

**Exhibition:** *The Inner Eye: Vision and Transcendence in African Arts*

**On View:** February 26–July 9, 2017

**Location:** Resnick Pavilion

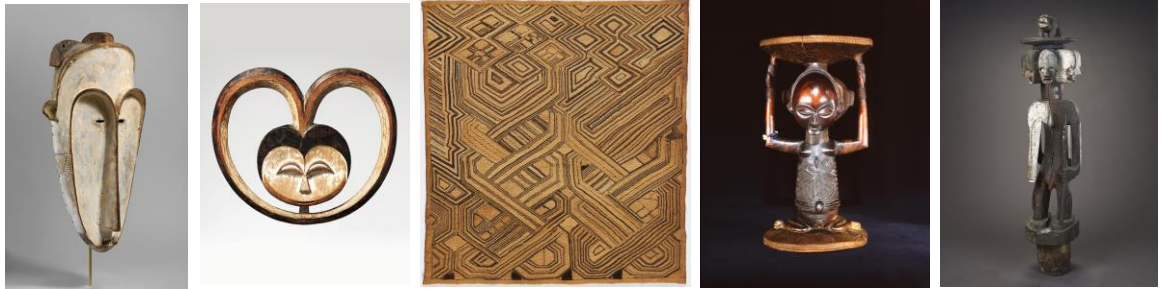


Image captions on page 6

(Los Angeles—January 31, 2017) The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) is pleased to present *The Inner Eye: Vision and Transcendence in African Arts*, an exhibition featuring more than 100 works of sculpture and textiles. Through a series of themes, the exhibition conveys multiple notions of visibility and celebrates artists and performers as agents of insight and transformation. *The Inner Eye* showcases works from diverse cultures in west, central, and east Africa, and made from a range of media including wood, ivory, terracotta, metalwork, and raffia palm fiber. The works, dating from the 13th to 19th centuries, include figures, masks, initiation objects, royal emblems, and reliquary guardians that guided people to spirit realms, the highest levels of esoteric wisdom, and the afterlife.

African perspectives are vital to understanding aesthetic principles of visibility informing particular works of art. Among Yoruba peoples of Nigeria, for example, an artist with enhanced perceptual capabilities is said to possess *ojú inú*, or “the inner eye.” The inner eye sees not what is in plain sight, nor what is apparent to the ordinary human eye, but rather, that which is interior and inherent. Thus, to possess an inner eye is to possess insight as expressed in a variety of ways to enhance perception, increase capacity, and enable transformation. While the inner eye as *ojú inú* is a notion specific to Yoruba culture, the concept of insight resonates across many African aesthetic traditions, which are further explored in the exhibition.

*The Inner Eye* is curated by Dr. Mary (Polly) Nooter Roberts, consulting curator for African art at LACMA and professor of world arts and cultures at UCLA, and underscores LACMA’s commitment to presenting and educating audiences about the arts of Africa. The exhibition also provides an opportunity to display several significant LACMA acquisitions made in

recent years, such as a Bamana Gwan mother and child figure (acquired in 2014) and a selection of Kuba raffia pile embroidered cloths (acquired in 2009)—all from LACMA’s textile collection—offering a frieze of design innovation representing profoundly meaningful patterns of perception.

“The exhibition explores how objects have enabled owners, users, and performers to transcend ordinary existence and bridge visible and invisible worlds,” says Michael Govan, LACMA CEO and Wallis Annenberg Director. “We are excited for viewers to consider how artists enable us to see further, both literally and metaphorically.”

Dr. Polly Nooter Roberts adds, “*The Inner Eye* presents a spectrum of African historical works to contemplate profound ideas about vision, insight, and the unseen. The works and their stories remind us that there is no single way of seeing but that every culture imbues the act of seeing with its own values, attributes, and potentialities.”

### **Exhibition Organization**

The exhibition opens with an introductory section that features a group of masks with different approaches to the gaze, from inward-directed eyes of spiritual reverence to projecting eyes of power and protection to multiple eyes for heightened vigilance and awareness. The section also offers two examples of cultural concepts of vision—the Yoruba inner eye (*ojú-inú*) and a Sufi concept called *batin*, which refers to “the hidden side” of every visible reality. The latter is exemplified by a Mano hornbill mask from Liberia with esoteric mystical writings on the inside of the mask, which enhances its powers and capacities to protect the community and enables the performer to achieve a state of spiritual transcendence. These are but two examples of the many different cultural constructions of seeing presented in the exhibition.

The introductory section is followed by eight sections organized according to themes, each of which addresses an aspect of vision that enables transitions from one life stage to the next, and from one state of being to another.

**Envisioning Origins** explores how artworks render distant pasts as visible realities to be revered and performed in the present. Dogon peoples of Mali, for example, have long preserved a culture of rich philosophical insight, often expressed through a range of sculptural genres. In this section, the ambiguous hermaphrodite with beard and breasts appears to be gazing beyond this world to another place and time, and embodies visions of ancient beginnings. Chi wara headdresses are also presented in this section silhouetted in a dramatic line formation. Danced in male/female pairs by young Bamana men designated as

champion farmers, the performers who wore these works atop their heads enacted the movements of planting, hoeing, and cultivating to dramatize the origins of humanity and infuse agriculture with energy and power. Such works show how the beginnings of humankind can be made present and visible through spiritual connections.

Many African works of art depict mother and child as the most essential relationship of human engagement and intimacy. In the sculptures displayed in **Maternal Gaze**, artists express the potency of this bond. For many communities, there is no greater wealth than a child; birth is considered a gift from the gods. A Gwan figure made by Bamana peoples of Mali possesses exceptional attributes of fertility and force and would have long helped women through the physical challenges of conception and childbirth. An equally regal figure of a Mbembe mother and child of Nigeria, with its wood deeply weathered and worn by generations of outdoor use, assumes a profoundly introspective gaze. Each female figure in this section tells a story about pride and protection through her countenance and gestures.

One of the most potent ways that African arts convey insight is through their use in educational contexts. **Insight as Education** explains how Lega peoples of the Democratic Republic of the Congo define life as stages of learning. An association called Bwami is dedicated to teaching moral codes and ethical standards by which behavior and integrity are judged. However, unlike many initiation rituals concerned with the stage that bridges childhood to adulthood, Bwami never ends. It is a lifelong learning association, and death and afterlife provide ultimate erudition. The older the members become, the higher they ascend through the ranks of Bwami, and the more insight and acuity of vision they acquire and command. Lega sculptures are used in combination with verbal arts, such as proverbs, maxims, and songs, to teach initiates moral precepts and give shape to philosophical concepts. For example, multi-headed figures known in Lega proverbs as Mr. Many Heads allude to the all-seeing powers of those who have ascended the stages of Bwami and whose acquisition of knowledge enables them to remain wise and fair-minded.

Textile design is a dynamic artistic expression that can convey perception through visionary patterns. The striking works in **Patterns of Perception** represent the versatility of Kuba artists; their designs are embedded with secret knowledge and esoteric wisdom. Used for trade and tribute in precolonial times, such panels were objects of transaction and transfer central to securing alliances, creating affiliations, and expanding the influence of the kingdom.

In southeastern Congo, many sculptural works envision interaction with the spirit world. **Beholding Spirit** examines how emblems associated with Luba royalty such as thrones,

scepters, and ceremonial axes are embodiments of spirituality that empower the ruler and the community as a whole. Female images attract spirits to reside within them, and their gazes are not intended for human eyes so much as the otherworldly eyes of the spirits who regulate humanity. In this section, a Luba throne—a connecting point between the living ruler and his ancestors—depicts a woman peering into another realm. Her inward gaze is one of transcendence as she guarantees the continuity of the kingdom and upholds the rulership as the seat of power.

Masks, more than any other art form, are instilled with the inner eye. Masquerades imply the dual identity of the dancer and the spirit or presence that is awakened and made manifest through performance. **Visionary Performance** explores how every person has an inner eye and an outer eye, and in a sense a masquerader is the ultimate embodiment of this concept. Fleeting moments of masquerade, when the sequence of masks presents an orderly world and the beauty of masks is ephemeral, is the essence of many African performance idioms. But just as vital are the specific choreographies that define the dance of masks, and how visuality can be shaped and transformed in the process—for example, when Punu female masks are performed on ten-foot stilts with astounding agility. Similarly, when performers of Teke/Tsayi *kidimu* round masks cartwheeled many times, they were turning upside down to divide upper realms of human activity from a mirrored spiritual plane beneath. The somersaults of the spirits brought visibility to ancestral forces that bore upon human circumstances of the here and now.

**Vigilant Sentinels** demonstrates how among the most important roles of the eyes in the arts of Africa are to “see” and thus promote well-being and protect individuals and communities from misfortune and peril. In many instances, it is critical to call upon the spirit world for assistance in the deflection of malevolence and the maintenance of social harmony. Some of the most monumental sculptures are made for such purposes, and often possess striking eyes complemented by “inner eyes” that apprehend invisible forces at work for and against those devoted to such spiritual presences. In this section, a seven-headed forest spirit sculpture made by an Ijo artist of the Niger Delta protects a community from wilderness dangers. This work and other imposing Kongo and Songye power figures provide warning to any who dare commit an offense by making tangible the belief that nothing escapes these spirits’ panoptic surveillance.

The visual is often a conduit to the invisible, and seeing implies unseen insights. Works associated with death and afterlife offer statements about the power of art to both transport us to the past and propel us toward the future. They demonstrate how the invisible is made visible as contact is instigated and maintained with another world. **Seeing Beyond**

constitutes a kind of shrine to commemorate family members and loved ones who have passed on to become benevolent ancestors. A Baule figure from Côte d'Ivoire presents a man's wife in the other world, while reliquary guardians of Fang and Kota peoples of Gabon once sheltered the souls of the departed. Each speaks to the ways that cultures cherish those who came before, and each creates a pathway between worlds that can transcend loss to restore hope and resilience.

### **Programming**

Exhibition Lecture: The Outsider (or Uninitiated) Usually Sees Through the Nose

Sunday, February 26, 2017 | 2 pm

Bing Theater | Free and open to the public

In conjunction with the exhibition, Rowland O. Abiodun, John C. Newton Professor of Art and the History of Art and Black Studies at Amherst College, speaks on the inner eye (*ojú-inú*), which refers to insight, a special kind of understanding of a person, thing, or situation, not usually derived from an obvious source. It is the intellect with which one perceives the individualized form, color, substance, outline, rhythm, and harmony of a subject. This sensibility is extremely important if the artist is to capture accurately the essential identity, character, and function of his subject.

**Credit:** *The Inner Eye: Vision and Transcendence in African Arts* was organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

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### **About LACMA**

Since its inception in 1965, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) has been devoted to collecting works of art that span both history and geography, in addition to representing Los Angeles's uniquely diverse population. Today LACMA is the largest art museum in the western United States, with a collection that includes more than 130,000 objects dating from antiquity to the present, encompassing the geographic world and nearly the entire history of art. Among the museum's strengths are its holdings of Asian art; Latin American art, ranging from masterpieces from the Ancient Americas to works by leading modern and contemporary artists; and Islamic art, of which LACMA hosts one of the most significant collections in the world. A museum of international stature as well as a vital part of Southern California, LACMA shares its vast collections through exhibitions, public programs, and research facilities that attract over one million visitors annually, in addition to serving millions through digital initiatives such as online collections, scholarly catalogues, and interactive engagement. LACMA is

located in Hancock Park, 30 acres situated at the center of Los Angeles, which also contains the La Brea Tar Pits and Museum and the forthcoming Academy Museum of Motion Pictures. Situated halfway between the ocean and downtown, LACMA is at the heart of Los Angeles.

**Location:** 5905 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA, 90036. [lacma.org](http://lacma.org)

**Image captions:**

*Ngi Mask*, Gabon, Fang culture, 1850, wood, kaolin and fiber, private collection, photography by Joe Coscia, The Photograph Studio, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

*Beete Mask: Ram (Bata)*, Gabon, Kwele culture, early-mid 19th century, wood and pigments, private collection, photography by Peter Zeray, The Photograph Studio, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

*Ceremonial Textile Panel*, Kuba culture, Shoowa people, late 19th to early 20th century, raffia palm plain weave, cut pile and embroidery, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of the 2009 Collectors Committee, photo © Museum Associates/LACMA

*Royal Throne*, Luba culture, 18th–19th century, University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Philadelphia, photo courtesy of Penn Museum, image #255385

*Shrine Figure*, Ijo culture, late 19th–20th century, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, museum purchase, gift of Phyllis C. Wattis and the Phyllis C. Wattis Fund for Major Accessions, photo © Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

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