Leadership Arts of West Africa

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Presented by the Ohio Arts Council in the Riffe Gallery

Organized by School of Art Gallery, Kent State University

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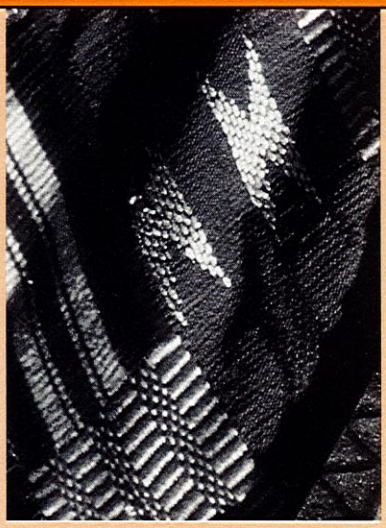

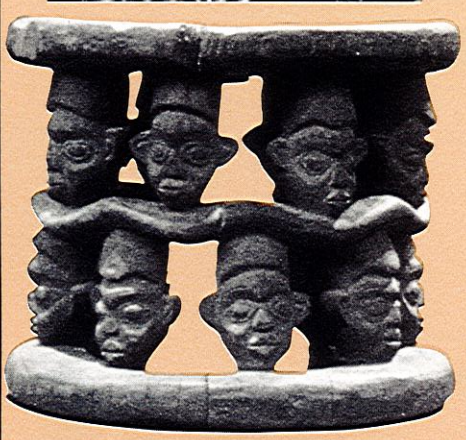

Leadership Arts of West Africa

The art of leadership in West Africa offers a visually rich resource for studying community values, traditions and organizations that structure society. Items in the exhibit *Leadership Arts of West Africa* at the Riffe Gallery include carved wooden stools, masks and figures, as well as accessories such as staffs, jewelry and hats. Special materials, motifs and objects often are the prerogatives of leaders. Objects are displayed individually, in groupings and in vignettes complemented by contextual photographs and didactic labels.

In Africa, art forms that support the political system are used in a wide range of activities including political ritual or drama, decision making and law enforce ment. At the same time, art symbolizes the importance of cooperation, shared beliefs and the responsibilities of both rulers and the ruled. The political structure and culture of a group determine in large part the type of political art employed. There are many kinds of traditional leaders in West Africa.

In non-centralized societies, councils of elders, masking associations and a variety of religious leaders make the major decisions and enforce community responsibilities. Among a number of ethnic groups in eastern Sierra Leone and western Liberia, two major secret societies exert considerable political, social and economic power. The Poro, a male association, makes most

major political and judicial decisions. Only a few wooden masks are used by Poro members; they play a minor role.

For women, the Sande society lays down rules of conduct, prescribes rules of behavior and educates young girls for an accepted pattern of life. European reports, as early as the 16th century, mention women's societies in this area. Sande is an unusual African association because wooden masks are worn exclusively by women. These blackened helmet masks, which represent spirits, are characterized by rings of fat around the neck and an elaborate coiffure. One of their roles is to maintain cooperation between the human and spiritual worlds.

Political art in centralized societies usually symbolizes and supports the authority of individual kings or chiefs. In these examples, art frequently becomes an active instrument of power. West African leaders, in general, have attached significance to their art forms, which are imbued with deeply held, strongly shared beliefs.

Among the Asante of Ghana, leadership regalia and elaborate prestige items for royals and others of high status are an important area of artistic activity. Gold has been associated with leadership in this part of West Africa from at least the 15th century. The linguist is an important court official for the Asante, serving as the chief spokesman and advisor to the king. As a symbol of his authority, he carries a staff covered with gold foil. Elaborate staffs with figurative finials are a 19th-century product of Asante expansion. There is a wide range of finial images, which usually depict proverbs or other verbal forms relating to power issues. One example, consisting of two men seated on stools in front of a table, refers to this proverb: "Food belongs to the rightful owner and not to one who is hungry."

In general, a variety of art forms define and support traditional leadership in both centralized and non-centralized societies of West Africa. These objects, which range from embodiments of power to symbols of authority or emblems of achievement, have aesthetic and artistic purposes but also function in historical, religious, philosophical and political ways. The contextual meaning of such objects is a major focus of *Leadership Arts of West Africa.*

From an essay prepared by Fred T. Smith, KSU gallery director, for dialogue magazine.

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The Ohio Arts Council, a state agency established in 1965, is committed to the economic, educational and cultural development of Ohio. The Council believes the arts should be shared by the people of Ohio. The arts arise from public, individual and organizational efforts. The OAC supports and encourages those efforts.

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The Riffe Gallery, operated by the Ohio Arts Council, showcases the work of Ohio's artists and the collections of the state's museums and galleries.

Riffe Gallery
Vern Riffe Center for
Government and the Arts
77 South High Street
Columbus, Ohio
614/644-9624

Gallery Hours
M,Tu,W 11-4
Th,F 11-7:30
Sat,Sun 12-4
Free Admission