WHEN ART WORKS
AFRICAN UTILITARIAN OBJECTS FROM THE FAXON COLLECTION
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ELAINE L. JACOB GALLERY      WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY
The Elaine L. Jacob Gallery features regional, national, and international artworks. The gallery invites exhibiting artists and curators to participate in the installation of work, conduct studio visits with graduate students, lecture, and provide demonstrations, all within the context of the Department of Art and Art History, Wayne State University.
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On behalf of the James Pearson Duffy Department of Art and Art History, I am pleased to welcome this very special exhibition, *When Art Works*, to our Elaine L. Jacob Gallery.

There are many who I would like to thank: first and foremost is Mr. Jack Faxon, the noted local collector who has generously made available to our educational community many rare and precious works from his personal collection. Mr. Faxon’s passion, knowledge, and patronage are remarkable. We greatly appreciate his vision and his willingness to share it with us.

*When Art Works* marks the first time that a curator from the Detroit Institute of Arts has created an exhibition in the Elaine L. Jacob Gallery. I am thrilled that the department has been able to collaborate with the Detroit Institute of Arts in this way. I greatly appreciate the endorsement of DIA Director and CEO Graham Beal. I am also very appreciative of the time, patience, and diligence with which Dr. Nii Quarcoopome, head of the DIA Department of Africa, Oceania, and Indigenous Americas has curated this exhibition. Dr. Quarcoopome has graciously provided us with an outstanding exhibition and one that we would not otherwise have been able to create ourselves.

The exhibition would also not have been possible without the dedicated work of the department’s faculty and staff. Interim Exhibitions Director Tom Pyrzewski spent considerable energy in preparing the exhibition, attending to all of the logistics, and creating an ideal environment for this collaboration to take place. The staff and students working under his capable direction also performed well in their roles.

Our former colleague, Dr. Prita Meier, is credited with the generative idea for this exhibition. While she was unable to plan the exhibition with us, her contributions have been significant and include securing necessary funding for the exhibition.

Finally, I would like to note the hard work of our Woodshop Supervisor Robert Taormina. Mr. Taormina designed and constructed the pedestals and supports for this exhibition. His expertise was key in allowing us to properly display these valuable and historic objects.

I hope that this exhibition will mark the beginning of a deeper and mutually beneficial relationship between the department and the Detroit Institute of Arts. To the many others both at the DIA and at Wayne State University whose efforts made the exhibition possible, thank you!

John J. Richardson
*Professor and Chair*
When Art Works is a gift to WSU’s students, faculty, staff, and galleries, as well as to the Detroit community at large. This unique exhibition serves the mission of the gallery by exposing its audience to historic objects from another time and place. The artworks offer a means by which we can become educated in another culture while recognizing links to our own.

I appreciate the generosity of Jack Faxon for lending his rare collection of utilitarian artworks to the gallery. It has been an honor to work with Mr. Faxon and the exhibition’s curator, Nii Quarcoopome, head of the Detroit Institute of Art’s Department of Africa, Oceania, and Indigenous Americas.

Dr. Quarcoopome’s vision, knowledge, and acumen were apparent at the conception of the exhibition. His talents have provided an optimal environment for each container, cover, implement, and support, enabling each viewer to experience the works of art presented at their best.

This exhibit is a significant contribution to the lineage of noteworthy exhibitions at the Elaine L. Jacob Gallery. I am very pleased to direct the gallery during such an important exhibition as this one, while collaborating with the Detroit Institute of Arts.

Tom Pyrzewski
Interim Exhibitions Director

Creativity is the wellspring of my life. As a child I remember finding stones and rocks along the water’s edge. I imagined them to be miniature mountains in a landscape. Playing with household objects was an integral part of my fantasy world. I was also fascinated with colors, shapes, textures, and forms, which led me to collect stamps for their images and books for their content and bindings. And, as a teenager, I translated my drawings over all the past years into watercolors.

Collecting, however, was now more challenging, as I began to connect with what I was seeing with what I was doing and discovered that the great 20th-century modern masters collected African art. I realized the connection between these artists’ collections and their art and wanted the same experience. Over the past decades, I have continued to find some inspiration from every object I have acquired and especially from those useful everyday pieces that combined function with a unique aesthetic. Though often overlooked as household objects, they were, in my eyes, beautiful works of sculpture infusing the cultural identity of a people with a vision that far surpassed their functionality.

This exhibition is a selection that touches many of the ideas that were part of my earliest memories. Abstract shapes, forms, textures, materials, and function coupled with human and animal parts and a rich patina filled with history makes each piece a wonder to behold. Certainly the curator, Nii Quarcoopome, struggled to
select a representative sample of works from a truly large encyclopedic collection; each category makes the viewer want to see more. I am grateful for his critical support in embracing and exploring so many facets of African creativity in this exhibition.

Collecting does not require traveling. There are many excellent art dealers in this country who sell both publicly and privately fine works of African art. In addition auction houses throughout the country will often have items from Africa, and a good eye helps to make the best choices. What exists here is replicated in London, Paris, and Brussels for those who travel abroad.

The African continent with hundreds of millions of people could have produced enough material to satisfy the human race. The keys to successful collecting are verification of authenticity, quality, and rarity. An informed buyer is the best customer. Fortunately, with a great museum and outstanding universities, all of these resources are available in southeast Michigan.

Many thanks to those who have made this exhibition possible: John Richardson, chair of the art department at Wayne State University; Graham W. J. Beal, director of the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA), whose support was invaluable; Nii O. Quarcoo, curator of African art at the DIA, whose object selection and essay have added a brilliant level of scholarship to his field of study; and finally Tim Thayer and Robert Hensleigh, whose photography made the text come alive. The public mission of our museums and universities is to enlighten, illuminate, and educate, and this exhibition and catalogue have certainly achieved that objective.

Jack Faxon
Collector
The fact that art from African cultures south of the Sahara desert is predominantly functional has long been enshrined in scholarship, and it is widely accepted that Africans created most of what we call art primarily as tools of daily life. Research has shown that few, if any, of the sub-Saharan African cultures have a word that equates “art,” as conceptualized in Western culture; if any African group boasts an approximate term, it would certainly be descriptive and not confer on objects the transcendence that Westerners often associate with art. Generally, indigenous African art is not made to hang on walls or to sit on living room mantles to be admired and to inspire conversation.

Researchers have likened African art to tools that enabled Africans to interact with their physical, social, and spiritual environments. This notion of functionality includes not just practical uses but also a host of symbolic or “transactional” purposes (Rubin and Pearlstone 1989, 43-54). More importantly, indigenous Africans view aesthetics and utility as inextricably linked, which renders the separation between “art” and “non-art” totally inconsequential. Indeed the ability to balance usefulness and beauty in the same object is uniquely shared by Africans and most non-Western cultures. Thus African preference for “useful” art does not preclude an appreciation for “beauty”.

For thousands of years, African artists have experimented with and mastered diverse materials and technologies that have enabled them to produce works of astonishing beauty and technical excellence. The archaeological record is replete with examples, of which everyday objects constitutes the vast majority. Noteworthy within the latter corpus is the incredible hoard of sophisticated bronze cast vessels from the ninth-century Igbo Ukwu, a site in eastern Nigeria. An equally intriguing group of ceramic vessels originating in Mali’s Inland Niger Delta and the Adamawa mountain regions of Nigeria and Cameroon, respectively, underscore the critical art historical potential of Africa’s utilitarian objects (Plates 1 and 2).

**Plate 1**
Vessel
Mande culture
Inland Niger Delta Region, Mali
18th century
brass
22½ x 12 in. (diameter)
The Exhibition

Ever since African art was introduced to the West more than a century ago, African masks and figures have enjoyed lopsided attention, in part because of their often touted contributions to modern art. While African sculpture—that is, three-dimensional, representational works of plastic art—have continued to be prized by museums and collectors, a great many other African art genres, particularly those broadly classified as utilitarian, remain largely uncelebrated. The scholarship has been slow to fully explore and to appreciate this body of material, even though it constitutes a significant part of Africa’s artistic heritage. Everyday useful objects often escape notice of most collectors, who often simply ignore or trivialize them because they do not meet certain undefined western aesthetic criteria. Consequently, purveyors of African art until recently paid little attention to such pieces as they forayed into African villages in search of art objects to sell to galleries and dealers in Western countries.

Still, in the hierarchy of art genres, utilitarian objects often get relegated to the realm of “low” art, which explains why art museums rarely spend large sums of money acquiring them and why they are mostly acquired as part of donations. The exceptions are objects that happen to be uniquely composed or embellished with a distinctive ornament that is either representational or deemed too noticeably captivating to overlook. These pieces are reclassified as “art” and, as such, attract the interest of collectors and museums.

In art exhibitions, too, utilitarian objects have mostly served as fodder to either diversify the content of installations or fill in the blanks in some overarching narrative. But, as William Fagg and John Picton (1970, 7) noted, “Pottery does not rely upon sculptured ornament or painted decoration in order to qualify as art; it relies upon its own counterpoint of form, color, texture, and ornament all directed towards a particular purpose.” In many respects, this statement could apply to all African utilitarian objects, regardless of medium and make.
These selections of utilitarian works from the Faxon African art collection comprise an assortment of forms: vessels, bowls, and cooking utensils; personal items like smoking pipes, staves and walking sticks; textiles and fashion accessories; furniture; musical instruments; weapons; and architectural parts. From the standpoint of purpose, the corpus encompasses quite a range of mundane human activities. Most of such objects were seen or handled so regularly within households, artisans’ workshops, farms, and religious shrines that their African users might have valued and appreciated them more for their specific, intended uses than for how they looked; in essence, their functionality took precedence over their physical attractiveness. Some utilitarian items were communally owned but many, too, belonged to individuals and, as such, were uniquely designed to appeal to their owners’ aesthetic sensibilities and concerns. Personal objects would frequently be less ornamented. By contrast, ceremonial artifacts like ladles and staffs might have been appreciated for their complex abstraction or figurative imagery. Other exceptional attributes of the latter often include distinctive materials that might either communicate the identities of their users or conceal symbolic messages about such things as kinship ties, political authority, and spiritual power. Even those with austere, abstract forms could belie their elevated ideological significance stemming from their past associations with certain historical persons or offices.

**Plate 3**
Box with lid
Kuba culture
Democratic Republic of Congo
20th century
wood, copper wire, and fiber
17 1/2 x 8 1/2 x 10 in.

**Plate 4**
Kwifon Society Doorposts
Bamileke culture (Bandjoun)
Grasslands, Cameroon
20th century
wood, pigment
33 x 3 x 5 in.
Utility of Art

In general, African utilitarian forms can be subdivided into four broad functional categories: first, containers or receptacles, which includes cups, dishes, and assorted vessels used in transporting and storing food, water, raw materials, valuables, cosmetic powders, and ointments (Plate 3); second, supports, such as architectural posts, beams, and lintels, as well as seats, neck rests, and other weight bearers and stabilizers (Plate 4); third, implements, primarily tools that aid the physical projection or extension of the body and enable tasks as diverse as farming, food preparation, warfare, and music (Plate 5); and last, covers like clothing and textiles, blankets, hats and headgear, doors, umbrellas, and blankets (Plate 6). Besides its daily or occasional use, a utilitarian object could have also fulfilled other, loftier purposes.

Plate 5
Pestle
Ehrie
Ivory Coast
20th century
wood, paint
H. 35 in.

Plate 6
Hat (Butofo)
Ekonda culture
Democratic Republic of Congo
20th century
natural fiber, brass
21 x 10 x 10 in.
Design as Language

In addition to their practical uses, most of the objects in this exhibition were created to embody shared as well as highly personal messages. Non-literate cultures employ art and design to transmit messages about self and society in innovative ways. In this regard African artists have long perfected the commingling of functions—the utilitarian and symbolic—so that focusing on one without considering the other runs the risk of totally misreading the full intent behind the creative process. To achieve this dual nature, many African cultures have relied on a body of shared “ancestral” knowledge to govern composition and design of objects. This knowledge has been passed down many generations and adherence to it might determine not only how a piece looks—that is, its basic lines, shapes, colors, and aspects of its exterior decoration—but also how weight is distributed and surfaces treated to enhance the object’s practical function. The physical appeal of a finished work within a particular culture thus depended on the consistency with which these long-held formal principles were applied and the extent to which they met a society’s expectations. This ingrained sensitivity to convention indicates that the indigenous artist remained in perpetual negotiation with societal norms to stay viable. Keenly aware that he or she was bound by these strictures, the indigenous artist strove to adhere to familiar forms, using only tried and tested techniques. For, as Fagg (1970, 12) notes perceptively, the artwork constitutes a symbolic language that is understood mostly within the group, which is “a universe to itself.” Channeling “ancestral authority” by replicating accepted forms is what guarantees that the artist’s works will elicit the desired public reception.

But to think that, even in a closely knit society, everyone would understand this language of design would be overly presumptuous. Like cultures the world over, African communities are complexly organized structures comprising countless subdivisions and strata with types and levels of shared and restricted knowledge. Thus, attributing too much to shared knowledge would represent gross negligence on the part of the

Plate 7 (above)
Stool
Kwere culture
Tanzania
20th century
wood
15½ x 16¼ x 15¼ in.

Plate 8 (right)
Pot
Mande culture
Inland Niger Delta Region, Mali
circa A.D. 1000
ceramic
H. 10½ in.
Moreover, African artists do not slavishly bow to tradition, as inventiveness is never discouraged. Innovation remains a core ingredient in every African creative endeavor and radical departures from established modes are common as are experimentations with new techniques. African artists’ extraordinary imagination is always alive and well, which means that variations in styles and methods of manufacture range from the very subtle to the blatantly provocative, depending on the kind of object in question and who uses it.

Thus we cannot underestimate the power of individualism in the creative process, for always at play are both the artist’s own innate capabilities and personal mannerisms, on the one hand, and the prospective patron’s preferences, on the other. As such, to understand the creativity in a utilitarian work, the overriding questions must include: What drove an artist’s creativity? How did he or she achieve the desired level of excellence or perfection? What conventional elements were minimized or sacrificed to balance practicality and presentation? And what was emphasized in the creation of each form, as an artist sought to consciously distinguish him- or herself from others? Considering that indigenous African artists, art styles, and, by extension, manufacturing technologies, do move across borders, we must be open to multiple influences in creativity.

Unlike works that are created for strictly representational purposes (that is, sculpture), the utilitarian object requires the artist to pay attention to practicality and convenience in the creative process. The latter brings to the fore the issues of rationale behind the choices of medium, shape and overall design (Plate 7). Forms may range from the purposely crude and austere, as in the approximately 1,000-year-old Inland Niger Delta clay pot (Plate 8), to delicate and exquisitely composed forms like the Tutsi basket and the Zulu pipe (Plates 9 and 10). Each choice

Plate 9 (above)
Basket
Tutsi culture
Rwanda and Burundi
20th century
natural fiber, pigment
14 x 8 x 8 in.

Plate 10 (right)
Smoking Pipe
Zulu culture
South Africa
9th century
ceramic, wood, ivory, metal, fabric
14½ x 2 in.
would reflect conscious selection and manipulation of medium, probably in line with established practice. For instance, among Shai potters of southern Ghana, clay is often tempered with ground quartzite to achieve a gritty surface texture, which makes the pot’s exterior less slippery and improves handling. This might explain, in part, why Northern Igbo potters probably employ ridge-like exterior decoration on their vessels (Plate 11). Some types of temper are believed to enhance porosity of the walls of a ceramic vessel, significantly cooling the interior to improve the taste of water stored in it. Similarly, the tapered neck of a Tutsi wood-carved flask makes it easy for a simple decorative beaded lid to shield its milk from flies, while its widened base keeps its contents from spilling when transported (Plate 12).

But, process or practicality aside, there is often more to some utilitarian objects than meets the eye. For, other than design, there could be something equally fundamental driving Africans’ emotional or psychological reactions to certain forms. It is a well known fact that Africans
generally believe that every natural material—wood, clay, ivory, metals, animal horns, skins, and bones—has spiritual properties. This idea ultimately informs and governs how and why a specific medium may be selected for use in creating a work of art; it may also dictate who handles it, especially in religious and political contexts. Thus the Bamana hunter’s shirt invested with leather-encased amulets and animal parts (Plate 13) or Cameroonian tunics composed entirely of porcupine quills (Plate 14) and human hair (Plate 15), respectively, would each be appreciated more for the inherent magical potentials of its materials than for its practical use as ceremonial clothes. Similarly, wood from the iroko tree (*Chlorophora excelsa*), which is respected for its innate powerful properties, is considered the preferred medium for most ritual sculptures among many West African cultures. But certain precious materials, such as ivory and metals, also often carry other symbolic meanings in addition to their intrinsic worth.

**Plate 13**

*Hunter’s Tunic*

*Bamana culture*

*Mali*

*20th century*

*woven cotton fabric, leather, animal skin and horns, mirrors, pigments*

*H. 41 in.*
Plate 14 (above)
Ceremonial Tunic (ngoum)
Mankon culture
Western Grassland, Cameroon
20th century
woven fiber, porcupine quills, ndop cloth
H. 39 in.

Plate 15 (right)
Ceremonial Tunic (ngoum)
Kom culture
Western Grassland, Cameroon
20th century
woven raffia fiber, human hair
H. 48 in.
Plate 16

Ritual Vessel
Zande culture
Democratic Republic of Congo
20th century
ceramic
H. 10½ x W. 12 in. (base)
While consistency in the morphology of objects might further reinforce the criticality of ancestral knowledge, it could also underscore the extent to which tradition, particularly in ritual practice and symbolism, influences how an object ultimately looks. For example, a Zande vessel that sports a single spout on a body composed of six interconnected chambers (Plate 16) probably served a largely figurative purpose, as it is impractical to separate its contents. Perhaps it was meant to draw attention to how many people or groups participate in its use, rather than how many different drinks it contained. Similarly, implements, supports, and covers may have abstract shapes that might highlight geometry (lines, volumes) or even focus on wood density, weight, grain, and color, as in the case of Zulu clubs (Plate 17). In the case of architectural posts, such as the pair that once decorated the entrance to a Bamileke home (Plate 4), monumentality and imagery are as important as weight-bearing capabilities.
Figural Depiction and Figural Ornament

The penchant for figural depiction in the design and ornamentation of utilitarian objects is not unique to Africans. It is universal, though perhaps more deep-rooted in sub-Saharan cultures than Western ones. In African art in particular, adding figural embellishments to everyday objects or rendering them in animal and human shapes does more than just expand the visual vocabulary, as they add whole new meanings and significance (Plates 18 and 19). For the preponderance of sub-Saharan cultures that lack conventional writing systems, figural depiction could even be an effective vehicle by which to inscribe and communicate symbolic messages—to record history, express temporal power, project identity, superior status and authority, or to underscore personal or family wealth. Figural elements could therefore enrich the social purpose of art.

Figures in African utilitarian art appear in two main forms: figural depiction and figural ornament. For depiction, an object is rendered wholly or in part in the shape of a human (anthropomorphism) or an animal (zoomorphism) (Plates 20 and 21). In vessels and other containers, the human or animal body doubles as a symbolic receptacle or conduit. Certain metaphorical meanings of some utilitarian objects derive directly from their shapes. For example, the Yoruba people dedicate to their river goddess, Eyinle, a distinctive clay vessel that is often surmounted by a highly decorated lid, festooned
Plate 20 (left)
Ceremonial Pot
Zande culture
Democratic Republic of Congo
19th century
ceramic
16 3/4 x 14 x 17 in.

Plate 21 (above)
Zoomorphic Doorlock
Bamana culture
Mali
20th century
wood
42 1/2 x 22 1/2 x 4 in.
with the bust of a priestess hugging in front of her a receptacle to hold daily offerings of kola nuts (Plate 22); the larger bowl, which comprises the vessel’s body, serves to house sacred river pebbles said to contain the life force of the deity (Drewal, et al., 1989, 229–230). Thus, in both real and symbolic terms, the vessel simultaneously serves as an abode and offering to the spirit of Eyinle. Similarly, the artist of the Yoruba caryatid bowl employs sophisticated imagery as a metaphor to communicate a deity’s powers (Plate 23). Previously used to furnish a shrine to Shango, god of thunder, it shows a female devotee in a kneeling pose, the ultimate expression of supplication. However, the bowl she carries and the human figures that decorate it speak to the burden of responsibilities borne by worshipers of this extremely capricious but benevolent deity. Still, certain vessels blur the usual distinction between utilitarian and representational sculpture. While such works had specific practical uses, they were also intended as
portraits in their own right. The anthropomorphic pot (wiiso) of the Yungur of northeastern Nigeria (Plate 24) is both a portrait of a deceased male leader and a receptacle for his soul. Topped by a human head in the likeness of the ancestor, the vessel’s body effectively becomes an abode for the spirit. Thus, when it stands in a shrine, it commands respect and attracts periodic sacrifices from the deceased’s relatives (Berns 1990, 50–60, 102).

Ornament is an embellishment to an object that incorporates only an aspect of the human or animal form (head, limbs, torso, foot, horns) in its composition. Anatomical parts occur as accent or means to attract and focus attention, as for example: the decorative lug on a pot’s lid; the handle of a sword, fly whisk, or knife; the finial of a staff or walking stick; or an ornament on a musical instrument. Two fine pieces exemplify this category: first, a hand piano decorated with a seated human figure (Plate 25), and second, a Senufo ladle with an anthropomorphic handle (Plate 26). In either case, is the human figure a portrait of a person or is it to be interpreted as that of a generalized ancestor bearing witness to the use of the implement?

By far, the human head remains the most pervasive decorative element, which isn’t surprising, given the head’s recurrent role in African ritual symbolism and philosophy. Its importance as a locus of human intelligence and the seat of one’s judgment probably also underlines its dominance in the rendering of this
Plate 26 (far left)
Ladel with Figurative Handle
Senufo culture
Ivory Coast
19th century
wood
25 x 6 x 6 in.

Plate 27 (left)
Drinking Vessel
Mafa culture
Cameroon
20th century
ceramic
6 1/2 x 7 x 8 1/4 in.

Plate 28 (right)
Pipe Bowl
Bamun or Kom culture
Cameroon
19th century
ceramic
18 x 9 x 16 in.

Plate 29 (far right)
Ceremonial Drum
Bamun culture
Cameroon
20th century
wood, animal hide
H. 40 x diam, top 18 in.
Plate 26 (far left)

Ladel with Figurative Handle

Senufo culture

Ivory Coast

19th century

wood

25 x 6 x 6 in.
Chamba, Mambila, or Mafa ritual mug rendered as a human head (Plate 27). Could the human mouth, which doubles as the mug’s rim, have served to symbolically mimic speech, prayer, incantations, or some other pronouncement when one drinks from this vessel during ceremonies? Similarly, could the powerful head imagery in the Bamun smoking pipe (Plate 28) have been intended as a portrait of an actual historical figure and, if so, does the act of tobacco smoking with such pipes become a means to figuratively inhale the spirit of the depicted? Even so, the consistency with which similar faces appear on a ceremonial drum suggests that they constitute a part of Bamun visual vocabulary for transmitting particular messages about the royal pedigree (Plate 29).

Utilitarian objects get more interesting when they are rendered fully anthropomorphic or zoomorphic: for example, the Kwere pipe bowl depicting a headless seated figure (Plate 30); the fine Senufo stool (Plate 31);
and the Longara drum (Plate 32). The drum, in particular, exemplifies another intriguing group of implements that, for the lack of a better term, can be categorized as “sounding forms”—objects that generate sound as well as mimic it. Like the Senufo stool, the choice of a particular animal species in such a work probably carries a localized meaning.

Architectural posts and lintels, stools and some neck rests, chairs and thrones may have been intended for more than just bearing or supporting weight. In some African cultures, ornamental seats can assume enormous symbolic significance as an axis mundi, a visual reference to the cosmos, in addition to obvious propagandistic implications. Thus, caryatid human and animal figures incorporated into the compositions of neck
rests could have served more than decorative functions. Given the aforementioned significance attached to the human head, one would expect its spiritual and physical protection to be all the more critical to owners of such neck rests. The human heads that rest on them must enjoy the perpetual vigilance of a totemic animal, an ancestor, or a protective spirit (Plate 33).

Still, some class of “utilitarian” objects may be viewed more as symbols or may have lost their utility following their elevation to symbols. The Topoke or Turumbu knife, employed as currency, seems to have totally shed its practicality as a cutting device so its artist instinctively omitted the “useless” handle (Plate 34). It appears the more ceremonial or elevated the ownership (from individual to collective), the lesser the practical uses of an object, as demonstrated by the Akan ceremonial sword (Plate 35).

In spite of their primary uses, African utilitarian objects were not devoid of aesthetic appeal; indeed the preponderance of examples show that formal excellence and decoration weighed equally on the minds of their creators and users. From both technical and symbolic standpoints, each of the works in this exhibition represents an achievement of artistry, one that blends not just cultural identity but also its maker’s beliefs, sense of tradition, personal style, and perhaps preferences of the owner(s).
What passes as “beautiful” in these useful objects certainly differs from culture to culture. For some, it is the mastery of working specific media to achieve excellence in forms; for others, it is the richness and complexity of surface decoration or the symbolic message inscribed in the piece that gives it appeal. Burnishing and coloring the exterior might also enhance a pot’s aesthetic appeal, just as applying powders or dyes, to wooden stools, staffs, and neck rests can augment their physical attractiveness or make them more appropriate for a specific ritual use. Other cultures may even conceptualize or treat the object as an approximation of the human body and, as such, embossed dots or incised designs might approximate bodily scars, which could carry particular social, religious, or political meanings and significance. In the same vein, color, texture, figurative, and related embellishments often provide intriguing clues about who used the objects, when, why, and in what contexts. Clearly, the Western tendency to elevate such works and give them an aura of “art” is artificial and invented. That being the case, how differently were the objects in this exhibition viewed in their respective cultures of origin?

While adherence to established practices and forms remained the bedrock of artistic practice in many cultures, the seminal influence of tradition does not mean that African artistic practice was static; indeed, nothing could be farther from the truth. Individual innovation remained, and still remains, the lifeblood of African creativity. Thus, while masterfully reproducing familiar forms, the artist made room for personal statements and flair. Even for the most conservative of social contexts—namely leadership and ritual—completely new forms have been invented in response to external stimuli, as in the case of an early twentieth-century Senufo status chair (Plate 36). Evidence of this mixing of the antique and modern in the utilitarian arts has been in style ever since Africans began interacting with other world cultures—particularly Islamic North Africa and Western countries—centuries ago. Even more so, contemporary globalized Africa is seeing the emergence of hybrid genres, which are fast becoming an integral part of recent aesthetic developments, and the demise of entire traditions is becoming all too common.

**Why Context Matters**

When it comes to understanding the contexts of African art objects, collecting practices have not helped much, as most pieces have largely been expropriated or traded without proper research and documentation. Given scholars’ obsession with sculpture, textiles, and other so-called high art, empirical information about practical

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**Plate 35**

*Syenite, afram*  
Akan culture  
Ghana  
20th century  
wood, iron  
4 x 33 x 6 in.
pieces, such as those in this exhibition, is, at best, anecdotal or fragmentary. As such, we are left to speculate how some objects were handled, viewed, and under what circumstances they were employed. More importantly, in the preponderance of cases, we lack the object’s precise contextual associations, particularly its spatial relationship to, and symbolic interactions with, other objects in the physical space it occupied, not to mention its degree of public exposure. Some pieces might never have been displayed in public, either because they were highly personal possessions or were originally confined to ritual spaces that were only accessible to a few people.

There is indeed so much we don’t know about each piece. What inspired the form? Was it belief, imagination, or individual ingenuity? Precisely how was it used, when, by whom, and why? Consequently, in an exhibition like this, we wade into uncharted territory, which limits us to assumptions based on our familiarity with objects in our own culture. It challenges the whole concept of the modern museum and the related interest in preservation,
conservation, and display of such objects for aesthetic appreciation. Given the myriad symbolic associations of some utilitarian objects, we cannot decontextualize them by simply isolating them in display cases and shining light on them if we seek to gain full appreciation of them.

The multiple uses to which some of these objects are put seem to parallel how their symbolism intersects with those of other artistic modes found at various levels and contexts of society. The interrelated nature of these different forms, where the same ideas are communicated in multiple objects, derives from core philosophies that underpin not just visual representation but also other expressive modes, such as music, figurative speech, and poetry. Viewed this way, utilitarian objects may help to channel ideas and psychic energies, express emotions, articulate histories, reflect and foster relationships on multiple levels (between and among people, leaders and subjects, humans and spirits), and project personal and communal aspirations the same way figurative sculpture does.

Moreover, because African art is multisensory, often incorporating sound, experiencing the work goes beyond its tangible form. The noises generated by objects—drums, whistles, rattles, and other instruments—add to the aura that surrounds them. Most of the objects under review were perhaps never intended to elicit the kind of emotional responses we usually associate with iconic sculptures. Thus what we see in the objects may not be what their African users saw in them, which means that our emotional reactions to the works may be completely at odds with those of the original owners. This situation definitely contributes to the dilemma. As a result of extensive and continuous handling and use of certain utilitarian objects, a rich and distinctive patina or aroma might develop and become an integral part of the piece’s composition. Accumulated scent and patina, like wear and tear, could signal a connection to past generations, thus making the object the embodiment of the accumulated essence of previous users. Such an attribute could thus give the object an aura or “a spiritual presence” of sorts in a ritual setting. Symbolic significance, therefore, may be acquired from use and does not always originate in the creative process.

Given their varied contexts of use and meanings, utilitarian objects have the potential to yield insights into class, religious beliefs, and social and economic life in African societies, if properly understood. We not only underestimate them at our peril, but also may be seriously misguided to discount them on the basis of how they look. Clearly, in some cultures, they may constitute all there is to see and to ignore them is to dismiss whole visual traditions.

**Dynamism of African Art**

African artists neither lived in a “cultural bubble” nor worked in total isolation; instead, they constantly interacted with the outside world, sometimes in unique ways. In particular, African engagements with the West, during and following the era of European colonization of the continent from 1875 through 1960, resulted in significant shifts in perception, artistic techniques, and use of objects. In recent decades, many indigenous works have been replaced with imported “Western” varieties that reflect newly adopted lifestyles and changes in philosophical outlook. Some new objects are clearly inspired by imported western forms. Others might have been created to cater to tastes of Western collectors and tourists and westernized Africans might be viewed as anomalies in traditional ritual performances. Even when such items are accepted, they defy categorization. Because their production is somewhat market driven, these newly invented forms naturally reflect the aesthetic preferences of their foreign patrons, which raise questions...
about their acceptability and relevance within their parent African cultures. Moreover, imported “Western” utilitarian objects commonly coexist with, rather than replace, preexisting indigenous types, and they may even be held up as superior to their traditional counterparts in fulfilling certain practical functions. Still, such commercial, mass-produced foreign genres may not always carry the same level of cultural resonance in African contexts. Manifestations of this kind are as much an indication of the versatility and inventiveness of African cultures as they are a reflection of the dynamism of tradition and should be welcome.

Plate 37 (left)
Bowl
Yoruba culture
Nigeria
20th century
wood, pigment
21 x 8 x 12 in.

Plate 38 (upper left)
Cosmetic Box
Kuba culture
Democratic Republic of Congo
20th century
wood, bone, fiber
4¾ x 13¾ x 9½ in.

Plate 39 (far lower left)
Lidded Vessel
Senufo culture
Ivory Coast
20th century
wood
12 x 13 x 6 in.
Plate 40 (far upper left)
Ceremonial Horn
Chokwe culture
Democratic Republic of Congo
20th century
wood
13 x 6 x 6 in.

Plate 41 (far bottom left)
Cosmetic Container
Tuareg culture
Niger or Mauritania
20th century
silver, copper
3 x 8 x 5 in.

Plate 42 (middle upper left)
Vessel
Bamileke or Tikar culture
Cameroon
20th century
ceramic
12 x 13 x 13 in.

Plate 43 (upper left)
Reliquary box
Ambete culture
Democratic Republic of Congo
19th century
wood, cowry shells
H. 18 in.
Supports

Plate 44

Stool

Nupe culture

Nigeria

20th century

wood

14 x 24 x 16½ in.
Plate 45 (far upper left)

Stool
Kuba culture
Democratic Republic of Congo
20th century
wood, brass
11 ¾ x 11 ¾ x 10 ¼ in.

Plate 46 (upper left)

Neck rest
Senufo culture
Ivory Coast
19th century
iron
8 ½ x 7 ½ x 16 ½ in.

Plate 47 (bottom)

Head Rest
Zulu or Swazi culture
South Africa
19th century
wood
7 x 27 x 3 in.


**Plate 48** (far left)

*Comb with Figure*

*Songye culture*

Democratic Republic of Congo

20th century

wood

11 x 4 x 4 in.

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**Plate 49** (upper middle)

*Divination Board (Opon Ifa)*

*Yoruba culture*

Nigeria

20th century

wood

12 x 15 x 3 in.

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**Plate 50** (lower middle)

*Ceremonial Knife*

*Bamileke or Tikar culture*

Cameroon

20th century

metal, natural fiber, leather

22 x 15 x 2 in.

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**Plate 51** (left)

*Spoon in Form of Standing Female*

*Kwere culture*

Tanzania

20th century

wood

62 x 3 x 3 in.
Plate 52 (upper right)
Blanket
Fulani culture
Mali
20th century
cotton, pigments
51½ x 76 in.

Plate 53 (lower right)
Woman’s Ceremonial cloth
Kuba culture
Democratic Republic of Congo
20th century
raffia, pigment
170 x 41 in.

Plate 54 (far right)
Door
Senufo culture
Ivory Coast
20th century
wood
51 x 28 x 6 in.


