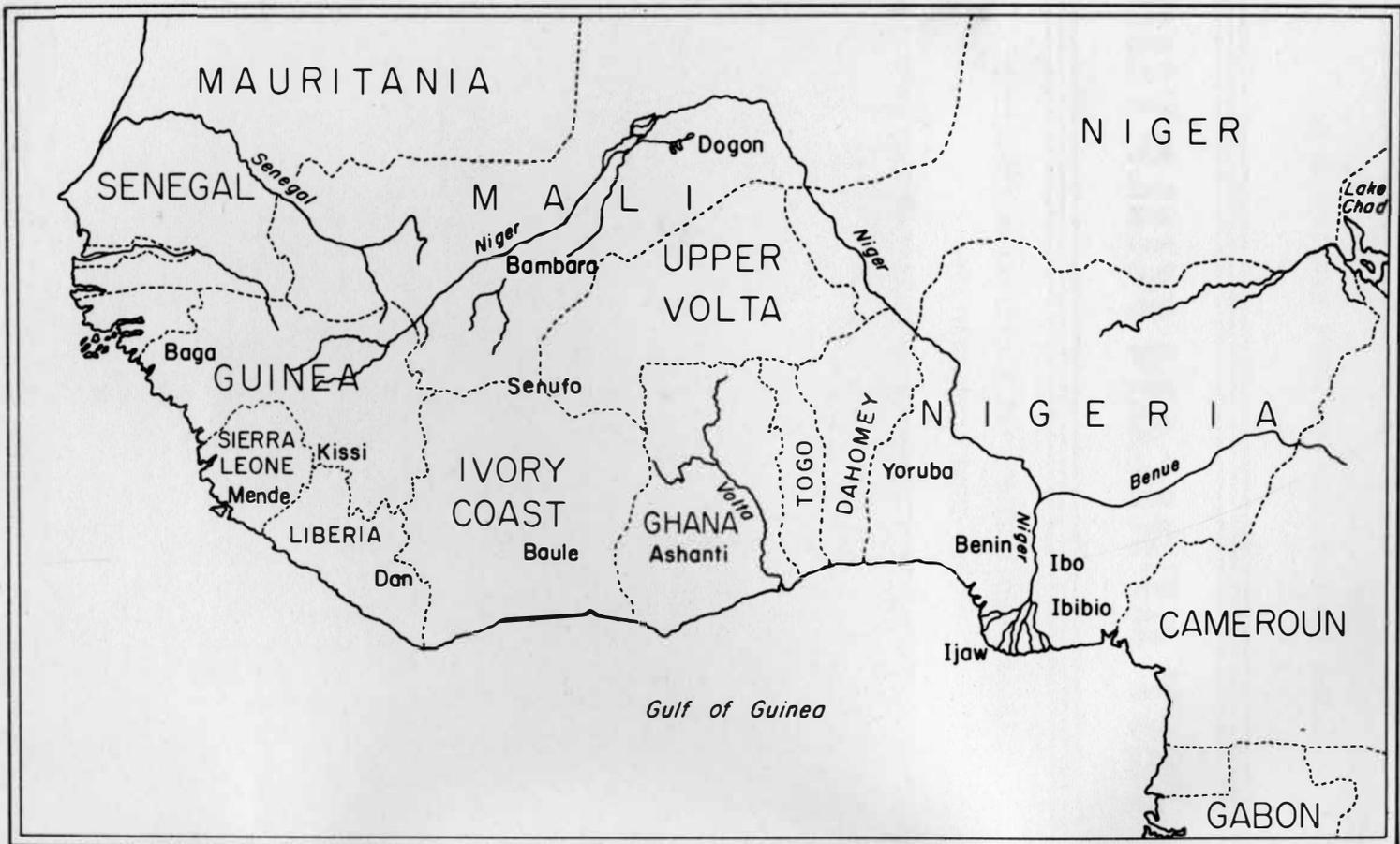

THE ROCKEFELLER INSTITUTE EXHIBITION OF

WEST AFRICAN SCULPTURE

CASPARY AUDITORIUM, THE ROCKEFELLER INSTITUTE
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This group of sculptures comes from the area of Africa bounded by the Senegal, Niger and Benue Rivers, and the Gulf of Guinea. Climatically, this area includes tropical rain forest, savannah zone, and arid sub-saharan regions in the north. The cultures represented in this exhibition range in complexity from centralized states to segmentary peasant societies.

African sculpture is firmly based on the human and animal forms. The abstractions are deliberate formulations of an idea by the artist. The symbols are meaningful within the tribal ethos. The sculptors work in wood, ivory, brass, clay and stone. Many pieces of African sculpture have more than one function, e.g., a mask can portray terror in a sacred ceremony and yet be used amusingly in another. Thus the classification "sacred" or "secular" would not apply in this context.

A Yoruba hymn about Taiwo the carver says of him: "He makes wood beautiful and adorned like a bride." The portrayals by African artists of the nature of man, and the forces working upon him surely provide a common meeting ground for all people.

A S H A N T I

A politically organized confederacy of 800,000 Akan speaking people which owes allegiance to the Ashanti king, whose power is symbolised by the famous Golden Stool. Ashanti wealth was based on the export of gold, kolanuts, and slaves. The Ashanti live today in the Northern Territory of Ghana.

Doll Wood (11 in. high) This is carried in the loincloths of girls and women to ensure fertility and good-looking children.

Kuduo Brass, lost wax technique (11 in. high) The vessel is used for cleansing purposes during the life of an individual, and becomes the repository for his soul.

B A G A

The 45,000 Baga exist in a shifting village agricultural economy. The immensely powerful masks are made for the Simo secret society which dominates social and religious life.

Yoke Mask Wood and Metal (31 in. high) The mask is worn on the head and shoulders, with a costume concealing the rest of the body, at harvest threshing and funerary ceremonies.

Serpent Polychrome Wood (54 in. high) A representation of the Gabon viper, which is the emblem of the Basundi society.

K I S S I

Stone artifacts excavated in Mende and Kissi country (Guinea and Sierra Leone) antedate the present inhabitants.

Head Steatite (10 in. high)

B A U L E

The agricultural Baule are the principal inhabitants of the Ivory Coast. They number 400,000 and broke from the Ashanti about 1750. They are also famous as smiths of gold and brass.

Male Figure Wood (17 in. high) Ancestor figure.

Male Figure with Simian head Wood (33 in. high) Gbekere, who judges souls on their way to the next world.

Mask Wood (15 in. high)

S E N U F O

The one million Senufo are an agricultural people occupying parts of Mali, Ivory Coast and Upper Volta. Never organized in large political states, these people appear to have preserved West African cultural complexes while the ancient empires of their neighbors rose and fell. The religious and social life is based on the Lô society which also serves as a unifying factor for the nation.

Firespitter mask Wood (36 in. high) The name is derived from the practise of blowing tinder sparks through the mouth in ceremonies.

Double Face mask Wood (10 in. high) The "legged" face masks represent the idea of the precariousness of human existence. This mask and the former are used in the Lô rituals.

Male and Female figures Wood (24 in. high) Ancestor figures.

Rhythm pounder, male Wood (46 in. high) Statues like this with heavy bases are used to beat time in memorial dance ceremonies.

Bird Polychrome Wood (26 in. high) (Gift of Mrs. Gertrud A. Mellon) This is an atypically small example of a stylised hornbill representing both male and female fertility.

D A N

The Dan of Liberia number 150,000. Apart from the Poro secret society they lack any complex social organization. They live in small hamlets and grow rice as staple crop.

Mask Wood (9 in. high) It is worn by stilted figures in flowing garments, and is the arbitrator of disputes and protector of children.

Spoon Wood and Metal (23 in. high) This symbolises the mother and wife of the chief.

B A M B A R A

They number about one million, occupy permanent towns on the upper Niger, and live by agriculture and fishing. For many centuries highly organized states existed amongst the Bambara and related tribes. The Bambara conceive of the entire universe as a series of forces over which man has control.

Initiation mask Wood and Cowries (24 in. high) (Gift of Carlebach Gallery) N'tomo are worn by youths at the time of their circumcision.

Antelope Headdress Wood (49 in. high)

B A M B A R A (continued)

Antelope Headdress Wood (22 in. high) Tji wara are the property of age-set societies, and are used in all ceremonies and dances.

Ancestor figure Wood (47 in. high) An outstanding example of a recently discovered style in Bambara art.

D O G O N

The Dogon are an agricultural tribe of 225,000 people of Mali who live in homesteads and compact villages, and use irrigation. They are closely related to the Senufo. Their vast and complex mythology is impressively coherent.

Hermaphrodite figure Wood (23 in. high)

Male figure Wood (29 in. high) Ancestor figures showing the stylistic change towards cubism.

B E N I N

Benin City was the capital of 400,000 Edo speaking people organized into a monolithic state in the mid-west of Nigeria. Formal diplomatic relations were established between Portugal and Benin in the reign of Oba (Emperor) Esigie (1504-1550). Superb tableware "of Elephants teeth very curiously wrought with divers Proportions of fowls and beasts made upon them"* was commissioned from sculptors about this time, which also corresponds with the end of the early period of Benin art and the onset of the "classical" period. The palace brass-smiths of Benin are the best known of all African artists.

*From the Diary of Master James Welsh, 1588, quoted by Hakluyt.

Head Brass, lost wax technique (19 in. high) Early period (before 16th Cent.) ancestor altar piece.

Plaque Brass, lost wax technique (20 in. high)

Plaque Brass, lost wax technique (19 in. high) Classical period (16th to 18th Cents.) depictions of historical scenes, which were set into the walls and pillars of the palace of the Oba.

I B O

"The manners and government of a people who have little commerce with other countries are generally very simple and the history of what passes in one family or village, may serve as a specimen of the whole nation. Every transaction of government was conducted by the chiefs or elders of the place. ... We are almost a nation of dancers, musicians and poets. ... As our manners are simple, our luxuries are few. ..."* Five million Ibos live in Eastern Nigeria. The most notable feature apart from complex chieftainship is the formation of age-sets for common labour projects.

*From "The interesting narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African, written by himself, London 1789."

Mask Wood (18 in. high) Death mask of a girl or woman, worn by male members of the Mmwo society at harvests and funerals.

I J A W

The lagoons adjacent to the Niger Delta are occupied by the 200,000 Ijaw people. They are fishermen, and fearless sailors and fighters.

Equestrian figure Wood (26 in. high) (Gift of Matthew T. Mellon Foundation) This carving represents a guardian deity, Ejiri.

Y O R U B A

Yoruba skill in art and crafts has been known for centuries. The 7 million Yoruba now form the bulk of the population of Western Nigeria. The traditional constitutional monarchy of their city-states, and the sophisticated social organization, have blended readily with a modern two-party democracy.

Mask Wood (34 in. high) Masks like this are worn by members of the Epa society while dancing in "increase" ceremonies.

Figure Wood, with cloth and cowrie garment (12 in. high) Ibeji, or twins are sacred to the Yoruba. This one was probably called Taiwo.

This is a loan exhibition by the courtesy of the Museum of Primitive Art, New York City. The Rockefeller Institute gratefully acknowledges the assistance of the Curator and Staff of the Museum of Primitive Art in organizing this exhibition.

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*In the Library of The Rockefeller Institute

Cover photograph of Ibo mask by Charles Uht