

The exhibition of African Arts at the Palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco is a significant departure from previous African exhibits in both the works themselves and the multimedia in which they are presented. In an effort to involve more than the eye in the show, the curators have installed the sound of drums, bold images of African life via slides synchronized to the exotic odor of cocoa-bean husks which are spread thickly across the floor of the exhibit.

Most of America's exposure to African art has been in the form of ritual sculpture imported, for the most part, from Western Africa. The present exhibit holds many pieces which relate to sculpture, but still remain as articles of personal adornment. They come from everywhere in Black Africa.

More than a collection of fascinating objects, this show provides an intimate insight into the African personality as expressed in its artifacts. It is immediately obvious that great pride is taken in the beauty and correctness of personal appearance. Subtlety is rarely important in African art. Visceral feelings surface in the strong design and bold decoration of the most ordinary objects. Combs, hairpins, razors, tweezers and sweat-scrappers all become vehicles for energetic artistry. The decorative motifs are large, bold and up-front. Two brass rings have decorative elements which extend five inches out from the finger.

Many of the garments and accoutrements are not only conspicuously visible, but kinetic and audible as well. They clank, brush, shimmer and jangle as the wearer moves. One woman's belt has a large pom-pom attached to the back which wiggles provocatively as she walks.

No material in the African environment escapes incorporation into costume: bone and horn, mirrors, feathers, seeds, monkey hair, cowrie shells, copper, silver, ivory, gold and anteater claws. Grisgris (leather amulets) combine with yellow amber, silver coins and coral in a handsome necklace from Mali. There is a Tanzanian necklace decorated exclusively with beetle-wing covers.



Feathered Hat

Humor and fantasy abound throughout the show. A group of rings bear kinship to the current visions of Bay Area ceramicists: the decoration of one is a miniature pair of sandals, while on another rests a single peanut, both cast in solid brass. Local people seeking inspiration for fantastic garb should take note of the long cloak completely covered by feathers; the yard-high beaded crown on which a bird sits, the draw-string breeches which, undrawn, measure twenty feet across and the immense beaten-gold earrings weighing half a pound each!

Imagine wearing two Long-Playing records around your ankles. Ibo ladies proudly wear brass discs thirteen inches wide on both ankles, making their walk a tricky waddle. Other prestige-conferring anklets weigh sixteen pounds each and are put on permanently, insuring the encumbered wearer a life of certain

leisure. Holes in the ear lobes are stretched to hold large boxes, tubes, and round wooden ear plugs, such as the one pictured here. The extreme example of willingly endured discomfort is that of scarification. Elaborate patterns are formed on the skin by artificially retarding the healing of small incisions, resulting in raised knobs darker than the surrounding skin; or by removing small portions of skin to create depressed, circular scars lighter than the skin around



Ear plug



# CLOTHES MAKE THE MUSEUM!

## African Art at the Palace of the Legion of Honor

by Jerelle Kraus

them. The exhibit includes photos of striking scarring patterns on the faces and backs of young people whose coming of age has thus been marked forever. Fashion is fortunately less fleeting in Africa than it is here. An American man in his middle-age may regret the Rosie tattoo on his chest from his sailor days, but the African carries proudly for life the ritual and decorative scars created in his early childhood and adolescence.

Hair, too, is a material for art. With his own hair and the help of mud, resin, animal fat and hide, the African creates exquisite sculpture. His sleeping head protected by wooden headrests, the elaborate hair sculpture lasts for months. In addition to shaping the hair itself, Africans adorn their coiffeurs with large ornamental hairpins and combs of bone, wood, ivory and copper which protrude far out from the head.

Correct form in draping the body varies greatly throughout Africa. For the male Zulu in South Africa the accepted minimum dress is a small penis cap. Several examples of these carved wooden caps in various interesting shapes are included in the exhibit. In other areas, a minimum costume consists of many layers of

cloth wrapped and tied about the body and head. The variety of handsome textiles produced in Africa is well-represented in this exhibit.

In addition to the wearing of specified garments, certain devices are sometimes required to complete one's costume. Elders are expected to carry a whisk, presumably to protect them from insects. This too has become a vehicle for decoration and play.

The whisk pictured here is made of an elephant's tail, its handle is covered with embossed sheet gold and plaited strips of gold and silver. The tail hairs have been embellished with beads of bone, glass and coral.

Drawings by Jerelle Kraus

Instead of gold trophies or framed certificates, skill and achievement are rewarded in Africa by personal objects which one wears or carries. One photo shows a

man in the fields, bare chested, proudly wearing the plumed hat which testifies to his skill as a champion cultivator. Another hat signifying prestige and depicted here was fashioned entirely of feathers.

The show is rich in tradition, culture and fantasy. Even the most urbane Bay Area resident will inevitably take with him a touch of tribal Africa in its contemporary and ageless modes.

CALIFORNIA PALACE OF THE LEGION OF HONOR, Lincoln Park, San Francisco. Thru September 3, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. daily.

Whisk