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# ARTS OF AFRICA







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### African Art: Then and Now

Dressed in finery and holding swords aloft, the men depicted on this bronze relief plaque demand attention (fig. 1). The artist has recorded every detail of their intricate ensembles, including the beaded coral net crowns that end at the brow-line and accentuate the men's open gazes and abstracted, deep-set eyes. Beaded strands fall from these crowns to the men's shoulders, framing elaborate coral-beaded collars that cover their lower lips. Strands of coral cross the men's torsos, while coral bands encircle their wrists and ankles. Two layers of finely woven cloth and embroidered belts wrap around the men's waists; the faces woven into the pattern on the upper skirt represent the Portuguese people and suggest access to imported luxuries. Leopard-tooth necklaces, leopard hip-ornaments that hide the knot securing their waist wrappers, special swords used for dancing at court, and the profusion of coral regalia all signal that these men are elite courtiers serving the king, or oba, of Benin. The oba is metaphorically praised as a leopard, an animal that is swift, smart, and powerful, while the coral represents the oba's great wealth. This small relief panel, with its world of detail, is part of a much larger commission of more than 850 plaques that once hung in shining magnificence in the audience court of the king of Benin. The story of this object—how it was made, collected, and studied—reflects not only the history of the kingdom of Benin, but also the larger history of African art in Europe and America, and provides an entry point to explore the collection of African art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

The kingdom of Benin, located in what is today Nigeria, included more than two million inhabitants at the height of its power in the sixteenth century, stretching over an area roughly the size of New England. The art, fashion, and political organization of the court inspired its neighbors, influencing many smaller societies in the region. The oba controlled militias feared for their military prowess. Benin's expanding territory brought wealth through tribute payments and the adroit management of trade and markets. The kingdom's internal political struggles led to decreasing regional power in the eighteenth and nine-

fig. 1. Detail of a relief plaque showing two officials with raised swords, by the Benin Royal Bronze Guild, Benin Kingdom, Nigeria, c. 1530–1570



**Pendant with a queen mother playing a gong**, late 17th–early 18th century  
Benin Royal Ivory and Woodworkers' Guild (Igbesanmwun; founded 10th–13th century, Benin kingdom, Nigeria)

This small ivory pendant depicts a queen mother (*iyoba*), the mother of the reigning king, striking a double gong as she might during a public celebration. The *iyoba* is the only woman with rank and authority in the Benin court. She wears a high coral beaded crown, a beaded collar, crisscrossed beaded bandoliers, and a wrapped skirt possibly embroidered with beads and held in place by a knotted belt. Similar pieces in bronze depict a woman with a musical instrument, but this is the only one known in ivory. Bronze ornaments of this size and shape were used to secure and decorate the knot of a man's wrapper, fine cloth layered around his waist like a kilt. Although the object is thin and fragile, it has a loop in the back that suggests it would have formed a waist ornament for a high-ranking palace official. Today only the king wears ivory ornaments at his waist during special palace celebrations.

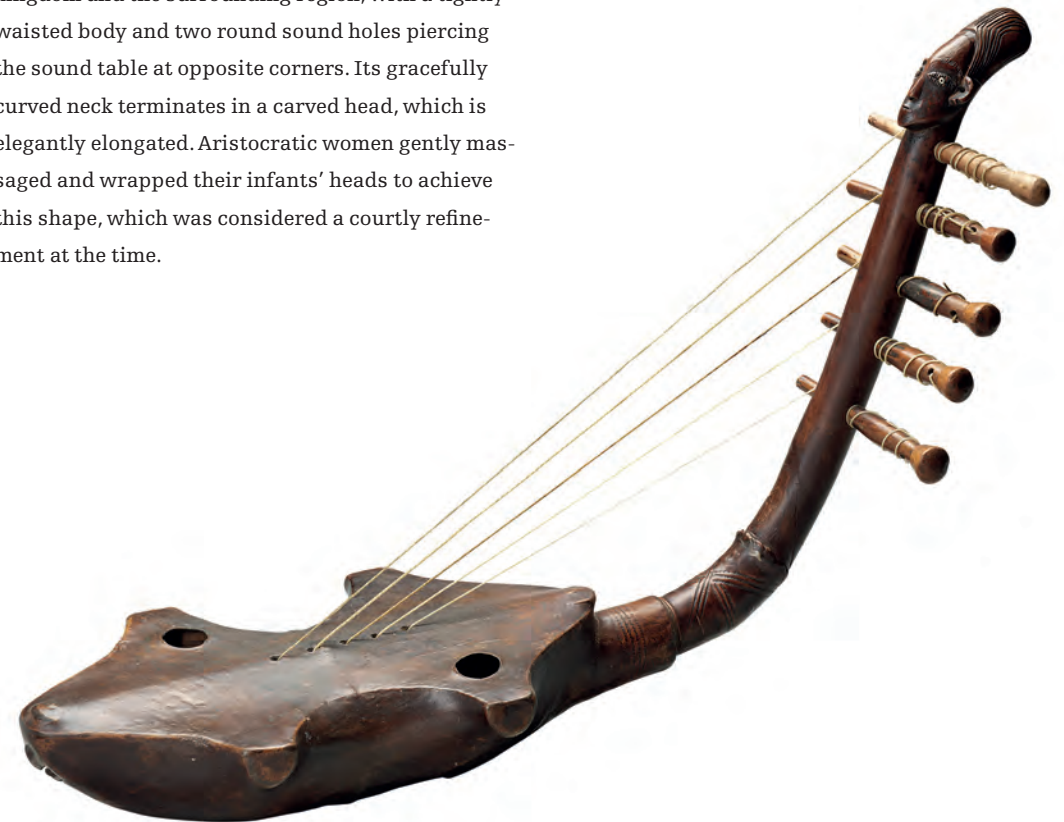
Ivory  
L. 17.1 cm (6 $\frac{3}{4}$  in.), w. 10.2 cm (4 in.)  
Robert Owen Lehman Collection

**Arched harp (*kundi*)**, late 19th century  
In or near Mangbetu kingdom, Democratic Republic of the Congo

When the ruling families of the Mangbetu kingdom took control of a territory near the Uele River in the nineteenth century, they quickly formed a court renowned for its taste and aesthetic refinement. Mangbetu sculptors developed a naturalistic style with smooth, finely finished surfaces. Made for the pleasure of the king and his courtiers, Mangbetu art features luxury decorative objects like this harp. The harp is made in a form commonly used in the kingdom and the surrounding region, with a tightly waisted body and two round sound holes piercing the sound table at opposite corners. Its gracefully curved neck terminates in a carved head, which is elegantly elongated. Aristocratic women gently massaged and wrapped their infants' heads to achieve this shape, which was considered a courtly refinement at the time.

The Mangbetu court garnered its wealth from the control of regional trade, and European officials visited to seek trading alliances with the king. These European visitors appreciated the anthropomorphic court arts they saw in the palace. During the latter half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, Mangbetu kings actively encouraged artists to create pieces based on the human form to be used as diplomatic gifts for foreign officials.

Wood and cowhide  
H. 57 cm (22 $\frac{3}{8}$  in.), w. 14.5 cm (5 $\frac{3}{4}$  in.)  
Helen and Alice Colburn Fund and William E. Nickerson Fund  
1994.194





**Monumental Qur'an folio**, about 1370–75  
Mamluk sultanate, Egypt

A ruler's piety is often a rationale for his authority. Like the kings of Benin, who commissioned altars to seek ancestral help, Mamluk rulers of Egypt commissioned artwork to aid in public prayer. During the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, Mamluk rulers commissioned huge copies of the Qur'an for public reading in mosques and religious schools. These volumes were written in stately *muhaqqaq* (meticulously produced) script distinguished by tall verticals and bladelike, pointed descending strokes. Rich illumination in gold and colors embellished the beginnings of chapters. This folio, commissioned by Sultan al-Malik al-Ashraf Sha'ban (r. 1363–77), may have been completed by calligrapher 'Ali ibn Muhammad al-Mukattib al-Ashrafi, one of his royal scribes. The text on this page is from Sura 85, verses 13–22, and Sura 86, verses 1–7; the first passage reads in part: "The Glorious Lord of the Throne, He does whatever He will. . . . This is truly a glorious Qur'an [written] on a preserved Tablet."

Ink, gold, and color on paper  
H. 75.6 cm (29<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in.), w. 50.2 cm (19<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in.)  
Denman Waldo Ross Collection 09.335

**Basin**, mid-13th century  
Mamluk sultanate, Egypt

The Mamluk court in Cairo hosted lavish banquets, and this basin may originally have been accompanied by a matching ewer to form a set for washing guests' hands before and during the meal. Much of the basin's silver inlay is now missing, possibly picked out during a financial crisis in the fourteenth century, but it originally bore inscriptions with the royal titles of Sultan al-Malik al-Mansur Qalawun (r. 1279–90). The large inscriptions have been altered to reflect another person's titles; perhaps one of Qalawun's successors had them changed to glorify its new owner, or so that it could be used as a gift.

Objects of this kind, bearing inscriptions for the ruler, were politically useful under Mamluk rule. Bombastic pronouncements about military prowess and royal glory, like those found on this bowl, supported men's claims to authority. In this period leadership was not inherited; any member of the powerful class of enslaved soldiers could, at least theoretically, rise in the political hierarchy.

Brass, with silver and copper inlay  
H. 19 cm (7<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in.), w. 46.5 cm (18<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in.)  
Gift of Mrs. Edward Jackson Holmes 50.3627



**Carved stone (*atal* or *akwanshi*)**, before 1905  
Cross River State, Nigeria

This stone sculpture is one of three hundred monoliths found in villages in the northern Cross River State, Nigeria. The heavy basalt rock, smoothed into an ovoid shape by the current of a river a few miles away, has been carved into an expressive face. The wide eyes and brows are raised in an expression of surprise. The hairline extends beyond the plane of the face, and below the chin abstract patterns cover the area where a torso might be. This example is one of the smaller sculptures, measuring just over two feet, although other monoliths measure up to six feet (180 cm) tall.

The Cross River monoliths were first recorded internationally in 1903 by Charles Partridge, a British colonial officer. Many of the sculptures were found overgrown with vines in the center of abandoned towns. At each site, groups of ten to twenty sculptures were set in a circle facing inward. Local communities embraced the sculptures when they were rediscovered at the turn of the century. Scholars at the time believed that the monoliths represented former leaders of the Bakor clans living in this region. Assuming that each sculpture was made to commemorate a chief at his death, these scholars proposed that the tradition began in the seventeenth century. In the 1990s, however, Chief Alul Nkap, an elder in the village of Alok, explained that the stones commemorated both men and women, clan leaders as well as individuals known for their piety, generosity, remarkable beauty, or remarkable ugliness. The monoliths are now included in the New Yam festival, a celebration at the end of the harvest season. Some families have moved the sculptures into the center of their villages, and women paint the surfaces for the festival to refresh the sculptures and honor the ancestors they may represent.

Basalt

H. 73.7 cm (29 in.)

Gift of William E. and Bertha T. Teel 1994.419





Women's fashion changes at a dizzying pace. These two indigo-dyed cloths were worn as a long skirt wrapped and cinched around the waist for everyday wear. First popular in the 1930s, wrappers made with different tie-dyeing techniques, including stitching or binding fabric tightly together to protect it from dye, had a renaissance in the 1960s. The pattern on the striped cloth incorporates two motifs that were particularly popular in the Yoruba city of Ibadan: small white circles in the border, and stripes in the central panel. The

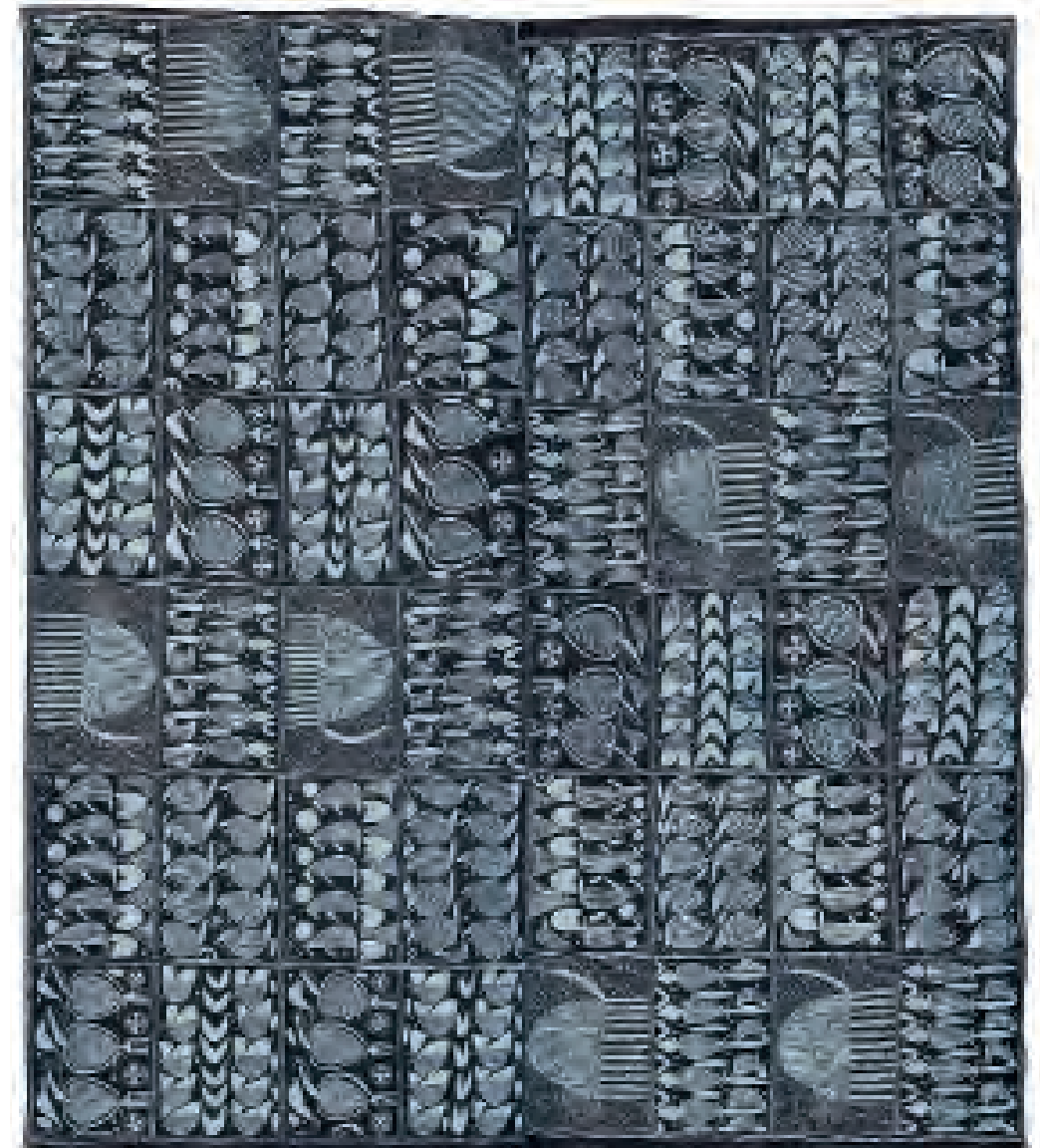
white circles, called a fruit motif, were part of the must-have pattern for 1962; they were made by tying a small stone into the cloth, so that the binding protected the fabric from dye and left a white ring. The stripes, which were all the rage in 1964, were made by folding the fabric and binding it tightly so that white stripes are visible on the final garment.

The overall pattern on the second cloth is a traditional motif that was appreciated in both the 1930s and the 1960s. Unlike the methods described above, this piece required hours of hand-painting with starch to protect the cloth from the dye. After first dividing the cloth into squares, women used cassava flour paste to paint established patterns, and at times, new designs of their own invention. This cloth bears the *Ibadan dun*, or "Ibadan is good,"

pattern, recognizable by the dome on pillars that represents the town hall of this prosperous city. Another square includes a chicken pattern that may allude to the Yoruba creation story.

The beautiful deep blue color is made from local indigo leaves, or from easier-to-use imported indigo grains made by specialists. Indigo dyeing is a com-

plex process that requires oxidation to achieve the final color, and older women in southern Nigeria have traditionally been trusted with the responsibility of maintaining the chemistry of the dye vats.



**Woman's wrapper (*adire alabere iro*),**

mid-20th century

Possibly Ibadan, Nigeria

Cotton plain weave, stitch-resist dyed

L. 168.9 cm (66½ in.), w. 196.9 cm (77½ in.)

Gift of Olaperi Onipede in memory of her parents, Dr. F. Oladipo Onipede and Mrs. Frances A. Onipede 2007.1143

**Woman's wrapper (*adire eleko iro*),**

mid-20th century

Possibly Ibadan, Nigeria

Cotton plain weave, paste-resist dyed

L. 191.8 cm (75½ in.), w. 167.6 cm (66 in.)

Gift of Olaperi Onipede in memory of her parents, Dr. F. Oladipo Onipede and Mrs. Frances A. Onipede 2007.1156





**Mask (*lipiko*)**, about 1930–55

Mueda plateau, Cabo Delgado province, Mozambique

Wood, hair, and pigment

H. 22.2 cm (8¾ in.) Bequest of William E. Teel 2014.315

**Mask (*lipiko*)**, about 1930

Mueda plateau, Cabo Delgado province, Mozambique

Wood and paint

H. 33 cm (13 in.), w. 17.8 cm (7 in.), d. 25.4 cm (10 in.)

Peter von Burchard in memory of Gisela and Joachim von Burchard 2014.1968

Dancing with quick steps in the center of town, two men would have supported these masks on the tops of their heads, their eyes looking out from the mouth of the mask. The smooth skin and finely carved eyes and ears of each mask create an idealized face; the slightly parted lips seem ready to speak. The mask with the turban depicts a Sikh trader from abroad, while the one with closely shaved hair portrays a local Makonde man. A fabric ruff and a tight costume would have concealed each dancer, leaving only his hands and feet visible to the crowd. In collaboration with the sculptor and the musicians, a young man would have commissioned a mask and developed a new choreography to express its character. The dance is both a celebration and an opportunity for public examination of important topics—politics; recent events in the village, such as a scandalous romantic affair; or daily events like cooking, reading, or hunting—communicated through both realistic representation and satire.

In performance, the *lipiko* is simultaneously considered an ancestral spirit, a man, and a character in the narrative of the dance.

These particular masks were both made during a time of significant political change in the Mueda plateau, an area in northern Mozambique. The Portuguese occupation of Mozambique had previously not reached this area, but when Portuguese businesses began to see the plateau as a resource for cotton production, political domination quickly followed. The colonial government used forced labor and tax laws to ensure a steady supply of laborers on plantations and cotton for textile mills in Portugal. Village elders

were pressured to cooperate with the colonial state. In response, thousands of young Makonde men and women moved north into Tanzania, returning home to visit with new ideas and imported luxuries. During this period, the style of Makonde masks changed. The abstract idealism evident here, with tiny lines conveying the nostrils, and delicate spirals to indicate the ears, began in the 1930s. This style may have been

developed by older men, who wished to assert the ancestral component of the masquerade that younger people increasingly challenged. Younger dancers in this period also commissioned masks in the abstract style but introduced new subjects, like the Sikh trader, to convey the increasingly cosmopolitan faces of Makonde daily life.



**Diadem (*tassabt* or *ta'essabt*), 1860s–90s**  
Kabylia, Algeria

A young woman might have received this beautiful diadem as a gift from her parents in Kabylia, a region along the Mediterranean coast in Algeria. The geometric shapes in the center are hammered silver ornamented with green and blue enamel on both sides and set with coral on the front. Small enameled beads flank the central rectangle, while numerous silver half-spheres and delicate wire connect the sections of the diadem together. The small diamond and teardrop shapes at the bottom are also finished with enamelwork, and would have moved against the forehead when worn; the pins at the top helped to secure the jewelry to a headscarf.

Amazigh (formerly called Berber) parents use a dowry payment to purchase jewelry for their daughter to wear on her wedding day and afterwards. Husbands added to their wives' collections throughout their lives together; today, many women also select jewelry for themselves. In 1866, countrywide famines plagued Algeria, and in 1871 the French occupied Kabylia and seized farms from local residents to give to French settlers. Many dispossessed families were forced to sell their jewelry to survive. The French occupation of northern Algeria led to a growing number of colonial officials and tourists in the area; the newcomers admired Amazigh arts and began buying jewelry and pottery as souvenirs. This diadem was purchased by Arthur Croft, the husband of donor Caroline A. Croft (née Brewer), during a trip to Algeria in the 1880s. At the time of his visit, new jewelry pieces were made specifically for the foreign tourist market, although jewelers also continued producing for local clients.



Silver and enamel set with coral  
L. 45.3 cm (17 $\frac{7}{8}$  in.), w. 18.5 cm (7 $\frac{1}{4}$  in.), d. 0.8 cm ( $\frac{3}{8}$  in.)  
Bequest of Mrs. Arthur Croft—The Gardner Brewer Collection  
01.6452



**Women's front skirt (*jocolo*)**, about 1960s  
Msiza village, Odi district, South Africa

Glass beads, leather, and brass

L. 71.1 cm (28 in.), w. 62.9 cm (24 $\frac{3}{4}$  in.)

Museum purchase with funds donated by Alan and Suzanne Dworsky, Jeremy and Hannelore Grantham, Hy and Shirley Zaret Acquisition Fund for African Art, Art of Africa and Oceania, and Lucy Scarborough Conant Fund 2018.76

**Women's ceremonial blanket (*urara*)**, about 1940s–1960s  
Likely Mpumalanga province, South Africa

Glass beads, woolen blanket, bells

L. 170.8 cm (67 $\frac{1}{4}$  in.), w. 168.9 cm (66 $\frac{1}{2}$  in.)

Museum purchase with funds donated by Alan and Suzanne Dworsky, Jeremy and Hannelore Grantham, Hy and Shirley Zaret Acquisition Fund for African Art, Art of Africa and Oceania, and Lucy Scarborough Conant Fund 2018.59

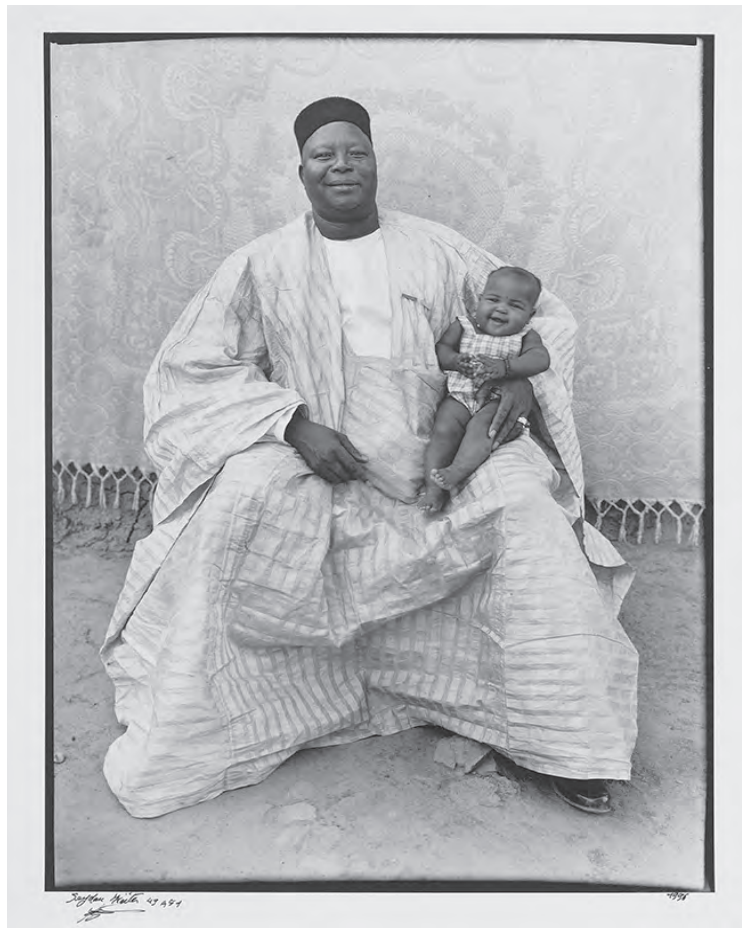
This heavily beaded skirt and blanket reflect changing styles in amaNdebele fashion over the twentieth century. Glass beads imported from Europe and Asia became available in South Africa in the late eighteenth century, and their rarity ensured that only the wealthiest of women could sparingly ornament their clothing with beads. By the twentieth century, beads were cheaper and more plentiful, and clothing styles incorporated them in much greater quantities. AmaNdebele women had previously beaded their clothing and painted their houses with patterns, but in the 1960s they used larger, more colorful patterns to announce their pride in their heritage and identity. During this period, the apartheid government forced black residents off their property and into artificially created “ethnic homelands” with few resources, but refused to recognize the amaNdebele as a distinct ethnicity. Alone among other groups in South Africa, the amaNdebele campaigned for an ethnic homeland

as a way of reuniting their people, who had lost their kingdom and been forced into indentured servitude across South Africa after a brutal war with Boer farmers in 1882.

This skirt—made by a woman living in Msiza village, where families were forcibly resettled in 1953—bears witness to the dislocations of amaNdebele people since the nineteenth century. The skirt is also a testament to the ways that amaNdebele women broadcasted their historic culture while simultaneously asserting their modern identities. The motif—two airplanes over a multistory house with streetlights on either side—speaks to the owner’s cosmopolitanism and hopes for the future, while the rare pink beads and three rows of copper rings display her wealth. Only a married woman may wear a skirt with five rounded flaps at the bottom, and the two tiny flaps on either side indicate that this skirt belonged to an established matron who was beyond her childbearing years.

This heavily beaded woolen blanket was similarly worn by a well-to-do older woman. The blanket itself was made by a factory in Middleburg and dates to the 1940s; the bead colors were chosen to match the stripes of the blanket. The beaded panels are a mix of sections from the same period and newer sections added later to repair breakage and update the fashion of the original garment. The snaking pattern on either side is called “ox-cart brake,” while the pattern in the center is a riff on the letter K, chosen to prove the beader’s skill in creating difficult angular patterns in the final design. While women once wore beaded clothing as part of their everyday clothes, by the 1940s the heavy beaded blanket and finely finished skirt were always considered “best dress.”





***Untitled (Man Holding Baby)***, 1949–51, printed 1996  
**Seydou Keita (1923–2001, Malian)**

Photograph, gelatin silver print  
L. 60.7 cm (23<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in.), w. 50.7 cm (20 in.)

Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation  
Fund for Photography  
2000.1006

***Untitled (Two Women)***, 1958, printed 1997  
**Seydou Keita (1923–2001, Malian)**

Photograph, gelatin silver print  
L. 60.9 cm (24 in.), w. 50.8 cm (20 in.)

Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation  
Fund for Photography  
2000.1005

Seydou Keita is the most celebrated African portrait photographer of the twentieth century. Working in the courtyard behind his house, Keita captured the emerging middle and upper class in Mali with striking immediacy. The stunning use of pattern and texture in his photographs, in his clients' clothing as well as in the bedspreads he used as backdrops, flattens space and emphasizes the sitter's face and gaze. In each of these two photographs, Keita has captured two sitters whose relationship to each other is unknown. Is the smiling man holding the baby a father, grandfather, or uncle? The gleam of pride in his joyful expression suggests a family connection, as does the easy way he holds the happy child. The man's generous tunic makes him appear larger than life, and the baby further exaggerates the impression of a successful family man. The two women are harder to discern. Are they sisters? Co-wives? Friends? They wear clothing in an identical pattern and similar cut. They share a reserved expression appropriate to dignified, well-to-do matrons. The woman on the left wears her hair wrapper in a classic style, while the woman on the right allows hers to fall past her shoulders, its pattern merging with the backdrop.





***Black River*, 2009**

**El Anatsui (born in 1944, Ghanaian, active in Nigeria) Aluminum, bottle caps, and copper wire**

El Anatsui is a professor at the Nsukka campus of the University of Nigeria, an institution known for challenging British colonial art instruction and developing a contemporary aesthetic rooted in Nigerian art history. Although he was born in Ghana, Anatsui has taught at Nsukka since 1975. In his artistic practice, Anatsui challenges himself to use only locally available materials. Here he has sculpted discarded liquor-bottle caps and wrappers into a metallic tapestry, its rolling hills and valleys recalling a topographical map. At the center, a black river seems to seep across a border and may reference disputes over oil wealth and pollution along the Niger River in southeastern Nigeria. Anatsui's sculptures challenge consumption and its relationship to environmental degradation.

Despite its beautiful, shimmering surface the sculpture invokes a history of violence as well as modern ills. Liquor wrappers with names like "Dark Sailor" and "Black Gold" hint at Africa's long history of enslavement and colonial occupation. In keeping with the innovations of the Nsukka school, the piece connects to West African aesthetics in new media and for a new purpose. The blocks of red, black, and yellow stripes at the lower right resemble woven kente cloth from Ghana, a historic Akan tradition that was reinvigorated as a national emblem after Ghana rejected colonial rule in 1957.

L. 266.7 cm (105 in.), w. 355.6 cm (140 in.)

Towles Fund for Contemporary Art, Robert L. Beal, Enid L. Beal and Bruce A. Beal Acquisition Fund, Henry and Lois Foster Contemporary Purchase Fund, Frank B. Bemis Fund, and funds donated by the Vance Wall Foundation 2010.586