *minkisi*. The power of such customized works was not transferrable; *minkisi* were deconsecrated when deemed no longer efficacious or following their owner's retirement.



ROYAL SEAT OF OFFICE: FEMALE CARYATID (LUPONA)

Luba artist, Shankadi region, southeastern Democratic Republic of the Congo

Late 19th–early 20th century

Wood and glass beads, H. 23 ¼ in. (59.1 cm)

Provenance: Joseph Corneille (José) Van den Boogaerde, Brussels, until 1950; Charles Ratton, Paris, 1950–58; Nelson A. Rockefeller, New York, on loan to the MPA, New York, 1958–69; MPA, New York, 1969–78
The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1969 (1978.412.317)

By the seventeenth century, exploitation of the rich reserves of salt, iron, palm oil, and fish along the great Congo River had led to the establishment of an influential Luba state. Its founding has been attributed to the arrival from the east of the hunter prince Mbidi Kiluwe, who ushered in a new political order. Central to Luba investiture rites, in which each new leader swears his oath of office and addresses his people for the first time, is a distinctive carved ceremonial seat. The most elaborate examples feature female caryatids, their bodies embellished with cicatrization patterns that constitute texts relating to the sacred powers of kingship. In Luba society, women are identified with the source of life and with privileged access to the source of divine kingship. As such, female mediums serve to incarnate Luba chiefs beyond their lifetimes. Royal residences remained sites of remembrance, where a past leader's seat of office acted as a receptacle for his spiritual essence.

A WOMAN CARRYING FOOD

Egypt, Thebes, Southern Asasif, Tomb of Meketre (TT 280, MMA 1101), *serdab*

Middle Kingdom, Dynasty 12, early reign of Amenemhat I (ca. 1981–1975 B.C.)

Gessoed and painted wood, H. 44 ½ in. (112 cm)

Provenance: MMA excavations, 1920, received in division of finds
Rogers Fund and Edward S. Harkness Gift, 1920 (20.3.7)

Someone preparing for the afterlife needed to ensure an eternal source of provisions, through either the burial of actual food, a written offering formula, the depiction of food production, or, often, a combination of these. Three-dimensional models of food production occasionally show people bringing offerings, such as this graceful woman carrying a basket of provisions and holding a duck.

Most ancient Egyptian statuary and relief carvings served multiple roles, and details or inscriptions could be added to each object to acknowledge these functions. This woman, found in the tomb of Chief Royal Steward Meketre, is unnamed, so she is not a family member of the deceased. For many years she was thought to represent a servant, but several details suggest otherwise. The most likely interpretation is that her human form denotes the estate designated to produce food for Meketre's offering cult; such anthropomorphism was not uncommon. However, the woman's elaborately feathered dress is the attire of neither a servant nor a figure personifying an estate, implying another meaning should be considered. There were two such statues in Meketre's tomb, both wearing elaborate dresses and beautifully carved. Estate figures come in multiples, so the fact that there were only two such statues present in the tomb (the other is now in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo) suggests they may reference the goddesses Isis and Nephthys, the divine mourners of the dead.



NURTURING FORCES

THE GODDESS ISIS AND HER SON HORUS

Egypt

Ptolemaic Period (332–30 B.C.)

Faience, H. 6 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (17 cm)

Provenance: purchased from the Kevorkian Foundation, 1955

Purchase, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest Fund, 1955 (55.121.5)

In one of the classic motifs of ancient Egyptian art, the goddess Isis offers her breast to her infant son, Horus. The throne atop her head, which is the hieroglyph for her name, establishes her identity without question. It has been suggested that Isis's name indicates a connection to the throne, so she confers kingship. Horus is shown nude with a sidelock to differentiate his child persona from his adult identity, that of a falcon-headed god. According to a tale, Isis fled into the dense papyrus marsh to give birth to Horus, hiding him from his uncle Seth, who sought to kill the infant and claim the Egyptian throne for himself. In the mythical contest between Horus and Seth for the throne of Egypt, Isis used her power on her son's behalf, so that the gods ultimately recognized Horus, not his uncle, as the legitimate ruler.

Thousands of such figurines celebrated the relationship between mother and child. Even the pharaoh was said to nurse at Isis's breast in her role as a divine mother. This act as well as several other responsibilities made Isis the most important Egyptian goddess, venerated throughout Egypt, Nubia, and, thereafter, the Mediterranean world. This iconic image of mother and child likely inspired the earliest Christian imagery of the Virgin Mary holding the baby Jesus.

TYEKPA MATERNITY FIGURE

Senufo artist, Côte d'Ivoire

Late 19th–mid-20th century

Wood and oil patina, H. 21 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (54.6 cm)

Provenance: Lawrence Gussman, Scarsdale, New York

Gift of Lawrence Gussman, 1981 (1981.397)

In Senufo society, individuals trace their ancestral affiliation through their mother's line of descent, and women play an outsized role in the visualization of family origins and engagement with the spiritual realm. Oral traditions concerning the source of the Tyekpa women's society relate that a female elder once came upon spirits dancing in the wild. This dance of surpassing beauty, animated by music, was subsequently adapted by the Tyekpa as a spectacular way to honor leading "mothers" for their contributions to the community's well-being. Funerary celebrations for those individuals, barred to men, featured works like this nursing maternity figure, which would have been balanced gracefully on the head of a female dancer as she performed to the rhythmic sounds of long, elegantly carved three-legged drums.







MASKS AS DOUBLES

FUNERARY MASK OF ESTATE MANAGER WAH

Egypt, Thebes, Southern Asasif, Tomb of Wah (MMA 1102)
Middle Kingdom, Dynasty 12, early reign of Amenemhat I
(ca. 1981–1975 B.C.)

Painted cartonnage, gold foil, and wood, H. 26 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (68 cm)

Provenance: MMA excavations, 1920, received in
division of finds

Rogers Fund and Edward S. Harkness Gift, 1940 (40.3.54)

Starting about 2000 B.C., masks became an integral element in the elaborate process of creating a mummy. A mask completed the mummy and, in conjunction with appropriate spells, transformed the embalmed and wrapped body into a transfigured soul, a necessary step for an individual to enter the afterlife. Sometimes spells, including the phrase “beautiful of face,” were written on the mask to aid in this transformation. A face could have details based on the deceased’s features, such as a short beard or mustache, but in general the countenance was idealized, often emphasizing youth but not the specific individual.

This mask belonged to a man called Wah, the estate manager for the Chief Royal Steward Meketre. The gilding on the mask helped Wah with his transformation into a divine being, as gold was associated with the sun and, therefore, with rebirth and divinity. The broad collar at the neck is a typical piece of funerary jewelry.

PORTRAIT MASK (MBLO)

Baule artist, Côte d’Ivoire

Late 19th–early 20th century

Wood and pigment, H. 14 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (37.5 cm)

Provenance: Henri Kamer, Paris and New York;
private collection, France; Galerie Alain de Monbrison,
Paris, until 2004

Purchase, Rogers Fund and Daniel and Marian Malcolm
Gift, 2004 (2004.445)

This refined portrait of an elder relates to *mblo*, the earliest artistic tradition remembered in Baule communities, and one that has been continually adapted over generations. The subject’s introspective expression, large downcast eyes, and high forehead denote his intellect, while his refinement is evident in the delicacy of the beard, coiffure, and markings on either temple. The sculptor further heightened the mask’s dramatic appeal through the addition of fanciful abstract horns. Such masks are the visual focal point of theatrical spectacles animated by musical accompaniment and audience participation, whose infrequency only intensifies the delight they instill in viewers. On such occasions, portrait masks appear to float above a fabric enclosure concealing their dancers’ bodily presence. Each is the namesake of a prominent member of the community who escorts their “double” into the arena.

When the subject who inspired a mask dies, its affiliation might transfer to a relative or fall into disuse. While this work’s active life is undocumented, the signs of wear and the local replacement and repair of one of the horns suggest that it was performed over multiple generations. It had entered a French private collection by the mid-twentieth century and was featured in 1967 in one of the early surveys of African sculpture organized by the French art historian Pierre Meuzé.



SUBLIME PILLOWS

HEADREST FOR ETERNITY

Egypt, Saqqara, Teti Pyramid Cemetery, Tomb of Khentika, Shaft B
Old Kingdom, Dynasty 6 (ca. 2323–2150 B.C.)

Travertine (Egyptian alabaster), H. 7½ in. (19.1 cm)

Provenance: Egyptian Antiquities Service excavations,
1920–21; purchased from the government of Egypt, 1926
Rogers Fund, 1926 (26.2.11)

This stone headrest is one of several excavated in the tomb of a wealthy official named Khentika. It appears to have been designed for use specifically in the afterlife, as its three components—pillow, column, and base—were glued together rather than mortised and tenoned, a joining mechanism that strengthened many of the more serviceable wood examples. Conceptually, ancient Egyptian headrests mimicked the sun (the head) rising on the horizon (the headrest's pillow). Therefore, waking up represented a rebirth for the sleeper, just as the sun's appearance each morning was for the world. Sleep was considered a deathlike state—the individual was rendered unconscious and powerless—so headrests often had protective images and spells added to their surface to safeguard the sleeper.

Many headrests show evidence of wear, and they either bear fabric impressions or have actual scraps of linen still attached, indicating that they frequently were padded for comfort. Although pillows existed, a headrest would have been cooler and kept the sleeper's face elevated from scorpions and other unpleasant night prowlers.



HEADREST WITH FEMALE CARYATID FIGURE

Master of the Cascade Coiffure, Shankadi region, southeastern
Democratic Republic of the Congo

19th century

Wood and beads, H. 6¾ in. (16.2 cm)

Provenance: Arthur Priest, missionary in Kasai region,
collected before 1908; his widow, until 1967; Margaret Barton
Plass, Philadelphia, 1967–81
Gift of Margaret Barton Plass, in honor of William Fagg,
C.M.G., 1981 (1981.399)

Across Africa, headrests have served to elevate the head in order to facilitate sleep, cooling the neck and preserving intricate, labor-intensive coiffures. A Luba owner's connection to such a personalized and intimate possession might warrant its inclusion in their burial. This exquisitely carved example features a refined female figure who kneels in a dynamic stance on the base and balances the horizontal pillow on the crown of her head. She herself is depicted with an elaborate *nkanda*, a step or cascade hairstyle of the variety that the owner of this headrest sought to protect. Arranged over a canework frame, the layered *nkanda*, favored in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries around the villages of Kabondo Dianda and Basangu, took nearly fifty hours to complete. Together with a series of related headrests, a seat of office, and a divining instrument, all of which feature similar delicate figures in fluid poses wearing this distinctive hairstyle, this work has been attributed to a master sculptor and his workshop.



HARNESSING DANGER



FIGURINE OF A HIPPOPOTAMUS

Egypt, Meir, Tomb B3 of the nomarch Senbi II, pit 1 (steward Senbi)
Middle Kingdom, early Dynasty 12 (ca. 1961–1878 B.C.)

Faience, L. 7 $\frac{7}{8}$ in. (20 cm)

Provenance: Khashaba excavations, 1910, Khashaba received from the division of finds; purchased from C. D. Kelekian, New York, 1917

Gift of Edward S. Harkness, 1917 (17.9.1)

This figure is easily recognizable as a hippopotamus, one of Africa's most dangerous animals. Although the figure's bright blue color and small size might encourage a viewer to think of this animal as friendly, the ancient Egyptians knew only too well how destructive and treacherous hippos could be and were very afraid of them. However, the Egyptians also used the hippo's dangerous nature as a protective force against malevolence. This dual way of thinking led to the development of hippopotamus deities, some of which had roles as protectors and others as aggressors.

Hippopotamus figurines were placed in tombs to assist in the deceased's rebirth, for the animal in its native environment, the Nile River, was understood to symbolize regeneration. A reference to this belief may be found in the depiction of open and closed lotus flowers on this hippo's back. Not only are lotuses found in the river, but their blossoms were seen as potent symbols of rebirth, for the heavily scented flower opens in the morning as the sun rises and closes in the evening when it sets. In recognition of the danger embodied by the hippopotamus, the legs of the figurines were intentionally snapped off—three of those seen here are replicas—making sure that the animal could only lend its support to the dead and not attack them in the afterlife.



POWER OBJECT (BOLI)

Bamana artist, Mali

First half of 20th century

Wood, earth, and organic materials, L. 20 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. (52.1 cm)

Provenance: [Robert L. Stolper Galleries, New York and Los Angeles, until 1960]; Nelson A. Rockefeller, New York, 1960; on loan to the MPA, New York, 1960–78

The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection,

Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979 (1979.206.175)

Evocative of the dangerous hippopotamus, this deliberately indeterminate form, known as a *boli* (plural *boliv*), was composed with precision as a microcosm of the universe. A concentrated reservoir of *nyama*, or life force, it combines animal, vegetable, and mineral ingredients gathered from nature and constitutes esoteric knowledge, or *daliluw*. The parched and cracked earthen surfaces of such creations are continually renewed with applied libations of millet, alcoholic beverages, expectorated kola nuts, and the blood of sacrificial offerings.

Historically, priests at the Bamana court of Segu (ca. 1712–1861) harnessed *boliv* while carrying out rites on behalf of their constituents. Those occult objects were recognized as a source of Segu's preeminence as a regional power, rendering Segu a "citadel of paganism" in the eyes of the Islamic reformer El Hadji 'Umar Tal and the chief target of his *jihad* in the nineteenth century. Accounts of his invasion, in 1861, describe the public destruction of *boliv*. While this twentieth-century example attests to the tradition's endurance, in recent decades iconoclastic campaigns by extremists have sought a similar eradication of what they deem to be idolatrous practices.

ROYAL STATES OF BEING

FACE OF KING SENWOSRET III

Egypt

Middle Kingdom, Dynasty 12, reign of Senwosret III
(ca. 1878–1840 B.C.)

Quartzite, H. 6½ in. (16.5 cm)

Provenance: acquired by Lord Carnarvon (d. 1923);
acquired from the Carnarvon estate, 1926

Purchase, Edward S. Harkness Gift, 1926 (26.7.1394)

Although only a fragment of the statue remains, the sculptor's consummate modeling of the stone brings to life a powerful yet aging man. In sculpture, King Senwosret III's features were so distinctive—for example, the heavily hooded eyes—that other statues bearing his name easily allow for the identification of this fragment, once part of a statue demolished in Egypt's ancient past. The complete figure would have presented a youthful body, which would have contrasted sharply with the king's aged visage. Kings generally chose to represent themselves in the prime of life, so the lined face here probably was intended to communicate the ruler's wisdom and experience.

Kings received their right to rule directly from the gods, for they claimed the sun god Re as their father, and their earthly presence was intertwined with the falcon-headed god Horus. Preferred marriages to sisters followed in the tradition of the gods and reinforced the pharaoh's divine connection. The king's primary responsibility was to create an orderly and prosperous land, and he did so by functioning as the high priest for every temple and as a defender of the Two Lands, that is, Egypt.

HEAD OF AN OBA

Edo artist, Igbo-Eronmwun guild, Court of Benin, Nigeria

16th century

Brass, H. 9¼ in. (23.5 cm)

Provenance: Court of Benin; a West African mine official,
acquired before 1885; John J. Klejman, New York, until 1958;
Nelson A. Rockefeller, New York, 1958, on loan to the MPA,
New York, 1958–78

The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection,

Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979 (1979.206.86)

This idealized tribute to a monarch in the bloom of youth was created as a marker within which his essence might be enshrined for eternity. Beginning in the fourteenth century, such works were among the centerpieces of royal altars placed within a courtyard of the palace in Benin City. This tradition of royal portraiture is said to have been introduced by a dynasty of leaders known as Oranmiyan. Their sponsorship of such portraits distinguished them from their precursors and identified them with the artistic legacy of the neighboring city-state of Ife.

The precious-metal medium, cast by specialists and acquired in great quantities through trade, was valued for its vitality and permanence. In Edo society, veneration of the head reflects its role as the fount of thought (*iroro*), judgment (*énwúe*), and character (*éxée*) that guide one through life. Although cast busts were commissioned for altars dedicated to an individual—that is, the predecessor of each new *oba*—their highly idealized consistency reinforced connections between generations. While this bust is reputed to have been acquired before the British invasion of Benin, its lack of documentation, like that of all the works that remained in the palace until 1897, means that it is impossible to reconstruct their placement on specific altars. Accordingly, earlier generations of art historians used formal analysis to propose a chronological sequence for these decontextualized works. Within that system of classification, the relative naturalism of this head's full, rounded contours, almond-shaped eyes, and thin walls has been attributed to the early fifteenth to mid-sixteenth century, a period that spans the reigns of ten different *obas*.







ENSURING NEW LIFE

FEMALE FERTILITY FIGURE (AKUABA)

Asante artist, Ghana

20th century

Wood, beads, and string, H. 10 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (27.2 cm)

Provenance: Everett Rassaig, New York, until 1957;

Nelson A. Rockefeller, New York, 1957, on loan to the MPA,
New York, 1957–78

The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest
of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979 (1979.206.75)

This miniaturized adult physiognomy fused with a disklike head articulates a woman's prayer to become a vehicle for new life. Carried by the hopeful mother for a prescribed period of time, the work, consecrated by a priest, was lavished with the same care she aspired to give her future child. Such fertility figures, or *akuaba*, have been credited with enhancing a woman's ability to reproduce as well as ensuring the safe delivery of a flawless new being. The aesthetic ideal of a high flattened-oval forehead, which Akan mothers seek to achieve by gently modeling the malleable crania of their newborns, is expressed here through a radical two-dimensionality. The expressly female gender of *akuaba* has been attributed to a preference for girls in the matrilineal Akan society. Over the past century, they have come to incorporate more detailed references to desirable features. Evident here, for example, are a ringed neck, its rolls of fat denoting prosperity; a small mouth; and fine facial markings inscribed below either eye as a medicinal treatment to protect against convulsions.

Akuaba often continued to play a role beyond a child's arrival into the world. They might be cherished for their connection to an individual, placed in a shrine as an offering to the deity responsible for fulfilling its owner's petition, or given to a girl within the household so that she might learn how to care for her own future progeny.

MOTHER AND "CHILD"

Egypt, Thebes, Asasif, Burial B44, East of Pabasa, inside coffin
Second Intermediate Period–early New Kingdom,
Dynasty 17–early 18 (ca. 1580–1479 B.C.)

Linen-wrapped pottery, unfired clay, unsaturated oil or resin,
seeds, hematite, and linen, H. 7 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. (18 cm)

Provenance: MMA excavations, 1918–19, received in
division of finds

Rogers Fund, 1919 (19.3.190)

These figurines are still wrapped in the linen bandages in which they were buried at least 3,500 years ago. Such female figures, of which these examples are a distinct type, emphasized certain aspects of ancient Egyptian femininity, such as the nude female body, elaborate hairstyles, and fancy jewelry. They were donated to shrines dedicated to the goddess Hathor, who embodied fertility, probably as a plea for a child. Statues like these were also placed in tombs so that their owners would be granted rebirth into the next life, giving the deceased the opportunity to join the sun god eternally on his daily journey.

Here, a mother holds her child, signaling to the viewer the concept of birthing and nurturing children. It is interesting that the "baby" is not actually shown as an infant but as a miniature adult woman, with breasts and an elaborate hairdo and jewelry, just like her mother. These observations suggest that the pair likely represents two different concepts of female fertility: a woman who has successfully given birth and the point in a girl's life when she is able to have a child, here embodied as a baby with adult characteristics.



AWE-INSPIRING FORCES

SERPENT HEADDRESS (A-MANTSHO-ÑA-TSHOL)

Baga artist, Guinea

First half of 20th century

Wood and pigment, H. 77 ½ in. (196.9 cm)

Provenance: John J. Klejman, New York, until 1958;

Nelson A. Rockefeller, New York, 1958, on loan to the MPA, New York, 1958–78

The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979 (1979.206.101)

From the Casamance region of Senegal to that of the Fouta Djallon in northern Guinea, the supreme manifestation of spiritual force is referred to as Ninkinanka. Associated with the danger of the boa constrictor and the allure of luminous rainbows, Ninkinanka may satisfy a petitioner's deepest desires, whether for rain, worldly riches, or to be cured of infertility, but at potentially great cost. In Baga society, celebrations marking the culmination of male initiation rites have evoked this force through an undulating column rising heavenward, boldly accented with alternating marks of red, white, and black, referred to as the "master of medicine," or *a-Mantsho-ña-Tshol*.

During the 1950s, Baga communities underwent forced conversion to Islam that led to the abandonment of earlier religious and artistic traditions. A campaign of attacks against those practices resulted in the confiscation and sale or destruction of creations such as this one. A decade later, indigenous religious practices were outlawed entirely by the Marxist national government of Guinea's first head of state, Sekou Touré. While no record exists of the once dynamic performance genre that incorporated such sculptures, they were likely positioned at the summit of a costume. Secured over the head of an especially strong dancer within a conical framework of palm branches, it was accented with decorative feathers and streamers.

SPHINX FOR A GOD'S BARQUE

Egypt

Late Period, Dynasty 26 (ca. 664–525 B.C.)

Leaded bronze, H. 8 ⅞ in. (20.5 cm)

Provenance: collection of Henri Rouart (d. 1912); acquired from Rupert Wace, 2011

Purchase, Gift of Henry Walters, by exchange; Liana Weindling Gift, in memory of her mother, and Lila Acheson Wallace Gift, 2011 (2011.96)

According to myth, the sun god Re rode in an ornate barque (a type of boat) during his daily journey across the sky. He was protected on his journey by numerous figures, including the elegant but menacing *sib*, a long-legged sphinx whose tail, missing here, arched over its back and whose otherworldly appearance communicates the power of his protection. Uraei, or aroused cobras, which were the sun god's special protectors, accompanied the *sib*. Together these beings stood atop a standard installed at the front of the barque so that the *sib* could trample to death any enemies that attacked the sun god.







EXCEPTIONAL WOMEN

IYOKA (QUEEN MOTHER) PENDANT MASK

Edo artist, Igbesanmwun guild, Court of Benin, Nigeria
16th century

Ivory, iron, resin, and copper(?), H. 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. (23.8 cm)

Provenance: Court of Benin, until 1897; removed from the Royal Palace by Sir Ralph Moor; Sir Ralph Moor and his wife, Adrienne Moor, London 1879–1909; John Sparks, London, 1909; Prof. Charles Gabriel Seligman, Oxford, 1909–(d.)1940; his wife, Brenda Z. Seligman, London, 1940–58; Nelson A. Rockefeller, New York, 1958, on loan to the MPA, New York, 1958–72; MPA, New York, 1972–78

The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1972 (1978.412.323)

Oba Akenzua II (1899–1978) identified this work as one of a series of portraits of the woman who nurtured one of Benin's most dynamic and transformative leaders. Under the warrior king Ozolua (mid-1400s–1520), Benin's territories expanded from the Niger River to the Kingdom of Owo. That glorious era was, however, disrupted by the instability and strife of a bitter civil war over succession. When Esigie (1504–1550) ultimately prevailed over a half brother, he credited his mother, Idia, a valued adviser whose political acumen and alleged mystical powers were critical to his successful reign. Tributes to Idia in precious ivory and brass may have been executed during her lifetime. The Met's portrait mask features suspension lugs that allowed it to be worn as part of the *oba*'s ceremonial ensemble when he presided over annual rites honoring her memory as well as those in which he drove out harmful forces. Idia's locks of hair, arranged in an elegant, tiara-like presentation, are defined by alternating motifs: mudfish and

Portuguese merchants' heads, the latter repeated as an openwork collar. These ubiquitous visual signs underscore the dual nature of Benin's semidivine leaders and their participation in lucrative global trade networks along the Atlantic coast.

Five ivory Idia portraits were removed in the 1897 British raid of the Benin palace. The best known of these entered the British Museum in 1909; all but one are now in public institutions. They are extremely rare among pre-nineteenth-century creations from sub-Saharan Africa for their association with a specific historical figure.

FRAGMENT OF A QUEEN'S FACE

Egypt

New Kingdom, mid-Dynasty 18, reign of Amenhotep III or Akhenaten (ca. 1390–1336 B.C.)

Jasper, H. 5 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. (13 cm)

Provenance: collection of Lord Carnarvon (d. 1923); acquired from the Carnarvon estate, 1926
Purchase, Edward S. Harkness Gift, 1926 (26.7.1396)

The rare stone and exquisite workmanship employed in the manufacture of this sculpture indicate that the woman depicted must have been a queen. Although only a fragment, these enigmatic lips have long intrigued scholars and visitors alike curious as to whom they belonged and how the mirrorlike surface was achieved some 3,300 years ago.

The face was once part of a composite statue, that is, one whose parts were made from different materials fitted together to make a complete figure. Like the face, the hands and feet most likely were made of yellow jasper, the clothing probably of limestone, and the crown of still a different material. The use of yellow jasper is especially relevant, as the sculpture was commissioned at a time when the king actively promoted worship of the sun, especially its disk. The color, together with the stone's reflective surface, thus connected the queen unequivocally to Re, the sun god.



SUPREME BEASTS

LION CUB

Egypt, said to be from Gebelein

Early Dynastic Period, Dynasty 1 (ca. 3100–2900 B.C.)

Quartzite, L. 9 ¼ in. (23.4 cm)

Provenance: collection of the Rev. Randolph Berens, by 1894; acquired from the Gallatin estate, 1966

Purchase, Fletcher Fund and The Guide Foundation Inc.

Gift, 1966 (66.99.2)

Today many people regard lion cubs as “cute,” but the expression of this lion cub is distinctly unfriendly, suggesting that this superb sculpture is most likely an early deity statue. Scholars believe that, at the beginning of Egyptian history, before the advent of writing, the Egyptians largely represented their gods as animals, not as humans. Lions, baboons, and falcons were the most common species venerated in statues at that time, when a state-level society led by a king was still being formalized. These representations were probably installed in shrines, and—as in later pharaonic times—the statues provided a home on earth for divine spirits so that their supernatural powers would be accessible to the ancient Egyptians.

Adult lions were also a royal symbol and, beginning in late Predynastic times (ca. 3200 B.C.), probably stood in for the king in certain scenes, like that of a battle. Later, lions were shown accompanying the king, as though a royal pet, while statues of reclining lions functioned as guardians at temple entrances. The most famous lion, however, is the Great Sphinx at Giza, with the head of King Khafre, the pharaoh who commissioned the second pyramid there.



LEOPARD

Edo artist, Igun-Eronmwun guild, Court of Benin, Nigeria

1550–1680

Brass, H. 15 ½ in. (39.4 cm)

Provenance: Court of Benin, removed from the Royal Palace in 1897 during the British military occupation of Benin City; W. D. Webster, London, until 1899; Augustus Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers, Farnham, Dorset, 1899–1957; K. John Hewett, London, until 1957; Matthias Komor, New York, 1957–58; Nelson A. Rockefeller, New York, loan to the MPA, New York, 1958–72; MPA, New York, 1972–78
The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1972 (1978.412.321)

Among the praise names granted the sovereign of the kingdom of Benin, or *oba*, was “Leopard of the Town.” The leopard was the *oba*’s alter ego, as they were the most powerful beings in their respective realms of forest and city. While identified with all *obas*, the leopard is particularly linked by oral traditions to the ruthless, uncompromising character of Ewuare the Great (d. 1473), the first of Benin’s warrior kings, who in the fifteenth century razed Benin City and then oversaw its renewal and fortification.

At the Benin court, leopards were represented on royal altars, and wild leopard cubs were captured and domesticated in preparation for ritual sacrifice. Seventeenth-century accounts of court processions describe the presence of these tame felines in the *oba*’s entourage. In the present sculpture, a visual metaphor for the *oba*’s preeminence, the leopard’s muscular legs, leaflike ears, and pelt defined by concentric circles underscore its associations with dangerous beauty and ferocity.

In 1892, Benin’s sovereign, Ovonramwen (1857–1914), signed a free-trade treaty with the British, yet tensions between the British colonial administration and the royal court escalated nonetheless. At a fateful turning point in the conflict, a series of Edo chiefs defied the *oba*’s orders to allow safe passage to a British delegation, attacking them instead. The resulting deaths of six British officials and some two hundred retainers were used to justify Britain’s subsequent invasion of Benin City. The British forces emptied the palace of its contents and shipped them to London after the destruction of the building by fire. The Met’s leopard was among the thousands of artifacts relating to some thirty royal altars that were later dispersed internationally.



PERSONIFYING IDEAS

CEREMONIAL LADLE (WAKEMIA OR WUNKIRMIAN)

Dan artist, Liberia

Late 19th–mid-20th century

Wood and pigment, L. 18 ¼ in. (46.4 cm)

Provenance: Henri Kamer, Paris and New York, until 1964; Nelson A. Rockefeller, New York, 1964, on loan to the MPA, New York, 1964–78

The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979 (1979.206.264)

The cultivation of rice, the major staple of life in Dan communities, is the purview of women. The bowls of the large spoons used to serve this bounty have been conceived of as a woman's belly. Sculptors have articulated this idea as an ovoid concave vessel with an extending handle defined as either a neck and head or a pair of legs. Elaborately carved ladles were awarded to women who distinguished themselves as farmers, were successful in commerce, and were generous in distributing food to extended family and guests. The accompanying title of *wakede* was transferred generationally on the basis of individual merit, or *tin*, rather than inheritance. Its attainment was credited to the active support of a spiritual force, incarnated in the present example through animated legs. At the festival acknowledging her new status, a *wakede* danced through her village carrying the trophy, filled with grains of rice and coins, while a female companion extolled her good deeds. The celebration assembled all the holders of this title from a given town so that they might compete to outdo one another in fulfilling their roles as examples to others.



BOWL WITH HUMAN FEET

Egypt

Late Naqada I–early Naqada II (ca. 3700–3450 B.C.)

Pottery, Diam. 5 ¼ in. (13.2 cm)

Provenance: purchased from M. Mohassib, Egypt, 1910
Rogers Fund, 1910 (10.176.113)

A potter handmade this striking vessel some 5,500 years ago, most likely while living in a small farming village along the Nile River at a time when urbanism had yet to emerge. The form illustrates a supported vessel tipped as though in the act of pouring a liquid. Amazingly, this bowl's shape suggests that it was intended to represent an abstract concept some five hundred years before the ancient Egyptians first wrote a hieroglyph using this image. In ancient Egyptian writing, this picture communicated the idea of "pure," and when this hieroglyph referred to a liquid, it most often signified water. A source of life, water was considered sacred and, when purified, cleansed people participating in religious rites, especially those associated with death and burial.



ANTELOPES OF THE SUN

DIADEM WITH A PAIR OF GAZELLE HEADS

Egypt, Thebes, Wadi Gabbanat el-Qurud, Wadi D, Tomb of the Three Foreign Wives of Thutmose III

New Kingdom, early Dynasty 18, reign of Thutmose III (ca. 1479–1425 B.C.)

Gold, carnelian and opaque turquoise inlays, and decayed crizzled glass, L. of forehead band 18 $\frac{7}{8}$ in. (48 cm)

Provenance: purchased from either M. Mohassib or M. Todros, Egypt, 1919–21

Purchase, George F. Baker and Mr. and Mrs. V. Everit Macy Gifts, 1920 (26.8.99)

A secondary wife of Thutmose III wore this delicate diadem over her wig not only to identify her elite rank but also when taking part in a cultic performance as a member of the king's court. Tomb depictions illustrate high-ranking women wearing similar headbands as they participated in rituals that honored important goddesses, like Hathor, Mut, or Sakhmet. Such individuals led a female troupe, many of whom sang, danced, and played instruments, and could themselves make music with *sistra*- and *menat*-necklaces, as both were markers of cultic activity.

The reason for depicting gazelles is not well understood, and several interpretations are possible. The most common species, the Dorcas gazelle, is associated with the sun god Re as well as with fertility, rebirth, and the goddess Anukis, who is closely connected to Hathor of Thebes, the location of this queen's tomb. Moreover, Dorcas gazelles, which often travel in pairs, inhabit the low desert along the edge of the Nile's floodplain, and the desert figures prominently in a myth in which any one of the abovementioned goddesses could participate. In another myth, Hathor milks a gazelle and uses the precious liquid to heal the damaged eyes of the god Horus. Additionally, poetry compares the beauty of young women to the swift and sleek gazelle, perhaps also contributing to its appearance here.

MALE CI WARA CREST FROM A MASQUERADE ENSEMBLE

Bamana artist, Mali

Late 19th–early 20th century

Wood and metal, H. 30 in. (76.2 cm)

Provenance: Hélène and Henri Kamer, Paris; Gustave and Franyo Schindler, New York; private collection, New York, until 2016

Purchase, Andrea Boltt Bequest, in memory of Robert Boltt Sr. and Robert Boltt Jr., 2016 (2016.574)

Members of religious, political, and philosophical associations known as *jow* played an important role in the administration of Bamana communities. Initiation into *jow* was said to impart knowledge concerning the nature of the universe, the place of humanity within it, and the activation of its most potent forces. Rites commemorating the divine gift of agriculture were the concern of the Ci Wara association, named for the mythical divine force that bestowed this essential knowledge on humankind. The group's insignia of elegant, silhouette-like crests, emblems of the harnessing of natural forces, were worn affixed to a basketry cap and synthesize features of the roan antelope with those of an array of creatures, including the pangolin and the anteater, whose digging evokes that of a farmer tilling the soil. Their graceful, highly graphic carved designs emphasize the play of negative and positive space. Female–male Ci Wara pairings constitute metaphors for the earth and the sun. Here, the upward dynamism of the male's horns and delicate zigzag pattern across the surface invoke the energy and movement of the sun's corona as well as the full force of its radiance through the heavens.

Bamana sculptors invested the carved crowning elements of Ci Wara ensembles with endless innovation. This highly original interpretation fuses the menacing strength of horns with the ethereal bodily presence of an empty vessel. The tradition has continued to accrue new meaning beyond its original performative context in agrarian communities and has generally come to be identified with productivity and superior achievement in Malian society.





Acknowledgments

This project would not have been possible without the vital contributions of many members of The Met staff, including teams from External Affairs, Development, Imaging, Digital, Security, and the Buildings Department, all of whom enabled the planning, production, and implementation of the exhibition and accompanying *Bulletin*. In particular, Anna Serotta, Ahmed Tarek, and Sara Levin in the Department of Objects Conservation were essential in getting these fragile works ready for display. In The Michael C. Rockefeller Wing, Lisa Althuler, David Rhoads, and Kambi Gathesha, our MUSE intern, played invaluable roles, as did Danielle Zwang, Elizabeth Fiorentino, Seth Zimiles, Jessica Vayo, and Lucas Galante in the Department of Egyptian Art. The Exhibitions Department, especially Christine McDermott, and the Design Department, notably designers Fabiana Weinberg and Alexandre Viault, helped translate our vision into a vibrant exhibition. In Publications and Editorial, we thank Dale Tucker, Paul Booth, Shannon Cannizzaro, and designer Mark Nelson for a publication that will disseminate the project's content and document it as a turning point in institutional history. For their support of the exhibition, we are grateful to The Daniel P. Davison Fund and Louise Grunwald, and for its dedication to the Museum's quarterly *Bulletin* program at large, the Lila Acheson Wallace Fund for The Metropolitan Museum of Art, established by the cofounder of *Reader's Digest*.

This publication is issued in conjunction with the exhibition *The African Origin of Civilization*, on view at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, from December 14, 2021.

The exhibition is made possible by The Daniel P. Davison Fund and Louise Grunwald.

The Metropolitan's quarterly *Bulletin* program is supported in part by the Lila Acheson Wallace Fund for The Metropolitan Museum of Art, established by the cofounder of *Reader's Digest*.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin, Spring 2022
Volume LXXIX, Number 4
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The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin (ISSN 0026-1521) is published quarterly by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1000 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10028-0198. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Membership Department, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, 1000 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10028-0198. Four weeks' notice required for change of address. The *Bulletin* is provided as a benefit to Museum members and is available by subscription. Subscriptions \$30.00 a year. Back issues available on microfilm from National Archive Publishing Company, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. Volumes I-XXXVII (1905-42) available as a clothbound reprint set or as individual yearly volumes from Ayer Company Publishers, Suite B-213, 400 Bedford Street, Manchester, NH 03101, or from the Metropolitan Museum, 66-26 Metropolitan Avenue, Middle Village, NY 11381-0001.

Published by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Mark Polizzotti, Publisher and Editor in Chief
Peter Antony, Associate Publisher for Production
Michael Sittenfeld, Associate Publisher for Editorial

Editor of the *Bulletin*: Dale Tucker
Production by Paul Booth
Designed by McCall Associates, New York
Image acquisitions and permissions by Shannon Cannizzaro
Bibliographic editing by Penny Jones

Typeset in Post Grotesque
Separations by Professional Graphics, Inc., Rockford, Illinois
Printed and bound by Mittera, Parsippany, New Jersey

Cover illustrations: front, Gelede sculptural element from a masquerade ensemble, Yoruba artist, southwestern Nigeria or Republic of Benin, mid-20th century (see p. 26); inside front, detail of Bes-image rattle, Egypt, Third Intermediate Period, Dynasty 22-25 (ca. 945-664 B.C.) (see p. 26); inside back, detail of commemorative portrait of a chief (*singiti*), Hembia artist, Upper Congo River, Democratic Republic of the Congo, late 19th-early 20th century (see p. 21); back, detail of woman carrying food, Egypt, Middle Kingdom, Dynasty 12 (ca. 1981-1975 B.C.) (see pp. 28-29). Pages 2-3: installation of *The African Origin of Civilization* at The Met, 2021.

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