

AFRICAN ART

from the

MARY JOHNSTON COLLECTION

For more than twenty years, Mary L. Johnston of Florence, Oregon, has been caretaker of a collection of West African art that she has freely shared with regional institutions so that residents of the Pacific Northwest might gain a better understanding of the African continent and the people who inhabit it. The collection contains approximately ninety items, one third of which are works by unknown Yoruba artists from Nigeria.

The collection was first acquired by Johnston's older brother, Fred W. Welty. Welty finished his degree in journalism at

Left: Bwa (Burkina Faso/Mali), Plank mask, 20th century, 43" x 7½" x 7", carved and painted wood
Below: Ejagham (Nigeria/Cameroon), Ejagham mask, 20th century, 13½" x 4" x 5½", carved and painted wood



the University of Oregon after serving in a Fifth United States Army unit that had fought its way across North Africa and Italy during World War II. After graduation, he left Oregon for New York and secured a job with *The New York Times*. A year later, he traveled to Germany and began work as a writer for the U.S. Department of State. His career in the foreign service included time spent in Sri Lanka, Singapore, Nigeria and Germany.

During four years in Nigeria (1960-1964), Welty wrote a variety of articles about psychology and psychiatry. He also helped raise money for Nigeria's first psychiatric clinic. In appreciation for his efforts, Welty was presented with an eight-foot-tall carved wooden housepost adorned with Yoruba religious imagery and fertility figures. The gift prompted an interest in West African art that he maintained for the remainder of his life.

Welty had begun collecting objects of historical and aesthetic interest when he was an adolescent living in The Dalles, Oregon. He continued collecting as an adult and in 1971, while in Berlin, he traded some of his acquisitions for nearly two hundred art objects of West African origin. The material had been gathered prior to 1960 by a European collector. Welty traded for the collection sight unseen.

Johnston first saw portions of her brother's African art collection in Connecticut in 1976, when she was returning home after a trip to Russia. The items were stored in boxes in Welty's home and the siblings together opened a few of these. The objects made an impact on Johnston and although some of them were eventually sold to other African art aficionados, she acquired several for herself. When her brother died in 1989, she inherited the remaining items—ninety works of art.

Having completed coursework at Oregon State University and the University of Oregon in the late 1940s, Johnston had left school to marry and raise four boys. After her sons reached adulthood she decided to return to school. Although she had previously been a psychology major, her later choice of majors was

inspired by her interest in her brother's African art collection. By the 1980s, Johnston was owner of a large Bobo antelope mask from Burkina Faso, a male Bambara Chi Wara mask from Mali and a We mask from Ivory Coast. After looking at them every day, she says it "became important to find out what they were about and the people who had used them." Anthropology classes at the University of Oregon provided some of the education that she desired and she graduated in 1994 with a double major in anthropology and psychology.

Johnston continued her education by reading numerous books about African art. She is particularly appreciative of works written by Henry J. Drewal of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her understanding of Yoruba art was significantly enhanced through her friendship with Dr. Olu Adeganmbi (1931-2006), whom she met at the University of Oregon. Dr. Adeganmbi was a Yoruba chief who earned his doctorate in political science in Eugene in 1970. After returning to Nigeria, he held prominent academic posts and served as a consultant on African arts and culture.

Several items in Johnston's collection—a bronze bust of King Ewuare (an important fifteenth-century Yoruba leader), a juvenile Egungun masquerade costume, and several large textiles—were given to Johnston by Dr. Adeganmbi. The gifts were made in appreciation of her friendship and her respect for Yoruba culture. The Egungun costume is one Adeganmbi wore while a teenage participant in the ceremonies of the Yoruba Egungun society.

Johnston has long sought to better understand the historical, social and religious importance of the objects in her care and has used them as an educational tool for cross-cultural understanding. As a result, portions of the collection have been exhibited at the University of Oregon Museum of Natural and Cultural History (1999), Washington State University, Vancouver (2002), Hallie Ford Museum of Art (2008 and 2012), Lane Community College (2012), Maryhill Museum of Art (2014) and elsewhere.

Steven L. Grafe, *Curator of Art*



Bobo (Burkina Faso/Mali), Antelope mask, 20th century, 48" x 11" x 9", carved and painted wood and raffia



Below: Yoruba (Nigeria), Gelede/Efe headdress, 20th century, 19½" x 11¾" x 20", carved and painted wood



Yoruba (Nigeria), Egungun funeral bowl, 20th century, 22" x 13" x 13", carved and painted wood

Further Reading

Drewal, Henry J., John Pemberton, Rowland Abiodun, and Allen Wardwell. *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought*. New York: Center for African Art in Association with H.N. Abrams, 1989.

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Ojo, G.J. Afolabi. *Yoruba Culture: A Geographical Analysis*. London: University of London Press, 1966.

Thompson, Robert F. *African Art in Motion: Icon and Act in the Collection of Katherine Coryton White*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974.

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