

Many African food related objects are embellished with abstract or figurative designs or carvings. Usually the ornamentation has significance beyond the decorative that could range from the powerful evocation of prayer to information on the social prestige of the owner. This large water gourd is incised with the figures of four animals: an elephant, rhinoceros, water buffalo, and a fourth figure thought to be an antelope. Intricate linear designs decorate the remaining area.



"Large Gourd with Exterior Carving"
Kikuyu People, Kenya



Selections from the
Joan and Gordon Tobias Collection

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POWER SCULPTURES

Sculpture is often used in the communal ceremonies performed at sowing time, to beg the blessing of the spirits, and at harvest, to give thanks. These festivals are meant to increase the food supply and also celebrate the human cycle of fertility. The antelope sculpture is worn as a headdress, accompanied by a full body fiber costume representing water. It is worn at harvest ceremonies and is the fifth of six graduated initiation rites associated with food production.

This antelope headdress with the sun-like form on its back represents the male; it is paired with a female form representing the earth. The female headdress carries on its back a carved fawn representing human beings. The entire ritual represents a union of sun, earth, and water; of male and female, and the cooperation necessary to produce a good harvest.



"Antelope Headdress (Chi Wani)"
Bambara People, Mali

Dancers performing during
agricultural cycle



BASKETS

This view represents only a small portion of the University's African basket collection. Note that the three baskets on the wall to the left are crafted in natural color and trimmed with brown geometric designs. The square intertwined pattern is found primarily in Zimbabwe baskets.

The Wedding Basket (front left center) is from the Zulu People of South Africa. Young girls begin learning how to weave by weaving small simple baskets. As their skills grow, their baskets become larger and more complex. The Wedding Basket symbolizes the coming of age of the weaver.

Installation View of South Gallery



INTRODUCTION

The visual arts and artifacts of Africa are wide-ranging and touch every aspect of daily life. This brochure is designed to be a brief introduction to the African section of the Joan and Gordon Tablos Collection, a collection of some 700 objects amassed over a thirty year period. The Tablozes were drawn to collecting cultural objects for their aesthetic value as well as their ethnographic value. Here we have selected objects in five categories generally representative of the University's holdings. It is hoped that this sampling will inspire visitors to the University's African Study Center to seek further understanding of the visual traditions of this vast and varied continent and a deeper appreciation for the complexities of African cultures.

Nancy Elneinshofar
Gallery Director

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Installation View of South Gallery



ANCESTRAL SCULPTURES

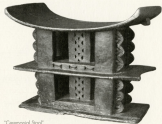
Ancestral sculptures honor the deceased and bring health and good luck to the living. Reliquary guardian figures such as this one, were placed on baskets containing the skulls and bones of ancestors to guard them from evil forces that might weaken the power of the relic. The power of the relic is directly related to the power of that person in life and benefits the clan by providing success in hunting, fertility, and general prosperity.



"Reliquary Guardian Figure"
Koto People, Gabon

SYMBOLS OF LEADERSHIP

The works of art associated with political and spiritual leadership, such as a ceremonial sword, a crown, or a royal belt, represent the power and authority of that leadership. The ceremonial stool pictured here symbolizes the unity of the state and the authority of the Chief. It is a pure symbol, not used for sitting, but placed on a cushion to the right of the Chief when he holds court. If the Chief rules well, the official stool will be enshrined with other venerable relics of the ancestor cult.



"Ceremonial Stool"
Akan People, Ghana



Chief seated with stool
on cushion