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## African Tribal Art

La Salle University Art Museum

Brother Daniel Burke FSC

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# AFRICAN TRIBAL ART

*From the Bequest  
of Margaret Webster Plass*

La Salle University Art Museum

February 1 - May 3, 1991

Margaret Webster Plass, an honorary alumna of La Salle, was a *grande dame* of Philadelphia society during the 1960's and '70's, a short, handsome, and lively woman who was a witty conversationalist and a gracious hostess to the varied guests she entertained or the students who visited her. She was also a world-traveler, a serious collector of, and author of several books about, African art. When she died in 1989 at the age of ninety-four, she left her remaining works of African art to La Salle University and to Bryn Mawr College, with additional legacies to strengthen the academic programs of both institutions. It is these gifts of art which are featured now in the Print and Drawing Room of the La Salle Museum.

Mrs. Plass's connection with La Salle goes back to the 1960's when she lectured several times here on African Art and had classes visit her collection periodically thereafter. A graduate of Bryn Mawr in 1917, she served in the Navy Reserve during World War I, and then married Webster Plass, an electrical engineer, recently graduated from the University of Pennsylvania. In the years that followed, they travelled extensively and lived in the Far East and Africa. It was while they were living in Zaire (the former Belgium Congo) that they became interested in African art and became avid collectors. Some years after Mr. Plass's death in 1952, she donated their major collection to the British Museum (for which she was later awarded the Order of the British Empire in gratitude); there were also gifts of important works to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of the University of Pennsylvania.

Together with these institutions, we are deeply indebted to Margo Plass for her generosity, for the learning she shared with us, and for her concern for the multi-cultural education of our students.

Bro. Daniel Burke  
Director

While most of us may be familiar with the symbolic and spiritually directed images of Early Christian and Medieval art, we may need to be reminded that African tribal art was dominated by a similar mode of expression since before the time of Christ. Because tribal art is often labeled "primitive" we sometimes misinterpret its sculpture as crude and naive, rather than as simply traditional. Research over the past several decades has shown that African tribal sculptors were skilled and trained craftsmen, producing an art which is highly sophisticated and working in a style which represents a delicate aesthetic choice evolved over thousands of years.

From the Renaissance until the end of the nineteenth century, visual art of the West was essentially perceptual and objective, based for the most part on what the artist saw in the natural world around him and then accurately, realistically depicted. On the other hand, tribal art throughout the ages, whether from Africa, South and North America, or the South Pacific, has been conceptual and subjective, based on what the artist feels and thinks--his fears, desires, ideas and beliefs. More specifically, as most African tribes have no written language, their intuitive art along with their oral tradition was the chief means through which they expressed and supported, from generation to generation, the spiritual values needed to sustain their communities. Their art is, thus,

essentially functional--the decorative or "art for art's sake" purpose emphasized in Western art is of secondary importance.

Much of traditional African sculpture which makes up this exhibition was produced in Sub-Saharan West and Central Africa (see map), areas dominated by the Negro and Bantu speaking tribes living in agricultural communities. These areas were also surrounded by tropical rain forests, which provided an abundant source of wood for the sculptors. Unfortunately, due to adverse weather conditions and prevalent wood-eating insects, few objects have survived for more than a century. Thus, most of the pieces in this exhibition probably date from the late nineteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century.

Although African tribes shared many beliefs and practices, distinct differences characterize their art. Isolated from other tribes or outside influences, traditional African art, unlike Western art, is not intertribal, certainly not international. Though the artists in this exhibition remain anonymous, the work of individual African carvers is beginning to be discerned as research develops. And, with time, the La Salle Museum hopes to have each piece in the Plass bequest more fully identified.

The ancestor, cult and fetish figures, reliquaries and masks of African sculpture were produced to

ward off evil and to invoke or honor the spirit and power of a particular deity or ancestor. These symbolic objects were used in ritual village ceremonies as the particular need arose and reflected the pantheon of gods belonging to the various cults and societies of each tribe. Other crafted objects with symbolic designs were made as daily accessories: goldweights made of brass, ladles, pottery, musical instruments, stools, and textiles.

African wood masks, which are the major part of the Plasse bequest, are considered by many scholars to be the most varied and intensely expressive form in the African arts. They were worn by trained performers dancing in ritual initiation, political investiture, funeral and seasonal rites. These rites were often concerned with the goal of increasing the fertility and life force of the tribe, its animals or crops. Although believing in one Creator, African tribes practiced "animism" whereby every natural object is endowed with a spiritual force and energy. To invoke these forces, as well as those of various deities and ancestors, African carvers were at liberty to simplify and abstract the animal or human facial features of the mask to heighten its expression. And here it should be recalled the strong influence that tribal art has exerted on Western modern art. Rather than any particular content, it is the expressive potential and unified structure in African sculpture--its

**bold patterns, simplified geometric shapes, vibrant rhythms and subjective colors--which strongly inspired the Post-Impressionists, Fauvists, Expressionists, and especially the Cubists. The Picasso print on exhibition here, also given by Mrs. Plass, suggests this influence.**

**In conclusion, it should be noted that the vitality and full expression of African tribal art can never be completely realized when seen out of its own environment or without adequate knowledge of the religious values and traditions that are the basis for its creation. But the generous bequest of Mrs. Plass to the La Salle Art Museum provides us with an invaluable introduction and permanent window into the mystery, magic and rich complexity of African tribal society. It is a strong beginning and one which we hope will encourage the student to seek further knowledge of our African-American heritage in the years ahead.**

**Caroline Wistar  
Curator**

### *Selected Bibliography*

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3. Rubin, William (Editor), *Primitivism in the 20th Century*, Vol. II (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984)
4. Plass, Margaret, *The African Image* (Toledo, Ohio: Toledo Museum of Art, 1959)
5. Wassing, René S., *African Art: Its Background and Traditions* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1968)



## CHECK LIST

The textiles in the exhibition have been generously lent once again by Dr. Christopher D'Amanda, a fellow African art collector and close friend of Margaret Plass.

Unless otherwise mentioned all of the objects on exhibition are carved in wood and are the bequest of Margaret Webster Plass. Where known, the tribe and the country from which the object comes is listed.

### Print and Drawing Room

#### *Photograph*

Margaret Plass being welcomed in the royal compound by a wife of the chief of the Mashonga tribe.

1. *Spoon*  
Guro, Ivory Coast
2. *Mask*  
Baule, Ivory Coast
3. Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), Spanish  
*Black Pitcher and Death's Head*, 1946  
Lithograph

4. *Mask*  
Dan-Ngere, Ivory Coast

5. *Mask*  
Ogboni ?

6. *Akuaba Fertility doll*  
Ashanti, Ghana  
Worn in the waistband of women and girls to insure fertility and beautiful children

6 A. *Ladle*  
Guro, Ivory Coast ?

7. *Textile fragment*  
Kongo, Angola

8. *Whistle*

9. *Mask*  
Bini, Nigeria

10. *Mask*  
Igbo, Nigeria

11. *Bone Horn*  
Congo, Angola
  
12. *Miniature Passport Masks*  
Dan, Ivory Coast
  
13. *Ladle*  
Guro, Ivory Coast
  
14. *Mask*  
Pende, Zaire
  
- 14 A. *Mask*  
Baule, Ivory Coast ?
  
15. *Mask*  
Yoruba, Nigeria
  
16. *Stool*
  
17. *Female Figure*  
(Modern)

**African Tribal Art in Hall Cases  
Generously Lent by Benjamin D. Bernstein**

18. *Flute*

Senufo, Ivory Coast

19. *Eshu Staff*

Yoruba, Nigeria

Used in the cult of "Eshu", god of spirit or mischief and chance

20. *Eshu Staff*

Yoruba, Nigeria

Used in the cult of the Thundergod, "Shango"

21. *Orisha Staff*

Yoruba, Nigeria

Used in the cult of the thundergod, "Shango"

22. *Caryatid Bowl*

Nigeria ?

This ancestor figure bowl for food and libation offerings perhaps was kept in a household shrine or a village hut.

23. *Akuaba Fertility Doll*

Ashanti, Ghana

24. *Queen Mother Nativity Figure*

Ashanti, Ghana

The artist, Osai Bonsu (d. 1977), carved a number of similar pieces for secular popular music groups as well as many other works for Ashanti kings.

25. *Ancestor Figure*

Baule, Ivory Coast