INTRODUCTION

This exhibition results from the collaboration of sixteen undergraduate and graduate students (listed below) in a two-semester seminar in museum studies entitled “Exhibiting Africa—Practicing Theory” taught by Henry J. Drewal, Evjue-Bascom professor of art history and adjunct curator of African art, together with the director and staff of the Elvehjem Museum of Art. Our initial seminar discussions focused on issues surrounding *representation*—the theories, practices, and challenges of representing the cultural lives and histories of African peoples in an exhibition of African art. With this foundation, students selected three to four objects from the collection and began to research their histories, cultural contexts, and meanings. Seminar members presented the results of this research toward the end of the fall semester 2001.

At the start of the spring semester 2002, we analyzed the themes that emerged from the object research that could be used to organize the exhibition. We developed three organizational concepts that reflect both the strengths and span of the selected objects as well as the composition of the seminar itself—sixteen women with diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and interests.

The first theme is **gender**—how African art represents ideas of women and men and their cultural/power relationships. We felt this would be especially appropriate for a seminar composed of women and also because this theme is often ignored in art exhibitions. A second theme focuses on the **art of the Yoruba,** since this culture is represented by a large number of objects in the collection. We decided that these works provide a focused and detailed case study of artistic creativity and diversity within a single culture, which serves to remind us of the dangers of oversimplifying or stereotyping artistic production in Africa.

The third theme emerged from works by **contemporary South African artists**. We felt that it was important to represent the dynamic, on-going artistic work of Africans today to counter misconceptions of the supposed isolated and unchanging nature of African art. We also wanted to show how artists express and reflect political realties in their work.

The process of choosing a title to encompass these themes produced intense and lively debate. We finally selected *Revealing Forms,* a title we feel captures the multiple dimensions of this undertaking from revealing the significances of these often little-known or poorly understood objects to revealing the processes by which we created this project of “representation.”

Under the guidance of Elvehjem staff members, we participated in all aspects of exhibition planning and execution, but perhaps the greatest challenge was the writing. This included research papers, brochure texts, press releases, extended object labels, gallery guide entries, wall texts for thematic groups, as well as educational materials and loan request letters. In the process, we had to learn to set aside ego as “my” writing became “our” collaborative writing—as we moved from personal ownership of objects and texts to negotiated and shared, collaborative ownership of this exhibition enterprise. Many minds contributed to the quality of this learning/exhibition-making experience.

The art in *Revealing Forms* presents ideas about gender, power, status, religion, and politics. We invite you to ponder the relationships between women and men, cultures, classes, races, faiths, and ideologies revealed by African artists as you reflect on art and life in your own culture.

Natalie Boten
Nichole Bridges
Sabrina Lynn Checkai
Christine Dent
Katie Friedman
Lisa M. Guido
Lisa Rappaport Hendrickson
Elizabeth Hooper-Lane
Justine Martin
Carol Parker
Paige Poling
Jenny Price
Vanessa Rousseau
Adrienne Watson
Holly Wetzel
Laura Zboralski

GENDER: WOMEN, MEN, AND ART

Gender, a theme often ignored in art exhibitions, permeates the works in *Revealing Forms*. Art embodies ideas about female/male social and power relationships in particular African societies. Some works exemplify ideas of gender distinctions and differences. For example, a warrior mask from the Dan people evokes male courage, strength, and aggressiveness in massive, bold forms and fearful expression. In contrast, a refined headdress carved by a male sculptor under instructions from powerful women in Mende society defines female ideals of beauty, morality, and intelligence with an intricately braided hairstyle, delicate facial features, broad and luminous forehead, and neck rings.

Other objects convey notions of gender interdependence, interaction, or equality. Cooperation and equality between genders is dramatically expressed in a Yoruba pair of female/male bronze figures joined by a chain and a shrine post with images of female and male devotees working together for the support and spiritual well-being of the community. A male jurist in matrilineal Pende society emphasizes his oration with a staff decorated with an open womb-like space honoring women's life-giving powers and figures of ideal women whose smooth foreheads and lowered eyes connote a pacifying demeanor. Figural pulleys depicting the heads of beautiful women decorate the looms of Guro, Senufo, and Baule male weavers in order to inspire their artistic work. As one of them explained, "no one wants to live without things of beauty."

The styles of art works capture gendered personality attributes. Smooth, rounded, and balanced forms connote "cooling" feminine qualities of composure and serenity. In contrast, rough, hard, edgy shapes convey "hot" male aggression and action. Enacting genders in performance, masqueraders remind viewers of social expectations and celebrate particular roles for male and female community members to ensure a strong and vital
society.

From culture to culture, similarities emerge that indicate the importance of maintaining gender equilibrium in African societies. Symbolic representations of gender ideals and differences, relationships between women and men, and desirable social behaviors emerge as widespread themes in art objects from many cultures.

YORUBA: IMAGES AND IDEAS

Works from Yoruba peoples serve as a focused case study of artistic variety, complexity, craftsmanship, and inventiveness within a single African society, something that could be replicated many times for the more than a thousand cultures on the African continent. Art (*ona*) for the Yoruba is “evocative form” meant to enlighten, surprise, and delight its audience. Yoruba artists create beautiful and meaningful objects by combining symbolic colors, materials, and images. Such evocative objects honor both worldly and spiritual forces—powerful persons, ancestors, gods, and
spirits.

Beads announce the presence of powerful and influential persons such as rulers, chiefs, elders, priests, and diviners. Precious beaded art links those who wear it with the gods (*orisha*) and ancestors. The colors and patterns of beadwork symbolize divine forces and proclaim the spiritual affiliation and social position of the wearer. Rulers wear elaborately beaded crowns and coronets to signify their rank and position. Diviners don necklaces and carry bags whose colors and patterns symbolize spiritual forces, such as the interlace patterns that symbolize the complexities and knotty problems one must face in life.

Elaborate masquerades known as *Egungun* honor ancestors. Created collaboratively by family members, *Egungun* ensembles assert the power and prestige of lineages and a family’s contributions to society in their rich array of expensive fabrics from the past and present, elaborate headdresses, and empowering amulets attached to the costume. The ensemble contains and conceals supernatural power. During whirling dances, costume panels fly outward in the air, fanning the audience with a cooling breeze of blessing.

Placed on communal or domestic altars, religious sculptures represent the followers of the gods and help to focus worship. Others are memorial figures meant to honor the souls of departed persons, like sacred twins. A massive drum highlights the importance of the Oshugbo society and its elderly female and male members, who are the judges in Yoruba communities. Paired bronze figures linked by a chain symbolize the unity and equality of the Oshugbo membership.

All these works of art create evocative visual experiences, shaping and reflecting the Yoruba cultural world as they reveal something of the lives and minds of a people.

SOUTH AFRICAN REALITIES

Drawing from personal experiences, South African artists depict scenes of everyday life, expressing a mixture of hope and despair. Most of the works are on paper, either prints or drawings. These contemporary images challenge our preconceived notions of African art. Printmaking developed in the black townships (government mandated segregated housing) in the 1950s. Informal artists' workshops often provided the only training opportunity for black artists, who were excluded from formal educational institutions. Because of the industrial associations of printmaking, the government perceived it as appropriate education for blacks, allowing it to become the dominant art form in many workshops. This, coupled with inexpensive materials and the ability to reproduce many copies of the same image, inspired artists to use printmaking as a tool for communicating their experiences.

Apartheid, the government-supported policy of racial separation and discrimination, imposed severe social divisions and inequalities in South Africa. Instituted in 1948, apartheid laws dictated where people could live, what jobs they could hold, and what type of education they could receive based on the color of their skin. Literally translated from Afrikaans to mean "separateness," or "separation," apartheid bred physical and emotional isolation for many. Dislocated from their homes and forced by economic conditions to live apart from their families, black South Africans experienced acute alienation. Even though apartheid was legally abolished in 1994, its aftermath continues to affect the lives of South Africans.

Separation and struggle, common themes in some of the works, derive from several sources: segregated housing, isolation from family due to migrant labor conditions, separation from reality caused by rampant alcoholism, and harsh competition for limited resources. Other works honor and reclaim the artistic and cultural heritage of the past, like the dress and story-telling traditions of KwaZulu. In all cases, the artists use politically charged and visually compelling imagery to enlighten viewers and to celebrate the strength, spirit and endurance of South Africans and their hopes for a better, more just future.

AFRICA

KEY

- ***CULTURE** represented in the exhibition*

COUNTRY NAME

Note: All flat projections of the spherical earth distort either shape or size. We have chosen the Gall-Peters Projection which accurately represents land mass size but distorts shape. We encourage viewers to reflect on their "mental maps" of the world.