

Believing Africa

Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology at Manning Hall, Brown University, Providence, RI

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"Believing Africa" grew out of a year-long collaboration between students and faculty from several different departments at both Brown University and its neighbor, the Rhode Island School of Design. It is the second such exhibition since the Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology at Manning Hall opened in May 2005. Its predecessor, "Warp Speeds," an exploration of textiles and globalization which includes African material, continues online at www.haffenreffermuseum.org/warpspeeds.

Some ninety objects drawn from the Haffenreffer Museum's collections are artfully arranged and exhaustively explained in the Gallery's 1800-square-foot space. As part of an anthropology museum, the gallery takes full advantage of its mission to use works as the vehicles for exploring culture and ideas, in contrast with an art museum approach that focuses on the work first, and the culture or idea second. At the same time, it exploits installation techniques and lighting from the art museum world, for many of the works on display are works of art as well as ethnography.



fig. 1

Upon entering the gallery, one encounters a Dogon Great Mask dramatically lit against a midnight blue cloth and set vertically into a bed of stones, evoking the caves in which these masks live out their lives (fig.1). The Great Mask opens the discussion of African belief systems, long-standing indigenous beliefs as well as Islam, Christianity, and new syncretic beliefs, with its reference to beginnings, "of birth and death, and of the self" in Dogon thought.

From this entry point, there is a natural flow of traffic around the gallery, the space broken up by window wells containing photomurals as well as vitrine cases and display islands. The first two photomurals, for example, show daily devotion in the court of the Great Mosque in Touba, Senegal, and an adult baptism in the Indian Ocean near Malindi, Kenya. They border cases containing works directly related to Islam (Quranic boards) and Christianity, both Coptic (Ethiopian eighteenth and nineteenth century icons and a medicinal scroll, for example) and more recently introduced versions represented by late

twentieth century Kongo sculptures of a nun and St. Francis, as well as those that reference Islam in relation to indigenous belief systems, such as a Mossi mask showing a Muslim trader on horseback and a Vai Sande Society mask, displayed upside down so that the protective prayer, an Arabic inscription, in the interior is visible.

Two island displays that focus on particular categories of work from specific ethnic and geographic areas fill the corners: an island focused on Sande society masks and associated objects from the Mende and related cultures of Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Guinea (fig.2) and one centered on masks used by the Bangwa of the Cameroon highlands (fig.3). Each group of objects allows the exhibitions curators to raise ancillary questions. The Sande society exhibit provides a context for a wide range of issues from historic masquerade practices in which women generally did not wear the masks, with Sande being the dominant exception, to female genital mutilation, since circumcision is historically an aspect of Sande's initiation of adolescent

girls into womanhood. A political cloth for the inauguration of Liberian president (and Sande Society member) Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf reminds us of the role this society has played historically and continues to play in fostering women's leadership skills. The Bangwa island features works collected by the British anthropologist Robert Brain, particularly groups of Night Society and Royal Society masks. Brain's documentation allows a sequencing of the Night Society masks to suggest the transformation from human to supernatural that underlies ideas of chieftaincy, while the diverse styles of a number of the Royal Society masks, notably skin-covered masks and helmets with multiple faces, reference the networks of trade and communication that existed historically in this area.



fig. 3



fig. 4

A third island features works organized around the idea of power, notably power in relation to sorcery and witchcraft in diverse African cultures as it is given visual recognition in object form, whether in a mid-twentieth century Pende Mbangú mask representing “the bewitched” or central African power figures from the Songye, Kongo, and Yombe. As the label text notes, the range of divination implements remind one that everywhere, events need explanation. A granary falls on a person sitting in its shade, a soccer team loses an important match, someone gets ahead in business or politics, another contracts AIDS. Mechanical explanations describe what happens: termites weaken the granary, the goalie blocks a shot, cronies stuff the ballot box, a person has unprotected sex. But why that granary, at that time, when that person sat in its shade? Why that penalty shot, that politician, that lover?

The questions remain, and more than one high-profile African, in spite of Western education and scientific awareness, has acted to find out why something has happened—finding out in Nigeria, for example, means seeking spiritual explanations from a pastor, priest, or traditional spiritualist.

Tucked into the third corner of the room, the literal and figurative end of the exhibition, is a striking group of objects that explore the visual culture of death and transition among the Akan, featuring both canonical and innovative objects (Fig. 4). The liveliness of this section in the color, quality, and character of the works displayed and the ideas they represent was not accidental, but meant to revitalize viewer interest. The works include a lovely rainbow stool with silver applique and a commemorative terracotta portrait by Madam Abena Owo, an early twentieth century



fig. 4

Fante artist from the Agona Asafo region of Ghana. It is wrapped in and backed by kente cloth and seated on an asipim chair. Taking up the central space of this exhibition bay is a fantasy coffin from the workshop of Kane Kwei—with an adinkra cloth filling the wall behind it. Its contemporary nature creates a transition to and context for current practices, such as printing T-shirts with a photo of the deceased for distribution at the funeral or memorial portraits painted on sheet metal for installation on headstones. Samples of such work complement the display of traditional memorial portraits in terracotta that are featured in an adjacent display case.

This review is co-authored by an American art historian and an African artist/art historian in the United States for the Triennial Symposium on African Art. We both agreed generally on the excellence of the conceptual structure and its actualization as an exhibit including both canonical and contemporary works, as reported above. John Ogene, the African reviewer, was most enthusiastic about the level of explanation, however, and what he referred to as faithfulness to the image or object, and his words make an excellent conclusion for this review, worth listening to specifically, rather than being folded into a cooperative venture. 'As a visiting African studio artist, teacher and scholar, I was privileged to visit quite a number of galleries and museums in America. As an African living in Africa, my impression was that the presumed insight of non-Africans into African art continues to be the bane of 'offshore' reportage of African art, tending to create perspective shifts that detract from the ideas upon which most African material and visual cultures are based.'

He asserts that the exhibitions he visited generally lacked "faithfulness" to the object, the kind of contextualization that places the work within the frameworks of belief and meaning, and that the prime culprits ironically were the art museums. He says, "They have tended to take greater pride in their 'catches' than in explaining them, making them more artifact graveyards than sanctuaries of knowledge.... My visit to the Manning Hall Gallery made a world of difference, relieving me from an impression of being unimpressed. I was initially attracted by the title, 'Believing Africa,' found the issues to be presented in a well ordered way and the articulation of the contexts with text and image to be spectacular. It removed the boredom attendant on a clinical presentation of African art and artifact that relegates the object to sheer exoticism, enjoyed perhaps, but not understood. Not only are objects, images and text well identified in this exhibit, but each forms part of a scholarly narrative. This makes it possible for both those who visit 'to see' and those who visit 'to learn' to come away with a clear understanding of object and subject matter."

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