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## Revealing Forms: African Art from the Elvehjem Collection

### *Revealing Forms: African Art from the Elvehjem Collection*

Mayer Gallery, April 20 through June 16, 2002

The Elvehjem Museum of Art has collected African art for over 40 years; this is the first exhibition devoted to the African collection. *Revealing Forms: African Art from the Elvehjem Collection* unveils the premier objects to the public for the first time. Fifty African artworks include masks, beadwork, and sculptural carvings from many cultures and regions across the African continent and paintings, prints, and drawings from South Africa. The exhibition is divided into three large groups: objects by the Yoruba peoples of Nigeria, objects associated with gender issues, and contemporary South African art.

### **Yoruba Collection**

The Yoruba people are the largest ethnic group in Africa; their homeland is located in southwestern Nigeria and the neighboring Republic of Benin and Togo. Yoruba objects range from statuettes to diviners' necklaces to a ceremonial staff sheath. Some of the objects were originally created for ceremonies to honor the gods or ancestors or to mark rites of passage.

In *Ifa* divination of the Yoruba, ancestors and gods provide the link between the world of the living (*aye*) and the afterworld (*orun*). Performances establish channels of communication between the gods, ancestors, and the living. Masks and costumes transform the wearer and facilitate communication between the two realms. Carved wooden sculptures also create conduits for spiritual guidance from ancestors and the Yoruba pantheon of gods (*orisa*). Beaded ritual tools decorated with sacred colors indicate diviners' spiritual knowledge. Beads may also denote privilege, such as the beaded royal coronet worn by kings.

### **Gender**

This section of the exhibition displays objects from several African cultures that embody information about the roles of men and women. Many objects reveal views of feminine and masculine ideals, gender differences, and relationships. Power, status, and balance are central issues surrounding gender. A female

masquerader from a Mende woman's initiation society that oversees girls' passage into womanhood wears a Soweï headdress. Carved by a man, this highly polished wooden headdress represents Mende ideals of feminine beauty through its elaborate hairstyle, large forehead, downward-cast eyes, small closed mouth, and carved rolls of fat around the neck.

### **Contemporary art from South Africa**

These seventeen two-dimensional South African artworks capture a complex political and social life and demonstrate African artists' presence on the global art scene. *Thinking Freedom*, an ink drawing by Ezrom Legae, portrays the tensions between postapartheid freedom and the harsh realities that many black South Africans face. A color lithograph, *Team Leaders II* by Sam Nhlengethwa, attempts to bestow dignity on migrant black South African miners.

Art reveals people's thoughts and experiences. Art in Africa, like art everywhere, both shapes and is shaped by culture and history. This exhibition explores the diversity of African art in works from more than 16 cultural worlds represented by one or more objects. These come in a variety of forms—masks, sculptures, musical instruments, prints, drawings, collages, decorative and personal arts—and a vast array of media—wood, ivory, beads, cloth, shells, seeds, grasses, coins, bronze, iron, leather, paper, paint, and photographs.

Organizers and curators for the exhibition are the graduate and undergraduate students in a two-semester museum studies seminar taught by Professor Henry Drewal of the Department of Art History and adjunct curator of African art at the Elvehjem.

### **AFRICAN ART AT THE ELVEHJEM**

Before the Elvehjem opened in 1970, a gift from Lester Wunderman, a well-known collector of African art, formed the nucleus of the collection. By 1990 the Elvehjem counted thirty-three objects in its collection from more than a dozen African societies.

In the past decade the African collection has grown vigorously through both gifts and purchases, with the present collection consisting of 150 objects. Under the scholarly guidance of Henry Drewal, professor of art history and African studies and adjunct curator of African art at the Elvehjem, the museum began acquiring objects that span a wide range of geographic and cultural areas from western, central, and southern

Africa, from Sierra Leone, Mali, and Cote d'Ivoire, to Cameroon and Nigeria, Democratic Republic of the Congo to South Africa. More than thirty different cultures and many media are represented; Yoruba objects, which comprise the largest subgroup, include some particularly fine examples of beadwork.

A generous donation dedicated to the purchase of African art, forming the J. David and Laura Seefried Horsfall Endowment Fund, made purchases possible; yet the museum has mostly benefited from a preponderance of gifts in this area over the years. Notable donors include the Drs. Gladys and James Strain, Dr. and Mrs. Pascal James Imperato, Diane Wedner and Ron Ziskin, and Jeremiah H. Fogelson. The Elvehjem Museum of Art is committed to the expansion of its collection of art from diverse African cultures. This exhibition is the first public presentation of a large portion of the African collection.

#### RECEPTION

A free public reception for *Revealing Forms: African Art* from the Elvehjem Collection is on Friday, April 19 from 5:30 to 7:30 pm. The reception will feature African music by Kweku Ananse and the Sweet Vibrations and African refreshments.

#### PROGRAMS

Cosponsored by Elvehjem Museum of Art and the UW-Madison Department of Art History  
Support provided by the Brittingham Fund

Saturday, April 20, 1-3 p.m. Elvehjem L140  
Professor Freida High Wasikhongo Tesfagiorgis,  
Department of Afro-American  
Studies, UW-Madison  
"Eyes Agazin' on Modern and Contemporary Art by  
Africans (from Colonial Workshops & Academies to  
Postcolonial Ruptures)"  
Sponsored by the Department of Afro-American Studies

Dr. Mbulelo Vizikhungo Mzamane, Professor in  
Residence, UC-San Diego and  
former Vice-Chancellor and Rector, University of Fort  
Hare, South Africa  
"Freedom—Art's Most Noble Purpose"  
Sponsored by the Department of African Languages  
and Literature with other departments

Thursday, May 2, 4–6 p.m. Elvehjem L140  
Curators' Symposium: eight ten-minute presentations by  
members of the museum studies seminar, who  
researched, wrote, and organized the exhibition, will  
speak about their favorite objects

Friday, May 3, 5:30- 6:30 p.m. Elvehjem L140  
Professor Rowland Abiodun, Amherst College  
“Art, Gender, and the Yoruba World: Oshun, the  
Seventeenth  
Odu”

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The Elvehjem Museum of Art is open Tuesdays-Fridays 9-5 pm; Saturdays and Sundays 11-5 pm; closed Mondays and major holidays. Admission to galleries and educational events is free. The museum is located at 800 University Avenue on the campus of the University of Wisconsin-Madison and is accessible to wheelchairs from the Murray Street (north) entrance. Parking is available at the city of Madison’s Lake Street and Frances Street ramps, university lot 46 on Lake Street between Johnson and University Avenue, university lot 47 on Johnson Street between Park and Lake streets. Evening and weekend parking is also available under Grainger Hall with entrance on Brooks Street between University Avenue and Johnson streets. The Elvehjem Museum of Art will provide sign language interpreters for associated programs by three-week advance request to Anne Lambert, Curator of Education, weekdays, 608 263-4421 (voice).

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