Art of the Senses

African Masterpieces from the Teel Collection

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WITH SUZANNE PRESTON BLIER

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Front cover: Chokwe *mwanangana* figure (detail of no. 99, page 189)
Back cover: Benin hip mask (no. 29, page 93)

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Ways of Experiencing African Art: The Role of Patina

SUZANNE PRESTON BLIER

One of the features of African art most important to a work's value, meaning, and beauty is the unique surface quality that signals its age and history of use, its patina. Originally designating the fine crust that forms on a bronze sculpture as a natural part of the oxidation process, the term *patina* today covers a spectrum of traits that provide evidence of the object's history. Some African figures, for example, show a surface patina that has been polished smooth through daily or ritual use. The patinas of other works might include a range of additive elements, such as offerings intended to activate the sculpture. In examining an African mask, specialists will often look carefully at the interior surface to determine if the wearer's face has smoothed the surface through repeated use, or if the holes used in attaching the mask show evidence of wear, indicating that the work was actively performed. In these and other ways, an art work's patina offers vital clues into its past.

The possible Latin root of patina, *pati*, "to suffer," suggests that the damage or marking associated with such use may carry important metaphoric properties. As both an actual process and a metaphor, patina offers a provocative frame from which to address the myriad ways in which elements outside an original work of African art (and sometimes the intent of the artist) impact on how the object is experienced and what it comes to mean. Patina, the extrinsic dimensions of an art object that become an intrinsic part of its form and significance, influences how these arts are known to their various audiences, in both Africa and the West.

This essay examines four key attributes of African art that address questions of patina. Some of these attributes derive from the art works themselves; others come to be associated with these objects after they have left the hands of the artist or the communities in which they were originally used. These four qualities are the sensory dimensions of art, the symbolic and aesthetic importance of artistic materials, the role of performance, and the significance of each work's collection or display history.

The Sensory Experience of African Art

Our experiences of art, African or otherwise, are far more complex than we tend to acknowledge. While these experiences are necessarily highly visual, in coming to know the works, a variety of other senses are also key, not only to round out the visual experience but also to amplify and change it. Multisensory attributes distinguish nearly all artistic forms. But in African art, as with so many other forms, Westerners have historically privileged the visual attributes, which encouraged a rather limited appreciation of the experiential power that these works hold.

Engaging with art works is an intensely visual experience, yet we tend to take sight for granted. In African art, sight is sometimes intentionally limited, such as when sculptures are displayed only after being covered in a protective cloth wrapper (for example, Baule figures [no. 23]). In other cases, including certain masquerade forms, works only appear at night, when one's ability to see is limited to the way the form is shaped in flickering light and shadows. As in European cathedrals, the interior light of many African temples might also compel viewers to strain to pick out a few salient details of the work. In addition, Africa's complex performance contexts, in which a range of masquerades might appear in the same event, carry unique sight dimensions. In these art-rich celebrations, one's eyes often dart from object to object, and from close-up to wider views, as one strives to take in simultaneously the details of an art work and the larger scene.

Failing vision, particularly of African elders (who are often the most important spokespersons and caretakers of art), can impose further limitations on visual perception and engagement with art. In some situations, seeing art may be linked to danger for certain segments of the population. A work's iconic power may be considered so strong that those who have not been adequately prepared for the experience are thought to run the risk of harm (see, for example, no. 24). All of these examples suggest how complex supposedly simple matters of sight can be.

24 (side view)

African art is also known through olfactory associations. In some African shrine sculptures the olfactory charge can be discerned through the faint remains of offerings placed on or near the work. While one may first become cognizant of these patina-adding supplements through sight, we are equally (and perhaps more deeply) conscious of their importance through the lingering scent. Sometimes perfumes or aromatic powders, such as kaolin (no. 75) or camwood, enhance the art experience; in other cases the heavy smell of liquors or tobacco consumed during related rituals are in evidence. Healing and spirit possession rites in a number of African societies (Fon, Luba, and Chagga among them) use aromatic basil and other fragrant plants. The smell of burning coals in Senufo "firespitter" masks, or the powerful additive materials applied to Yoruba Egungun masks, also are noteworthy. In so far as smell appears to be one of the most potent human senses, and our early knowledge of place and individuals is often defined first and most profoundly through this sense, it is not surprising that olfactory references are a key part of the African art experience as well.

Many African art works, long after they have entered Western collections, carry the lingering scent of kitchen smoke that permeated house rafters where they were traditionally stored between performances. Even when wooden objects or textiles have long been removed from their local settings, hints of this aura often remain. No doubt this sensory quality was a critical part of how local mask wearers knew these works as well. As performers generally experienced the mask from the inside, looking out, the bright piquancy of the aroma not only would have activated their senses, but also helped promote a fuller engagement with the spirit persona being performed.

Hearing is another vital mode through which these arts are experienced. In Africa, one often "hears" art works either prior to actually seeing them or as a vital part of the overall viewing process. In large mask performances, drum tones frequently penetrate one's being with their rhythmic pulses long before one views the masked persona that the sound accompanies. Related tones trail the work when the performer leaves the viewing area. Equally importantly, these beats inform us as to how we are meant to understand and experience the work. The rhythms that accompany some masquerades (no. 44) are so fast, intricate, and complex that we, like the performers, begin to experience the objects in ways at once complicated and ethereal, qualities that we in turn tend to superimpose on the work's visible features. In other contexts (such as no. 60), the strong, deep beats of the drum may awaken in us a different context of viewing, one that warns us from getting too close to a particular masked persona, conveying a sense that this figure carries great power and authority. As with smell, sound functions in ways analogous to metaphoric patina, shaping the work by changing the way it is experienced.

Naturally, musical instruments (nos. 10, 62) include important sound elements as part of their conceptualization, but other forms of sculpture also have vital sound dimensions. Senufo rhythm pounders (no. 16), for example, are rhythmically raised and lowered to the ground during ceremonies, the sound dimension adding to the overall signification. In other contexts, sound has an implied importance for the sculpture's meaning. In Igbo Nmwo masks (no. 44), the long thin nose displayed on the face is said to evoke the high-pitched squeak emitted by the performer, which is intended to distinguish the ancestral persona being represented.

Other ceremonial contexts of African art, similarly imbued with sound, are also vital to how we come to know these objects. In Africa, softly spoken prayers, the cry of a family infant, the shrill squawk of chickens being chased by young children for the accompanying offering, or the voice of the priest remonstrating the house owner because the young rooster that has just been caught is too small to make a sustaining dish are commonplace in the local art experience. Moreover, in some temple contexts, music is played throughout the event in which the art is being viewed. At the altars of Benin rulers in Nigeria, for example, spiritual presence is said to be marked by the continued ringing of bells (no. 30) placed along the altar front.

While these various instances show how sound impacts on the experience of art in Africa, equally important (if different) sound elements impact on this experience in the West as well. Whether in the context of the ambient noise or the adjacent conversation of a museum display, special exhibition guides on tape, or art history classes, one experiences African and other art works in a range of ways that involve sound as a critical component.

The sculptural power of many African art forms also necessarily involves another sensory mode, touch. Many African sculptures were intended to be handled as much as to be seen, and this handling changes and shapes an object over time. Among the African art works created specifically to be handled are not only dance staffs (no. 33), musical instruments (no. 10), and scepters, but also containers (no. 38), tools (nos. 64, 65), stools (no. 26), jewelry or body decoration forms (no. 29), masks, and an array of small and large figures.

During prayers, an elder may place his hand on the head of a sculpture that is the focus of a particular ceremony. In other art traditions, such as those involving Namji figures (no. 57), the works are carried and cared for on a regular basis, and their surfaces soon develop a polished patina. African sculptures that serve as mnemonic aids for recalling family or group history frequently have distinctive tactile elements because these details are known to jog memory in particularly salient ways. Touch retains its primacy too when individuals — elders, historians, priests, devotees, healers, court ministers — who are charged with the art's safekeeping maintain their contact and cognition of these works by feel long after their sight has failed them. Masks embody vital tactile qualities because by definition they are worn on the body. The varied typologies of masks, their differing features and scales, all impact on the tactile way these works are experienced.

Taste is perhaps the most complicated of all the senses. In many African art-viewing contexts, the consumption of food and drink is a central feature. An animal sacrificed during a rite is frequently incorporated into the meal that follows, a feast whose preparation may be already underway in the family kitchen nearby. This anticipation engages and heightens the senses as one is looking at the arts on display. In some areas, where rites associated with art viewing are the main or sole context in which animals are eaten, this bodily anticipation can have an especially potent impact on the visual experience.

One of the principal contexts that combines art with eating in Africa is the harvest ceremony (see nos. 6, 7, 55, 58), a time of rare food abundance after months of hard labor and deprivation. The pleasure of the ample meal no doubt carries over to the enjoyment of seeing art and is thereby inscribed within this experience. Some initiation (no. 72) or healing contexts that involve periods of fasting coupled with the enforced sleeplessness of nightlong rites impart in viewers the heightened sensory potency of physical debilitation. The added dimension of increased mental and body awareness alters and amplifies the ways that art works come to be known.

In many cases, palm wine (no. 82), millet beer, strong liquors, kola, potent roots, raw tobacco, marijuana, and other substances are also a prominent part of the art-viewing process, their consumption promoting at once a sense of celebration linked to the art works themselves and a change in how these works are experienced. Bitter kola, a substance consumed in many ceremonial contexts in West Africa, provides a slight stimulant effect that helps carry one through daylong events, seeming to focus one's attention, to soften the sense of exhaustion, and by its very bitterness to shape one's acuity and perception.

Together, these various sensory qualities impact profoundly on the reception of art. Along with other aspects of perception, they bring to the works a richness that is difficult to convey in words, much less to fully grasp out of context. Whether viewing art in a small intimate space or during a large performance, multisensory dimensions are a key part of the experience — not only for the viewer, but also for those closest to the works, the individuals who use them. It is said that in many African masquerade performances, the dancer enters into a trance. Music, particularly drums, encourage this trans-

formation, but olfactory, tactile, and other qualities of the masquerade add to it as well, underscored by the weight of the mask and the severely limited sight, hearing, and respiration that most of these masks afford.

The Materials of Art

The diverse materials used to create African art works have an additional impact on how these objects are experienced. A work made of materials that are hard to fashion, or one whose very creation defies imagination, evokes a sense of wonder or amazement. The knowledge that a particular material is rare or expensive or difficult to acquire — such as ivory (no. 29), horn (no. 83), or copper alloy (no. 30) — creates a set of expectations that affects how these works are understood.

One of the most important of Africa's art media is wood. Knowing that important spiritual forces inhabit the trees out of which an object was carved heightens its iconic power. For some art forms, specific species of trees or trees found growing on particular sites are selected, the qualities of which add to the aura that local audiences may identify with a work. The fabric of the wood, its relative hardness or softness, its hue, grain, or texture, the height and width of the piece itself, and the inclusion of branches all give shape to the way related objects are fashioned, displayed, and experienced.

The decidedly lanky figures of the Lobi (no. 9) and Zulu (no. 103), for example, are shaped both by the sparse, narrow timber available to the artists and the aesthetic decisions they make in transforming it into works of striking beauty. At the same time, within these limitations, artists add their unique creative imprint, as seen in the great diversity of works within this distinctive form.

Weight is a vital factor as well. The relatively light-weight woods of the upper savanna areas of Burkina Faso and Mali allow for tall, thin masks (no. 11) that have a striking visual impact when worn in this sparse landscape. The thicker, often deeply cut and articulated figures from some of the forested areas of West and Central Africa (nos. 38, 39) suggest not only a different aesthetic sensibility but also the distinct ways in which harder woods yield to the artist's knife. As with artists everywhere, African sculptors look deeply into the raw materials before them, shaping in their minds a particular form and then extracting vital features.

Wood is also of interest as an art medium because its surfaces can be treated in variant ways. Wood can be smoothed and polished to a glowing sheen (nos. 20, 21), or, as in the Cameroon grasslands, intentionally left with the heavy faceting of the adze or knife, each mark angled slightly differently to pick up and reflect light (nos. 59, 60). When the use of an African wood sculpture keeps it out in the elements (no. 104), the carving is often washed into a soft, almost velvety surface that becomes a central part of the work's beauty and meaning. In addition to weathering, the surfaces of wood are often shaped in striking ways through the application — and often reapplication — of oils, sacrificial offerings, pigments, and other materials (see, for example, nos. 75 and 77). Whether this surface effect is defined by the artist as part of the original creative process or is achieved through later use, such surface enhancement becomes an integral part of the core work. Wood surfaces enhanced with camwood powders often show a soft, modeled effect. Oils applied to an object frequently leave a shiny surface that also helps to preserve it. Later this oil may "bleed" from the interior under the heat of an exhibition spotlight, further adding to the visual impact. Bold polychromatic painted designs have an equally transformative effect on the work. The bright geometric painted forms of Nuna (no. 12) and Teke masks (no. 78) define these objects visually as much as, if not more than, their carved wooden cores. These additions also affect the surface patina.

For their part, works carved of ivory draw in critical ways not only on the visual qualities of this rare material but also on its close association with the elephant, a symbol of royalty or individual status. The great difficulty in acquiring ivory adds prestige and an aura of danger to the objects. Partly as a result, ivory in Africa carries associations not only of political primacy but also of religious power. Ivory's historically high

87 (detail)

regard in the West adds to its value in collections here. The unique properties of ivory, a porous material whose surface is continually reshaped, not only by use but also by the colors of added oils and pigments, add to the sculpture's visual power. Works made out of animal horn (no. 83) carry some of these same features. The type of animal from which the horn was taken is often significant: the horn of the African buffalo or bush cow, for example, draws on the danger associated with this animal in the wild.

A range of material properties is associated with African stone carvings. Features such as color and patterning, grain and weight impact art in striking ways. The stone fabric itself thus imparts distinctive visual, tactile, and iconic properties to related objects. Sculptures made of soapstone differ markedly from those of granite, for instance. Soapstone, while easier to shape, is also more readily scratched or marred, thereby leaving the surface quite vulnerable to abrasions that become part of the patina.

Broader cultural associations add to the significance of these materials as well. A stone's association with hardness, permanence, and land sometimes carries over to sculptures made from this material, for example Kongo memorial figures (no. 74). And because stone sculptures tend to last longer than wooden ones, works from earlier eras (nos. 13, 41) were sometimes rediscovered by later populations living in the areas where they were created. The discoverers in turn applied new meanings to these objects. Sapi stone carvings, for example, were often placed in later-era shrines in agricultural fields, though there is no indication that these works originally functioned in a comparable way.

Clay, meanwhile, conveys a range of unique properties to art works (compare nos. 14 and 27). After being modeled, clay is heated to a high temperature so that it takes on a long-lasting rigidity. Not surprisingly, works of terra-cotta ("cooked earth") feature among the many arts from sub-Saharan Africa that have survived over the centuries. Different colored clays and slips (color washes added to the surface after firing) provide these works with a range of hues; later, surface pigments add to the visual effect. While modeled clay objects are quite different from those carved from wood or stone, terra-cotta sculptures display an equally striking range of both naturalistic and abstract forms. A number of African terra-cotta sculptures function in memorial contexts (nos. 14, 27, 56), suggesting the potential of modeled clay not only to capture likenesses but also to serve as ritual objects, such as vessels for the spirits of the dead.

For its part, iron is often fashioned into sculptures that convey beauty through their visual austerity or simplicity. The Fon *asen* memorial staff (no. 40) provides a remarkable example, suggesting how much a skilled artist can do even within the technical limitations imposed by iron. The vibrant tableau incorporated into the height of this sculpture references the deceased. Many iron art works carry important iconic dimensions of material or spiritual transformation because iron is created from raw ore that has been metamorphosed through fire. Moreover, when iron is worked, it is transformed through the forging process. It is first heated to a red hot semisoft solid, then hammered, bent, or twisted into various shapes and, after cooling, it returns to a deep-black resilient form. Among the Fon, the god of iron, Gu, is simultaneously both the god of war and of artists, suggesting a central element of transformation from death to life.

The emergence of the iron revolution in Africa brought with it enduring changes not only in available tools — hoes, machetes, swords, lances, arrowheads, fishhooks, picks, knives, needles — but also elegantly forged utilitarian objects (nos. 64, 65). Because iron in humid climates such as tropical Africa develops rust over time, the patina of these works in local shrine settings may take on a reddish hue that recalls the color of the original ore, and harkens back to its process of transformation.

Brass, bronze, and other copper alloys carry additional important visual and iconic properties. Copper is expensive and often imported, thus it is generally used in objects marking high status. In Asante *kuduo* (no. 25), the use of brass underscores the roles of these vessels as containers for valuable

objects, such as religious relics and gold dust. In these vessels, we can observe the different ways in which this metal can be shaped. The top incorporates figural forms that have been cast using the lost-wax method. The surface of the metal container has been elegantly incised with geometric designs that further add to the visual impact. Benin royal bells (no. 30) also are cast from a copper alloy, the material here mirroring the association of these bells with royalty.

The red, yellow, and amber shades of different copper alloys add a striking visual effect to these works. When copper sheathing is affixed to the surfaces of works of wood, it enhances both their visual and status value. Asante stools (no. 26), Boso (Bozo) canoe prows (no. 1), and Kota reliquary figures (no. 66) are particularly good examples. The reflective properties of copper alloys may add to their meaning.

Textiles of various sorts also feature prominently in African art, both in their own right and when applied to other works, such as masks and costumes. Kuba Mwashambooy masks (no. 80) suggest how striking these works can be. Because Kuba textiles feature prominently in court dress and related status displays, their integration into royal masks draws in vital ways on this tradition. Beads also figure centrally in many African art works, either as jewelry affixed to figures, as surface decorations for masks, or as a richly colored and textured surface within the art work. Among the Yoruba, beaded forms often serve as sheaths or containers for objects identified with gods and kings. Yoruba Orisha Oko staffs dedicated to the god of agriculture are housed in beaded sheaths whose rich polychrome patterns add a sense of visual power to these gods. In these sheaths as well we can see the ways that beaded elements sometimes form separate sculptures — in this case, projecting three-dimensional birds (no. 32).

A significant number of African art works are created from multiple media. The unique visual and symbolic associations of these forms are drawn from their diverse materials. Not only do the varied media add to the distinctive look and meaning of these objects, but each element enhances their real and metaphoric patina. The mix of textiles, patterned animal skins, metal strips, and beads that define the surface of Kuba masking forms (no. 80) demonstrates how such surface additions alter the visual effect of these works. With other masks, complex costumes of differing materials enhance the masquerade's significance and impact.

One of the best examples of how multimedia features are important to the form and meaning of African art is in the tradition of Yoruba *edan* Ogboni (no. 31). These staffs, which are dedicated to the earth god, are used by members of a powerful association of elders responsible for preserving the sanctity of the land. The paired staffs (generally one male and one female) are joined at the top by a metal chain. Each figure incorporates an iron staff, an outer layer of cast brass, and an earthen or clay core. The iron staffs extending from the base allow these sculptures to be inserted in the ground on specific occasions, such as when a crime against the earth has been committed.

The earth or clay core at the center of these sculptures is in some respects their most sacred feature. It represents not only the core from which these castings are made, but also and more importantly the core of earth through which the Earth God herself is worshiped. While one cannot see the clay inside these staffs (except in some cases by turning them upside-down), it does add considerably to their weight, and so to their iconic power and the way they are handled. The brass that covers the core in turn links these art works to individuals of high status, in keeping with the association of these sculptures with wealthy landowners identified with the original occupants of the area.

Performing Art

Works of African art are defined not only by their unique sensory elements and materials of manufacture but also by their use in performances. The stage on which the art is presented determines to a large extent who will be able to view a work, under what conditions, and in what circumstances. Identifying the intended stage thus helps us understand the artist's

creative approach to the subject, the resulting work, and the way it would be perceived. This performative aspect provides an added dimension to our appreciation of these arts, bringing their various elements together in a more comprehensive and meaningful whole.

Traditional stages in Africa vary considerably. They include shrines, houses, village commons, fields, beaches, water, forests, crossroads, and rooftops, to name only a few. The human body might also serve as a stage on occasion. Often, special symbolic associations determine the selection of a stage. Not infrequently a sculpture will appear in several different performance contexts, each of which may be accounted for by the artist in the overall conceptualization of the work.

The circumstances of viewing in a small private shrine or temple can enhance a sense of contemplation and individual engagement. The restrictions of light, sound, and height serve to focus attention: a low roof, for example, might require the viewer to kneel, which increases the sense of reverence. To some degree, viewing art in an African shrine is comparable to seeing an object in a Western church, or even in a museum gallery, where the display and lighting provide a special focus. And as in the West, groupings of sculptures might be shown in Africa in a single structure or locale, encouraging viewers to address both the entire grouping and individual objects within it.

In some cases, the village itself may have special stages where works are commonly exhibited. The Konso of Ethiopia (no. 104) place sculptures in special fences set up around their villages. Oriented to an audience consisting of community members and outsiders, these figures provide daily reassurance of protection for those within, and a clear image of an ever-present observer to those outside. Lega masks (no. 72), for their part, are often displayed on a specially constructed fencelike exhibition setting, where they are viewed by young initiates as instructive pedagogical elements during the initiation process.

Other occasions for viewing art in Africa consist of events stretching over several days that draw together much of a community's population. In some of these pageants, such as Asante Odwira festivals, the sheer quantity of the art and regalia on display, and the richness of the forms themselves, convey a visual overload that is almost blinding in intensity — not only because there is so much to see but also because the gold regalia is brilliantly reflected by the sun. In other cases, viewing is limited to rare events taking place at long intervals: every seven years for some initiations, or as much as sixty years for certain generational ceremonies; or at long but irregular intervals, as when a new monarch comes to power. While they may share features with Western coronations, African enthronements, because they tend to feature such a rich array of art, become all the more important as occasions for artistic viewing.

In considering African art, it is also vital to address who will view the work (men, women, priests, special society members, children, sick persons, persons of a particular occupation, royalty, supernaturals), when it will be seen (period of the year, age in life), and what state of mind the audience will be in at the time (joyful, sad; working, in celebration, ceremony, or daily conduct). Added to this are the personal dimensions. Different emotions are stirred when a relative is being commemorated, or when one's son or daughter has just been initiated, or when an ailing loved one approaches a work of art as part of the hoped-for healing, or when one's husband or brother is performing one of the masks on display. Personal contexts can heighten the visual power of the object or, at other times, diminish its aesthetic qualities because the events themselves are so overwhelming. Whatever else these unique personal features convey, they help to shape the ways that the arts are seen and understood.

Art works often address a supernatural audience as well as a human one. Ijaw masks, for example (no. 48), are worn in such a way that their faces are turned skyward to address the local gods. The Yoruba of Nigeria sometimes display scepters representing Eshu, the trickster deity, on their heads or at crossroads, in keeping with the god's identity as mes-

senger between humans and deities. Yoruba staffs dedicated to Shango, the god of thunder and rain (no. 33), in turn are sometimes performed on rooftops (closest to the sky) in a direct appeal to the heavens. And Yoruba *edan* Ogboni staffs (no. 31) may be imbedded in the earth at times of adjudication so that only the brass sculptures are visible. As such, they address both the Yoruba human audience (as "cues" that a crime has been committed) and a supernatural audience, the earth goddess Odudua, who thus enters into direct contact with the sculptures and their user.

Lighting is essential to the total visual and symbolic message that works of art present to their audiences. It is controlled in various ways, such as presenting objects in shrines or interior spaces, whose dimensions or orientation help channel it; selecting particular times of day and months of the year in which to show the works; or using such subsidiary lighting elements as torches or fires. The coordination of ceremonies or performances with sun, moon, and other sources can produce lighting of precise color, intensity, and direction.

Props and other ancillary effects provide further dimensions to a work of art. Masquerade participants commonly carry special bells, weapons, fans, herbs, or staffs that are essential to the overall mask form, helping to define a role, character, and total aesthetic image. Art works that in themselves serve as props are also important to persons of special status such as royalty, messengers, priests, devotees, or members of special groups. Scepters, arms, and dance staffs are particularly good examples of this.

Costume and jewelry function in a similar way when added to figures or masquerades. Indeed, they help convey the special symbolic roles associated with each work. The Yoruba Gelede maskers (no. 34), through their elaborate costuming and apparel, reaffirm their relationship both with the powerful elderly mothers of society and with the Yoruba goddess Yemoja, the deity of witches. Each Gelede masker wraps great quantities of cloth around his hips to suggest the massive girth of these supernaturals. Expensive metal bracelets and anklets are worn as well to denote Yemoja's enormous wealth. Large wooden breasts strapped to the masker's chest define the femininity of the mothers and their associations with nourishment.

Performance interaction is also important to the staging of art objects. Such interaction helps define the various relationships between separate works of art, between one art object and its particular audience, or occasionally between various elements within the work itself. Some sculptures, the Gelede masquerades of the Yoruba (no. 34) among these, usually interact in pairs. Other art works like Lobi (no. 9) and Dogon (nos. 6, 7) statuary or Benin memorial heads (nos. 27, 28), bells (no. 30), and other arts are presented in a series or in large thematically linked compositions.

The unique dramaturgical dimensions of African art can be seen in an array of examples. In this regard, the striking tradition of Ci wara headdresses created by the Bamana of Mali (no. 2) are particularly interesting because in the actual drama of their performances they tell a story that allows us to see these objects to their fullest advantage. Ci wara is identified by the Bamana as a great mythic hero said to have invented and introduced agriculture to the population. During traditional Ci wara performances, a pair of performers wearing these headdresses would appear on the edge of a stark brown field as cultivation was getting under way. One of these performers wears a beautifully carved headdress depicting a male roan antelope. His mate, who follows shortly behind, has a slightly smaller antelope headdress, her baby secured on her back.

The performance is carefully choreographed to drum and rattle music and focuses on several distinct themes that are central to the overall aesthetic and meaning of the dance. On the one hand the choreography emphasizes the individual character of each masker (the male's dance is the more exuberant); on the other, it assures the union of the two performers into a single artistic image (no one is permitted to walk between the two). Since Ci wara and his mate wear headdresses that must be seen in profile to grasp their full beauty, the leaps and spins of the dancers for the audience of agri-

cultural workers emphasize the silhouette in their movements across the field.

Both maskers wear garments of deep brown mud-soaked fibers, which reemphasize the dominant brown coloring of the earth. Short sticks held as props transform the dancers into humped earth-regarding quadrupeds, who recreate the original act of cultivation as they scratch their sticks along the earthen surface. The nearly monotone starkness of the field sets off the elaborate silhouettes of these sculptures to best advantage. Moreover, as the purported place of Ci wara's self-sacrifice and burial, the field-stage addresses the hero's spirit by presenting this honorific dance upon his grave. As such, the staging is simultaneously directed toward the supernatural Ci wara and toward the young men and women who are inspired by his ultimate sacrifice to put their energies into farming (the name Ci wara, in fact, means "good farmer").

Just as Ci wara is performed in male-female pairs, so too women play an important role at these masquerade events. When they arrive on the field to witness this performance, they bring with them the day's meal. Suggested by their role here is the importance of partnering — the men cultivating food and the women preparing it. That the Ci wara masker feigns to consume some of the food prepared for this occasion underscores this. In this way, the Ci wara dancers present a powerful dual image of male-female unity in transforming the seeds of planting into nutritional meals. The symbolism is all the more striking because of the tiring work and the self-sacrifices farmers must make at this time of the year, when the most strenuous fieldwork is done. At this time, the granaries holding available food are depleted as every grain is planted in hopes of a strong harvest. The deprivation heightens the maskers' sensory impact, adding new layers to the symbolic patina of the works, as does the headdress worn in these performances. Its form generally replicates the angled shape of the short-handled agricultural hoe common in this area, making the performer's head into a symbolic hoe blade.

The shape of the Ci wara antelope horns is also important. The male Ci wara horns, in keeping with the horns of the male roan antelope that these masks represent, are curved back at the height, in part so that the potential danger of male fights over females will not be deadly. In contrast, the female roan antelope (and Ci wara) horns, consistent with her need to protect her defenseless young, are straighter and sharply pointed, capable of skewering an enemy. The dire political situation of many Bamana agriculturalists as serfs or slaves in the region's empires is suggested in the performance, too. The forced posture of a back-breaking crouch, stoop, or hunch is similar to that of a subaltern's acquiescence to his lord. The hands of the agriculturalist performer in turn are affixed to short stick crutches resembling those of someone who is crippled or lame. As such, they suggest the crippling process of the state with regard to its poorest members. Bound to these crutches are sacro-magical forms called *boliw*, the same forms that bound the Bamana empire itself to the authority of its king. The costumes, made of mud-encased fibers, present an image of the farmer-performers as synonymous with the soil they are obliged to farm.

The case of Kuba (Bushoong) royal masking is also of interest in this regard. The triad of Mwashambooy, or king (no. 80), Ngaady aMwash (the king's sister and incestuous lover), and Bwoom (no. 81), the Mbuti "pygmy" and competitor for the affection of the king's sister, is generally described as an image of détente and symbiosis, in keeping with Kuba genesis narratives. Yet within the context of this myth, considerable unresolved conflict is also evident. Questions of incest in the king's family may have served to "mark" the royals in a way consistent with the mystical authority granted to many African rulers. While underscoring the symbiotic relationship between the king, his family, and the Mbuti forest dwellers, these myths (and masks) also reify the difficulties that the local Ituri forest hunter-gatherers (the Mbuti "pygmies") faced with the expansion and dominance of the Kuba agriculturalists in the region, particularly in the context of coercive labor plantations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Not only were the forest lands of these hunter-gathers increasingly infringed upon by the ruling agri-

2 (detail)

culturalists, but the Mbuti themselves were sometimes coerced into labor.

Kuba royal performances in this context seem to take on the character of a charter that grants the forest dwellers primordial and perpetual subaltern status. To some degree, this is reinforced in the royal attire of Bushoong kings and the related *ndop* portrait figures. In both, the king wears a headdress in the shape of a hoe blade, making clear the continued supremacy of the Kuba agriculturalists over the vanquished "pygmy." Here, too, the performance aspect of these art works offers a fuller understanding of the larger social importance of the masking forms, giving vital shape both to the mask persona and to the context in which it can be understood.

The Collection and Exhibition of African Art

Much as African objects come to be imbued with additive sensory experiences, material features, and performance contexts, the roles that these arts assume as cultural icons and objects of exchange are shaped by their collection histories. While true of all art, this aspect is particularly striking in African works because their meanings are so complex and the circumstances of their indigenous display so powerful and varied. The unique collection history of each sculpture and its diverse exhibition settings in many respects function like a metaphoric patina — the older the collection date, the more important the work's earlier owner, the longer the list of exhibition venues, the "thicker" the patina of value that is accrued to an object.

We often view the collecting of African art with a distinctly Western eye, colored by factors as varied as colonial imperative, aesthetic interest, market value, and desire for cultural heritage. In Africa, too, individuals of means — kings most importantly — sometimes collected the arts of different cultures through trade, gifts, war, or other means. The Fon of Benin Republic, for example, displayed foreign arts alongside domestic examples in long parades that circulated through the capital and were intended to impress the local populace and foreign guests. African rulers are also known to have specifically commissioned works of art from Europe (in both African and Western styles), the works sometimes serving important ritual roles. In one instance, a large Songye power figure, similar to the one in the Teel collection (no. 95), was among several foreign works that held an important place in the Kuba court.

Once out of Africa, works of African art continue to add to their histories, and therefore to their significance and value. The ownership of a work by a specific king, colonial official, or collector carries a patina of value similar to the physical patina visited on the surface by wear or age. These value-adding contexts include early museum holdings such as the Pitt Rivers Collection at Farnham, where the Cross River monolith (no. 41) was once housed, as well as important private collections in Africa (such as the previous owner of the Benin leopard mask [no. 29], Oba Erediauwa, who ascended to the throne in 1979) and in the West, for example that of George Oritz (no. 52) and of J. J. Klejman (nos. 6, 15). Like the stone monolith once in the Pitt Rivers Collection, where many colonial objects were deposited, a number of African art works still carry the patina of Europe's early colonial engagement with Africa. These objects include a Chokwe *mwana pwo* mask (no. 100) formerly in the collection of M. Quintin, a Belgian territorial agent in the 1920s; a Lega mask (no. 72) that for thirty years was owned by a Belgian colonial administrator; and a Makonde *mapiko* mask (no. 101) that once was part of a Portuguese missionary collection. In some cases, these colonial linkages overlap with other early Africana exhibition contexts in the West. The Kuba head-form cup (no. 82) was once in the collection of Walschaert, an early Belgian animal and African art procurer. The Mangbetu box collected in the 1890s (no. 63) was formerly in the Umlauff Collection in Hamburg. Umlauff, an early importer and exhibitor of zoo and circus animals, also was involved in transporting humans from African to Europe to perform in the degrading but then-popular ethnographic spectacles that took place in zoological parks, bars, dance halls, and other settings.

In their own way, exhibitions of African art not only increase an object's real and perceived value but also add to its aura. Thus, a key part of each object's post-collection history is defined in part by the places where it has been shown and the publications in which it has appeared (see Christraud Geary's essay in this volume). As such, object owners and museum curators often share in the value-adding process. Academic writers, whether intentionally or not, also add to the metaphoric patina of African art works and sometimes become part of the very process of value enhancement and object change. Sometimes, soon after a publication appears, works that have been discussed are bought and removed from their local settings by individuals holding the books or articles as an illustrated shopping list. In this sense, scholarship, like collection histories, serves as a patina enhancer, conferring value on works through the very process of publication.

Patina, as both a physical quality and a concept, plays a vital role in shaping how African art is experienced and the values that come to be associated with it. It offers insight into the ways these arts are known locally as well as how these objects continue to be defined by those coming in contact with them long after they have left the artists' hands. Taking the importance of patina into account when examining African art encourages us to peer more closely at these works, to examine the minute details of their surfaces, to note the places of wear or weathering and the effect of added materials. It fosters a realization that we need to value not only sight in "viewing" these art works, but also the unique attributes of touch, sound, smell, taste, and material that each work may hold. And it presses us to think about performative factors such as staging, lighting, props, sound effects, viewers, and display. Patina, like a work's aesthetic and economic value, often increases over time, adding in significant ways not only to form and meaning, but also to overall viewing pleasure. In a work's various patina attributes we come to know, fundamentally, some of the variant ways of experiencing African art.

24 Baule *kple kple* mask

Côte d'Ivoire, 20th century
Wood, pigments
Height 28 1/2 inches
Gift of William E. and Bertha L. Teel 1996.382
Formerly in the collections of Alain de Monbrison, Paris, and Merton Simpson
Acquired in 1990
Bibliography: Vogel 1997

The Baule assimilated a number of their neighbors' masquerade forms: a naturalistic face mask, a horned helmet mask, and a flat circular mask called *kple kple*. The last of these, a male mask of junior rank, is one of several paired works that would perform sequentially in Goli society entertainments or funerals. It impersonates an unruly nature spirit that is considered to be both frightening and amusing. The flat, disk-shaped face with ringed eyes and rectangular mouth is surmounted by ears and large curving horns. The bold red coloring has contrasting touches of white, while the complementary female mask would be painted black.

87 Yaka *kholuka* helmet mask

D. R. Congo, 20th century
Wood, raffia, cane, fiber, pigments
Height 15 inches
Acquired in 1978
Bibliography: Bourgeois 1984

Yaka power figures and masks may be recognized by their trademark upturned nose. On this mask, a thick ruff of palm raffia sets off the polychromed wooden face with large eye sockets and projecting ears. The fiber superstructure was sometimes shaped into figures or fanciful projections; in this example it incorporates a tripartite form painted with a delicate rosette pattern. These masks, called *kholuka*, are worn by initiates in the Mukanda association, whose rites mark the passage of youths into manhood after a period of seclusion.

88 Yaka Janus figure

D. R. Congo, 20th century
Wood
Height 9 3/4 inches
Formerly in the Selinsky collection
Acquired in 1992
Bibliography: Bourgeois 1984

This small hermaphroditic sculpture artfully combines the features (and symbolic importance) of two figures. The undifferentiated feet rise to legs flexed outward on the female section, the handless arms bend to each side, and the opposing mouthless faces share tablike ears. The female face with upturned nose and the male with a bulbous nose are surmounted by an expansive cap. The double vision, or insight of male and female personas, here suggests an increased protective or problem-solving power. Unlike most other power figures from this area, no added substances were incorporated into the figure, or they have been lost.

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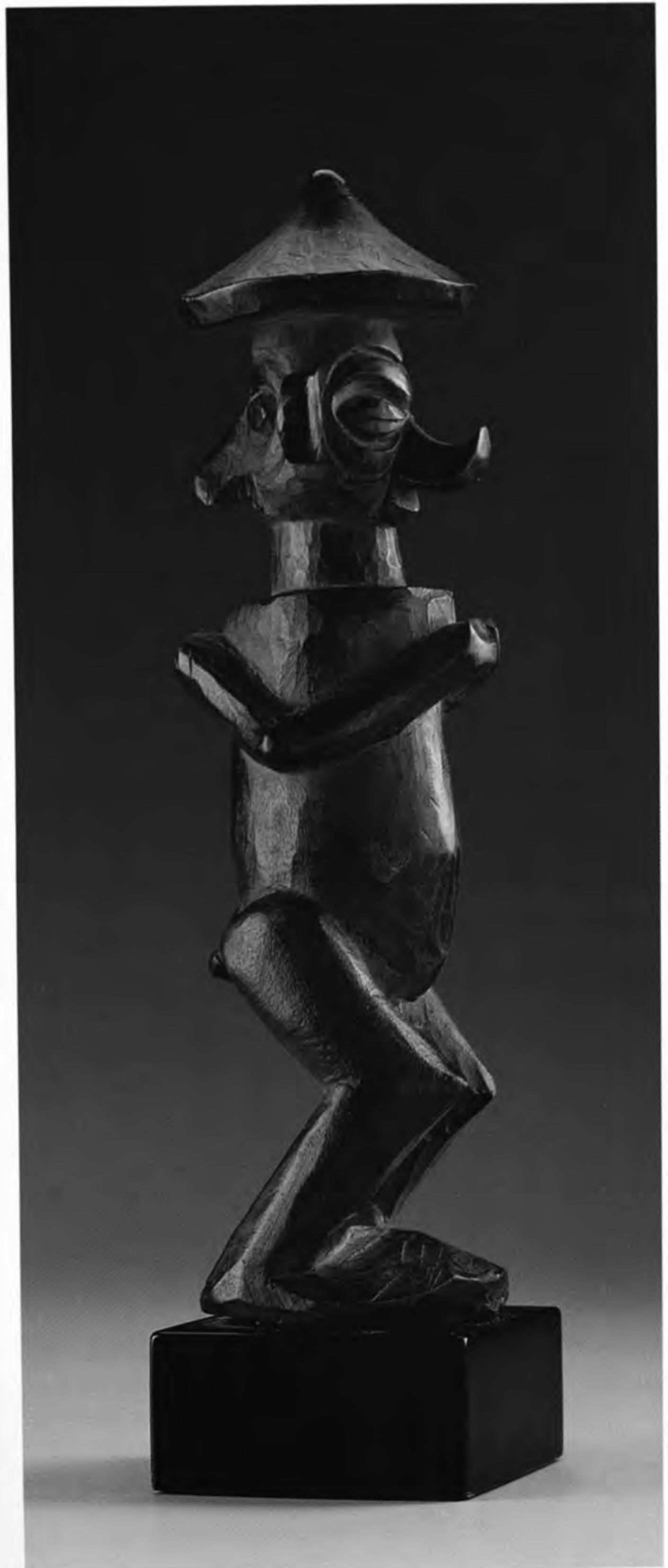

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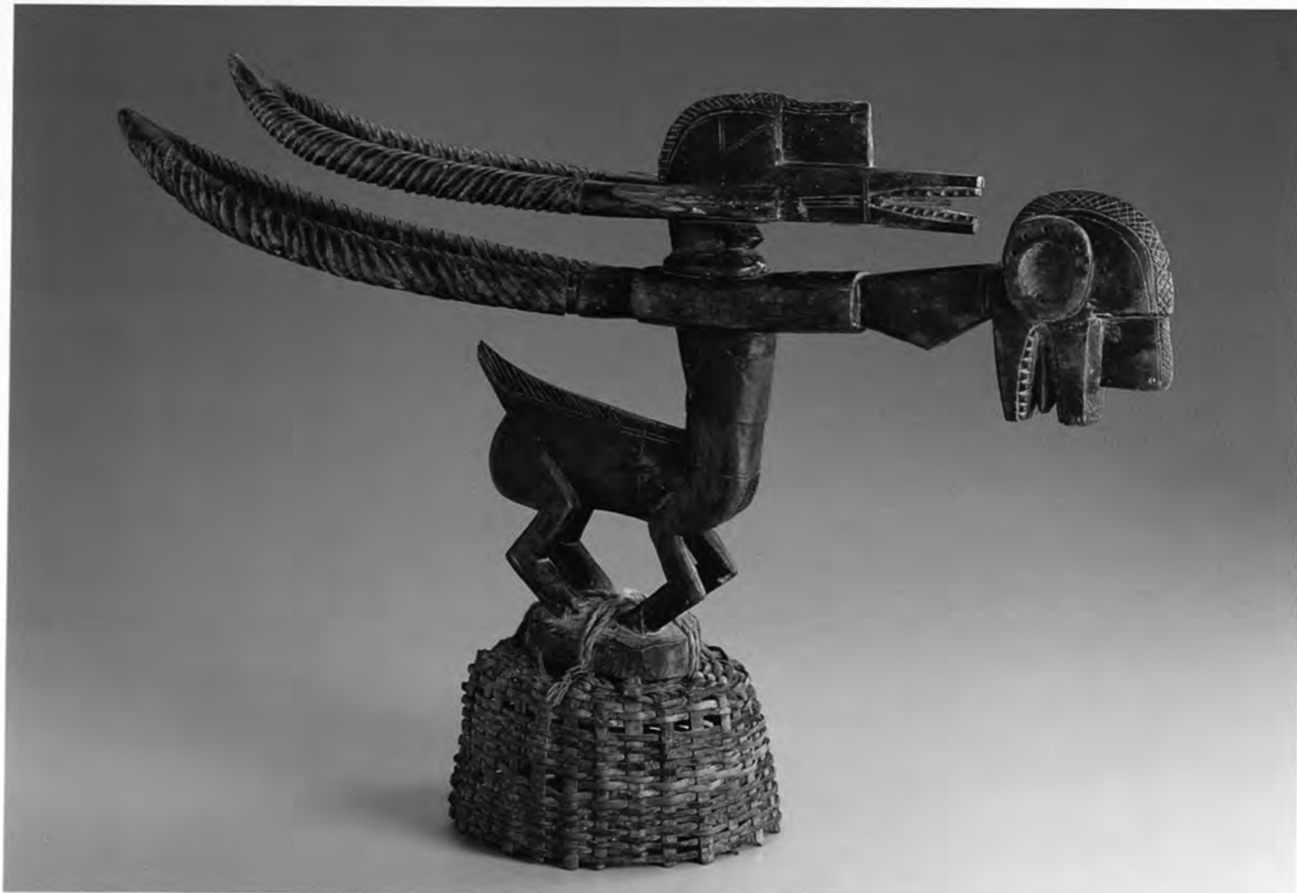

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1 Boso (Bozo) animal head

Mali, late 19th–20th century
Wood, metal, cloth
Height 24¾ inches
Acquired in 1981
Bibliography: Arnoldi 1995

Ancient settlers near the confluence of the Niger and Bani rivers, the Boso fishermen, like the nearby Marka, embellished their arts with bright metal overlays. This horned ram head, for example, is carved of wood with additions of cotton fabric and thin, delicately cut pieces of tin. It was manipulated during performances by means of a handle inserted in the bottom. Similar heads were attached to Boso canoe prows. Rams and antelope horns are often considered emblematic of strength.

2 Bamana headcrest

Mali, 20th century
Wood, basketry
Height 17 inches
Gift of William E. and Bertha L. Teel 1996.369
Acquired in 1978
Bibliography: Colleyn 2001

The Bamana Ci wara association with which this work is identified celebrates the vital spirit of agriculture and, by extension, the fruitfulness of both the earth and humans and the idea of regeneration. Antelope headdresses, which like nearly all Bamana wood carvings are made by blacksmiths, appear as male and female pairs at sowing and at harvest competitions, as well as at marriages. The female here displays a baby on its back, a feature typical of the type. Affixed to basketry caps, both horizontal and vertical genres exhibit stylized pierced shapes with degrees of abstraction, and are best seen in profile.