

# SURFACES SEEN AND UNSEEN

African Art at Princeton

July 2–October 9, 2016

Celebrating the Princeton University Art Museum's new acquisitions of African art, this exhibition explores changes to sculptures' surfaces additions of pigment or oil, attachments of cloth or metal, and accumulations of mud or millet made over time. Unlike works of art deemed complete when they leave the artist's hand, African art often evolved through use and wear, ritual sacrifices, or the addition of empowering materials.

Artists frequently sculpted a work's underlying form, and then a range of owners or specialists assumed responsibility for the life and appearance of the object. With their layered surfaces, these works become documents of their own histories, revealing the spiritual practices, cultural values, and artistic innovations of their owners and users. Among the Kongo of West Central Africa, for example, an expert attached medicines to a wooden figure, carved by a sculptor, to empower it as a container for spirits. An Urhobo mask, danced in southern Nigeria for a water spirit, was recolored by its owners for new performances and also worn down through use. In northern Nigeria, a Wurkun specialist refreshed sculpted figures with libations of millet beer and seed oil to aid healing.

Some of the earliest dealers of African art in America and Europe altered these surfaces by polishing wooden objects and detaching encrustations or brass tacks to appeal to their market. Now there is a better appreciation for the insight that this materiality provides into the social life of objects. In this exhibition, the materials listed alongside the works on view take on particular significance. We see surfaces in a constant state of becoming, renewed and enhanced through artistic and ritual intervention.

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# SURFACES SEEN AND UNSEEN

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Kaka artist

Western Cameroon

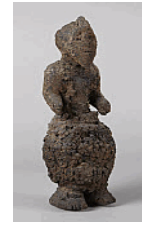
Figure, 20th century

Wood, leather twine, probably mud, resin, and other organic material

h. 36.8 cm., w. 12.7 cm., d. 11.4 cm (14 1/2 × 5 × 4 1/2 in.)

Promised Museum Acquisition from the Holly and David Ross Collection

This figure from western Cameroon has firmly planted feet, strong shoulders, and tense bent arms. Encased with thick organic materials, the object conveys a sense of mystery. Leather twine wrapped around the bottom helps to hold an additional element, itself encrusted, in place. Kaka figures are rare, as is information about their use. Research has not yet determined whether the bulbous addition was meant to empower the figure, was appended during a ritual sacrifice, or had some other meaning entirely. While this addition appears to be unique among known Kaka examples, it is possible that others had similar appendages that were removed when the figures were cleaned.



Wurkum artist

Nigeria

Figures (*kundul*), 20th century

Wood, chicken blood, millet beer, clay, and seed oil

h. 45.7 cm., w. 10.2 cm., d. 8.3 cm. (18 × 4 × 3 1/4 in.)

Princeton University Art Museum. Museum Acquisition from the Holly and David Ross Collection, with the support of the Fowler McCormick Fund (2015-6681 a-b)

Wurkun ritual healers in Nigeria would have directed their clients to acquire a pair of *kundul* figures like this from an artist—probably a blacksmith—as a component of treatment. Through sacrifices of chicken blood and millet beer, the ritual healers would then empower the figures to aid the client's well-being. Scholar Joerg Adelberger, who carried out field research between 1989 and 1993, observed that offerings were repeated each year after the October harvest. The figures were then washed with a solution of brown or red clay and polished with a local seed oil, resulting in the encrusted surfaces seen here. Some figures, including these, were once decorated around their long necks with palm frond fibers, the friction from the fibers smoothing the surface of the neck.



Kongo artist

Democratic Republic of the Congo

*Nkisi*, early 20th century

Wood, mirror, beads, glass, fabric, metal, calabash, and string

h. 36.2 cm., w. 7.6 cm., d. 8.9 cm. (14 1/4 × 3 × 3 1/2 in.)

Promised Museum Acquisition from the Holly and David Ross Collection

This is an *nkisi* (pl. *minkisi*), a container for a spirit from the land of the dead and for medicines imbued with spiritual powers. An *nkisi* melds the creativity of the artist who sculpted it with the expertise of the ritual specialist in charge of its spiritual elements. The purpose of this particular *nkisi* is not known, but *minkisi* were often used to heal, inflict disease, punish thieves, or regulate trade and enforce agreements. On this figure, the mirrored belly pack, the calabash on its back, and the dome on the head contain substances that a ritual specialist would have added over time to fulfill particular political or social functions. The figure, identified by his bracelets as a priest or leader, sits on a cylindrical bench often used by elders. With fingers held to his lips, he may be whistling to invoke the spirits or concluding a healing session or legal agreement.



Mau artist  
Ivory Coast  
Mask, 20th century  
Wood, cord, animal blood and hair, cowrie shells, and organic material  
27.6 × 11.1 × 8.1 cm (10 7/8 × 4 3/8 × 3 3/16 in.)  
with mount: 33.8 × 11.1 × 8.1 cm (13 5/16 × 4 3/8 × 3 3/16 in.)  
Private Collection



Encrusted with dried blood and hair from animal sacrifices and layered with other organic material, this mask was used by members of the Koma secret initiation society. Its small size and the areas on the protruding beak that are void of encrustation suggest that the mask was grasped by the beak and held in front of the face. Dancers singing songs in a falsetto voice performed with this type of mask in order to detect sorcery and attract evil spirits. The mask appeared only in front of Koma initiates and not the wider public.

Dan artist  
Ivory Coast or Liberia  
Mask, late 19th century  
Wood, cowrie shells, metal, feathers, fiber, and probably dried blood  
approximate with base: h. 22.9 cm., w. 9.5 cm., d. 7 cm. (9 × 3 3/4 × 2 3/4 in.)  
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Brian Leyden



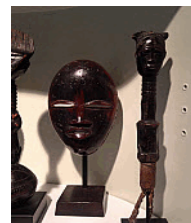
Replicating the form of larger masks owned communally by secret societies and worn during public masquerades, this small Dan mask was used for personal protection or to foster the owner's well-being. The variety of materials assembled on the mask—including cowrie shells, feathers, and organic materials added over time—signal its power. Most masks of this type were denuded of their attachments in the West.

Dan artist  
Ivory Coast  
Mask, 20th century  
Wood, organic material, metal, and upholstery tacks  
h. 25.4 cm., w. 14.6 cm., d. 7.6 cm (10 × 5 3/4 × 3 in.)  
Promised Gift from the Holly and David Ross Collection



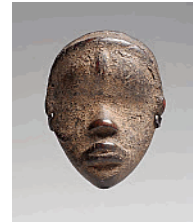
Frequent libations of food, animal blood, and oils produced a thick surface on this mask, softening the facial planes. The reason for these additions is unknown. Removed from its context and missing the costume and hat or hairpiece that completed the masquerade ensemble, this mask's function cannot be stated with certainty. We do know, however, that Dan masks with round tubular protruding eyes were always male and one of two types: *Zakpai ge* masks protected the village when sparks from cooking fires threatened to set ablaze the palm-thatch roofs; *'Gunye ge* masks were worn by a village's fastest runner in races held during the dry season. A row of imported metal tacks lines the edge of the chin and may have once secured tufts of hair. At one time, the metal brads along the forehead ridge fastened a cloth headband or another part of the costume that fit within the carved-out space.

Dan artist  
Ivory Coast  
Mask, late 19th century  
Wood  
h. 20.3 cm., w. 13.3 cm., d. 5.4 cm. (8 × 5 1/4 × 2 1/8 in.)  
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Brian Leyden



This Dan mask was once owned by the pioneering Belgian collector Jef Van der Straete (1903–1984), an antique furniture restorer by trade. As was often the case with African art collected during this period, the surface of the mask was cleaned and polished to accentuate its formal qualities and to make the work more desirable to the European market. The small holes across the forehead once held tacks; the rectangular holes were created to attach the masquerader's costume. The convention of slit eyes suggests the artist worked closer to the Liberian border near where the Mano reside.

Mano artist  
Liberia or Ivory Coast  
Mask, 20th century  
Wood and organic material  
8.3 × 5.6 × 3.2 cm (3 1/4 × 2 3/16 × 1 1/4 in.)  
with mount: 14.6 × 5.6 × 4.4 cm (5 3/4 × 2 3/16 × 1 3/4 in.)  
Private Collection



The current appearance of this small mask from Liberia or Ivory Coast is the result of two practices that occurred after the sculptor finished his work. The Mano owner would have made frequent sacrifices of bits of food, animal blood, or oils in order to maintain his mask's protective power; this resulted in an encrusted surface. The owner also rubbed the mask over a long period of time, the friction and transfer of skin oils creating the shiny patina on the nose, ears, mouth, forehead, and hairline. These different signs of long use indicate the mask's importance to its owner.

Urhobo artist  
Nigeria  
Mask, late 19th–20th century  
Wood, kaolin, Reckitt's Laundry Blue or indigo, camwood, and metal  
h. 69.2 cm., w. 26.7 cm., d. 15.2 cm (27 1/4 × 10 1/2 × 6 in.)  
Promised Museum Acquisition from the Holly and David Ross Collection



This mask with two birds at the brow was danced at festivals held for the Urhobo water spirit, Ohworu. While tradition dictated that white riverbank chalk or kaolin had to coat the eyes and mouth, the other layers of pigment were selected and added over the years by the family that owned the mask. In addition, the family would have chosen the mask's iconography; birds are seen as auspicious harbingers of the coming of Ohworu and also refer to the birdlike movements of the masquerader. Because dancers grasped the chin projection to stabilize the heavy mask as they performed exaggerated movements, a shiny patina has developed on the grip from repeated use.

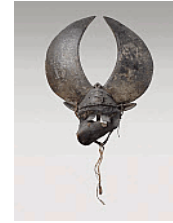
Kurumba artist  
Burkina Faso  
Headdress (Adoné), early 20th century  
Wood, pigment, seeds, organic material, cloth, thread, leather, and metal  
without mount: h. 98.4 cm., w. 22.9 cm., d. 46.4 cm. (38 3/4 × 9 × 18 1/4 in.)  
Princeton University Art Museum. Museum purchase, Mary Trumbull Adams Art Fund (2013-115)



Among the Kurumba people, costumed dancers wore antelope headdresses to honor ancestors and the spirit of the protective antelope before the first rains and at the beginning of planting seasons; these headdresses—worn as crests upon the head—also escorted bodies of elders to their tombs and supervised burials. Close examination of the painted surface reveals subtle wear on the antelope's neck and snout, where a masquerader would have grasped the piece to lift it and steady it on his head. A large costume made from loose vegetable fibers plaited into cords would have been attached through the holes at the bottom edge.

The headdress's red, white, and black painted spots are colors commonly found on Burkina masks, but the green may have been added during a later repainting. Two other alterations to the artist's original sculpture are evident: red-colored seeds are embedded in a mud-like compound where the neck meets the rounded cap and just beneath the horns on the front, while staples, leather, and metal pieces repair a large crack at the base.

Senufo (possibly Bamana) artist  
Ivory Coast or Southern Mali  
Headdress, 20th century  
Wood, hide, metal, string, feathers, and smoke patina or other organic material  
85.7 × 65.4 × 32.4 cm (33 3/4 × 25 3/4 × 12 3/4 in.)  
with mount: 98.4 × 65.4 × 32.4 cm (38 3/4 × 25 3/4 × 12 3/4 in.)  
Promised Museum Acquisition from the Holly and David Ross Collection



This striking work features the broad curving horns of the bush cow, the principal insignia of the elite society of healers, Nyikaryi. The society's members, herbalists and physicians held in high esteem, wore the headdress for secret initiations and healing rites. At some point in its life, the headdress split in two and was repaired with metal pieces that span the front and back. Such repairs are viewed as a sign of authenticity by collectors in the west; the fact that the object was repaired rather than replaced also speaks to its value to its owners. Scholars offer two explanations for the headdress's dark surface. It may be the result of exposure to cooking fires, since prized pieces were often stored near fires to prevent damage from termites and rodents; in addition, specialists may have applied ritually-significant plant matter to the surface over time.

Senufo artist  
Ivory Coast or Burkina Faso  
Oracle figure (kafigeledjo), 20th century  
Wood, cotton cloth, ostrich feathers, vegetal fiber, and organic material  
h. 71.1 cm., w. 20.3 cm., d. 12.7 cm. (28 x 8 x 5 in.)  
Promised Museum Acquisition from the Holly and David Ross Collection



The name kafigeledjo—meaning he who tells the truth—describes both this shrouded figure and the masquerade ritual where misdeeds were exposed and guilt assigned. Resembling an actual costumed performer, kafigeledjo are composite figures: a cloth jumpsuit covers a figural body and a headpiece with a single hole conceals the head. By attaching feathers and encrusting its clothing with organic materials, members of a male association empowered the figure and reinforced its dangerous powers for divination and sorcery. The sculpture and the costumed masquerader each carry a whip or club, which signals their authority to police the truth.

Areogun of Osi-Ilorin, Nigerian, 1885–1954  
Bowl (Opon Igede Ifa), before 1923  
Wood and organic materials  
h. 58.4 cm., diam. 43.2 cm (23 × 17 in.)  
Princeton University Art Museum. Museum Acquisition from the Holly and David Ross Collection, with the support of the Fowler McCormick Fund (2015-8 a-b)



Sculpted by Areogun of Osi-Ilorin in his signature style of low relief, this bowl held the implements of a priest of Ifa, the ritual divination system at the heart of the Yoruba religion that determined and influenced one's destiny. The bowl's heavy patina suggests its long ritual history, and its iconography may offer clues to the sacrifices that created this patina. On this side of the upper register, an Ifa priest stands on the head and upraised arms of a woman. He holds the leashes of what appear to be goats, animals often used in Yoruba ritual sacrifice. On this side of the Yoruba divination bowl, a priest stands over the head of Esu, the trickster god who mediates between gods and humans. To one side of Esu's head a female supplicant holds an offering bowl, for Esu demanded sacrifices or he could become a troublemaker. The sacrificial patina fills in many of the decorative patterns of Areogun's work, particularly on the figures' garments.

Areogun of Osi-Ilorin, Nigerian, 1885–1954  
Bowl, early 20th century  
Wood  
h. 52.1 cm. (20 1/2 in.)  
Lent by the Schorr Family Collection

Lidded bowls in the form of roosters, once found throughout the Ekiti region of Nigeria, were used to hold the kola nuts, cakes, and eggs with which a host would welcome his guests. This bowl's large size and the lost female figure that originally stood behind the rooster, and whose toes point in the same direction, suggest that a Yoruba king owned this work and used it to express his royal hospitality to visiting dignitaries. Wear in areas of decorative patterning suggests regular use over an extended period of time. This is in contrast to the Ifa divination bowl (to the right), which is thickly encrusted with a sacrificial patina.



Ejagham artist  
Cross River Region, Southeast Nigeria or Southwest Cameroon  
Leopard (Ngbe) Society Emblem, early 20th century  
Animal bones, wood, cane, raffia, vegetable fibers, and pelt of a rodent  
94.6 × 101 × 31.7 cm (37 1/4 × 39 3/4 × 12 1/2 in.)  
with mount: 94.6 × 101 × 40.6 cm (37 1/4 × 39 3/4 × 16 in.)  
Private Collection

Hung on a wall or mounted from a central pillar and never meant for public view, this emblem screened a storage area for ritual paraphernalia used by the Leopard Society (Ngbe), a male association that sought to harness the energies of the leopard spirit. These emblems have as a central feature a skin-covered drum representing the voice of Ngbe. Uniquely, this example has two such drums. When a hole damaged the original drum, eliminating its sounding properties, soot—probably from exposure to smoke and ash from cooking fires—formed a deep accumulation on the drum's membrane. A thin coating of a similar substance covers the bones. The newer working drum, in contrast, has a relatively clean surface. The emblem's visual composition is shaped by an assemblage of materials—including skulls and a rodent pelt left over from animals consumed during society feasts—that are attached to an underlying raffia mat.



Dogon artist  
Mali  
Miniature ladder, 20th century  
Wood, possibly animal blood, and minerals or millet gruel  
h. 39.3 cm., w. 2.5 cm., d. 2.5 cm. (15 1/2 x 1 x 1 in.)  
Princeton University Art Museum. Bequest of John B. Elliott, Class of 1951 (1998-579)

These miniature ladders replicate the full-size ladders that had a practical function among the Dogon. The diminutive versions have a spiritual rather than utilitarian purpose. Along with pottery and figurines, they were placed on interior domestic altars where individuals poured sacrificial offerings to facilitate communication with their ancestors. Libations of materials such as animal blood, millet gruel, and minerals from the surrounding landscape coated the surface of the carved wood. The distinct surfaces on these ladders indicate that each has a different sacrificial history.



Dogon artist  
Mali  
Miniature ladder, 20th century  
Wood, possibly animal blood, and minerals or millet gruel  
h. 38.2 cm., w. 1.7 cm., d. 2.3 cm. (15 1/16 x 11/16 x 7/8 in.)  
Princeton University Art Museum. Bequest of John B. Elliott, Class of 1951 (1998-582)



Dogon artist  
Mali  
Miniature ladder, 20th century  
Wood, possibly animal blood, and minerals or millet gruel  
h. 45.2 cm., w. 2.5 cm., d. 2.8 cm. (17 13/16 x 1 x 1 1/8 in.)  
Princeton University Art Museum. Bequest of John B. Elliott, Class of 1951 (1998-581)



Dogon artist  
Mali  
Figure, late 19th–early 20th century  
Wood and organic material  
11.9 × 3.2 × 3.2 cm (4 11/16 × 1 1/4 × 1 1/4 in.)  
Private Collection, Princeton NJ



Sculpted by a Dogon artist living on the Bandiagara escarpment in present day Mali, this work belonged to an individual and was probably used as a personal charm. If this figure originally had details on the face and body, they have been worn away from years of rubbing by the owner and obscured by the addition of materials that remain in the hollow areas of the sculpture.

Tellem or Dogon artist  
Mali  
Figure, 15th–19th century  
Wood, minerals, animal blood, and other organic materials  
50.2 × 7 × 6.8 cm (19 3/4 × 2 3/4 × 2 11/16 in.)  
Private Collection, Princeton NJ



A range of materials—including plant juices and pulps, millet flour, shea butter, local silicates, and animal blood—were applied during sacrifices to form a thick, layered crust that obscures a wooden figure carved by a Tellem or Dogon artist. The Tellem were the early occupants of Mali's Bandiagara cliffs until they ceded their villages to the Dogon in the fifteenth century. Dogon artists used the older figures of the Tellem people and also adopted the Tellem sculptural style in their own work. With an arm raised thought to be imploring the heavens for rain, this piece was probably buried in a cave with the chief who possessed it. The protection afforded by the cave, together with the arid climate, preserved examples similar to this one from as early as the eleventh century.

Bamana artist  
Mali  
Hat, 20th century  
Cotton fabric, leather, mirror, and animal parts  
Private Collection



An accumulation of amulets, including leather packets, claws, mirrors, skulls, and strips of rawhide, are attached to an herb-dyed cotton hat. Bamana hunters believed that amulets— purchased from the blacksmiths who made them—aided them on the hunt, protected them from the wild, and shielded them from the spirits of dead animals. The accrued attachments on this hat indexes a long history of successful hunting. Hats such as this one would have been worn only at public gatherings such as festivals and parades where, along with similarly adorned tunics, they would have distinguished hunters from others.



Lega artist  
Democratic Republic of the Congo  
Maskette (lukwakongo), late 19th–early 20th century  
Wood, kaolin paste, and fiber  
h. 15.0 cm., w. 8.5 cm., d. 5.5 cm. (5 7/8 x 3 3/8 x 2 3/16 in.)  
Promised gift of Perry E. H. Smith, Class of 1957, in honor of his 50th reunion



This small mask signaled the rank of male members of the second highest grade in the Bwami initiation association. The carved wood is covered in a white substance—probably kaolin, a soft white clay—which often dried and broke away from the surface. The white material symbolized the deceased and also suggested the continuity of the Bwami association. The holes running around the bottom edge of the mask originally held a fiber beard. Masks such as this one were not worn over the face but rather were held in the hand, displayed in groups, attached to hats, or placed on graves.

Pende artist  
Democratic Republic of the Congo  
Pendant, 20th century  
Ivory  
h. 4.2 cm., w. 2.9 cm., d. 2.0 cm. (1 5/8 x 1 1/8 x 13/16 in.)  
Princeton University Art Museum. Gift of Perry E. H. Smith, Class of 1957 (y1992-55)

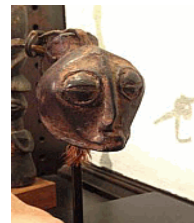


These miniature ivory masks were worn as jewelry, and their honey-colored, glossy surfaces and smooth features suggest histories of personal use and wear. Extended contact with the wearer's body oils, sweat, and the red body cosmetic camwood deepened the color of the ivory. While the warm tones are prized by Western collectors, Pende owners sought to preserve the whiteness of the ivory by scrubbing the pendants with sand. Over time, this mild abrasive blurred the mask's features, as seen on the eyelids, nose, mouth, and hairdo of the pendant on the left.

Pende artist  
Democratic Republic of the Congo  
*Pendant*, 20th century  
Ivory  
h. 4.2 cm., w. 2.7 cm., d. 1.7 cm. (1 5/8 x 1 1/16 x 11/16 in.)  
Princeton University Art Museum. Gift of Perry E. H. Smith, Class of 1957 (y1992-56)



Boyo artist  
Democratic Republic of Congo  
*Head*, early 20th century  
Wood and leather  
9.4 × 6.3 × 17.5 cm (3 11/16 × 2 1/2 × 6 7/8 in.)  
with mount: 17.5 × 6.3 × 17.5 cm (6 7/8 × 2 1/2 × 6 7/8 in.)  
Private Collection, Princeton NJ



The stylistic features of this head, with its bulging closed eyes, arched nose, and narrowed chin, suggest that it was created by a Boyo artist from southeastern Democratic Republic of Congo. It is thought to be a personal amulet because of its small size and the accumulated residues that likely resulted from the owner adding materials to the surface over a long period of time. The features protruding beyond the plane of the face, especially the nose, show evidence of rubbing and the transfer of body oils from the owner. The feathers inserted at the bottom may have helped to empower the amulet for its owner's protection.