The Performative in African Art

Acknowledgments

The Performative in African Art is a course-integrated, student-curated exhibition undertaken by Kara Morrow's Fall 2013 *African Art* class. Beginning in September, students selected objects from the CWAM's permanent collection to research, present in class, and discuss. We applaud and thank the students for their contributions, collaboration, and above all, a job well done! This exhibition is an excellent demonstration of integrating theory and practice.

We also thank Dean Kreuzman for reaching across campus constituencies and including this exhibition in the 2013 Wooster Forum: Facing RACE. And, of course, we thank CWAM preparator, Doug McGlumphy, who not only worked diligently with the students throughout, but also gave this exhibition such a beautiful ease of presentation. Finally, we thank the donors of these materials for providing Wooster faculty and students with such a valuable teaching tool: William C. Mithoefer, Class of 1953, and Renee-Paule Moyencourt; Mikell Kloeters; and Dr. David C. and Karina Rilling. Without such generous, forward-looking gifts, object-based learning and exhibitions such as this one would not be possible.

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Assistant Professor of Art History

Kitty McManus Zurko
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From the Cape of Good Hope to the Upper Niger Delta, the meanings within African art derive not only

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The College of Wooster Art Museum

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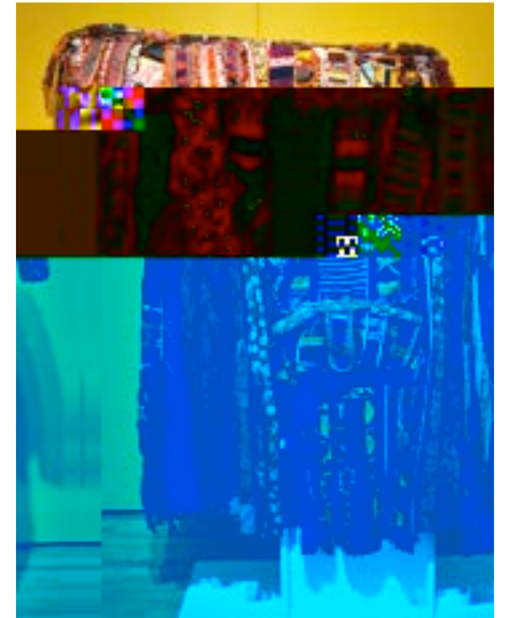


Egungun masquerade, Yoruba peoples, Nigeria
c. 20th century
Fabric, wood
The College of Wooster Art Museum 2009.32
Gift of Dr. David C. and Karina Rilling

> Resting motionless in a gallery, an Egungun costume ensemble is merely a shell of cloth. Its true power and purpose are activated only when a masker enters the costume, transformed into the presence and power of the ancestors in an Egungun ceremony.
>
> –Mary Ann Fitzgerald

Yoruba masqueraders wear this costume to honor their ancestors, and to incarnate or materialize spirits. The Egungun society worships *Amaiyegun*, who taught the Yoruba people to cover the body with cloth to protect themselves from death. Placement of the cloth and the performance of the dance transform the masqueraders into spirits of the ancestors. Specific aspects of the Egungun masquerade, or performance, represent this transformation process, such as when the dancer spins his body while moving through the surrounding crowd.

The chaos of the dance represents a storm, or the "wind of death" known as Shango, (see the Shango wand in the *Ancestral* section of the gallery). This twirling motion reveals the solid inner layer of the costume, which represents the shroud encompassing the body of the deceased. A moment of calmness follows after the whirling performance. This tranquility is known as the "wind of blessing," or Oya, the wife of Shango. Oya reconciles the ancestors with the living community.

Intricate carpet, shiny silk, and voluptuous velvet make up the patchwork of the Egungun costume. Variety within the fabric shows the wealth of the family who created the costume. The jagged edges symbolize salvation. The masquerade costume covers the entire body including the face, which is masked by black and white yarn woven strips. Ultimately, the dancer's body is completely hidden as Egungun transforms into the spirits of the ancestors.

Katelyn Schoenike '16
Archaeology Major

Reliquary figure, Kota-Mahongwé peoples, Gabon
c. mid-20th century
Wood, copper, metal
The College of Wooster Art Museum 2013.35
Gift of William C. Mithoefer, Class of 1953,
and Renee-Paule Moyencourt

The Kota-MaHongwé (also called Hongwé) people of Gabon believe men have great mystical powers, and that their remains retain this power after death. Families of influential local leaders preserve the bones for use in communal ceremonies to appease and celebrate ancestors. These relics are guarded by a reliquary figure such as this one.

This Hongwé reliquary figure is an abstracted human form with three components: head, neck, and handle. Copper and brass, the primary materials covering the wood figure, are sometimes used as currency among the Kota, and indicate the status of the ancestral line. Strips of copper cover the center of this figure's head, while narrow wires precisely align to create a rhythmic horizontality. Two hemispherical protrusions indicate eyes, a semi-circular disk forms the nose, and curving copper arcs suggest a moustache over the mouth.

The figure is attached to a basket at the handle, as seen in the photograph to the right, which contains the remains of important ancestors. On ceremonial occasions, these baskets are placed in the center of the village, where they are offered sacrificial food and covered in red powder. The head of the lineage removes the figure from the basket and dances with it in a decorative costume of red raffia and feathers.

Rebecca Roper '14

INITIATORY

Ciwara headdresses, Bamana peoples, Mali
c. late 20th century
Wood, metal, plant fiber, cotton
The College of Wooster Art Museum 2007.123
Gift of William C. Mithoefer, Class of 1953,
and Renee-Paule Moyencourt

For the Bamana peoples of southwest Mali, farming and hard work are of the utmost importance, and the Ciwara masquerade embodies these values. Ciwara is performed both to welcome a new male initiate into society and to symbolize his coming-of-age. The headdresses, or *ciwarakunw*, depict the Bamana deity Ci Wara, a half-man, half-antelope who taught mankind how to cultivate the fields. There are several regional variations of Ciwara: the vertical style (right) is found in the eastern Bamana area, while the horizontal style (left) is found in areas north of the Niger River. The headdresses are part

INITIATORY

Circumcision mask, Salampasu peoples,
Democratic Republic of the Congo
c. 20th century
Wood, copper, fiber
The College of Wooster Art Museum 1976.20
Gift of William C. Mithoefer, Class of 1953

The art of masking is a concept found within almost every culture. Masks elicit a powerful fascination because they transform a person into an entity, which raises questions about identity and possession, reality and artifice, and the natural versus the supernatural. Masking also demonstrates the visual communicative power of art and its contemporary relevance to enduring ideas about cultural values. Through performance and ceremony, the men of the Salampasu become fierce warriors in society as they make the transition from boy to warrior, aided by the mask shown here.

The Salampasu peoples base their social hierarchy on the status of their male warriors. A man wears this mask during the ceremony that takes place after the circumcision of a boy. The sharpened teeth and narrowed eyes, overshadowed by the large, bulging forehead, are common among all Salampasu masks. The long beard that hangs from the chin emphasizes masculine features. Such distinguishing characteristics instill fear within spectators and those entering battle with the Salampasu. These features also suggest the power of Salampasu warriors and the fearlessness celebrated among males of this society. After the circumcision ceremony, a boy is destined to become a brave warrior who defends his people. In addition, a man is awarded a new mask every time he defeats an enemy or shows his boldness and courage. The accumulation of masks is directly related to the power a man holds within the community. Once a warrior dies, the masks are worn by other Salampasu men, and are displayed at his funeral.

The elaborate craftsmanship and exquisite detail of this mask not only highlight the time spent creating this mask, but emphasizes the importance of this mask as a cultural and societal symbol of manhood and bravery.

Olivia Gregory '14
Anthropology/Sociology Major

INITIATORY

Sande helmet masks, Mende/Vai/Gola peoples
Sierra Leone/Liberia, c. 20th century
Wood, palm oil
The College of Wooster Art Museum 1980.121-.122
Gift of William C. Mithoefer, Class of 1953

Among the Mende peoples of Sierra Leone there exists a sodality of women known as Sande. These two masks belong to this sodality, and are used during initiation masquerades that take place in Sande "bush" schools. Sande is the parallel to the Poro society for Mende men (see the Poro helmet on the next page). During initiation in the schools, Sande initiates are taught the "trades" of the traditional Mende wife and mother. When performed, the helmet masks represent the ideal for female Mende beauty, and also embody their water deity Sowo. Above all, Sande helmet masks are meant to be an example of ideal femininity to the initiates.

Sande helmet masks often depict perfectly coiffed hair intended to teach the girls the ideal of good Mende grooming. Research has shown that motifs in the hair can represent waves in the water or geminating seeds, which fits with the agriculturally based Mende. The mask to the left has talons or canine teeth in the hair; these are called power objects. Palm oil covers these masks; Sande members say the mix correlates to the oil mixture the women put on their skin to keep it beautiful and black. The large foreheads have been described as conveying wisdom, while the small faces are a sign of beauty as are the downcast eyes. The neck rolls reflect health, prosperity, Sowo breaking the surface of the river water, as well as, chrysalises (cocoons) and caterpillars growing in to butterflies.

Female masqueraders wear these masks while performing dances at night when entering and leaving the bush schools. These women are called *sowei*, and have a high status in the society. The *sowei* can perform alone or juxtaposed to a *gonde* (a "funny *sowei*") that wears a tattered, old, and ugly mask. This juxtaposition and performance shows the initiates who they should not be and what they should not do. It also demonstrates the consequences of such actions. In this way ideals are conveyed performatively and physically through the helmet masks.

Jennifer Caventer '15
Anthropology & Art History
Double Major

INITIATORY

Poro helmet mask, Mende peoples, Sierra Leone/Liberia
c. 20th century
Wood
The College of Wooster Art Museum 1985.10
Gift of William C. Mithoefer, Class of 1953

This helmet mask originates from the male Poro Society of the Mende peoples of Sierra Leone. The Poro society initiate young Mende boys into manhood through performances while wearing these masks. The society parallels the all female Sande society of the Mende peoples.

This mask is phallic in shape and reflects the circumcisions that take place during initiations. The rolls along the neck and shaft refer to the Mende river goddess Sowo, and represents Mende ideals of health, prosperity and beauty for both men and women. The rolls also relate to the breaking of the water as Sowo rises from the river. This imagery is borrowed from the masks of the Sande society.

Poro initiation performances teach the Mende boys leadership, wisdom, and responsibility. Through these masquerades the boys learn how to be true Mende men, husbands, and fathers.

Jennifer Caventer '15
Anthropology & Art History
Double Major

ANCESTRAL

Shango wand, Yoruba peoples, Nigeria
c. mid-20th century
Wood
The College of Wooster Art Museum 1976.30
Gift of William C. Mithoefer, Class of 1953

According to Yoruba myths, Shango was the fourth *Alafin*, or king, of Oyo in Yorubaland. He was said to be hot headed, with a temper as unpredictable as a tempest. Upon his death, Shango was apotheosed and transformed into an *orisha*, or deity, of thunder and lightning.

Also referred to as an *oshe*, or double-headed axe, the Shango wand is based on a Neolithic axe design. Only devotees of Shango carry the staff in ceremonial occasions. Featuring a tripartite structure, the wand's unique axe motif is reminiscent of the form Shango's lightning takes when it is hurled from the heavens. This Shango wand manifests the previously mentioned idiosyncrasies as well as a "Janus," or dual visage, a caryatid effigy, and a handle.

Shango remains a venerated deity in Yoruba religious practice and performance, whose devotees are considered wedded to him regardless of gender. Despite the volatile nature of the god they serve, the devout are graced with an unparalleled serenity to balance the devastating power.

James Parker '15
Art History Major

ANCESTRAL

Gelede cap masks, Yoruba peoples, Nigeria
c. 20th century
Wood, polychrome
The College of Wooster Art Museum 1980.123-124
Gift of William C. Mithoefer, Class of 1953

This pair of cap masks would have been worn by two male members of the Gelede society in a performance intended to appease an *orisa*, or deity, named Iya Nla, whose power controls female reproduction as well as postmenopausal feminine efficacy. This type of cap mask would have been worn with a costume portraying the female figure. Such cap masks normally have faces that represent women as a means of honoring Iya Nla, and a superstructure depicting culturally relevant motifs such as ornate hair styles, performed social roles, or metaphorical animals that symbolize or reference a particular *orisa* found within Yoruba myths.

The cap mask on the far right features a superstructure depicting a sculptural hairstyle above the symmetrical face. Vivid colorations as well as scarification patterns—both containing symbolic meaning—relate to specific *orisa* within Yoruba myths. In this particular example there are diamond-shaped scarification patterns and hollowed triangular shaped eyes placed evenly on the face. Such components also suggest symbolic parallels to a particular *orisa* through the shapes and designs. The small face depicts beauty and fertility associated with Iya Nla, and the large forehead suggests wisdom.

Brendon Taylor '14

ANCESTRAL

Oro Efe helmet mask, Yoruba peoples, Nigeria
c. late 20th century
Wood, polychrome
The College of Wooster Art Museum 1976.9
Gift of William C. Mithoefer, Class of 1953

This wooden helmet mask comes from the Gelede society of the Yoruba peoples. Originally sculpted and painted by a male artist, it would also have been worn by a male masquerader. The Gelede view the *Oro* Efe as a leader of their society. He serves as an intermediary between the Yoruba people and their female ancestors collectively referred to as "Our Mothers." As the *Oro* Efe performs, he sings songs that address "Our Mothers" in an effort to appease them so their powers are used for good (fertility and harvest), and not for evil (infant mortality and plague). Balancing the daytime performance of Gelede cap masks (previous page), the *Oro* Efe performance takes place at night, tapping ancestral feminine power, and condemning antisocial behavior.

An idealized feminine face provides the foundation for the *Oro* Efe mask. Characteristic of such masks, a crescent moon surmounts the forehead, linking the object with the night. Locks of hair arc from the head behind the moon. The mask's superstructure creates a sophisticated play of positive and negative space delineated by a belt-like circle, supporting sheathed knives hanging on either side of the head. The knives allude to the masculine, aggressive power of the *Oro* Efe. Straps extend over the top of the headdress and cross at the back, referencing Islamic talismanic belts. Dark birds hold snakes in their mouths at the pinnacles of the structure. Birds of all types are specifically associated with women and the ambiguous power of "Our Mothers" to either do irreparable harm or great good. As such this mask is an image of physical and supernatural power and is considered a brother-mask to the Gelede cap masks.

Jennifer Caventer '15
Anthropology & Art History
Double Major

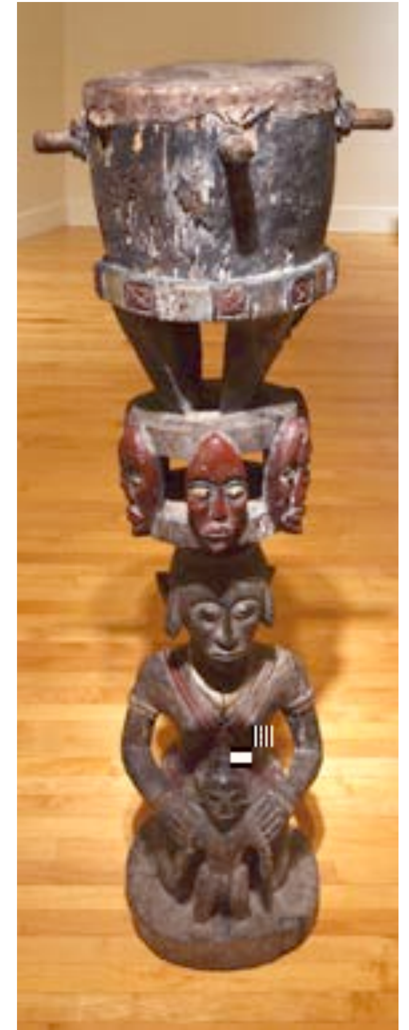
Nimba mask, Baga peoples, Republic of Guinea
c. 20th century
Wood, metal, raffia
The College of Wooster Art Museum 1985.12
Gift of William C. Mithoefer, Class of 1953

The Nimba masquerade has been in use by the Baga peoples since they migrated to the coastline of New Guinea sometime before the sixteenth century. Nimba is unique because she is considered an idea to be performed and emulated, and not a deity or

Rattlers

ANCESTRAL

Drum, Baga peoples, Republic of Guinea
c. 20th century
Wood, hide, paint
The College of Wooster Art Museum 2009.29
Gift of Dr. David C. and Karina Rilling



The ideal of motherhood occupies a premier place in Baga society, and is symbolically linked to the fecundity of the earth. In the drum to the right, the idealized mother presenting her child, as well as the large Nimba mask on p. 15, address this important aspect of Baga worldview.

Starting at the bottom of the drum, the woman kneels and her body frames the small figure before her. Formality and hierarchy characterize the composition. The mother's head supports the superstructure of the drum. From her ornate coiffeur emerges a flat horizontal platform. Elliptical heads punctuate that plane, and the drum terminates the composition. The red faces support staring eyes that survey the scene.

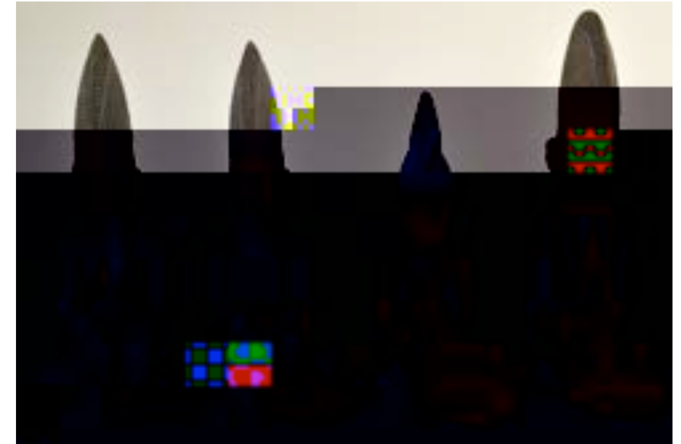
Such drums are used by the Baga to promote the concepts of human fertility and earthly fecundity, and to provide the acoustic structure of celebrations where women dance and celebrants throw rice, a staple of the Baga diet and economy. Both Baga men and women play drums in ritual festivities; however, only a woman would have played the instrument displayed here, creating an eloquent link between the drummer and the drum.

Kara Morrow
Assistant Professor of Art History
The College of Wooster

New Acquisition

ANCESTRAL

Ere Ibeji figures, Yoruba peoples, Nigeria
c. 20th century
Wood, pigment
The College of Wooster Art Museum 2013.35
Gift of William C. Mithoefer, Class of 1953,
and Renee-Paule Moyencourt



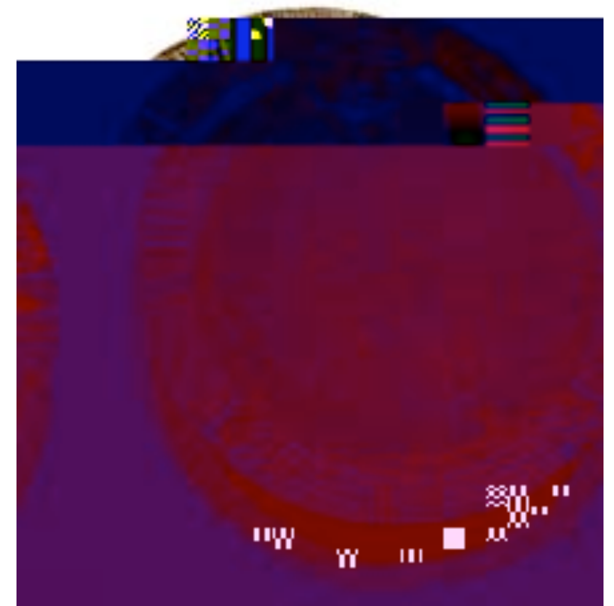
While the Yoruba peoples of Nigeria have a high rate of twinning in their society, there is also a high infant mortality rate, especially among twins. When a twin dies, the family commissions *Ere Ibeji* figures to appease the soul of the deceased. The Yoruba call twins "the twice born," and believe they share a soul, which gives them spiritual power to bring good luck to their family. All *Ere Ibeji* are carved from wood and depict fully-grown adults—identified through their developed genitalia—and celebrate the potential of the life that was lost. The four *Ere Ibeji* in front of you follow these stylistic norms, and also include carved details representing their village's hairstyles and facial scarification patterns.

To appease the deceased twins, the mother ceremonially feeds the figure by dabbing oil and beans on the mouth. This practice causes the fading around the mouth visible on Wooster's *Ere Ibeji*. The *Ere Ibeji* are also decorated with clothes, beads, shells, textiles, and covered with indigo powder or traditional cosmetics, as seen in the photograph below. Traces of indigo powder appear on the head of one of Wooster's *Ere Ibeji*, along with bracelets on her wrist and ankles. All of these attributes show how reverence is "performed" for the deceased soul.

Ere Ibeji shrine with offerings and decorative aspects.

Rebecca Roper '14
History Major

ANCESTRAL



Ifa divination tray, Yoruba peoples, Nigeria
c. 20th century
Wood
The College of Wooster Art Museum 1976.5
Gift of William C. Mithoefer, Class of 1953

In Yoruba culture, religious specialists, or *babalawos*, use Ifa divination trays in times of uncertainty and conflict to contact the deity Eshu-Elegba, commonly known as Eshu, the trickster god. Eshu is one of 400 *orisha*, or deities, created by *Olodumare*, the Supreme Being. He is also a mediator between earth, heaven, and Ifa, the god of divination. Eshu only tricks those who deceive him and doubt him as a god by transforming himself into the wind, birds, and other people.

To perform the divination session, the *babalawo* turns the tray so the image of Eshu faces him, and plays a rhythm on a drum. He then spreads the divination powder, *iyerosun*, across the center section of the tray. After spreading the powder, the *babalawo* casts palm nuts and a divination chain across the tray. The design formed in the powder dictates which *Odu* he and the other diviners will chant out of 256 possibilities. Each *Odu* refers to a collection of sacred verses that reflect Yoruba culture, religion, and worldview. The person who purchased the divination session is responsible for interpreting the *Odu* chanted.

Ifa divination trays often depict the Yoruba culture, religion, and worldview along the raised edge of the tray, through carved images of kings, animals, and the divination ritual, but these images are purely decorative. This tray contains carved geometric lines around the edge, rather than images of Yoruba life. For trays to be used in Ifa Divination, however, they must contain the face of Eshu, as can be seen at the top of Wooster's Ifa divination tray.

Nora Yawitz '15
Theatre Major

LEADERSHIP

Stool, Bamileke or Bamum Peoples, Cameroon
c. mid-20th century
Wood
The College of Wooster Art Museum 1992.1
Gift of Mikell Kloeters

Kings and other rulers play essential roles in the Bamileke and Bamum ethnic groups who live in the grasslands of northern Cameroon. Many forms of royal regalia display the king's power; however, stools happen to be one of the most valued objects in this region. The stools are so important to these peoples that they believe the king's life force is absorbed into the wood of the stool. The Bamileke and Bamum peoples take pride in stool making. Stools often require many years to carve, and involve ancestral interactions to complete.

Most royal stools display an animal supporting the seat, thereby symbolizing a relationship between ruler and powerful creatures. The Bamileke and Bamum peoples use spiders for divination practices because spiders have divine knowledge and are a link between the real and the ancestral worlds. Ground-dwelling tarantulas burrow below the earth when making a home, but also rise above the ground when looking for food, echoing the human connection with the ancestors below and the living above. The seven X-like figures in this stool represent the tarantula and refer to the king's power to mediate between the earthly and spiritual realms.

Maki Love '16
Africana Studies Major

Beaded apron, Zulu peoples, South Africa
c. 20th century
Cloth, beads
The College of Wooster Art Museum 2013.54
Gift of William C. Mithoefer, Class of 1953,
and Renee-Paule Moyencourt

The Zulu peoples occupy the eastern seaboard of South Africa. The Zulu nation took shape in 1817 under King Shaka Zulu, for whom the nation is named. The king, having great control of the economy of his state due to a large military, was able to restrict beaded decoration for himself and members of his court. Today, all members of Zulu society use beaded objects for personal adornment.

In traditional ceremonies, young women wear uniforms made up of a beaded apron, similar to the one above, over a skirt of red or black. Girls not yet ready for marriage wear red skirts. Across their chest, a young woman may wear a band of beadwork or nothing at all. The wearer, who is often also the artist, chooses the patterns and colors. Regional styles are therefore referenced in these uniforms. Wooster's Zulu apron is suggestive of the Nongoma regional style, characterized by the diamond-like shield pattern. In this way, these aprons and uniforms convey to the audience the performers' age, gender, regional affiliation, and status.

Beaded staff, Ndebele peoples, South Africa, c. 1960s
Wood, beads, thread, grass fiber
The College of Wooster Art Museum 2013.51
Gift of William C. Mithoefer, Class of 1953,
and Renee-Paule Moyencourt

The Ndebele peoples occupy northern South Africa and Zimbabwe. The Ndebele and Zulu originally made up a larger nation; however, political differences led to the divergence of these two peoples. The Ndebele are known for vibrant geometric murals that women paint on their homes to communicate the status and skill of the artist. These patterns also appear in their beadwork, which initially inspired house-painting motifs.

The Ndebele wear beaded garments and adornments for special ceremonies like weddings, circumcisions, and harvest celebrations. The dance wand to the right represents one of the accessories

New Acquisition

LEADERSHIP

Beaded necklace, probably Zulu peoples, South Africa
c. 20th century
Cloth, beads
The College of Wooster Art Museum 2013.54
Gift of William C. Mithoefer, Class of 1953,
and Renee-Paule Moyencourt

Beaded jewelry takes many forms in Zulu culture. Adornments for the body include necklaces, bracelets, anklets, arm bands, headbands, and hats. Both men and women may wear the necklace displayed here. The white, blue, green and black beads are woven on strings, which are then wrapped around a fibrous tube to form its thick, but flexible shape.

The small square hanging from the bottom of the necklace resembles what has become known as the Zulu "love letter." In Zulu culture, primarily young women create beaded art. If a girl is interested in a young man, she will give him a beaded object that commonly takes the form of a small, patterned square of beads. Although western perceptions have exaggerated the meaning of the color and pattern of these love letters, the giving of such tokens communicates the intention of young Zulu lovers.

Sarah Van Oss '16
Art History & Archaeology
Double Major