

# Turning Heads to Africa

BY SARA LONDON

PARADING DOWN the streets of millennial America, our young toss green hair, hooped to the gills with gold piercings. Pants and skirts husk the hip and praise the navel. Tattoos are in, underwear is on top. Ours may be a tribe in confusion, but ethnologists of the future will surely find us colorful. And while such present-day get-ups are largely costumes sans ceremony, distinctive ethnic and religious signifiers such as saris or *shaytls*, caftans or *kaffiyehs*, increasingly garnish America's multifarious mix.

Not so much, however, that foreign appearances don't maintain the power to excite our sometimes provincial western sensibilities. *Heads and Tales: Adornments from Africa*, which opened to an unprecedented crowd at Harvard's venerable Peabody Museum on December 9, focuses on embellishments of the head in African societies and underscores the continent's substantial contribution to canons of imagery. This exquisite display of sculpture, masks, jewelry, and artifacts relating to the head was collected from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries from a variety of sub-Saharan countries. Guest curator Monni Adams, a Peabody associate in ethnology and art, and a former professor at Harvard, says her decision to focus on adornments of the head was inspired in part by the "body decoration" of the many students she's encountered. She finds fascinating this "pervasive theme of self-image" in society at large and finds particularly resonant the preoccupation with adornment in the cultural history of Africa. Her exhibit is a reminder that the art we make of ourselves, whether innovation or mimicry, composes a language of celebration, pride, devotion, anger, rebellion, and mourning. It is through the art of self-presentation that we communicate the mutable narratives of our diverse histories.

While head imagery is the dominant motif in this exhibition, the objects also tell "tales" about personal preferences, social standing, traditions, and religious belief in tribal communities. From hair styles signaling wealth or official position, to masks used in full-costume ceremonies that convey messages to and from supernatural spirits, to musical instruments and objects employed as enhancements for diviners in their interpretive powers, what emerges is a picture of lives ripened through ritual. To help museum goers visualize the full formal context of the objects in the exhibit, Adams includes a selection of enlarged black-and-white documentary photographs, some of which were made as recently as the late 1980s.

Tucked in a third-floor gallery of a teaching museum characterized by amply packed old-style showcases, this exhibition is notably elegant and contemporary in its presentation. The more common contextual component has been respectfully muted by a masterful design that highlights the art of some of Africa's finest carvers and craftsmen. Sam Tager, exhibit designer and coordinator, and a sculptor in his own right, has created minimalist modular showcases, including an ingenious central cruciform glass case of headdresses and masks in which the objects are mounted with plenty of breathing room and can be observed from all angles. A deep blue paint blankets the gallery walls and transports the viewer to a place of mystery and exoticism while providing a backdrop ideal for raising the lights on the brilliance of the works themselves. Monni Adams is careful not to define this as a "masterpieces" show (it constitutes but a small fraction of the Peabody's substantial African holdings), but pervasive here is a highly developed mastery of skill in carving stylized figures and faces in particular, and in sensibilities keenly attuned to nuances of pattern and design generally.

From a Southern Dan carver of Liberia, an elegantly sculpted female figure standing about two-foot tall sports a high-crested hairdo, indicative of a nonworking woman, with dried palm-leaf strips and border braids in a central raised comb snaking down the scalp to a short bound tail at the neck. Her darkly polished wood form, with pendulous breasts parted to the sides, is partially draped in a cloth skirt, and she stands in a characteristically rigid frontal position. A narrow white band, painted across her face like an eye mask, conceals all but the slits of her mysterious gaze, while her parted lips bare a row of tiny spaced white teeth. The short limbs and long body reflect typical stylistic choices, pervasive in African figurative sculpture regarding body proportions.

Reshaping of the body itself, the head in particular, was a tradition among the Mangbetu people of the Democratic Republic of Congo. A distinctive elongated female head is represented in vivid detail incised on the wooden handle of an ornamental metal dagger from a Mangbetu artisan. The stretched eyelids, raised eyebrows, pierced ears, and linear facial painting are all signs of beauty and status. Elongation of the skull, achieved by binding an infant's head with

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**OPPOSITE:** Salampasu mask, copper strips over wood, Salampasu carver, West Kasai province of the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire).

**THIS PAGE, TOP:** Hood mask with painted face and fibre ruff, Northern Yaka carver.

**BELOW, LEFT:** Manbetu knife, metal knife with head image carved in wood, Manbetu carver, Uele River region, Democratic Republic of Congo.

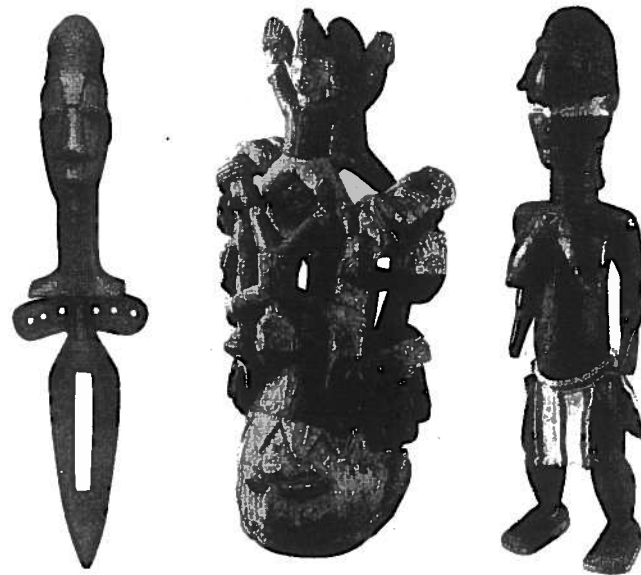
**BELOW, MIDDLE:** Crest mask showing male acrobats and female figure, Yoruba carver, Abeokuta subgroup, southwestern Nigeria.

**BELOW, RIGHT:** Standing Female Figure, Southern Dan carver, Liberia.

All courtesy President & Fellows of Harvard College, Peabody Museum, Harvard University.



PHOTO: HILLE BURGER



## africa

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braided cord, was considered a mark of the elite class of this northeastern DRC group that constituted a royal court in the late eighteenth century. Early in the twentieth century, a halo-shaped hairstyle was added, women and men began wearing hairpins, and men donned small fiber hats. The practice of head elongation continued until the mid-twentieth century.

Not surprisingly, masks are among the most intriguing pieces here, born of cultures immersed in rituals of disguise. They are primarily carved and worn by men who assume the moral authority of past leaders and impersonate both male and female spirits. Female officials of Sierra Leone and Liberia, who also don masks, are an exception. One unusual piece from the DRC has coiled cane balls poised in a warrior-style cluster atop a forehead-heavy face of woven copper strips mounted over wood. A small jagged line of teeth, exposed through growling lips, gives this intimidating visage a fearful expression.

More whimsical in appearance and exemplifying a Nigerian Yoruba carver's remarkable skill with a single block of wood, a complex crest mask over two-feet high depicts nine acrobats performing feats in a contiguous puzzle of bodies and heads—all balanced atop a single carved life-sized head. An additional priestess figure stands guard from behind the tower of daring males. Simpler, more serene esthetics are manifested in a quartet of wood masks by Pende carvers of central Africa. Worn by village entertainers, they exaggerate gender distinctions, such as slitted or hooded eyes and smooth flat foreheads for females, and open, predatory eyes and bulging lumpy foreheads for males. Strikingly modern in their bold reds, blues, browns, blacks, and whites, as well as in their formal linear nuances, they are mild, even tender in expression. One, painted half black and half white as a reminder of human vulnerability and misfortune, represents an illness-death duality. Another sprouts four cobs of hair pointing like horns to the sky. Today, such images can't help but summon the "primitive art"-inspired modernism defined by Picasso.

Contrastingly Byzantine is a face mask by a Bushoong carver of the Kuba group in the DRC embellished with a nearly dizzying design of small black-and-white painted triangles and beads in a pattern emblematic of the leopard's strength, but also signifying beauty and leadership. Shell embroidery above the forehead and a patterned bark cloth draping from the sides underscore the mixed-media skill of the artist portraying a royal female of the Bushoong tradition.

Feathers and spotted fur, red wool, shells, and bells are combined in magnificent patterns for several ceremonial headdresses mounted in three-

dimensional splendor in the gallery's central cruciform display case. From Cameroon and Liberia to the Ivory Coast and the DRC, they are worn with masks in martial and ritual contexts, and several have tail-like extensions variously trimmed with objects such as imported cowries and clusters of scrap metal, a sign of power and wealth, or padlocks "to lock up harm." A headdress from Cameroon sprays plumes of feathers skyward; another, horizontal and conical in shape, mimics the basketry of fishing traps cast horizontally in streams by Liberian women.

European influences add an odd twist to the Colonial-era headwear, sometimes worn by chiefs wishing to flaunt their official appointments. Examples here incorporate the pith helmet of colonial officers or the English top hat worn in Liberia. Men's shirt buttons are sewn in tight rows along the sides of a hat covered from front to back in a band of cowries.

Beyond headgear, items such as carved cups and ladles are also introduced here as transporters of nourishment to the head for both physical and spiritual effects. In addition, Adams selected a few small wood "medicine" figures carved with holes for the insertion of plant, animal, and mineral substances and used to invoke mystical powers. Such medicines are still prepared by the Yoruba priesthood of southwestern Nigeria, we learn, and placed in shallow incisions in the actual scalps of priests and priestesses, who then become trance mediums for their deities.

Fascinating cultural tidbits are in abundance here, and one envies the student who has regular access to such showcases of learning. But the exhibition's audience appeal is wide ranging, and the subject is particularly timely. On view through 2001, it coincides with nationally prominent shows that have also seized upon notions of self-image, among them, *Body Art* at the Natural History Museum in New York, *Masks: Faces of Culture* at the St. Louis Art Museum in Missouri, and *Hair In African Art and Culture*, which will be at the Museum for African Art and Culture in New York City from February 9 to May 28, and then tours nationally for two years. Events such as the popular PBS series and companion book, *Wonders of the African World* (Knopf), hosted and authored by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and *African Ceremonies* (Abrams), the impressive tome of color photographs by Carol Beckwith and Angela Fisher, also point to a thriving interest in African culture. These are encouraging signs that our appetite for appearances extends to distances well beyond ourselves, to those transcendent realms of art that are also crucibles of culture and learning.

SARA LONDON TEACHES ENGLISH AT SMITH COLLEGE AND IS A FREQUENT CONTRIBUTOR TO ART NEW ENGLAND.



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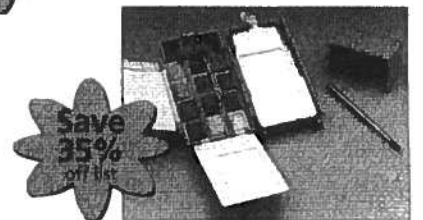
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