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Gallery: Yoruba Masterpieces

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GALLERY

Yoruba Masterpieces

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An eye-opening exhibition depicting nine centuries of the Yoruba peoples' gift to the art world is on view until August 26 at the National Museum of African Art, in Washington, D.C.

"Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought" clarifies certain misconceptions about the origins of three-dimensional art. As this unique exhibition shows, the Yoruba of Nigeria and the Republic of Benin indeed can share the credit with other ancient cultures in originating this form.

"The Yoruba-speaking peoples of Nigeria and the Popular Republic of Benin, together with their countless descendants in other parts of Africa and the Americas, have made remarkable contributions to world civilization," write Henry John Drewal, John Pemberton III, and Rowland Abiodun in a 256-page, richly illustrated catalog. The bulk of the text was written by Drewal and Pemberton, the exhibition's guest curators, with Abiodun contributing a substantial essay and collaborating in another. Drewal is professor of art history at Cleveland State University, and Pemberton, professor of religion at Amherst College, where Abiodun is professor of art history.

In a concluding essay, the three write: "Our study of nine centuries of Yoruba art and thought have been shaped by four considerations. We have sought to trace the history of Yoruba art, revealing its antiquity, its rich diversity in media and style, and its continuity over time, thereby challenging the





Divination Cup
Owo group, Yoruba peoples, Nigeria,
17th–18th century
Ivory
Photo courtesy of Merton D. Simpson Gallery



popular misconception of African art as ahistorical. We have attempted to illustrate the plurality of 'centers' that at various times and in diverse ways significantly shaped the course of Yoruba cultural development, thereby calling into question the notion that Yoruba culture is a single, monolithic whole, or one that is understood primarily in terms of a particular center, such as Ife or Oyo.'

The 104 objects on view focus on six major themes: Antiquity, Ancestors and Mothers, Chiefs and Elders, Warriors and Kings, Gods and Spirits, and Artists. Of these, 17 objects are being exhibited in the United States for the first time, through the auspices of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments of Nigeria. The rest come from museums in Ife and Lagos, as well as from public and private collections in Africa, Europe and the United States. The artistic work covers a range of media, including bronze, ivory, terra cotta, wood, stone and cloth. The work represents artistically complex regional styles from the 11th to the 20th centuries.

The Center for African Art in New York organized the exhibition, with the support of the National Endowment for the Humanities, National Endowment for the Arts, New York State Council on the Arts and the Anne S. Richardson Fund. The catalog, which sells for \$38 (paper) and \$65 (cloth), was published by Harry N. Abrams, Inc. For information, call (202) 357-4870. □

—Abdulkadir N. Said

Upper half of a figure
Yoruba peoples
Igbo' Laja site, Owo, Nigeria
15th century
Terra-cotta
Photo by Jerry L. Thompson

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oshe Shango (staff with female figure and child) from the Yoruba peoples, Nigeria
Wood, pigment, glass beads
Photo by Jeffrey Ploskonka





Head of a King
Yoruba peoples, Ile-Ife, Nigeria,
11th–12th century
Cast brass
Photo by Jerry L. Thompson

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Bell
Yoruba peoples, Ijebu group, Nigeria
18th–19th century
Cast brass
Photo courtesy of the National Museum
of African Art



Equestrian figure
Artist: Maku (died 1927)
Oyo group, Erin, Nigeria,
19th–20th century
Wood, indigo dye, glass beads
Photo courtesy of the National Museum
of African Art



Staff with birds
Southern Yoruba peoples, Nigeria,
19th–20th century
Forged iron, ritual material
Photo by Jerry L. Thompson

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