

TRADITIONAL ART FROM AFRICA



*Malinke Mask (konden), wood, silver aluminum, and nails,
22½ in. high. Sylvia and Michael Horowitz Collection.*

*From the collections
of
Sylvia and Michael Horowitz
and
James A. Miller*

**BINGHAMTON UNIVERSITY
ART MUSEUM**



Bamana Headdress Mask, in form of female antelope and young (chiwara), wood, raffia, 37 in. high. Sylvia and Michael Horowitz Collection.



Dogon Male and Female Figures, seated on imago mundi stool, wood and metal, 58 in. high. Binghamton University Art Museum. Gift of Sylvia and Michael Horowitz.

TRADITIONAL ART FROM AFRICA

"Traditional Art from Africa" aims to provide an introduction to the beauty, strength, variety and complexity of African art. The identity of African art in global art history is represented by two categories of art objects: wooden masks and figurative sculpture. As well as being beautiful, the Bamana and Malinke masks and the Lobi and Baule figures make an effective, quiet statement about African aesthetics, rituals and values.

The exhibition presents some of the best-known African art groups: Dogon, Bamana, Bobo-fing and Bwa, Lobi, Dan and Baule peoples. The objects range from the extreme of abstraction to naturalism.

The Dan, the related peoples of the Ivory Coast, and northeastern Liberia are represented by the mask with fringe of bells and by the mask assembled of wood, fiber, metal, cloth and paint. For the Dan, form is meant to be evocative; specific emotions and reactions are for specific contexts and are evoked by a symbolism of forms. Highly valued are features such as finished and polished surfaces, color, symmetry across the vertical axis, balance among volumes and carefully rendered linear patterns. Typical also are the complex assemblages of bells, fur, cartridges, metal, hair, cloth, wood and paint. For masks, there is the added consideration of their suitability for seeing and breathing well.

The ethnic groups of Bwa and Bobo-fing are known for extremely large masks, usually in the form of the head of an animal, such as an antelope, bird or toucan. The image of an antelope's head is also a favorite motif of the Bamana artists. The impressive headdress masks in form of a male and of female antelope with young (*chi-wara*) have been used by performers of agricultural rites, such as the celebration of the crop cycle.

Ancestor worship is the basis of an entire genre of figurative art. Crucial for this genre is the "ancestor figure," interpreted mainly by Baule and by Dogon artists. The primogenitor is represented either as a single androgynous figure or as a male-female pair, seated on an *imago mundi* stool. Revealing a whole complex of cosmological notions and beliefs of their creators, the Dogon carved figures contain some of the signs of highest social and political status: a prestigious stool, a beard or a headdress.

Some of the figurative sculptures are good examples of traditional ideals of feminine beauty. The Yoruba female figure's high, broad, smooth forehead; thick hair; and earrings and other decoration express her intelligence, energy, fertility, high status and well-being. By depicting women, the artists demonstrate their skills and technical proficiency.

The importance of figurative art to an understanding of traditional African art cannot be overestimated. However, musical instruments, used in ritual performances, also deserve special attention. Original textiles, made of rafia, some of which are colored, have been used for men's skirts.

Looking at the exhibits, one can characterize traditional African art as both poetic and direct—conveying emotion through line, form, color and surface—while expressing African culture through its use and context. In this way the approaches of traditional African art have influenced many of the modern painters and sculptors in the West, and also taught Western audiences about the customs and traditions of Africa.

Silvia Ivanova
Curatorial Assistant



Textile, rafia, 2 1/2 in. wide. Binghamton University Art Museum.
Gift of James A. Miller.



Bamana Headdress Mask, in the form of a male antelope (chi-wara), wood and raffia, 40 in. high. Sylvia and Michael Horowitz Collection.

APPRECIATION FROM THE DIRECTOR

The Binghamton University Art Museum staff is pleased to open this gallery devoted to traditional art from Africa, reflecting the University's General Education theme of Global Vision. This presentation was made possible through the generosity of collectors of African art who have lent and donated objects: Michael Horowitz, professor of anthropology, his wife, Sylvia, and alumnus James A. Miller '69. Binghamton University is very fortunate to have these loyal friends.

This exhibition of traditional art from Africa opens in conjunction with the performance, on October 24, 1997, of *Umabatha: The Zulu Macbeth*, by Welcome Msomi, in the Anderson Center for the Arts, and the fall 1977 General Education Theme Semester: "Africa, Shakespeare, and Global Culture." On behalf of the Art Museum staff, I thank Floyd Herzog, director of the Anderson Center, and Albert H. Tricomi, vice provost for undergraduate studies, for their extraordinary efforts to enrich our campus with these special events.

Lynn Gamwell, Director

Art Museum Staff

Lynn Gamwell, Director

Jacqueline Hogan, Business and Operations Manager

Silvia Ivanova, Curatorial Assistant

Lucie Nelson, Permanent Collection Curator

Peter Harris, Installation Designer

Jennifer Nyman, Intern

Brenda LaBier, Intern

Michelle Heame, Intern

**Binghamton University Art Museum
State University of New York**

October 24, 1997–January 16, 1998

Opening Reception Friday, October 24, 7-8 p.m.