AFRICAN PUPPETRY

an exhibition from the
Center for Puppetry Arts
Atlanta, Georgia

Sponsored by the
Southern Arts Federation
An Exhibition Of
AFRICAN PUPPETRY

In the past several decades African art has enjoyed increasing popular attention. Most American museums have mounted exhibits of sculpture, furniture, ceremonial costumes and masks. Less well known to museum goers, however, is the African art of puppetry. In order to acquaint the public with this important part of African culture, the Center for Puppetry Arts is proud to present this exhibition of rare puppets from Africa.

African art is often set into motion by music and dance, and to a larger degree by investing movement into artistic images of all types. These images, when animated, are carried, danced or manipulated by human hands or worn as masks atop the head or on the face; thus they become performing objects or "puppets." The art of puppetry is used in African life to enhance civic and religious activities rather than solely as an entertainment medium. Puppet theatre in some African groups uses the dramatic performances for instruction, in celebration of harvests, initiations or funerals, and as satiric commentaries on topics of concern in the community, individual misbehavior, or personal eccentricities. The figures in this exhibit come mainly from two tribes -- the Ibibio, located in southeastern Nigeria, and the Bamana and Bozo of western Mali. The puppet images from these regions are activated in open-air, dramatic productions which incorporate both secular and sacred elements of African life and are held for the benefit of all members of the community.

"Among the Bamana and Bozo peoples of Mali and the Ibibio people of Nigeria, young men of the community take charge of puppet performances. The players present performances which express their general values and suggest proper ways to behave in social situations. With the introduction of new images drawn from experiences within a changing world, these puppet presentations also draw attention to innovations in community life. The cast of puppets may illustrate men dressed as European soldiers and bureaucrats, or show bikini-clad 'modern' women. These characters act alongside figures representing 'water spirits' and women adorned for traditional initiation ceremonies."

"Among the Bamana/Bozo/Maninke, puppets appear out of the back of a movable stage which houses the puppeteer. Constructed as a wooden framework covered with cloth, the stage may be decorated with a carved animal head at one end and an appropriate tail at the other. To insure the anonymity of the puppeteers, assistants follow the stage holding mats which hide the performer's feet.

"Another form of "puppet," not associated with a mobile stage, would be carried on the shoulders of a performer, raising his stature well above the height of members of the audience. Female figures point to the ideal Bamana beauty both moral and physical.

"The Bozo, a fishing people of the Niger River, live alongside the agricultural Bamana. In keeping with their water activities, the Bozo stage puppet performances on boats which glide to shore to entertain the waiting audience.

"Puppets of the Ibibio people of Nigeria are performed by members of the young men's society ("Ekon"). A stationary stage, formed by a wooden framework covered with cloth, is set up in the central square of the village. The
actors stand behind the enclosure, holding puppet figures above their heads by means of handles. Assistants beat the cloth sides of the stage with palm fiber brushes to create vibrations which conceal the movements of the puppeteers. Unlike Bamana and Bozo puppets, Ibibio characters speak carefully prepared lines. Voices of actors, however, are disguised by speaking through reeds. The actors rehearse their parts during a strictly prescribed, seven-year period. Traditionally, as the carved figures appeared on stage, a black rooster, the appropriate sacrifice to the guardian spirit of the society, was lifted to touch the sculptures. It was believed that this gesture confirmed the power of speech to the images. Carefully constructed, brightly painted figures having articulated arms, neck and jaw, represent a set of characters familiar to Ibibio villagers. Skits dealing with family problems and community issues unfold through monologues and dialogues. These skits demonstrate the social tensions and moral dilemmas which are experienced by people living in polygynous, small-scale village societies. In most cases, the audience is expected to draw its own conclusions.

"While operating a wooden image, puppeteers can safely risk opinions and display conduct normally forbidden to individuals. In the African setting, puppets operate with guidance from the spiritual realm and thus act or speak with extra-human authority. By dramatic portrayals, they set examples for proper behavior, reinforce accepted customs and tactfully introduce changing values."*

The puppets in the "African Puppetry" exhibit are from the Center's Permanent Collection and from the private collection of William and Robert Arnett.

*Materials excerpted from "Puppets From Africa" by Marietta B. Joseph, Museum Specialist, Museum of African Art at the Smithsonian Institution, Folklife Program. Additional information provided by Mary Jo Arnoldi, Department of Fine Arts, Indiana University.

ON THE COVER:

"Mammy Wata" photograph by David A. Carter.
This figure, known as "Mammy Wata," represents a water spirit worshipped since ancient times by the Ibibio and other groups in southeastern Nigeria. Depending upon its mood, the spirit is capable of richly blessing or causing serious mental and physical anguish. Puppet is from the collection of William and Robert Arnett.
1. IBIBIO
Ekon Society Marionette
Lower Cross River Region
Southeastern Nigeria
Center for Puppetry Arts Collection

5. IBIBIO, Anang
Ekon Society Marionette
Lower Cross River Region
Southeastern Nigeria
William & Robert Arnett Collection

2. IBIBIO, Anang
Ekon Society Marionette
Lower Cross River Region
Southeastern Nigeria
William & Robert Arnett Collection

6. IBIBIO, Anang
Ekon Society Marionette
Lower Cross River Region
Southeastern Nigeria
William & Robert Arnett Collection

3. IBIBIO
Ekon Society Marionette
Lower Cross River Region
Southeastern Nigeria
William & Robert Arnett Collection

7. IBIBIO, Anang
Masquerade Crest (Mammy Wata)
(Probably carved by Chukwu Family)
Lower Cross River Region
Southeastern Nigeria
William & Robert Arnett Collection

4. IBIBIO, Anang
Ekon Society Marionette
Southeastern Nigeria
William & Robert Arnett Collection

Left to Right: No. 11, No. 10, No. 9, No. 8
8. BOZO
Bird Puppet
Segou Region
Mali
Center for Puppetry Arts Collection

9. OGONI
Masquerade Puppet Headdress
Cross River Section
Southeastern Nigeria
William & Robert Arnett Collection

10. OGONI
Masquerade Puppet Figure
Cross River Region
Southeastern Nigeria
William & Robert Arnett Collection

11. BAMANA
Female Figure
Segou Region
Mali
Center for Puppetry Arts Collection

12. BAMANA
Three-headed Female Marionette
Segou Region
Mali
William & Robert Arnett Collection

13. BAMANA
Female Figure
Segou Region
Mali
Center for Puppetry Arts Collection

14. BAMANA
Female Figure
Segou Region
Mali
Center for Puppetry Arts Collection

15. Fetish Figure
Senufo Region
William & Robert Arnett Collection
16. **BOZO**
   Animal Head with Female Figure
   Segou Region
   Mali
   William & Robert Arnett Collection

17. **BAMANA**
   Antelope Headdress
   Segou Region
   Mali
   William & Robert Arnett Collection

18. **BAMANA**
   Hyena
   Segou Region
   Mali
   Center for Puppetry Arts Collection

19. **BAMANA**
   Antelope with Puppets
   Segou Region
   Mali
   Center for Puppetry Arts Collection

20. **YORUBA**
    Body Puppet
    Center for Puppetry Arts Collection

21. **BAMANA**
    Animal Head
    Bougoni Region
    Mali
    William & Robert Arnett Collection

22. **YORUBA**
    Gelede Headdress with Puppet
    Nigeria
    William & Robert Arnett Collection

23. **Headdress with Skin Covering**
    Upper Cross River Region
    Cameroon
    William & Robert Arnett Collection
24. BAMANA
Antelope with Figures
Eastern Segou Region
Mali
Center for Puppetry Arts Collection

25. BAMANA
Fula Horseman
Mali
Center for Puppetry Arts Collection

26. BAMANA
Female Figure
Mali
Center for Puppetry Arts Collection

27. YORUBA
Twin Figures
Southwestern Nigeria
Center for Puppetry Arts Collection

28. BAMANA
Dance Headdress
Eastern Sougou Region
Mali
William & Robert Arnett Collection

29. KUYU
Puppet Head
Zaire
Center for Puppetry Arts Collection

30. IBO
Male Figure
Nigeria
Center for Puppetry Arts Collection
The Center for Puppetry Arts was founded in 1978 to promote puppetry as a performance and visual art form. It is the only major arts institution in the U.S. devoted entirely to puppetry. The Center has three areas of programming: Performance Program for both children and adults, Museum Program and School for Puppetry. Each season our Museum Program features three large-scale exhibitions of puppetry from all over the world. Our permanent collection features over 175 figures. The principal benefactor and founder of the Center for Puppetry Arts Collection is Nancy Lohman Staub.

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