



# The Performative in African Art





November 14–December 6, 2013

## Acknowledgments

*The Performative in African Art* is a course-integrated, student-curated exhibition undertaken by Kara Morrow's Fall 2013 *African Art* class. Beginning in September, students selected objects from the CWAM's permanent collection to research, present in class, and discuss. We applaud and thank the students for their contributions, collaboration, and above all, a job well done! This exhibition is an excellent demonstration of integrating theory and practice.

We also thank Dean Kreuzman for reaching across campus constituencies and including this exhibition in the 2013 Wooster Forum: Facing RACE. And, of course, we thank CWAM preparator, Doug McGlumphy, who not only worked diligently with the students throughout, but also gave this exhibition such a beautiful ease of presentation. Finally, we thank the donors of these materials for providing Wooster faculty and students with such a valuable teaching tool: William C. Mithoefer, Class of 1953, and Renee-Paule Moyencourt; Mikell Kloeters; and Dr. David C. and Karina Rilling. Without such generous, forward-looking gifts, object-based learning and exhibitions such as this one would not be possible.

**Kara Morrow**  
Assistant Professor of Art History

**Kitty McManus Zurko**  
Director/Curator, CWAM

From the Cape of Good Hope to the Upper Niger Delta, the meanings within African art derive not only from the visual forms, but also from an object's presentation, manipulation, and performance within a particular cultural context. Whether referencing revered ancestors, aiding age-grade transitions, or symbolizing traditional leadership structures, African art is fundamentally performative because efficacy is only completed through enactment.

Artists conceived of each of the objects in this gallery to function in a performative capacity, and even more importantly, intended them to be experienced within the multisensory context of specific communities. The most evident and familiar of these interactive contexts is the masquerade where the power of the spiritual world is tapped in order to achieve balance and harmony in the corporeal realm. Such performances are necessary for the smooth transition of the neophyte, the visual declaration of status, and the liminal movement between the earthly and the spiritual worlds.

Because the eloquence and power of African art stem from both form and context, the meanings behind these objects—as communicated by African artists, patrons, and performers—form an integral part of this exhibition. Therefore, the exhibition is first divided into four categories common to most African art—*FUNERARY*, *INITIATORY*, *ANCESTRAL*, and *LEADERSHIP*—and then, as best possible, contextualized through text, image, and placement. Although fully reflecting the depth and complexity of the beliefs and philosophies behind each object's physical manifestation is not possible, *The Performative in African Art* attempts to convey the multivalent meaning of objects removed from their intended contexts and audiences.

**Kara Morrow**

Assistant Professor of Art History

*Student Curators*

**Jennifer Caventer '15** Anthropology & Art History

**Philip Chung '15** Art History

**Jennifer Filak '16** Psychology

**Olivia Gregory '14** Anthropology/Sociology

**Maki Love '16** Africana Studies

**Chloe McFadyen '15** Art History

**James Parker '15** Art History

**Rebecca Roper '14** History

**Katelyn Schoenike '16** Archaeology

**Brendon Taylor '14** Philosophy

**Sarah Van Oss '16** Art History & Archaeology

**Shanteal Weldon '16** Africana Studies

**Nora Yawitz '15** Theatre



Burton D. Morgan Gallery  
The College of Wooster Art Museum

# FUNERARY

## Egungun masquerade, Yoruba peoples, Nigeria

c. 20th century

Fabric, wood

The College of Wooster Art Museum 2009.32

Gift of Dr. David C. and Karina Rilling

Resting motionless in a gallery, an Egungun costume ensemble is merely a shell of cloth. Its true power and purpose are activated only when a masker enters the costume, transformed into the presence and power of the ancestors in an Egungun ceremony.

–Mary Ann Fitzgerald

Yoruba masqueraders wear this costume to honor their ancestors, and to incarnate or materialize spirits. The Egungun society worships *Amayegun*, who taught the Yoruba people to cover the body with cloth to protect themselves from death. Placement of the cloth and the performance of the dance transform the masqueraders into spirits of the ancestors. Specific aspects of the Egungun masquerade, or performance, represent this transformation process, such as when the dancer spins his body while moving through the surrounding crowd.

The chaos of the dance represents a storm, or the “wind of death” known as Shango, (see the Shango wand in the *Ancestral* section of the gallery). This twirling motion reveals the solid inner layer of the costume, which represents the shroud encompassing the body of the deceased. A moment of calmness follows after the whirling performance. This tranquility is known as the “wind of blessing,” or Oya, the wife of Shango. Oya reconciles the ancestors with the living community.

Intricate carpet, shiny silk, and voluptuous velvet make up the patchwork of the Egungun costume. Variety within the fabric shows the wealth of the family who created the costume. The jagged edges symbolize salvation. The masquerade costume covers the entire body including the face, which is masked by black and white yarn woven strips. Ultimately, the dancer’s body is completely hidden as Egungun transforms into the spirits of the ancestors.



**Katelyn Schoenike '16**  
Archaeology Major

## New Acquisition

# FUNERARY

**Reliquary figure**, Kota-Mahongwé peoples, Gabon

c. mid-20th century

Wood, copper, metal

The College of Wooster Art Museum 2013.35

Gift of William C. Mithoefer, Class of 1953,  
and Renee-Paule Moyencourt

The Kota-MaHongwé (also called Hongwé) people of Gabon believe men have great mystical powers, and that their remains retain this power after death. Families of influential local leaders preserve the bones for use in communal ceremonies to appease and celebrate ancestors. These relics are guarded by a reliquary figure such as this one.

This Hongwé reliquary figure is an abstracted human form with three components: head, neck, and handle. Copper and brass, the primary materials covering the wood figure, are sometimes used as currency among the Kota, and indicate the status of the ancestral line. Strips of copper cover the center of this figure's head, while narrow wires precisely align to create a rhythmic horizontality. Two hemispherical protrusions indicate eyes, a semi-circular disk forms the nose, and curving copper arcs suggest a moustache over the mouth.

The figure is attached to a basket at the handle, as seen in the photograph to the right, which contains the remains of important ancestors. On ceremonial occasions, these baskets are placed in the center of the village, where they are offered sacrificial food and covered in red powder. The head of the lineage removes the figure from the basket and dances with it in a decorative costume of red raffia and feathers.

**Rebecca Roper '14**

History Major



# FUNERARY

**Mukyeem mask**, Ngeende, Kuba peoples  
Democratic Republic of Congo, c. 20th century  
Raffia, cowry shells, beads  
The College of Wooster Art Museum 1985.1  
Gift of William C. Mithoefer, Class of 1953

Within Kuba religious practices, masquerades play a critical role in conveying spiritual and cultural meaning. The Mukyeem mask is worn during ceremonial funerary processions that are held to honor deceased male nobility. Due to the patriarchal nature of these processions, the Mukyeem is always worn by a Kuba male with high social status.

The defining characteristic of the Mukyeem mask is its anthropomorphic form, which reflects both a man and an elephant. The mask's representation of the elephant alludes to the Kuba people's reverence for the animal's strength and courage. Along with suggesting masculinity and virility, the Mukyeem indicates wealth and power through its lavish ornamentation of raffia, cowry shells, and beads. The mask's formal and symbolic content, therefore, correspond to ideal Kuba traits, and honor the the strength and courage of the deceased man.

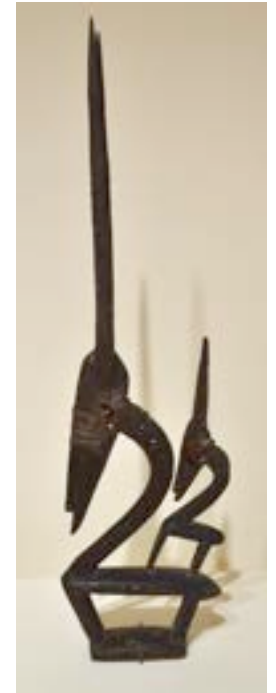
**Philip Chung '15**  
Art History Major





# INITIATORY

**Ciwara headdresses**, Bamana peoples, Mali  
c. late 20th century  
Wood, metal, plant fiber, cotton  
The College of Wooster Art Museum 2007.123  
Gift of William C. Mithoefer, Class of 1953,  
and Renee-Paule Moyencourt



For the Bamana peoples of southwest Mali, farming and hard work are of the utmost importance, and the Ciwara masquerade embodies these values. Ciwara is performed both to welcome a new male initiate into society and to symbolize his coming-of-age. The headdresses, or *ciwarakunw*, depict the Bamana deity Ci Wara, a half-man, half-antelope who taught mankind how to cultivate the fields. There are several regional variations of Ciwara: the vertical style (right) is found in the eastern Bamana area, while the horizontal style (left) is found in areas north of the Niger River. The headdresses are part of a masquerade performed in male and female pairs, which symbolizes fertility and encourages agricultural success. The female figure represents the earth and carries a smaller, baby antelope upon her back, as a human mother would do. The male embodies the sun, and his phallus gives life to the earth. The vertical Ciwara typically have curved necks, and both variations are often decorated with carved textures, metal attachments, beads, or leather to give the object *di*, or “sweetness.” These materials embellish both the headdress and the performance.

The Ciwara ceremony is an important milestone in a young man’s life. It signals his preparation for his role as a husband, father, and contributing member of the Bamana community. Elders place the boys into age-grades, and they go to a sacred wood where they are taught lessons pertaining to their masculinity and societal values. The initiation process culminates in the Ciwara performance.

The Ciwara performance is filled with motifs of farming and hard work. Along with the headdress, the dancer wears an outfit of long, dark fibers that covers his entire face and body, which represents water cascading onto the earth. He holds two canes in his hands and hunches over, resembling a farmer working hard in the fields. The canes transform the dancer into a four-legged creature, and he moves in a hopping motion that mimics an antelope. One performer represents the deity Ci Wara and wears the male headdress on his head, while the other dancer symbolizes his female consort and dons the female headdress. The community surrounds the masqueraders, while drums provide the beat for the dance, and women clap and chant.

**Jennifer Filak '16**  
Psychology Major

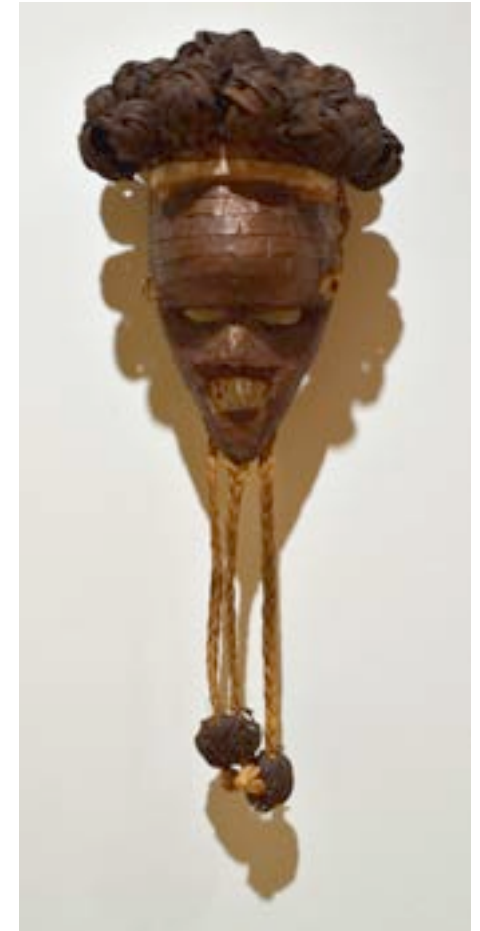
# INITIATORY

**Circumcision mask**, Salampasu peoples,  
Democratic Republic of the Congo  
c. 20th century  
Wood, copper, fiber  
The College of Wooster Art Museum 1976.20  
Gift of William C. Mithoefer, Class of 1953

The art of masking is a concept found within almost every culture. Masks elicit a powerful fascination because they transform a person into an entity, which raises questions about identity and possession, reality and artifice, and the natural versus the supernatural. Masking also demonstrates the visual communicative power of art and its contemporary relevance to enduring ideas about cultural values. Through performance and ceremony, the men of the Salampasu become fierce warriors in society as they make the transition from boy to warrior, aided by the mask shown here.

The Salampasu peoples base their social hierarchy on the status of their male warriors. A man wears this mask during the ceremony that takes place after the circumcision of a boy. The sharpened teeth and narrowed eyes, overshadowed by the large, bulging forehead, are common among all Salampasu masks. The long beard that hangs from the chin emphasizes masculine features. Such distinguishing characteristics instill fear within spectators and those entering battle with the Salampasu. These features also suggest the power of Salampasu warriors and the fearlessness celebrated among males of this society. After the circumcision ceremony, a boy is destined to become a brave warrior who defends his people. In addition, a man is awarded a new mask every time he defeats an enemy or shows his boldness and courage. The accumulation of masks is directly related to the power a man holds within the community. Once a warrior dies, the masks are worn by other Salampasu men, and are displayed at his funeral.

The elaborate craftsmanship and exquisite detail of this mask not only highlight the time spent creating this mask, but emphasizes the importance of this mask as a cultural and societal symbol of manhood and bravery.



**Olivia Gregory '14**  
Anthropology/Sociology Major

# INITIATORY

**Sande helmet masks**, Mende/Vai/Gola peoples

Sierra Leone/Liberia, c. 20th century

Wood, palm oil

The College of Wooster Art Museum 1980.121-.122

Gift of William C. Mithoefer, Class of 1953



Among the Mende peoples of Sierra Leone there exists a sodality of women known as Sande. These two masks belong to this sodality, and are used during initiation masquerades that take place in Sande “bush” schools. Sande is the parallel to the Poro society for Mende men (see the Poro helmet on the next page). During initiation in the schools, Sande initiates are taught the “trades” of the traditional Mende wife and mother. When performed, the helmet masks represent the ideal for female Mende beauty, and also embody their water deity Sowo. Above all, Sande helmet masks are meant to be an example of ideal femininity to the initiates.

Sande helmet masks often depict perfectly coiffed hair intended to teach the girls the ideal of good Mende grooming. Research has shown that motifs in the hair can represent waves in the water or geminating seeds, which fits with the agriculturally based Mende. The mask to the left has talons or canine teeth in the hair; these are called power objects. Palm oil covers these masks; Sande members say the mix correlates to the oil mixture the women put on their skin to keep it beautiful and black. The large foreheads have been described as conveying wisdom, while the small faces are a sign of beauty as are the downcast eyes. The neck rolls reflect health, prosperity, Sowo breaking the surface of the river water, as well as, chrysalises (cocoons) and caterpillars growing in to butterflies.

Female masqueraders wear these masks while performing dances at night when entering and leaving the bush schools. These women are called *sowei*, and have a high status in the society. The *sowei* can perform alone or juxtaposed to a *gonde* (a “funny *sowei*”) that wears a tattered, old, and ugly mask. This juxtaposition and performance shows the initiates who they should not be and what they should not do. It also demonstrates the consequences of such actions. In this way ideals are conveyed performatively and physically through the helmet masks.

**Jennifer Caventer '15**

Anthropology & Art History

Double Major

# INITIATORY

**Poro helmet mask**, Mende peoples, Sierra Leone/Liberia

c. 20th century

Wood

The College of Wooster Art Museum 1985.10

Gift of William C. Mithoefer, Class of 1953

This helmet mask originates from the male Poro Society of the Mende peoples of Sierra Leone. The Poro society initiate young Mende boys into manhood through performances while wearing these masks. The society parallels the all female Sande society of the Mende peoples.

This mask is phallic in shape and reflects the circumcisions that take place during initiations. The rolls along the neck and shaft refer to the Mende river goddess Sowo, and represents Mende ideals of health, prosperity and beauty for both men and women. The rolls also relate to the breaking of the water as Sowo rises from the river. This imagery is borrowed from the masks of the Sande society.

Poro initiation performances teach the Mende boys leadership, wisdom, and responsibility. Through these masquerades the boys learn how to be true Mende men, husbands, and fathers.

**Jennifer Caventer '15**

Anthropology & Art History

Double Major



# ANCESTRAL

**Shango wand**, Yoruba peoples, Nigeria

c. mid-20th century

Wood

The College of Wooster Art Museum 1976.30

Gift of William C. Mithoefer, Class of 1953

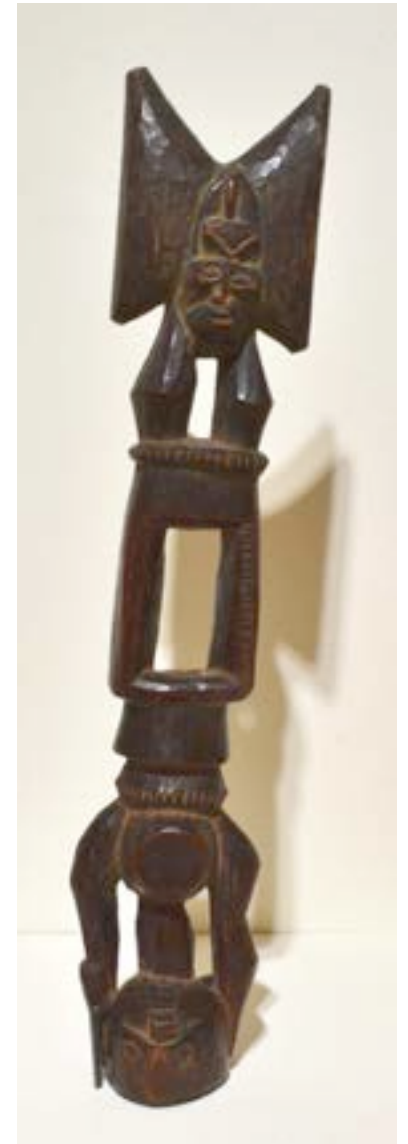
According to Yoruba myths, Shango was the fourth *Alafin*, or king, of Oyo in Yorubaland. He was said to be hot headed, with a temper as unpredictable as a tempest. Upon his death, Shango was apotheosed and transformed into an *orisha*, or deity, of thunder and lightning.

Also referred to as an *oshe*, or double-headed axe, the Shango wand is based on a Neolithic axe design. Only devotees of Shango carry the staff in ceremonial occasions. Featuring a tripartite structure, the wand's unique axe motif is reminiscent of the form Shango's lightning takes when it is hurled from the heavens. This Shango wand manifests the previously mentioned idiosyncrasies as well as a "Janus," or dual visage, a caryatid effigy, and a handle.

Shango remains a venerated deity in Yoruba religious practice and performance, whose devotees are considered wedded to him regardless of gender. Despite the volatile nature of the god they serve, the devout are graced with an unparalleled serenity to balance the devastating power.

**James Parker '15**

Art History Major



# ANCESTRAL

**Gelede cap masks**, Yoruba peoples, Nigeria

c. 20th century

Wood, polychrome

The College of Wooster Art Museum 1980.123-124

Gift of William C. Mithoefer, Class of 1953



This pair of cap masks would have been worn by two male members of the Gelede society in a performance intended to appease an *orisa*, or deity, named Iya Nla, whose power controls female reproduction as well as postmenopausal feminine efficacy. This type of cap mask would have been worn with a costume portraying the female figure. Such cap masks normally have faces that represent women as a means of honoring Iya Nla, and a superstructure depicting culturally relevant motifs such as ornate hair styles, performed social roles, or metaphorical animals that symbolize or reference a particular *orisa* found within Yoruba myths.

The cap mask on the far right features a superstructure depicting a sculptural hairstyle above the symmetrical face. Vivid colorations as well as scarification patterns—both containing symbolic meaning—relate to specific *orisa* within Yoruba myths. In this particular example there are diamond-shaped scarification patterns and hollowed triangular shaped eyes placed evenly on the face. Such components also suggest symbolic parallels to a particular *orisa* through the shapes and designs. The small face depicts beauty and fertility associated with Iya Nla, and the large forehead suggests wisdom.

**Brendon Taylor '14**

Philosophy Major

# ANCESTRAL

**Oro Efe helmet mask**, Yoruba peoples, Nigeria

c. late 20th century

Wood, polychrome

The College of Wooster Art Museum 1976.9

Gift of William C. Mithoefer, Class of 1953

This wooden helmet mask comes from the Gelede society of the Yoruba peoples. Originally sculpted and painted by a male artist, it would also have been worn by a male masquerader. The Gelede view the *Oro Efe* as a leader of their society. He serves as an intermediary between the Yoruba people and their female ancestors collectively referred to as “Our Mothers.” As the *Oro Efe* performs, he sings songs that address “Our Mothers” in an effort to appease them so their powers are used for good (fertility and harvest), and not for evil (infant mortality and plague). Balancing the daytime performance of Gelede cap masks (previous page), the *Oro Efe* performance takes place at night, tapping ancestral feminine power, and condemning antisocial behavior.

An idealized feminine face provides the foundation for the *Oro Efe* mask. Characteristic of such masks, a crescent moon surmounts the forehead, linking the object with the night. Locks of hair arc from the head behind the moon. The mask’s superstructure creates a sophisticated play of positive and negative space delineated by a belt-like circle, supporting sheathed knives hanging on either side of the head. The knives allude to the masculine, aggressive power of the *Oro Efe*. Straps extend over the top of the headdress and cross at the back, referencing Islamic talismanic belts. Dark birds hold snakes in their mouths at the pinnacles of the structure. Birds of all types are specifically associated with women and the ambiguous power of “Our Mothers” to either do irreparable harm or great good. As such this mask is an image of physical and supernatural power and is considered a brother-mask to the Gelede cap masks.



**Jennifer Caventer '15**

Anthropology & Art History

Double Major

# ANCESTRAL

**Nimba mask**, Baga peoples, Republic of Guinea

c. 20th century

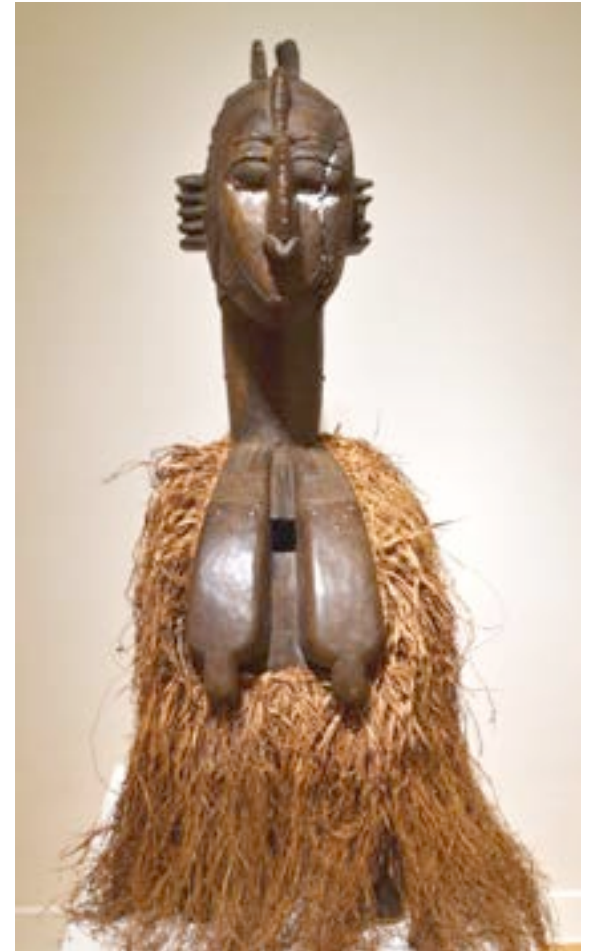
Wood, metal, raffia

The College of Wooster Art Museum 1985.12

Gift of William C. Mithoefer, Class of 1953

The Nimba masquerade has been in use by the Baga peoples since they migrated to the coastline of New Guinea sometime before the sixteenth century. Nimba is unique because she is considered an idea to be performed and emulated, and not a deity or spiritual being. She is the personification of what might be attained in the best of all possible worlds for the Baga, and represents the ideal Baga woman in her physical appearance. Specifically, she embodies a mother with long sagging breasts, who has nursed many children. Additionally, she is polished and regal with an elaborate coiffure. Occurring every other year at harvest time, the masquerade's performance radiates positivity. Even though only male maskers perform Nimba, both men and women participate by singing and dancing with drums alongside the colossal Nimba figure draped in vibrant raffia and cloth.

In the mid-twentieth century, the Nimba masquerade developed a different meaning to the Baga peoples when they became part of the Marxist and Islamic Republic of New Guinea. Under this government, all traditional and indigenous rituals were declared illegal. For nearly thirty years the performance of this central masquerade was kept secret, until a new regime came to power in 1984, and traditional rituals were reinstated. This marked a Baga cultural renaissance, and a subsequent revival of the Nimba masquerade, which has come to represent pride in Baga traditions.



**Chloe McFadyen '14**  
Art History Major



*New Acquisition*  
**ANCESTRAL**

**Rattlers**, Democratic Republic of Congo

c. 20th century

Raffia, seed pods

The College of Wooster Art Museum 2013.50

Gift of William C. Mithoefer, Class of 1953,  
and Renee-Paule Moyencourt



Although often disregarded in anthropological accounts of African cultures, the notion of aurality, or sound, plays a significant role in these cultures' religious conceptualizations and practices. Masquerades and ritual practices invariably include some form of deliberate sound, ranging from percussive strikes, tonal intonations, and vocalization/chanting. These designed sounds are regarded as channels for communication between the earthly realm of humans and the otherworldly realm of deities. Sounds, therefore, correspond to the transcendental "speech" of these deities.

These rattlers originate from the Democratic Republic of Congo, and were most likely used in a masquerade setting. They would have been wound either around a ritual dance staff or the legs of a dancer just below the knee, and played alongside drums during bouts of song and dance. Their composition of hollow, open-ended seed pods and loosely woven raffia allows them to swing freely to produce a rustling sound when the numerous dry seed pods strike each other. The sounds rattlers and other instruments produce parallel the aesthetic function of the masks, and serve as another medium for spiritual communication and exhibition.

**Philip Chung '15**  
Art History Major

# ANCESTRAL

**Drum**, Baga peoples, Republic of Guinea

c. 20th century

Wood, hide, paint

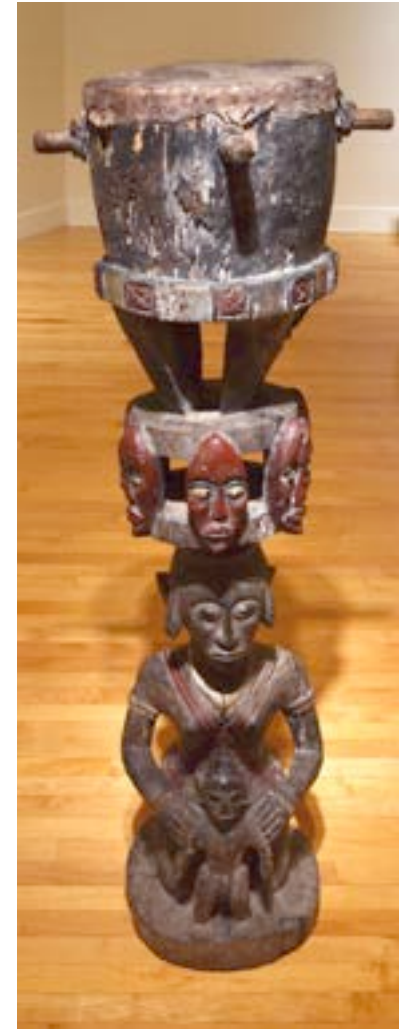
The College of Wooster Art Museum 2009.29

Gift of Dr. David C. and Karina Rilling

The ideal of motherhood occupies a premier place in Baga society, and is symbolically linked to the fecundity of the earth. In the drum to the right, the idealized mother presenting her child, as well as the large Nimba mask on p. 15, address this important aspect of Baga worldview.

Starting at the bottom of the drum, the woman kneels and her body frames the small figure before her. Formality and hierarchy characterize the composition. The mother's head supports the superstructure of the drum. From her ornate coiffeur emerges a flat horizontal platform. Elliptical heads punctuate that plane, and the drum terminates the composition. The red faces support staring eyes that survey the scene.

Such drums are used by the Baga to promote the concepts of human fertility and earthly fecundity, and to provide the acoustic structure of celebrations where women dance and celebrants throw rice, a staple of the Baga diet and economy. Both Baga men and women play drums in ritual festivities; however, only a woman would have played the instrument displayed here, creating an eloquent link between the drummer and the drum.



**Kara Morrow**

Assistant Professor of Art History

The College of Wooster

## New Acquisition

# ANCESTRAL

**Ere Ibeji figures**, Yoruba peoples, Nigeria

c. 20th century

Wood, pigment

The College of Wooster Art Museum 2013.35

Gift of William C. Mithoefer, Class of 1953,  
and Renee-Paule Moyencourt



While the Yoruba peoples of Nigeria have a high rate of twinning in their society, there is also a high infant mortality rate, especially among twins. When a twin dies, the family commissions *Ere Ibeji* figures to appease the soul of the deceased. The Yoruba call twins “the twice born,” and believe they share a soul, which gives them spiritual power to bring good luck to their family. All *Ere Ibeji* are carved from wood and depict fully-grown adults—identified through their developed genitalia—and celebrate the potential of the life that was lost. The four *Ere Ibeji* in front of you follow these stylistic norms, and also include carved details representing their village’s hairstyles and facial scarification patterns.

To appease the deceased twins, the mother ceremonially feeds the figure by dabbing oil and beans on the mouth. This practice causes the fading around the mouth visible on Wooster’s *Ere Ibeji*. The *Ere Ibeji* are also decorated with clothes, beads, shells, textiles, and covered with indigo powder or traditional cosmetics, as seen in the photograph below. Traces of indigo powder appear on the head of one of Wooster’s *Ere Ibeji*, along with bracelets on her wrist and ankles. All of these attributes show how reverence is “performed” for the deceased soul.



*Ere Ibeji shrine with offerings and decorative aspects.*

**Rebecca Roper '14**

History Major

# ANCESTRAL

**Ifa divination tray**, Yoruba peoples, Nigeria

c. 20th century

Wood

The College of Wooster Art Museum 1976.5

Gift of William C. Mithoefer, Class of 1953

In Yoruba culture, religious specialists, or *babalawos*, use Ifa divination trays in times of uncertainty and conflict to contact the deity Eshu-Elegba, commonly known as Eshu, the trickster god. Eshu is one of 400 *orisha*, or deities, created by *Olodumare*, the Supreme Being. He is also a mediator between earth, heaven, and Ifa, the god of divination. Eshu only tricks those who deceive him and doubt him as a god by transforming himself into the wind, birds, and other people.

To perform the divination session, the *babalawo* turns the tray so the image of Eshu faces him, and plays a rhythm on a drum. He then spreads the divination powder, *iyerosun*, across the center section of the tray. After spreading the powder, the *babalawo* casts palm nuts and a divination chain across the tray. The design formed in the powder dictates which *Odu* he and the other diviners will chant out of 256 possibilities. Each *Odu* refers to a collection of sacred verses that reflect Yoruba culture, religion, and worldview. The person who purchased the divination session is responsible for interpreting the *Odu* chanted.

Ifa divination trays often depict the Yoruba culture, religion, and worldview along the raised edge of the tray, through carved images of kings, animals, and the divination ritual, but these images are purely decorative. This tray contains carved geometric lines around the edge, rather than images of Yoruba life. For trays to be used in Ifa Divination, however, they must contain the face of Eshu, as can be seen at the top of Wooster's Ifa divination tray.



**Nora Yawitz '15**  
Theatre Major

# LEADERSHIP

**Stool**, Bamileke or Bamum Peoples, Cameroon

c. mid-20th century

Wood

The College of Wooster Art Museum 1992.1

Gift of Mikell Kloeters

Kings and other rulers play essential roles in the Bamileke and Bamum ethnic groups who live in the grasslands of northern Cameroon. Many forms of royal regalia display the king's power; however, stools happen to be one of the most valued objects in this region. The stools are so important to these peoples that they believe the king's life force is absorbed into the wood of the stool. The Bamileke and Bamum peoples take pride in stool making. Stools often require many years to carve, and involve ancestral interactions to complete.

Most royal stools display an animal supporting the seat, thereby symbolizing a relationship between ruler and powerful creatures. The Bamileke and Bamum peoples use spiders for divination practices because spiders have divine knowledge and are a link between the real and the ancestral worlds. Ground-dwelling tarantulas burrow below the earth when making a home, but also rise above the ground when looking for food, echoing the human connection with the ancestors below and the living above. The seven X-like figures in this stool represent the tarantula and refer to the king's power to mediate between the earthly and spiritual realms.

**Maki Love '16**

Africana Studies Major



## New Acquisition

# LEADERSHIP

**Beaded apron**, Zulu peoples, South Africa

c. 20th century

Cloth, beads

The College of Wooster Art Museum 2013.54

Gift of William C. Mithoefer, Class of 1953,  
and Renee-Paule Moyencourt



The Zulu peoples occupy the eastern seaboard of South Africa. The Zulu nation took shape in 1817 under King Shaka Zulu, for whom the nation is named. The king, having great control of the economy of his state due to a large military, was able to restrict beaded decoration for himself and members of his court. Today, all members of Zulu society use beaded objects for personal adornment.

In traditional ceremonies, young women wear uniforms made up of a beaded apron, similar to the one above, over a skirt of red or black. Girls not yet ready for marriage wear red skirts. Across their chest, a young woman may wear a band of beadwork or nothing at all. The wearer, who is often also the artist, chooses the patterns and colors. Regional styles are therefore referenced in these uniforms. Wooster's Zulu apron is suggestive of the Nongoma regional style, characterized by the diamond-like shield pattern. In this way, these aprons and uniforms convey to the audience the performers' age, gender, regional affiliation, and status.



**Sarah Van Oss '16**

Art History & Archaeology

Double Major

## New Acquisition

# LEADERSHIP

**Beaded staff**, Ndebele peoples, South Africa, c. 1960s

Wood, beads, thread, grass fiber

The College of Wooster Art Museum 2013.51

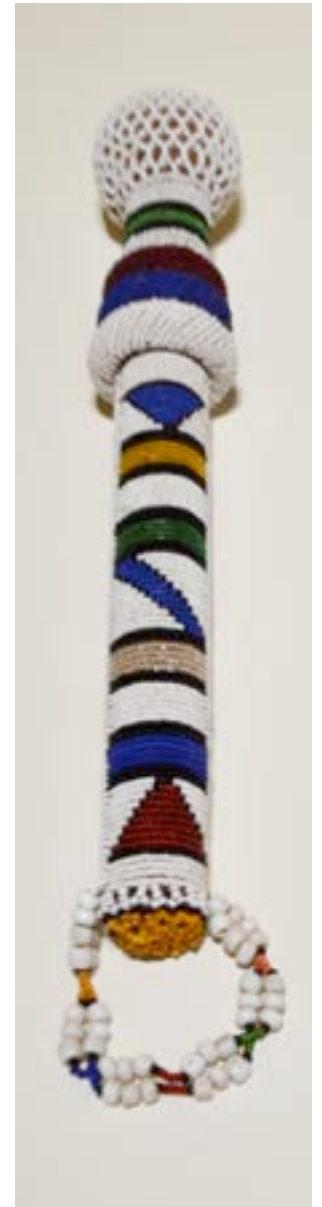
Gift of William C. Mithoefer, Class of 1953,  
and Renee-Paule Moyencourt

The Ndebele peoples occupy northern South Africa and Zimbabwe. The Ndebele and Zulu originally made up a larger nation; however, political differences led to the divergence of these two peoples. The Ndebele are known for vibrant geometric murals that women paint on their homes to communicate the status and skill of the artist. These patterns also appear in their beadwork, which initially inspired house-painting motifs.

The Ndebele wear beaded garments and adornments for special ceremonies like weddings, circumcisions, and harvest celebrations. The dance wand to the right represents one of the accessories used by Ndebele women. Its colorful, geometric designs echo those found on Ndebele homes. The female beadworker designed it to be held in the hand as she sings and dances. The thick rings of beads on the dance wand echo the necklaces worn by Ndebele women, as seen in the image below.



**Sarah Van Oss '16**  
Art History & Archaeology  
Double Major



## New Acquisition

# LEADERSHIP

**Beaded necklace**, probably Zulu peoples, South Africa

c. 20th century

Cloth, beads

The College of Wooster Art Museum 2013.54

Gift of William C. Mithoefer, Class of 1953,  
and Renee-Paule Moyencourt

Beaded jewelry takes many forms in Zulu culture. Adornments for the body include necklaces, bracelets, anklets, arm bands, headbands, and hats. Both men and women may wear the necklace displayed here. The white, blue, green and black beads are woven on strings, which are then wrapped around a fibrous tube to form its thick, but flexible shape.

The small square hanging from the bottom of the necklace resembles what has become known as the Zulu “love letter.” In Zulu culture, primarily young women create beaded art. If a girl is interested in a young man, she will give him a beaded object that commonly takes the form of a small, patterned square of beads. Although western perceptions have exaggerated the meaning of the color and pattern of these love letters, the giving of such tokens communicates the intention of young Zulu lovers.

**Sarah Van Oss '16**  
Art History & Archaeology  
Double Major

