

CHAZEN MUSEUM OF ART
University of Wisconsin–Madison
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Digital images can be found at http://www.chazen.wisc.edu/pr_pictures.asp

West African Masquerade Portrait Photographs at Chazen Museum of Art

The urge to dress up in costumes, for celebration or ceremony, is a universal phenomenon. Masquerading allows for magical transformation and frees the human spirit. Photographer Phyllis Galembo has been intrigued by masquerade since childhood and for 20 years has traveled to Africa and the Caribbean to photograph the stunning costumes worn by traditional priests and priestesses, carnival participants, dancers, and Haitian vodou practitioners. *West African Masquerade: Photographs by Phyllis Galembo* will be on view at the Chazen Museum of Art from November 26, 2008 to February 1, 2009. These 17 eye-catching portraits, some as large as 50 by 50 inches, were taken in the West African nations of Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and Benin over the past three years.

Galembo approaches her subjects as an artist, and her decisions about color, light, and background are based in a desire for aesthetic impact more than ethnographic precision. She focuses on the inventive and expressive craft of costume-making and the potential for transformation that wearing these garments allows. Upon arriving in a country, Galembo meets a translator and negotiator who accompany her to different locations. She meets village elders who provide permission and help schedule the photography.

Masqueraders make elaborate garments and masks from inexpensive materials such as raffia, carved wood, coarse fabrics, crocheted yarns, body paint, flowers, grasses, leaves, and sticks. The dramatic designs and shapes, as unique as their creators, range from striped-knit bodysuits to voluminous appliquéd fabric costumes. One head-to-toe costume from Benin sports dozens of long, fluttering strips of spotted and striped animal hide; another, from Burkina Faso, looks like a walking flower, its wearer hidden under a cascade of fresh green leaves and fabric. A burly beast with a “hairy” coat of spray-painted raffia wears a black-and-red horned mask that appears both fearsome and surprised.

Created for festivities and ceremonies such as weddings and burials, initiations, chiefs’ coronations, and holidays like Christmas and the New Year, the costumes can disguise anyone, man or woman, girl or boy. Shooting on location, Galembo often does not know—or seek to know—who is hidden under masks representing male or female entities, animals like elk and jaguar, or mythic figures. This mystery lies at the heart of her interest in masquerade, a process that allows the wearer to become something else—to change gender or species, or even become a spirit. Galembo has earned national recognition for her work. *Art in America* praised her combination of a “careful, almost ethnographic observation with a deep sense of mystical wonder,” and the *New York Times* recognized the “dignity, conviction, and formal power” in her photographs.

Masquerade is widespread in Africa, and many celebrate Mami Wata (pidgin English for “Mother Water”) and other water spirits. Costumes, photographs, and video of Mami Wata masqueraders can also be seen in the exhibition *Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in African and Its Diasporas*, at the Chazen Museum of Art through January 11, 2009.

Reception and Artist Talk

Phyllis Galembo will discuss her work at 5:30 p.m. on Friday, December 5, at the Chazen Museum of Art. A reception will follow from 6:30 to 8 p.m. All events are free and open to the public. For more information, call (608) 263-2246 or go to www.chazen.wisc.edu.

About the Artist

As a child, Phyllis Galembo enjoyed dressing up for Halloween and Purim, fascinated by “how masquerade becomes magical.” She earned an MFA in photography and printmaking from the UW–Madison in 1977, and has taught photography at the University at Albany, State University of New York, since 1978. Her work has appeared at the International Center for Photography, the Fashion Institute of Technology, the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, the Albany Institute of History and Art, and the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. Her photographs are in numerous public and private collections, including the New York Public Library’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Houston Museum of Art, the Albany Institute of History & Art, the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, and the Polaroid Corporation Collection. She has published several books, including *Vodou: Visions and Voices of Haiti* (1998), *Divine Inspiration from Benin to Bahia* (1993), and *Dressed for Thrills, 100 Years of Halloween Costumes and Masquerade* (2002), which includes photographs of vintage American costumes from her own collection.

West African Masquerade: Photographs by Phyllis Galembo was organized by Tang Teaching Museum, Skidmore College, and is toured by George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film. Generous local support for this exhibition has been provided by the Chazen Museum of Art Council, Hilldale Fund, and Wisconsin Arts Board with funds from the State of Wisconsin.

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The Chazen Museum of Art is open Tuesdays–Fridays 9 a.m.–5 p.m.; Saturdays and Sundays 11 a.m.–5 p.m.; closed Mondays and major holidays. Admission to galleries and educational events is free. The museum is located on the campus of the University of Wisconsin–Madison and is accessible to wheelchairs from the north entrance (nearest to Library Mall). An elevator is down the corridor to the right. Parking is available at the City of Madison State Street Campus Ramp (entrances on Frances and Lake streets). Metered parking is available in the UW lot 46 lower level. Evening and weekend parking is also available in UW lot 83 under Fluno Center, entrance on Frances Street, and in UW lot 7 under Grainger Hall, entrance on Brooks Street between University Avenue and Johnson Street. The Chazen will provide sign language interpreters for associated programs by three-week advance request to Anne Lambert, Curator of Education, weekdays, (608) 263-4421 (voice). Information is also available by visiting our Web site at www.chazen.wisc.edu.