



FIVE TAKES ON AFRICAN ART

A STUDY GUIDE



TAKE 1 considers materiality, and the elements used to make aesthetic objects. It also considers the connections that materials have to the people who originally crafted them, and furthermore, their ties to new generations of crafters, interpreters, and collectors of African works. The objects in this collection challenge our notions of “African art” in that they were not formed for purely aesthetic purposes, but rather were created from raw, natural materials, carefully refined, and then skillfully handcrafted to serve particular needs in homes and communities.

It is fascinating to consider that each object featured here bears a characteristic that identifies it as belonging to a distinct region or group of people, and yet is nearly impossible to unearth the narratives of the individual artists who created them. Through these works, we can consider the bridge between materiality and diaspora—objects of significance with “genetic codes” that move from one hand to the next, across borders, and oceans, with a dynamism that is defined by our ever-shifting world. Here, these “useful” objects take on a new function, as individual parts to an entire chorus of voices—each possessing a unique story in its creation and journey.

What makes these objects ‘collectors’ items’? Pay close attention to the shapes, forms, and craftsmanship. Can you find common traits or themes? The curator talks about their ‘genetic codes’. Beside the object’s substance, specific to the location of its creation, it may carry traces of other accumulated materials, such as food, skin, fiber, or fluids. An investigation of micro substances could help reveal their journey. With advances in microbiology, people, too, can now find out their own genetic make-up. They may not be able to recreate the narratives of their ancestors, but perhaps they are better able to appreciate the complexities of their genetic heritage.

Does an object’s meaning change when it moves its location?

Is there a correlation between the African objects in this exhibition and the African diaspora?



TAKE 2

TAKE 2 The popularized idea of “African art” is a largely Western construct, applying to the objects assumptions and stereotypes that are outside of African cultural framework. We in the West reimagine the significance and value of these objects based on our own cultural biases and definitions of visual art. To arrive at a foundational understanding of these remarkable objects, we must first consider how our biases can complicate an authentic glimpse of African aesthetic traditions and the creative minds behind the works that we have come to celebrate in our own museums.

This section of the exhibition explores the degree to which African aesthetic creations (sculptures, wearable objects, and even weaponry) are classified as valuable and/or “authentic.” In the world of African art, the question of authenticity—often determined by influential Western consumers of African art—tends to weigh the age of an object, where an older object may be crowned as “valuable” or “authentic,” and more contemporary works of the same styles deemed as cheap “tourist” art.

The two ***Ci Wara*** pieces, meticulously made and elaborate in style, come from very similar origins. This headdress design is considered one of the most recognizable and famous pieces of African art. The “traditional” antelope has marks of heavy usage and has been broken and repaired many times. This antelope headdress was used by the Bamana for agricultural ceremonies to honor the God Ci-Wara. These ceremonies serve to celebrate successful farming, as well as the essential union between men and women to produce new generations, and between the sun and the earth to produce new crops. In contrast, while the other Ci Wara is more elaborate with tassels and brass details it has minimal signs of use, as it was created for the commercial trade.

Stools play an important role in Asante culture. Typically, the stool is used to represent power and royalty. African chairs, headrests, and stools, are often very personal in nature, used only by their owner. Many of these objects are portable, permitting people to carry their furniture with them, whether visiting a neighbor or traveling long distances. Because these items become closely identified with its owner, chairs, headrests, and other objects are often kept with in a family for generations. Curved stools such as this one from the Asante are associated with the soul of their owner, and are regarded as a person's most intimate and prized possession. The owner alone may sit on it throughout life, and after death a person's stool is placed on an ancestral shrine. At the death of honored individuals—such as clan elders, priests, chiefs, or queen mothers—the spirit of the deceased is transferred into their personal stool, which embodies the spirit of its owner. The stool is then placed in the family or royal shrine, along with stools from other important deceased family members. The stool, as a spiritually charged object and the repository of the owner's soul, helps maintain the participation of the deceased in the social, political, and religious life of the community.

Dream Lovers. The six male and female figures are dream lovers, part of Baule belief in a parallel spirit realm, in which humans leave behind their “spirit spouses” when they enter this world. When an adult Baule experiences difficulty assuming a gender specific role, as in the case of a man not marrying or a woman not being able to bear children, he or she may dream about the spirit spouse that has been left behind. The troubled person consults a diviner, who, through communication with the spirit world and interpretation of the dream, will prescribe the carving of a wooden figure with attractive hairstyles and/or scarification, to represent the spirit spouse. The afflicted person will then take care of the figure, feeding, dressing, and polishing in hopes of appeasing the otherworldly lover which it represents. Such figures are called *waka snan* (“people of wood”), for they embody the spirits of “people” in the parallel spirit world. The male figures (Colons) in this exhibition are unusual because of their attire. Their “Western” clothing reflects the tastes of the time especially when contrasted with the more typical, here female, statuettes wearing traditional or no clothing.

The term for these statues, “Colon,” may come from African art dealers and point directly to the colonial days, signaling a shift in the African art market and a new form of art being produced and sold. Often, the artists used traditional African carving techniques to make objects inspired by European forms and/or motifs. When these pieces were initially sold on the market to Europeans they were often cast aside as merely souvenirs or lesser art due to their “inauthentic” clothing.

All African art—past and present—is a vigorously changing mix of influences, inspirations, and transformations. Even the most “traditional” art forms reflect the vitality and creative resilience of African thought in many African languages, the term “tradition” does not imply the static repetition of customs generation after generation that the word does in English. Rather, it refers to a dynamic, living process combining continuity and change. As one Yoruba scholar puts it, “innovation is implied in the Yoruba word for tradition.” Tradition is what we choose to remember and use from the past and something that is “creatively, actively, intentionally selected and constructed, not thoughtlessly preserved and repeated.”

Many power objects including the Ci Wara, stools, or Dream Lover statuettes have found their way from Africa into American and European art collections. In this process, some of these pieces have been stripped of their original medicinal and symbolic elements, either stripped by their African owners as part of the deactivation process, or purposefully “freed” from surface accumulations by Western art dealers or collectors.

What is the difference between a fake and a fraud?

Which considerations may be contributing to the label “authentic”?

Was Western art always created for “art’s sake”?



TAKE 3

TAKE 3 In the traditional Yoruba belief system, *ibeji* is the name of an Orisha (or minor god) representing a pair of human twins. *Ere ibeji*, loosely translated, is “the sacred image of the twins.” Ibeji sculptures are created to honor a twin who has passed away; they are crafted only after a twin dies. While this sculptural tradition is commemorative, the creation of Ibeji is also regarded as a necessary precautionary step in protecting the surviving sibling from the restless spirit of the deceased one.

The sculptures in this grouping are in fact idealized portraits of people – not deities or spirits – but real people, belonging to real families, who mourned their deaths in part through artistic representation. These people, however, have been cast in a “sacred” deified reflection. This vast collection of honored souls offers us a philosophical portal into Yoruba and West African ideas about how those who are living elect to remember the dead, and the degree to which collective memory serves to build a specific type of representation of the deceased, whether in appearance, characteristics, or personality.

The Yoruba have one of the highest rates of twin births in the world: 45 out of 1000 births. Twins are more fragile at birth than a single child, and frequently one or both may die. If one twin dies the parents consult a diviner of Ifa, the *babalawo*, who may indicate that an *ere ibeji* must be carved, and may refer them to an artist. The figure is placed on a small shrine in the home, its face is washed, and it is dressed in rich garments or beads. The figure may be fed the favorite foods of twins and the body is rubbed with red camwood powder mixed with oil and the hair with dark indigo dye. It is carried along to participate in daily activities. If honored in these ways the spirit of the deceased child is pacified and less inclined to pull the surviving twin to the spirit world.

African religions believe that the body and soul are separable and that the soul, or spirit, lives on after the body deceases. At death, the spirit of the deceased joins the ancestors in a world that is similar to that of the living. From this other world, the ancestors have the power to intervene in the lives of the living, and are actively involved, serving as their advocates in the spiritual world. The ancestors are concerned with the well-being of the living, but their interventions may be either beneficial or detrimental. If the living fail to give the deceased a proper funeral or do not show the dead the honor they deserve, the deceased's spirit may haunt the living and disrupt their lives by causing illness and misfortune.

For all peoples, in all cultures, death is the cessation of the body's vital processes. But death is both an ending and a beginning. For many African peoples, death is also the commencement of the new life of an ancestor.

People all over the world keep images or memento of their deceased family members to help remember them and to help in the grieving process.

Consider the mourning traditions in your family.



TAKE 4 The veneration of the female body is a salient theme of West African cosmology. Because women's bodies were believed to be imbued with supernatural capabilities, they were typically the subjects of various ceremonial and religious works. Feminine beauty, wisdom, and the ability to gestate were presumed to be indicative of a woman's spiritual power. For this reason, women serving as advisors, religious leaders, spiritual mediums, and caretakers were considered necessary for the social well-being of their respective communities.

When depicted through sculpture, the female body is frequently used to represent the duality of the physical and spiritual world. As vessels for humanity, literally and metaphorically, the symbolism of a mother and child is commonly invoked in West African art to elucidate the primacy of ancestral connection. Additionally, sculptures with embellished physical characteristics—typically regarded as feminine—personify divinity, supernaturalism, and status.

Hemba/Luba Stool. Among the Luba and Hemba, rank and title are indicated by the progressive ascension to more prestigious forms of seating, beginning with simple woven mats and proceeding onto animal pelts, clay thrones, and finally, sculpted wooden thrones. The main function of the stool was not to serve as a seat, but rather as a receptacle for the chief's spirit. Stools are such powerful emblems of a chief's power and identity that they were often kept secretly in a village different from their possessor's to reduce the risk of theft or desecration. The predominately female imagery adorning the emblems of male kings and officeholders in Luba society reflects the ambiguity and two-sided nature of power. As one Luba proverb has it, "Men are chiefs in the daytime, but women are chiefs at night." For several centuries, women have played critical roles in Luba political life as counselors, ambassadors, queen mothers, and chiefs. In addition to their participation in politics, women also fulfilled spiritual roles that were fundamental to Luba sacred kingship. The representation of female form on Luba royal regalia, including this stool, reflects the importance of women to Luba political life. Women are recognized as the primary keepers of societal secrets. These secrets are not trivial bits of gossip, but rather the history and memories of Luba peoples as a whole. Women are represented in nearly all Luba sculpture, and many objects symbolically represent the secrecy and power associated with women.

Staff. Scepters, held by kings or chiefs signify power and influence. The staffs frequently depict carvings of women. Here, too, the female figure symbolizes her power, as carrier of future generations, emissary, and kingly advisor.

Mende Mask. Among the approximately one million Mende people of southern Sierra Leone, and among many of their neighbors, powerful associations control the most important activities

of men and women. The women's organization, Sande, is famous, too, because it sponsors masquerades in which women wearing carved helmet masks represent the Sande society and the ideals of female beauty and power that it promotes. The Sande masquerade is the only known instance where women, rather than men, impersonate spirits wearing full body disguises and carved headpieces. Because of the prominence of women in Mende life—they not only control important areas of social life, but can also rule as chiefs—the Sande mask is an outstanding example of the visual expression of African female power.

Gelede Mask. Yoruba peoples often assign at least one woman to a high title in otherwise male institutions, for it is said that women must keep men from giving away the secrets. Men's power is seen as overt, outwardly directed, and assertive, while that of women is covert, mysterious, and secretive. To express these concepts and to honor the women who wield considerable authority in Yoruba political life, men stage performances called Gelede to pay tribute to and to appease elderly women, called "our mothers," whose powers are potentially as malevolent as they are benevolent.

The Efe/Gelede masquerades of the Yoruba of western Nigeria and Benin (formerly Dahomey) are held during the period from March to May at the beginning of the new agricultural season. The performances honor "our mothers," *awon iya wa*, and acknowledge the power and authority of women (elderly, ancestral, or deified) in a male-oriented society. "The power of women is manifest in the mystery of birth and in the dreadful work of witchcraft. It is a power that cannot be directly observed or controlled, a cool power, detected, yet hidden, in the beauty of the composed face"

How are women represented visually in cultures around the world, and in American culture?

How does this compare to West African traditions?



TAKE 5 This section explores the critical role played by Charles Derby, the collector of the works in this exhibition. By examining his storied experiences in collecting, his methods in curating his own collection, and his unique process of acquiring these works, we arrive at a fascinating portrait of a man fully engaged in a set of cultures that are separate from his own. Derby, by his own account, sees much of himself reflected in the works that he collects, and feels that this body of African works—though textured in the histories of the people who created them—somehow also tells *his* story. Additionally, as this installation will reveal, the collector—especially one as unique and outspoken as Charles Derby—undoubtedly shapes

the works that he possesses, imbuing their narratives with new perspectives, and ultimately impacting how we digest the stories they offer.

Because Mr. Derby's lineage includes Native American Indians he started collecting objects created by North American natives. Through a dream and the mentor Paul Rabut he began collecting African objects mainly in New England at flea markets, at auction, and through trading with other collectors. Derby never travelled to Africa but studied African art and its cultures extensively eventually becoming an expert whose advice is sought by collectors and institutions alike. Derby's collection, and by extension the objects on view, does not represent an encyclopedic overview of African art or may not reflect the (Western) canonical ideals of African Art but is a very personal selection of choices that are often guided by intuition.

There is also marked difference between the works on display and the photo depicting a wall in Derby's home. Consider the difference between living with objects and exhibiting objects.

Does the photo give insights into the attitude of the collector? What would that be?

What attitude does the UMCA as a museum pose?

Can an argument be made against showing cultural objects in a museum?