

TITLE: Great Mosque of Djenne **LOCATION:** Mali **DATE:** c. 1200 C.E.

ARTIST: _____ **PERIOD/STYLE:** Sudano-Sahelian architecture **PATRON:** The First Djenne King, Koi Konboro

MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE: Adobe

FORM:

Djenne's great mosque is composed of cylindrical mud bricks about the size of a soft drink can. The entire community contributes to the process of creating the surprisingly durable construction material. "WE do it all by hand," one mason proudly boasted, "Every man leaves a part of himself in each brick." Three large symmetrically arranged towers dominate the qibla wall. Reaching a height of over 50 feet, the towers serve as minarets. The pinnacles at the top of each minaret are crowned with ostrich eggs, symbolizing purity and fertility. A muezzin climbs a spiral staircase inside the tower five times a day.

FUNCTION:

Local African chiefs frequently adopted Islam. According to tradition, sometime during the 13th century Djenne's 26th chief, Koi Konboro, converted to Islam. He then erected a mosque in Djenne as a sign of his religious devotion. Mali's emergence as a powerful sub-Saharan empire enabled Djenne to become a prosperous commercial and religious center. Over the centuries, the Great Mosque has become the epicenter of the religious and cultural life of Mali, and the community of Djenné. It is also the site of a unique annual festival called the Crepissage de la Grand Mosquée (Plastering of the Great Mosque).

CONTENT:

The wall facade also contains distinctive projecting beams. Known as Torons, the bundles of palm sticks provide a decorative ornament. They also help reduce cracking caused by frequent changes in humidity and temperature. One less expected component is found at the tip of each minaret: an ostrich egg. Apparently, ostrich eggs keep spiders away. They've been used in other mosques in Istanbul, Turkey, for exactly that purpose. They also may serve as drainage and water redirects. Similarly, the thick minarets recall the architectural form found throughout the Islamic world, save for their spiky exterior, which gives them the look of medieval weaponry. These rodier palm sticks are actually used for decoration, rather than weaponry, as well as scaffolding for the yearly re-mudding of the building.

CONTEXT:

During the 8th century, Arab traders ventured across Northern Africa into the Savannah region south of the Sahara Desert. These Muslim merchants enjoyed great commercial success by trading gold, ivory, and salt. At the same time, they introduced their Islamic faith to the people and rulers they encountered. While Islam had arrived in northern Africa quickly after Mohammad first started making his rounds in the seventh century, it took time to trickle down further into the interior of the continent. With the help of trade routes, the religion spread amongst the elites, such as Koy, in Mali, and Sudan around 1200. In the 13th century, there was a revolt between a powerful king, Soso, and a prince, Sundiata, that led to the rise of the Mali Empire. Even today, storytellers recount the epic of Soso's defeat. Shortly after Sosa's fall, Mansa Musa, a ruler who followed the Islamic faith, would come to power, becoming known throughout Europe and Egypt for his wealth. When he made his trip to Mecca, he left a trail of riches in his wake that was nearly incomprehensible to those who came in contact with him outside of Africa.

INNOVATION/CONVENTION:

Very little is known about the appearance of Koi Konboro's mosque. As Mali's fortunes declined, his mosque slowly deteriorated. During the 1830's a second less impressive mosque replaced it. After the French gained control over Mali, they funded a new mosque between 1906 and 1907 on the same site where the original once stood. This building still stands and is universally known as the Great Mosque of Djenne. Minarets are essential parts of a mosque's architectural plan. However, their number and style vary. The Great Mosque of Djenne includes an innovative design in which its three symmetrical minarets are part of the Qibla wall. The mosque has a large courtyard in front of a roofed prayer hall, emulating the plan of many of the oldest mosques known. For example, the great mosque at Damascus in Syria and at Kairouan in Tunisia. Djenne's qibla wall faces Mecca, as do all Qibla walls, but the mosque's facade is unlike that of any other Islamic shrine. It features soaring adobe towers and vertical buttresses resembling engaged columns that produce a majestic rhythm. It is also the largest mud-built structure in the world.

ARTISTIC DECISIONS:

The Great Mosque's mud brick walls are stronger than those made with conventional rectangular bricks. However, mud bricks are vulnerable to erosion from rain. As a result, the Great mosque requires frequent maintenance. The entire Djenne community takes an active role in maintaining the Great mosque. During an annual spring festival known as Crepissage, thousands of devoted citizens re-plaster the mosque's rain soaked walls. This festive occasion includes music, food, and a race to recognize the fastest runners delivering plaster to the mosque. Experienced members of Djenne's mason's guild direct the work. The Torons provide ready-made scaffolding, enabling volunteers to reach all parts of the walls. This new coat of mud plaster protects the walls and gives them a smooth, sculpted look.

INTERPRETATION:

Djenne is the oldest known city in sub-Saharan Africa. The Great Mosque of Djenne is located in present-day Mali on the flood plain of the Bani River. It is the largest mud brick building in the world and one of the most famous landmarks in Africa. The Great Mosque is widely recognized as a symbol of the city of Djenne and a source of pride for the nation of Mali.

DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:

The mosque had been razed in 1830 by a Muslim ruler who judged it size and lavish decoration to be offensive to the tenants of his faith, which is why it needed rebuilding in 1907. It's status as a World Heritage site has caused problems for the residents of Djenne. They are not allowed to update or change their residences. The current state of Djenné highlights the complex network of factors that affect world heritage: armed conflict and civil unrest, environmental threats, urban development, and lack of cooperation between agencies can all undermine the fate of monuments like the Great Mosque. Such circumstances remind us of the importance and the difficulty of conservation efforts not just in Djenné, but around the globe.

TITLE: Conical tower and circular wall of Great Zimbabwe **LOCATION:** Southeastern Zimbabwe **DATE:** 1000-1400 C.E.

ARTIST: Shona peoples **PERIOD/STYLE:** 11th century African Art **PATRON:**

MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE: Coursed granite blocks.

FORM:

A 820 foot long elliptical-shaped outer wall defines the boundaries of the Great Enclosure. The towering structure rises 32 feet above the surrounding savanna. A 2nd inner wall runs along part of the outer wall and forms a narrow parallel passageway leading to the conical tower. The tower is 19 feet in diameter and rises to 30 feet. The Great Enclosure was completed in approximately 1450, and it too is a walled structure punctuated with turrets and monoliths, emulating the form of the earlier Hill Ruin. Inside the Great Enclosure, a smaller wall parallels the exterior wall creating a tight passageway leading to large towers.

FUNCTION:

There is no evidence that the Great Enclosure functioned as a defensive fortress. Instead, its formidable walls separated the royal family from their subjects. The walls thus symbolized the ruler's power. Shaped like a granary, the Conical tower may have underscored the ruler's role as a custodian of bountiful harvests. Most architectural historians agree that Great Zimbabwe was a royal residence with special areas for the ruler, his wives, and nobles, including an open court for ceremonial gatherings. At the peak of the empire's power, as many as 18,000 people may have lived in the surrounding area, with most of the commoners residing outside the enclosed complex reserved for royalty. The third section of Great Zimbabwe, the Valley Ruins, include a number of structures that offer evidence that the site served as a hub for commercial exchange and long distance trade.

CONTENT:

The two walls and conical tower contain over 1,000,000 granite blocks quarried from nearby hills. An astonished 16th century Portuguese historian reported that despite their "marvelous size", the granite stones had "no mortar joining them." Requiring over 30 years to build, the Great Enclosure was as stunning architectural feat that displayed great precision and craft. At the time, the Great Zimbabwe Empire had a wide trade network. Finds of beads and porcelain pottery from Mesopotamia and China, along with copper, gold, and ivory objects, underscore that Great Zimbabwe was a prosperous trade center long before Europeans began their coastal voyaging in the late 15th century. Many artifacts have been found on site, including the things you might find in a typical Shona kitchen and household: pottery shards, adzes, and spears of various metals. Archaeologists have found porcelain fragments originating from China, beads crafted in southeast Asia, and copper ingots from trading centers along the Zambezi River and from Central African kingdoms.

CONTEXT:

Great Zimbabwe's granite walls were more than just symbols of royal authority; they were also a testament to the city's great wealth. Between approximately 1000 and 1450, mines in the Zimbabwe Plateau and Limpopo Valley produced about 2/5th of the world's total mined gold. The rulers of Great Zimbabwe controlled and taxed the flow of gold from these inland mines to Kilwa and other port cities along East Africa's famed Swahili coast. Great Zimbabwe was thus an integral part of a lucrative trading network connecting Africa to Arabia, India and China. During the peak of their power, Great Zimbabwe's rulers collected glass from Arabia, pottery from Persia and prized porcelain from China.

INNOVATION/CONVENTION:

It is the largest stone complex in Africa built before the modern era, aside from the monumental architecture of ancient Egypt. It's a serious architectural feat to construct stone walls without the help of mortar to glue the individual stones together. That is exactly what the builders of Great Zimbabwe did, not unlike the Inca builders across the Atlantic Ocean. Difficult to swallow for Europeans in the 19th century, research conclusively showed the work was African in design and construction.

ARTISTIC DECISIONS:

Not all walls are alike, however. The Great Enclosure, or circular wall, stands out because not only does it look lace-like with the geometric ornamentation on the top, it also encloses other walls and a conical tower that resembles a "stone beehive." What's even more mind-blowing is that the conical tower is completely solid. A monolithic soapstone sculpture of a seated bird resting on atop a register of zigzags was unearthed here. The pronounced muscularity of the bird's breast and its defined talons suggest that this represents a bird of prey, and scholars have conjectured it could have been emblematic of the power of Shona kings as benefactors to their people and intercessors with their ancestors.

INTERPRETATION:

The great enclosure houses one large and several small conical, tower like stone structures, which archaeologists have interpreted symbolically as masculine and feminine forms, but their precise significance is unknown. The form of the large tower suggests a grainery. Grain bins were symbols of royal power and generosity, as the ruler received tribute in grain and dispensed it to the people in times of need, a social service with parallels in many civilizations-- for example, the ancient Roman Empire, that also legitimized the ruler's authority. Because the Great Enclosure shares many structural similarities with the Hill Ruin, one interpretation suggests that the Great Enclosure was built to accommodate a surplus population and its religious and administrative activities. Another theory posits that the Great Enclosure may have functioned as a site for religious rituals. Some believe this place to be the capitol of the Queen of Sheba.

DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:

The word "Zimbabwe" derives from a Shona term meaning "houses of stone" or "venerated houses". Both meanings provide insights into Great Zimbabwe, the largest and most important collection of stone ruins in Sub-saharan Africa. Built between 1000 and 1400, Great Zimbabwe served as a royal center where kings governed from "venerated houses". The Great Enclosure and the Conical Tower are symbols of Great Zimbabwe's rich past and sources of national pride for the people of modern Zimbabwe. Once called Southern Rhodesia, it was renamed Zimbabwe after gaining independence from Britain.

TITLE: Wall plaque **LOCATION:** Benin (Nigeria) **DATE:** 16th century C.E.

ARTIST: Edo peoples **PERIOD/STYLE:** 16th Century African Art **PATRON:**

MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE: Cast brass

FORM:

At the center of the symmetrical, hierarchical composition is the Benin king, who wears an elaborate headdress, multi-strand coral necklace, and coral and agate bracelets and anklets--emblems of his high office. Attendants whose size vary greatly according to their importance in Benin society hold shields over the king's head, underscoring his elevated status. The artist uses Hierarchy of scale, and also enlarges the heads for emphasis.

FUNCTION:

The purpose of the finest preserved Benin artworks was to honor the ruling Oba, his family, and his ancestors.

CONTENT:

The royal sculptors emphasized the Oba's undisputed power by placing him in the center of the plaque. They skillfully used HIERARCHICAL SCALE to underscore the Oba's relative importance compared to that of the surrounding figures. Two smaller palace attendants hold shields to protect their rulers head from the hot tropical sun. Two smaller sword-bearers support the Oba's outstretched hands. In addition, miniature figures can be seen hovering in the corners, and a tiny figure supports the Oba's royal feet. Almost every detail in this work speaks to the Benin Kingdom's mutually beneficial trade with Portugal, which first made contact with Benin in the late 15th century.

CONTEXT:

The Kingdom established in the 13th century, reached its peak of wealth and power in the 16th century. Benin kingship was hereditary and sacred. The first Portuguese caravels reached Benin in about 1485. Their unexpected arrival soon led to mutually profitable trade. The Portuguese coveted Benin's rich supply of pepper, ivory, gold, and slaves. The Oba coveted the Portuguese' rich supply of coral beads, horses, and brass bracelets known as manillas. For example, in 1548 one German merchant house supplied Portugal with 432 tons of brass for the West African trade. When Portuguese influence gradually faded, the British emerged as the dominant power in West Africa. In 1897 small British delegation demanded a meeting with the Oba to negotiate more favorable trade agreements. Since he was conducting state ceremonies, the Oba requested that the meeting be delayed. However, the British arrogantly rejected this request. A group of insulted local chiefs they ambushed the British party and killed most of its members.

INNOVATION/CONVENTION:

Unlike in most other African cultural and linguistic groups, the names and dates of many of the Benin kings have been recorded, and numerous extant artworks can be confidently associated to specific rulers. The royal sculptors used a distinctive canon of proportion designed to emphasize the Oba's head. Recall that the ancient Greek sculptor Polykleitos created a canon of human proportion prescribing the human head be 1/6 of the body's size. In contrast, Benin's royal sculptors portrayed Oba with an enlarged head that was about 1/3 of their ruler's total height. This canon is consistent with the Benin's understanding of the Oba as the kingdoms "Great Head." As the center of wisdom and thought, the head controls the body. Similarly, as the center of leadership and power, The Oba controls the kingdom of Benin.

ARTISTIC DECISIONS:

The plaque originally hung alongside many others on posts throughout the palace of the Oba. The order of their placement on these posts would have told the history of the royal lineage of Benin's Obas, who traced their dynasty all the way back to Oranmiyan, whose son was the first Oba of Benin. However, the sequence of plaques is lost to us since they were long held in storage when found by westerners in the 19th century. This image provides visual evidence of the trade between Benin and Portugal. The royal sculptors melted the manillas and then used the LOST WAX PROCESS to create the brass plaques. Since brass never rusts or corrodes, the metal implied that an Oba would reign over Benin forever. European horses and Mediterranean coral were also prized as the symbol of the Oba's power and wealth. The sight of the Oba sidesaddle on a large horse must have awed the people of Benin. The rings of red coral beads covering their ruler's neck provided a dazzling display of his wealth. Taken together, the brass plaques provided an unparalleled visual record of Benin's elaborate rituals and long history

INTERPRETATION:

The small but revealing brass plaque sheds light on many aspects of West African history. Originally created to express royal power, it also illustrates 16th-century commercial relations between Portugal and the West African Kingdom of Benin. The plaque's layered meanings do not stop in the 16th-century. It provides a vivid and painful connection to the consequences of British imperialism during the late 19th century Scramble for Africa. We know that this plaque was one of the artworks looted in the siege because Norman Burrows, a known trafficker in stolen Benin objects, owned it briefly during this time. This act of looting perpetrated by the British was later condemned as a criminal and violent act of British imperialism and colonialism. As such, there are many who believe that objects such as this plaque should be returned to the people of Benin, who remain deeply connected to their history and cultural traditions.

DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:

The figure of the Oba, or, ruler, of Benin dominates the plaque. Although we do not know his name, we do know that the people of Edo believed he was descended from the gods. As a divine ruler, the Oba exercised absolute power over every aspect of life in his kingdom. The wall plaques were part of the spoils the British took during what is now called the "British Punitive Expedition." That moniker says it all: It was a time in which British wrath was made apparent. The British promptly sold some spoils and kept others, accounting for the fact that these plaques can now be found throughout the world.

TITLE: Sika dwa kofi **LOCATION:** Ghana **DATE:** 1700 C.E.

ARTIST: Ashanti peoples **PERIOD/STYLE:** 18th Century African Art **PATRON:** Okomfo Anokye

MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE: Gold over wood and cast-gold attachments

FORM:

The Golden Stool is covered with pure gold. It is 18 inches high, 24 inches long, and 12 inches wide. It is never placed on the ground and is so sacred that no one has ever sat on it. New kings are lowered and raised over the Golden Stool without touching it. It's decked out with a number of sacred brass bells that hang from the sides.

FUNCTION:

For the Ashanti, stools have historically represented clan leadership. With the arrival of the golden stool, all the Ashanti clans were united under one ruler. Therefore, the stool represents infinite cosmic power. That's probably an overstatement, but the stool does represent the soul, or sunsum, of the Ashanti people. Because the welfare of the Ashanti people was and is unified within the stool, its loss would result in the demise of the kingdom. It holds even more importance than the Ashanti ruler, which was made apparent in an early 20th-century conflict between the Ashanti and the British. The Ashanti exiled their king, Prempeh I, to save the stool from landing in British hands.

CONTENT:

Legitimized by the Golden Stool, the Ashanti Kingdom flourished. The royal treasury in the Kumasi contained over 20,000 pounds of gold dust. But this great wealth did not protect the Ashanti from British imperialism. In 1874, British soldiers burned Kumasi. Determined to suppress all resistance, the British royal governor Sir Frederick Hodgson imperiously demanded that the Ashanti surrender the Golden Stool and "give it to me to sit upon." Hodgson's arrogant insult touched off a rebellion known as the War of the Golden Stool. Although the British suppressed the revolt, the Ashanti claimed victory because they prevented Hodgson from seizing the Golden Stool and sending it to the British Museum in London. Today, the Golden Stool

CONTEXT:

In the late 1690s Osei Tutu, a warrior-chief of Kumasi, attempted to unify a loose confederation of Ashanti states. According to Ashanti tradition, Osei Tutu's chief priest Okomfo Anokye assembled the various chiefs and then dramatically extended his arms towards the heavens. A Golden Stool miraculously descended from a cloud and landed on Osei Tutu's lap. Awed by this divine symbol, the proud chiefs swore allegiance to Osei Tutu. Legitimized by the Golden Stool, the Ashanti Kingdom flourished. The royal treasury in Kumasi contained over 20,000 pounds of gold dust. But this great wealth did not protect the Ashanti from British imperialism. In 1874 British soldiers burned Kumasi. Determined to suppress all resistance, the British royal governor Sir Frederick Hodgson imperiously demanded that the Ashanti surrender the Golden Stool and "give it to me to sit upon". On that day, one of the priests, Okomfo Anokye, confiscated all of the other stools and buried them, leaving the Golden Stool as the only seat left; it symbolized Ashanti rule. As it turns out, Anokye became influential during Osei Tutu's rule, helping to create a number of laws and games. He also had time to perform a number of miracles that only the anointed priest could perform, including carrying baskets of water without losing a single drop.

INNOVATION/CONVENTION:

ARTISTIC DECISIONS:

Certain legends even state that Anokye made the Golden Stool himself. While he surely had the know-how, it's more widely believed that it was his chanting that called the stool forth from the skies. Anokye commissioned the bells that grace the stool, adding them to the sides after its first terrestrial appearance.

INTERPRETATION:

The Ashanti are the largest ethnic group in the modern West African state of Ghana. Their memorable history stretches back to the late 17th century, when King Osei Tutu unified a number of previously independent chiefs. The unification and subsequent rise of the Ashanti Kingdom is closely tied to a remarkable object known as the Golden Stool.

DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:

The Ashanti believe that the Golden Stool contains the sunsum, or soul, of their people. Just as individuals cannot live without a soul, so the Ashanti people would disappear from history if they lost their Golden Stool

TITLE: Ndop **LOCATION:** Democratic Republic of Congo **DATE:** C. 1760-1780 C.E.

ARTIST: Kuba peoples **PERIOD/STYLE:** **PATRON:** King Mishe miShyaang maMbul

MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE: Wood

FORM:

A highly skilled royal sculptor created the figure shown in image 171 for King Mishe miShyaang maMbul. The nearly two-foot-high ndop is an idealized depiction of a nyim or Kuba ruler. Like all existing ndop statues, the nyim is seated cross-legged on a platform. The elevation underscores the nyim's royal status as a leader raised above his people. Typically, the figures appear in a state of Zen, with their eyes closed, sitting in cross-legged positions on square bases decorated with X-like designs. Each ruler's base shows a symbol (ibol) of his societal contributions. In the case of King Mishe miShyaang maMbul, his emblem is a drum with a severed hand.

FUNCTION:

The ndop was more than a visual reminder of the nyim's wealth and power; it also served as a carefully preserved surrogate that absorbed the king's spiritual essence. This prepared ndop for its essential function as a source of future instruction and inspiration. At the beginning of the 20th century, a Kuba ruler quoted an early nyim who explained the ndop's vital role for his people: "when they look at his statue they will be able to remember me and think I am looking at them consoling them when they are sad, giving them inspiration and new courage." The Ndop portrait of Shyaam illustrated here like all the other Kuba portraits of this type, an idealized posthumous representation of The King (nyim) in the prime of life, intended to capture his spirit rather than his individual likeness.

CONTENT:

Although the ndop does not contain any distinguishing physical characteristics, it does include a prominent relief located on the front of the base. Known as an ibol, the image of a drum with a severed hand is a customized visual signifier chosen by King Mishe miShyaang maMbul. The surviving ndop figures all date to the second half of the 18th century. They may be replacements for earlier images of the Kuba rulers and are testimonials to the strength of Kuba oral history, which preserves the names of Kings who died more than a century before. The ndop are among the oldest preserved Wood Sculptures from Africa. All of them depict the king seated cross-legged on a plinth with an identifying emblem between his legs. Shyaam's is a board game which he is said to have introduced to his people. He holds a sword in his left hand and wears a sash and armbands. On his head is the distinctive Bushoong visor crown.

CONTEXT:

The Kuba Kingdom flourished between the 17th and 19th centuries in the southwestern region of what is today the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Known as a major center of artistic creativity, the kingdom's sculptural tradition featured a series of carved ndops or "portrait statues" of Kuba rulers. Located in the current Democratic Republic of Congo, the Kuba Kingdom was a powerhouse in its day. As the story goes, around the year 1625, Shyaam a-Mbul a Ngoong-Shyaam unseated the then-ruler to take the reins of what would eventually become known as the Kuba Kingdom. This kingdom, once a hodge-podge of clans, was unified under his prosperous leadership. Before he ousted the previous ruler, Shyaam a-Mbul a Ngoong-Shyaam had been a drifter exploring the Kongo and Pende kingdoms, where he was inspired by all the great advances in metalworking and agriculture. This experience lit a fire in the soon-to-be king's belly because, as soon as he dethroned the former king, he began making big changes based upon his travel encounters. Not only did he introduce iron technology, he also introduced the Kuba to crops that had begun arriving from the New World, including corn, tobacco, and beans.

INNOVATION/CONVENTION:

Most of the objects examined thus far come from Western or Southern Africa. Fewer early artworks have survived from the densely wooded areas of central Africa, where the climate is not conducive to the preservation of the materials most commonly used by African artists. Notable exceptions are the carved wood Royal portrait figures (ndop) of Kuba Kings from the Democratic Republic of Congo. The ndop of King Mishe miShyaang maMbul happens to be the oldest of all the Kuba sculptures of rulers so it is recognized as a prototype for the ndop to come. Art historians believe that there are seven ndop statues of historical significance in Western museums. These seven are significant because the lives of the nyim they portray were celebrated in oral histories that were recorded and written down by early European visitors, so we know the most about them. The facial features of each statue follow sculpting conventions and do not represent features of a specific individual. All figures are sculpted using a one-to-three proportion—the head of the statue was sculpted to be one third the size of the total statue. Kuba artists emphasized the head because it was considered to be the seat of intelligence, a valued ideal.

ARTISTIC DECISIONS:

The sculpture portrayed King Mishe miShyaang maMbul with an enlarged head about one-third of the ruler's total height. This traditional canon of proportion emphasized the head's role as the seat of intelligence, knowledge, and power. The nyim's expressionless face imparts a sense of dignity while reinforcing a feeling of royal distance. Similar to art traditions in other world cultures, the apprentices imitated or copied early pieces from their teachers until they were skilled enough to develop their own designs. Although the names of individual artists were not written down—and are not known to us today—artists were sought after by name and were important to the Kuba royal court and beyond.

INTERPRETATION:

The Kuba kept the ndop portraits in a shrine in the women's quarters of the palace. They rubbed the statuettes with oil, which produced a glowing reddish surface symbolizing the king's magical powers. When one of the Kuba women was about to give birth, they placed the ndop near her to ensure a successful delivery. It's debatable when these sculptures were carved. However, some sources note that ndop were carved during the nyim's rule. If this was the case, the sculpture personified the ruler during his absence. When the King went out of town, his ndop was under the care of his wives, who were left with the task of making sure the sculpture got the proper kingly TLC. On the other hand, other sources claim that the ndop was carved after the king died. Whatever the case may be, the sculptures do convey the nyim's aura. Whether made in life or after death, they can be considered vessels for the spirit of a particular nyim, channeling his power to the world of the living in true Kuba style.

DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:

Although the ndop is relatively small, it contains a number of symbols intended to convey the nyim's wealth and royal lineage. The bracelets, armbands, and closed eyes shaped like cowrie shells all project an impressive display of regal opulence. Known as a shody, the distinctive hoe-shaped head ornament provides a visual link to a headdress worn by one of the founders of the Kuba Kingdom.

TITLE: Nkisi n'kondi **LOCATION:** Democratic Republic of Congo **DATE:** C. late 19th century C.E.

ARTIST: Kongo peoples **PERIOD/STYLE:** 19th Century African Art **PATRON:**

MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE: Wood and metal.

FORM:

Like all other minkisi, (plural of nkisi) this was the collaborative work of an expert wood carver and a ritual specialist known as a nganga. The carver skillfully shaped a single block of wood into an imposing figure who leans forward as he stands upon raised blocks. Image 172's wide-open eyes, bent knees, and hands on hip create a distinctive pose that conveys a heightened sense of alertness. This nkisi is clearly ready to spring into action.

FUNCTION:

A nkisi n'kondi served its community in a number of ways. It could be used positively to provide protection from misfortune, cure physical ailments and resolve disputes. Or it could be used negatively to hunt down evildoers and violators of agreements. Supervised by the nganga, members of the community accessed a nkisi's power by driving a nail or a pointed object into the figure. These sharp objects captured the nkisi n'kondi's attention thus activating the spiritual power residing in the figure. The word n'kondi or "hunter" underscores a nkisi's ability to swiftly track down thieves and other wrongdoers. These images, consecrated by trained priests using precise ritual formulas, embodied spirits believed to heal and give life, or sometimes to inflict harm, disease, or even death. Each figure had its specific role, just as it wore particular medicines, here protruding from the abdomen, which features a large cowrie shell.

CONTENT:

Although the carved image presents a formidable presence, it remained an empty vessel until the nganga completed his role by combining herbs, bits of animal bones, special minerals, and ancestor relics into a spiritually charged matter called bilango. The nganga then placed his material into a hollow cavity typically located in the figure's belly, believing this location was the nkisi's spiritual center. The nganga then sealed the cavity with a piece of glass. Packed in resin, this potent medicine attracted a spiritual force, thus giving the nkisi its power. The metal pieces embedded in each nkisi n'kondi provide a historic record of the agreements, disputes, and medical ailments experienced by a Kongo community. The number of nails indicates a nkisi's power and efficacy. For example, Image 172 contains 380 sharp objects. This nkisi n'kondi must have been a truly formidable guardian who effectively served his community.

CONTEXT:

A nkisi n'kondi could also be used to finalize a binding agreement between neighboring communities. In one documented example, representatives of two warring villages inserted a nail into a nkisi n'kondi and then solemnly vowed, "Between your village and my village we have an accord. You may not seize hostages from us and we will not seize hostages from you. If one of our people does something to the other group, we will meet to talk and not fight." The parties understood that the nkisi n'kondi would severely punish anyone who violated this agreement. The nkisi's range of punishments included unleashing deadly afflictions and destructive natural forces such as thunderstorms and fire. Aware that the nkisi n'kondi would show no mercy to violators of the agreement, the parties could pay the nganga a substantial fee to remove the nail, thus annulling the accord. A nkisi n'kondi can act as an oath-taking image which is used to resolve verbal disputes or lawsuits (mambu) as well as an avenger (the term nkondi means "hunter") or guardian if sorcery or any form of evil has been committed. Kongo traditions such as those of the nkisi n'kondi have survived over the centuries and migrated to the Americas and the Caribbean via Afro-Atlantic religious practices such as vodun, Palo Monte, and macumba.

INNOVATION/CONVENTION:

By the 1930s, African sculpture, such as the Nkisi n'kondi, had caught the eye of enterprising artists and museums, who participated in categorizing non-Western objects as primitive archaeological artifacts, despite the reality that many African societies were still in existence. The Nkisi n'kondi even appeared in an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, where the power sculpture was exhibited alongside modern art, and therefore outside of its original context. A prominent photographer of the Works Progress Administration named Walker Evans snapped pictures of the Nkisi n'kondi and provided text for the exhibition.

ARTISTIC DECISIONS:

Compared with the sculptures of other African peoples, this Kongo figure is relatively naturalistic, although the carver simplified the facial features and magnified the size of the head for emphasis. Forged in the area now known as the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Nkisi n'kondi were given an intimidating appearance because of the role they played in keeping order for the people of the Congo. Medicinal combinations called bilongo are sometimes stored in the head of the figure but frequently in the belly of the figure which is shielded by a piece of glass, mirror or other reflective surface.

INTERPRETATION:

The figure served as an important public object that played an integral role in the administration of justice for Kongo communities. Owners appealed to a figure's forces every time they inserted a nail or blade, as if to prod the spirit to do its work. People invoked other spirits by repeating specific chants, rubbing the images, or applying special powders. The roles of power figures varied enormously, from curing minor ailments to stimulating crop growth, from punishing thieves to weakening enemies. Very large Kongo figures, such as this one, which is nearly four feet tall, had exceptional ascribed powers and aided entire communities. Although benevolent for their owners, the figures stood at the boundary between life and death, and most villagers held them in awe. Minkisi represent the ability to both "contain" and "release" spiritual forces which can have both positive and negative consequences on the community.

DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:

The Congo (or Kongo) peoples migrated to the area around the Democratic Republic of Congo in the 13th century under the leadership of Wene. By the late 15th century, the Portuguese parked their boats on the coast and initiated political relations with the Congo peoples. The relationship between the two groups was touch-and-go at best, given conflicts between Christianity and local belief systems. African invaders from the south pushed the Congo peoples to look to the Portuguese for help, creating even more strain between them. Mostly, the Portuguese and the Congo peoples were enemies, fighting on the same side when it was convenient, and otherwise fighting each other when there wasn't a common foe.

TITLE: Female (Pwo) mask **LOCATION:** Democratic Republic of the Congo **DATE:** Late 19th-20th century C.E.

ARTIST: Chokwe peoples **PERIOD/STYLE:** 19th-20th century African Art **PATRON:**

MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE: Wood, fiber, pigment, and metal

FORM:

Crafted by the Chokwe peoples, this female (Pwo) mask features a delicately featured face stained in a rich brown. The color comes from a combination of red clay and oil. The woman's eyes are closed and inset in white circles created from clay called kaolin. The whiteness around her eyes: spiritual realm/ her eyes are the most important part of face. She has a small, round nose, a pursed mouth, and pierced ears that boast a nice pair of hoops, while her coif is made from fiber and arranged with a braided headband. Bearing a number of tattoos, the mask's cheeks and forehead reference the accessories Chokwe women normally wore around their necks.

FUNCTION:

The Pwo mask was more than an impressive work of art; it was also a vital part of a MASQUERADE. Like other West African communities, the Chokwe performed masquerades that combined performers, dancers, music, masks, and costumes. The Pwo mask played an especially important role in initiation ceremonies for adolescent boys by dramatizing Chokwe cultural traditions. The masks are thus part of a total experience that cannot be fully conveyed in a static museum exhibit. The Chokwe made these masks to honor female ancestors. It's important to note that the Chokwe are a matrilineal society.

CONTENT:

This mask represents Pwo Mwana, who is the younger and more idealized founding mother. Although it is just over 15 inches high, the Pwo mask conveys a great deal of information. For example, the mask contains a number of pounded dots representing SCARIFICATION patterns. The cingelyengelye or cruciform design on her forehead may have derived from the Cross of the Order of Christ introduced by 17th-century Portuguese monks. The tears under the Pwo's eyes mark her pride as a mother and sorrow at the inevitable dissolution of the close ties with her son.

CONTEXT:

The Chokwe, who are Bantu speakers, inhabit the Democratic Republic of Congo, as well as Angola and Zambia. Their lineage can be traced back to the Mbundu and Mbuti pygmies. For over two centuries, they were under the rule of the Lunda empire, which had been established in the 16th century. According to lore, the Lunda empire was founded by two lovers. The Chokwe people are an ethnic group who reside in northeastern Angola and the southwestern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The Chokwe won renown as successful traders and gifted artists. The masks may take the form of women, but it's typically men who wear them during ceremonies that involve slow dancing in the manner of a woman. These masks make their cameo during male initiation ceremonies in which participants pair the mask with a fitted bodysuit that features female breasts carved from wood. In some cases, the Pwo references fertility, while in others it has come to suggest ideal female beauty. Either way, the female form is inspiration for these ceremonies and a source of cultural expression in a matrilineal society.

INNOVATION/CONVENTION:

ARTISTIC DECISIONS:

The Pwo's half closed almond-shaped eyes dominate the mask. The Chokwe craftsman used kaolin, a fine, white clay crushed into powder, to create the whiteness around the Pwo's eyes. The figure's eyes draw attention to her inner wisdom and suggest a connection to the spiritual realm.

INTERPRETATION:

The Chokwe are a MATRILINEAL society, in which descent is traced through the female line. The Pwo mask underscores the prominence of women among the Chokwe. A male dancer dressed like a woman wore the Pwo mask. The dancer used graceful steps to honor the special importance of Chokwe mothers. The central cruciform on the forehead has been interpreted as a cosmogram while the markings on either cheek are described as a solar disc joined by tears. Right cheek is the cijingo: in combination with a cross, denotes a spiral brass bracelet. Forehead: mitelumuna (knitted eyebrows) an allusion to discontentedness or arrogance. Under the eyes is the masoji, signifying tears.

DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:

TITLE: Portrait mask (Mblo) **LOCATION:** Kami, Ivory Coast **DATE:** Early 20th century C.E.

ARTIST: Owie Kimou **PERIOD/STYLE:** Baule peoples **PATRON:** Moya Yanso's husband
Kouame Ziarey

MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE: Wood and pigment

FORM:

Unlike most African masks, the names of both the carver and his subject are known. Carved by Owie Kimou, the mask is just over 14 inches high. The small but impressive work is an idealized portrait of Moya Yanso, a woman renowned in Kami for her great beauty and extraordinary dancing skills.

FUNCTION:

The mblo is a performance category in which performers put on the masks and perform skits. Other dances include the gba gba, performed during funerals, and the goli, a daylong ceremony that involves consuming massive amounts of palm wine. Each performance, like the mblo, has a specific mask. All of these masks represent community members rather than ancestors, unlike in other African societies. When not in use, the Gbagba masks were kept out of sight so it is unusual that we get to see a mask displayed in this manner. Masks like this one were not intended to be hung on a wall and appreciated, first and foremost, for their physical characteristics. Sculpture throughout West Africa has the power to act; to make things happen. A carving of a figure, for example, can be utilized by practitioners to communicate with ancestors and spirits. The physical presence of a mask can allow the invisible world to interact with and influence the visible world of humans.

CONTENT:

Portrait masks characteristically have an oval face with an elongated nose, small, open mouth, downcast slit eyes with projecting pieces that extend beyond the crest to suggest animal horns. Most also have scarification patterns at the temple and a high gloss patina. These stylistic attributes are actually a visual vocabulary that suggests what it means to be a good, honorable, respected, and beautiful person in Baule society. The half slit eyes and high forehead suggest modesty and wisdom respectively. The nasolabial fold depicted as a line between the sides of the nose to the outsides of the mouth and the beard-like projecting triangular patterns that extend from the bottom of the ears to the chin, suggest age. The triangular brass additions heighten the lustrous patina when danced in the sunlight, a suggestion of health.

CONTEXT:

The Baule are Akan peoples that split away from the Ashanti nearly three centuries ago. According to Baule oral histories, the reigning queen was in competition with the Ashanti king at the time. Things didn't go as planned and she eventually led the Baule to the Ivory Coast, outside of the Ashanti dominion. Like the Chokwe, the Baule have a matrilineal society in which chiefs inherit power from their mothers' side. Moya Yanso's Mblo mask appeared at a climatic moment of a gbagba, an elaborate Baule masquerade that included drummers, singers, and dancers. As the gbagba unfolded, highly skilled male dancers performed a series of increasingly complex dances. In order to heighten the drama, selected villagers carefully concealed the Mblo mask. Then at a climatic moment, Moya Yanso's husband appeared wearing her Mblo mask. Yanso also played a vital role in the performance as she danced alongside of her husband. Audience members participate by dancing, clapping, and drumming.

INNOVATION/CONVENTION:

Owie Kimou used traditional stylistic attributes to convey Moya Yanso's physical beauty and wisdom. The mask's gracefully shaped, wrinkle-free face portrays a woman in the prime of her life. At the same time, the mask's high forehead and small almost closed mouth convey intelligence and composure, qualities of reserve highly esteemed by the Baule. This example of a mblo mask is rare, however, because both the artist and the dancer's identities are known.

ARTISTIC DECISIONS:

Owie Kimou used two additional attributes to enhance the mask's artistic quality. The figure's left eye is a little higher than its right eye. This subtle asymmetry gives the mask a feeling of complexity. Kimou also placed six projecting tubular pieces above Yanso's head. Included for beauty, they have no iconographic significance. Despite the differences between various examples of this type of masks, there are many similarities as well, including the long, slender nose, the pouty lips, half-moon shaped eyes, elaborate hairdos, arched eyebrows, and highly buffed surfaces. The mblo of Moya Yanso is different from other examples for another reason; the artist tacked metal triangles to the forehead and chin. Other mblo masks show scarification (creating scars or keloids on the face), while masks of males often feature sweet braided goatees.

INTERPRETATION:

"Baule believers first encounter the object's indwelling spiritual powers, or the metaphysical ideas it evokes, while the connoisseur begins with the visible forms, colors, textures—the artist's material creation."

DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:

The Baule include about 400,000 people who live in compact villages in the Cote d'Ivoire. The Baule are noted for their fine wood sculptures and carved ceremonial masks. Image 174 is an outstanding example of Mblo portrait mask carved in about 1913 for a masquerade performed in the village of Kami.

TITLE: Bundu mask (Sowei) **LOCATION:** West African forests of Sierra Leone and Liberia **DATE:** 19th to 20th century C.E.

ARTIST: Sande Society **PERIOD/STYLE:** Mende peoples **PATRON:** _____

MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE: Wood, cloth, and fiber

FORM:

The ideal mask has clearly defined features that embody Mende ideals of physical and moral beauty. The highly stylized neck rings signify fertility, good health, and high status. The high forehead conveys character and wisdom, while the small mouth and ears represent a person who will neither speak nor listen to gossip. The intricately styled coiffure indicates elegance, wealth, and femininity. Elaborate coiffures, shiny black color, dainty triangular shaped faces with slit eyes, rolls around the neck, and real and carved versions of amulets and various emblems on the top commonly characterized Sowie masks. These symbolize the adult woman's role as wives, mothers, providers for the family, and keepers of medicines for use within the Sande Association and the society at large.

FUNCTION:

The Sande bring out their masks during funerals, anniversaries, to exercise justice, or to initiate new members into the society. Sande women associate their Sowie masks with water spirits and the color black, which in this society, in turn, connects human skin color and the civilized world. The women wear these helmet masks on top of their heads as headdresses, with black raffia and cloth costumes to hide the wearers identity while personifying the spirits during public performances. A public masquerade celebrates the girls' transformation into adulthood. The Sande women cover themselves because if any part of the dancer's identity is revealed, the spirit (Nga-fa) could enter the human as opposed to its real destination, the mask. The Nga-fa are like genies in a bottle, unleashed when a woman reveals any part of her body.

CONTENT:

A coat of palm oil gives the mask a black, lustrous shine, representing healthy and beautiful skin. The mask and its parts refer to ideal female beauty, morality, and behavior. A high, broad forehead signifies wisdom and success. The neck ridges have multiple meanings. They are signs of beauty, good health, and prosperity and also reference the ripples in the water from which the water spirits emerge. Intricately woven or plaited hair is the essence of harmony and order found in ideal households. A small, closed mouth and downcast eyes indicate the silent, serious demeanor expected of recent initiates.

CONTEXT:

The Mende- and Mande-speaking peoples brought the practice of wearing the black helmet mask to parts of Liberia and Sierra Leone. By the dawn of the 19th century, the Mende began organizing into independent chiefdoms. On the social ladder, the Mende were classed according to land rights. Each local society had its own version of the ceremony that included the helmet mask, but overall they shared a general sensibility. The female organization of the Sande and its male counterpart, the Poro, are considered moral compasses for the larger community, aiding in creating virtuous community members. The Sande Society, a fellowship of Mende women, prepares young girls for their roles as wives, mothers, and community members. Their existence is well known to the entire village. Nonetheless, the Sande Society is often described as "secret" because it hides some of its rituals from the eyes of uninitiated children and Mende men. The Sande Society of the Mende controls the initiation, education, and acculturation of Mende girls. Women leaders who dance the Sande masks serve as priestesses and judges during the three years that the women's society controls the ritual calendar (alternating with the men's society in this role), thus serving the community as a whole. Women maskers, who function as initiators, teachers, and mentors, help girl novices with their transformation into educated and marriageable women.

INNOVATION/CONVENTION:

This is one of the few ceremonial masks worn by African women. Typically, Sande officials commission the hefty masks from male carvers, who stick to a set of conventions when hewing the mask's features. The masks usually have extravagant hairstyles made with raffia fibers. Facial features are small, while foreheads are broad.

ARTISTIC DECISIONS:

Sande members commission the masks from male carver's, with the carver and patron together determining the type of mask needed for a particular societal purpose. The Mende often keep, repair, and reuse masks for many decades, thereby preserving them as models for subsequent generations of carver's. To achieve the high sheen, carvers use rough ficcus leaves to sand down the wood, which is then dyed black with a blend of other leaves and finally polished with palm oil. A few ingenious carvers have begun using shoe polish to match that rich black finish, a reference to shiny, healthy skin.

INTERPRETATION:

A talented Sande dancer appears in full costume as Sowoi, the water spirit of the Sande Society. She wears a black gown of raffia fibers that conceal her identity. A two to four pound conical helmet rests over her head on her shoulders. Sowoi refers most specifically to medicine—the kind of medicine that female healers/herbalists utilize. Embodied in this idea of medicine is a spiritual force. The mask, when danced, is a visual expression of this spirit. The term also refers to the custodian of the medicine.

DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:

The Mende primarily live in small villages in the southern third of Sierra Leone. Most Mende art is associated with elaborate initiation ceremonies. The Sande initiation process includes taking young girls to a secluded spot in the forest where they are taught the spiritual knowledge, medicinal skills, and rich traditions necessary for adulthood in Mende Society. The rituals include performing a clitoridectomy, a form of female genital mutilation. The Sande society believes this procedure prepares young girls for the pain of child bearing.

TITLE: Ikenga (shrine figure) **LOCATION:** Nigeria **DATE:** C. 19th to 20th century

ARTIST: Igbo peoples **PERIOD/STYLE:** 19th and 20th century African Art **PATRON:**

MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE: Wood

FORM:

Abstract in every sense, the Ikenga is a vaguely human, vaguely sheep-like figure that has been reduced to a series of geometric surfaces. The ram's horns protrude vertically from the top of the head (in other examples they curve), while the face is comprised of slits for eyes and a long, straight nose. Two legs sprout from the bottom half of the figure, though other examples of Ikenga can have multiple prong-like forms jutting out instead.

FUNCTION:

The ikenga reflects the importance of earned status in Igbo culture. Ikenga figures honor the power and skills of a man's right hand. As an indispensable center of action the right hand often wields weapons that enable Igbo men to earn recognition as intrepid warriors. The Ikenga aren't made only to decorate one's abode. They inhabit a special place in a ceremony in which a man sacrifices kola nuts or a chicken to his Ikenga to draw from its all-powerful reservoir of authority. The Ikenga becomes the source of the man's authority, as suggested by the inclusion of symbols of achievement: a pipe in the figure's mouth, the head of an enemy held in the left hand, and a sword held in the right hand.

CONTENT:

Ikenga figures vary in size and sculptural style. However, all figures include a set of ram horns. The distinctive horns symbolize calculated aggressiveness and ambition. According to Igbo tradition, a ram fights first with his head. The head therefore initiates all action. Some Ikenga are so abstract that they don't have arms. The Ikenga is supposed to represent one's ability and personal achievements. The right hand "gets things done."

CONTEXT:

The Igbo lived in a remote inland location that enabled them to enjoy an extended period of independence. As a result, they did not develop a centralized government. The absence of a rigid class of powerful chiefs created a relatively open society celebrating individual achievement and success. The Igbo constitute the largest ethnic group in what is today southeastern Nigeria. Their arts are both varied and complex. The ikenga is a masculine sculptural genre celebrating the Igbo's belief in the importance of individual achievement. The Igbo peoples of southeastern Nigeria (also called Igboland) are a varied lot who speak multiple, distinct languages and live in independent villages that are not unified under one ruler. What the Igbo do share is a belief in reincarnation and a conviction that both visible and invisible forces mingle amongst the living and the dead. The Igbo also believe in a world of supernatural forces, both gods (one supreme god, Chukwu, presides over all) and spirits that are said to live at the edges of the forests. Initial contact between Igboland and Europe came in the 15th century with the arrival of Portuguese traders. This kicked off an era of trade (mostly in slaves) with other Europeans as well, including the Dutch and the English. When the slave trade came to an end, other items went onto the market: palm oil, elephant tusks, and timber to name a few.

INNOVATION/CONVENTION:

ARTISTIC DECISIONS:

INTERPRETATION:

Modern museums display their ikenga as isolated figures in a Plexiglas case. In contrast, an Igbo awarded his ikenga a place of honor in a personal shrine. He regularly offered his ikenga sacrifices of palm wine, pounded yams dipped in soup, and prized kola nuts. During the early 1900's, George T. Basden worked as a missionary among the Igbo. He concluded that, "Without the ikenga, no household would rest in peace, its absence would be considered fatal."

DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:

The Igbo, like other African societies, practice scarification; this is reflected on the Ikenga's head, which shows ichi, or the scar's designs, proving membership in a particular society.

TITLE: Lukasa (memory board) **LOCATION:** Democratic Republic of Congo **DATE:** C. 19th-20th century C.E.

ARTIST: Mbudye Society **PERIOD/STYLE:** Luba peoples **PATRON:**

MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE: Wood, beads, and metal

FORM:

The lukasa illustrated here is one of the oldest known examples, with carved geometric designs on the back and sides, and complex clusters of beads of various sizes whose colors have faded over time. The board is narrower at the center making it easy to hold. The most important function of the lukasa was to serve as a memory aid that describes the myths surrounding the origins of the Luba empire, including recitation of the names of the royal Luba line.

FUNCTION:

Like other cultures, the Luba peoples developed a way to record and remember their history. The Mbudye Society evolved during the 1700's as a special council charged with preserving the Luba's legendary past and major political achievements. The Mbudye Society included trusted "men of memory" trained to remember and interpret vast stores of information. The Mbudye society developed a remarkable mnemonic device to help them recall details of Their kingdoms long history. Known as a Luckasa, the small objects appear to be nothing more than a flat piece of wood studded with brightly colored beads and bits of shell and metal. However, each lukasa actually contains a wealth of symbolic information. A senior member of the Mbudye society would read the lukasa by holding the board in his left hand and then tracing its design with his right forefinger. This tactile contact facilitated his ability to recall past legends and events.

CONTENT:

The object is organic, changing and morphing over time as it absorbs more history with the addition of different elements, such as shells, beads, and carvings. These additions reference specific events or chiefdoms. Layering them onto the rectangle wooden surface creates a narrative made of bumps and incisions, one that could be read by a court historian in a manner similar to Braille.

CONTEXT:

The Luba kingdom was located in what is now the Southwestern corner of the Democratic Republic of Congo. It's origins and expansion began in the 1500's. Within a century, the Luba emerged as a powerful political and economic presence in central Africa. Luba artists left a distinctive legacy that included beautiful carved representations of women and unique lukasa memory boards. The Mbudye Society was similar to King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table, steering the Luba king in the right direction with the help of the lukasa. In a sense, the society was similar to an accountability board, comprised of both men and women and schooled in Luba etiquette and principals, to help keep the king on his toes.

INNOVATION/CONVENTION:

ARTISTIC DECISIONS:

The lukasa were truly three-dimensional objects, with each element containing vast amounts of information. They have component parts: a head and a tail, which reference the balance of power between the king and society, as well as an "inside" and "outside" that can reference historical figures, historical events, and animals.

INTERPRETATION:

Each lukasa functioned as a complex archive of information. Reading its conceptual map enabled elite members of the Mbudye Society to recall vital Information about court ceremonies, cultural heroes, clan migrations, geographic landmarks, and a ruler's genealogical records. The Mbudye Society reader did more than just recall the past he also used the symbols to interpret contemporary events. As the keepers of knowledge, the men of memory thus played a key role in sustaining the rituals and authority of the Luba estate.

DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:

The Luba states rapid expansion rested upon the twin principles of sacred kingship and rule by a council. This model of government provided the Luba with a durable and flexible political system.

TITLE: Aka elephant mask **LOCATION:** Bamileke, Cameroon **DATE:** C. 19th-20th century C.E.

ARTIST: Kuosi Society **PERIOD/STYLE:** 19th and 20th cent. African Art **PATRON:** _____

MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE: Wood, woven raffia, cloth, and beads

FORM:

The bamileke people have traditionally recognized the elephant as a potent symbol of royal authority. The Aka Mask successfully evokes the features of an elephant. The two large circles suggest the elephant's ears while the long front panel alludes to its trunk. The large, round ears, which sway with the movements of ceremonial dances, and long trunk are covered in trade beads. The trade beads (emphasis on trade) weren't indigenous to Africa but were usually of Venetian design and imported through trade routes with Europeans. Laid out in geometric designs, such as stars and chevrons, these beads are brightly colored and cover almost every inch of the elephant mask.

FUNCTION:

An elite masking society known as the Kuosi owned and wore the Aka elephant masks. The Kuosi included members of the royal family, wealthy title holders, and ranking warriors. Kuosi members displayed their elephant costumes during an impressive masquerade. As spectators cheered, a single column of Kuosi masqueraders dramatically emerged from a large house in the palace compound. Many embellished their costumes by wearing expensive Ivory bracelets and rare leopard pelts. Accompanied by an orchestra of drums and iron gongs, the masquerade symbolically underscored the power of the elephant and thus the Bamileke king.

CONTENT:

The Mask features a lavish display of colorful beads. Imported from Venice and the Middle East, the coveted glass beads and fly great wealth. Their colors also convey symbolic messages. For example, black denotes the relationship between the living and the dead, white refers to ancestors and medicines, and red symbolizes life and women. In addition, the beads form repeating triangular patterns that allude to leopard spots, an important symbol of royal power.

CONTEXT:

The Bamileke live in the lush grasslands of central and eastern Cameroon. Their ornate Aka elephant masks are among the best known and most striking works of art from sub-Saharan Africa. The intricate bead work featured in this mask is one of the trademarks of their artistic legacy. A long tunic and distinctive headdress completed the costume. Wearing a headdress was an important privilege reserved for special ceremonies. Composed of bright red feathers from the African Grey Parrot, the headdress added a flamboyant and memorable feature that impressed awed spectators. Kuosi is an exclusive society that only allows the upper crust to participate, especially given that participation is correlated with political power. The Kuosi are similar to the chief or "fon's" bouncers. They help to enforce his power in the stratified Bamileke society. When they put the elephant masks on, members of the Aka dance slowly to a drum and gong. They wield horsehair whips that are playfully lashed toward the audience. At the end, the best performers are rewarded with kola nuts and wine.

INNOVATION/CONVENTION:

ARTISTIC DECISIONS:

Elephant masks comprise cloth panels and hoods woven from plantain fiber over raffia. On this background multicolored beads are stitched in geometric patterns. The basic form depicts salient features of the elephant—a long trunk and large ears. The hood fits tightly over the masker's head, and two hanging panels, one behind and one in front, partially conceal the body. The front panel is the elephant trunk, and the two large, stiff circles hinged to either side of the head are its ears, which flap as the masker dances. While the mask symbolizes an elephant, the face is human. Eyeholes provide visibility, and a nose and mouth with teeth are normally present.

INTERPRETATION:

In the museum setting it is completely divorced from its original context as part of a masquerade. They were worn with red feathered headdress, leopard skin pelt, and full body costume. The leopard and elephant are symbols of the fon. These masks would have expressed the power of the king. The Kuosi society was entrusted with wearing these symbols of power and authority. In the past, payment of a slave or a leopard pelt to the chief who owns the society was necessary for entrance to the highest rank. The glass beads used on earlier masks were nineteenth-century trade beads of Venetian or Czechoslovakian manufacture, used as well in exchange for slaves. Elephant mask costumes were thus called "things of money" since their beads were both objects and symbols of wealth.

DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:

By the 19th century, trade beads made their way around the world, including to the Americas, where many Native American societies also integrated them into their goods like bandolier bags. On the other side of the Atlantic, in Africa, trade beads were so popular they were exchanged for slaves.

TITLE: Reliquary figure (byeri). **LOCATION:** Southern Cameroon **DATE:** 19th to 20th century C.E.

ARTIST: Fang peoples **PERIOD/STYLE:** **PATRON:**

MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE: Wood

FORM:

The byeri's expression also contributed to the harmony between opposing qualities. The figures' calm, expressionless face presented a sense of tranquillity much admired by the Fang. Yet at the same time, the byeri's clasped hands, large eyes, and tense muscles project a coiled energy ready to strike out at any threat to the irreplaceable relics stored inside the reliquary.

FUNCTION:

The Fang believe that their ancestors could continue to wield power from the afterlife. It thus became imperative to preserve the remains of great men who founded lineages and great women who gave birth to numerous healthy children. The Fang prepared cylindrical bark containers or reliquaries to conserve skulls and other prized ancestral relics. They could then consult the relics on significant matters such as where to locate a village, how to prevent an illness and when to fight a battle. Because of their great spiritual power, the relics required additional protection. This led the Fang to attach wooden guardian figures known as byeri to the top of each reliquary. From this secure position, byeri could protect the sacred relics from evil spirits and from the forbidden gaze of women and uninitiated boys. The guardian sculptures also played an important role in ritual ceremonies. During these occasions, clan leaders use the byeri as puppets to help instruct boys about the history of their people.

CONTENT:

The reliquary figures sit in a crouched position with knees bent, muscles bulging, hands clasped together, and holding a figure of the ancestor in its hands. The sculpture's genitalia are visible (this example is clearly male, but others are female). Beads and other medicinal items are stored along with the ancestors' remains in the box as the byeri stands guard against any negative forces that might want to sneak in. The relics are brought out during male initiation ceremonies, where the sculptures are processed about and the skulls are revealed for all to see, at which point the accomplishments of the ancestor are recited.

CONTEXT:

The Fang lived in the dense rainforests of Equatorial Africa. During a period of over three centuries, they slowly migrated into present-day Southern Cameroon and Northern Gabon. Their gradual village-by-village movement created a migratory culture that valued portable objects such as the reliquary figure illustrated here. The religion of the Fang is a belief system primarily emphasizing ancestor worship, which explains the importance of relics. These ancestors are believed to retain and even gain authority from beyond the grave. The bones and skulls were especially potent in determining the future of the family. These objects encapsulated sacred power, which they use to help guide their descendants. These reliquary figures are not ancestral relics themselves, but instead stand guard over ancestral relics. They are positioned on top of a bark box where an ancestor's skull is kept. The figures are either portraits of the deceased family member or his or her protector.

INNOVATION/CONVENTION:

Rather than burying their dead, the Fang peoples were migratory, so they would keep the skulls and relics of their ancestors inside of bark cylindrical boxes. These reliquary figures would be placed on top as protective figures.

ARTISTIC DECISIONS:

Fang sculptors did not create byeri as a portrait of a specific ancestor. Instead, it embodied a complex but harmonious combination of contrasting traits. For example, this byeri juxtaposed the large head of an infant with the bulging muscles of an adult. This union of juvenile and adult characteristics underscored the continuity between infants, adults, and ancestors. Newborn traits such as a prominent belly button and a high domed forehead emphasized an ongoing life cycle in which infants form a crucial link between the living and the dead.

INTERPRETATION:

During the late 1800's, French Colonial officials banned byeri as unacceptable idols contradicting the biblical injunction against graven images. Forced to comply with this demand the Fang destroyed many byeri and sold others to Western collectors. Today, the surviving byeri have a new function in museums, where visitors and students can admire the Fang sculptor's abstract interpretation of the human form.

DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:

TITLE: Veranda post of enthroned king and senior wife
LOCATION: Southwestern Nigeria and Southern Benin
DATE: c. 1910-1914 C.E.
ARTIST: Olowe of Ise
PERIOD/STYLE: Yoruba Peoples
PATRON: king of Ikere

MATERIAL/TECHNIQUE: Wood and pigment

FORM:

Olowe uses physical traits as ornaments to provide additional information about the senior wife. Her large eyes suggest alertness and the ability to detect potential enemies. The senior wife's intricate hairstyle, the gap between her front teeth, and the scarification pattern on her face all signify great beauty and high social status. The bracelets around her neck, wrists, and waste all proclaim her lofty royal position.

FUNCTION:

Olowe's artistic reputation began when he carved a program of sculptures for the Royal Court in Ise. As his fame spread, other Yoruba Kings commissioned Olowe to carve decorative containers, elaborate doors, and striking veranda posts. This image was one of four figurative posts created for the king of Ikere's palace courtyard. Carved from a single piece of wood, The veranda post is a masterpiece that uses high relief figures to successfully portray key ideals of leadership in Yoruba Society.

CONTENT:

Olowe's innovative composition deliberately features a tall female figure who towers above a seated King. Known as the senior wife, the figure's size visually emphasizes the importance of Yoruba women as the source of human life and the embodiment of formidable spiritual powers. The senior wife's strong, solid body provides an architectural support for the veranda while also functioning as a visual reminder that Yoruba men cannot rule without the support of Yoruba women. Olowe carved the king as a smaller figure than his senior wife. The king nonetheless occupies a central position in the overall composition. Seated on a prominent throne, the ruler wears beaded jewelry almost identical to the ornaments worn by his wife. The two figures convey a carefully presented balance between the king's overt little authority and his wife's understated but real spiritual authority.

CONTEXT:

The Yoruba live in Southwestern Nigeria and Southern Benin. They are a diverse people with a rich cultural and artistic heritage. Yoruba artists produced a wide range of works designed to glorify their king and his court. Olowe of Ise is the most important and admired Yoruba sculptor of the 20th century. Olowe completed the royal couple by placing a bird perched on the peak of the king's crown. The bird symbolizes the presence of older women, female ancestors, And female deities. Known collectively as "our mothers", these groups command great respect for possessing supernatural powers that enable a king to rule. This explains why during the royal coronation the senior wife performed the critical role of placing the crown on the king's head. Olowe was so talented that people believed he had *ojuona*, or "design consciousness." This post is only one of three commissioned by the King of Ise. The other two veranda posts show the queen offering him twin daughters and a man on horseback, which was another lively form.

INNOVATION/CONVENTION:

A *oriki* is a Yoruba praise song extolling a specific person. A song dedicated to Olowe of Ise reveals the extent of his fame. Sung by one of his wives, the *oriki* lavishes praise on the way as "a great man" who was "an excellent husband", "a great dancer", and most of all "a master carver". Possessed of unrivaled skills, Olowe of Ise inspired awe and wonder as a sculptor who "carves the hardwood of the iroko tree as though it were as soft as a calabash".

ARTISTIC DECISIONS:

Olowe was unique as a carver, because he carved with the full figure in mind as a 3 dimensional form. He broke the conventional rules of strict frontality.

INTERPRETATION:

Visitors entering the palace courtyard would focus their attention on the large beaded conical crown worn by the king. The crown was a Yoruba king's most important symbol of royal power and authority. According to Yoruba tradition, the beaded crown is a link in a continuous line of rulers dating back to the original Yoruba kingdoms. Olowe underscored this connection by using the crown to depict the all seeing faces of previous rulers.

DETAILS/TERMS/DEFINITIONS:

In 1925, the British museum acquired directly from the Yoruba *ogoga* (king) of Ikere (in exchange for British throne) the elaborate carved and painted doors of the shrine of the king's head in his palace in northeastern Yorubaland.