

## AFRICAN TEXTILES AND DECORATIVE ARTS - WALL LABEL

This exhibition has been prepared under the auspices of The International Council of The Museum of Modern Art, and has been made possible by generous grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and Exxon Corporation.

African art has been known to the Western World since Portuguese explorers first visited the West African Coast almost 500 years ago. In this century the West has come to understand and appreciate the power and beauty of African sculpture, but textiles, ornaments and useful objects - particularly as they relate to the decoration of the body - have remained largely unknown to all but collectors and anthropologists.

Of the 99 textiles and 142 decorative objects in this exhibition, all assembled from institutions and individual collectors in the United States, about 90% were produced within the last 100 years. Perhaps 75% can still be found in use, or on sale, or in current production in Africa. The textiles are perhaps least known and may therefore offer the greatest number of surprises. The more familiar jewelry ranges from bone-crushing bronze and iron to delicately modelled gold.

Like such earlier Museum of Modern Art exhibitions as African Negro Art (1935), Indian Art of the United States (1941), Arts of the South Seas (1946), Ancient Arts of the Andes (1954), Textiles and Ornamental Arts of India (1955), and Art of the Asmat (1962), the present exhibition chooses work distinguished for its esthetic excellence, and which the sensibilities of our own time find particularly sympathetic.

(over)

## TEXTILES

Two types of looms are found in West Africa from Senegal through Nigeria: a fixed frame, comparatively wide vertical loom used by women; and a horizontal narrow-band loom used by men. The women's vertical loom may descend from an early type used for raffia; the men's horizontal loom was probably introduced from the north by way of the trans-Saharan trade routes.

Beaten bark cloth and raffia have continued in use well into the twentieth century, particularly in those areas of Central Africa where the spinning and weaving of cotton did not spread. Cotton cloth, of homespun or imported fibers, is highly developed in West Africa. The women's vertical loom is capable of producing large cloths useable as wraparounds as they come off the loom, but the horizontal men's loom produces a long, narrow strip which must be cut and edge-sewn to make a large cloth. Bands of color woven into each strip yield surprising rhythmic patterns when the strips are sewn together. Some examples from Niger, Ghana, and Upper Volta are particularly sophisticated, rivaling in their design qualities the elegance of the Japanese or the studied control of the Bauhaus.

Although there are many exceptions, woven or dyed patterns tend to be abstract rather than figurative. African textiles seldom present "pictures" of something, although parts of a design may have symbolic meaning. Along with tie-dyeing in traditional patterns, painting, patchwork, and embroidery are also used to enhance the basic cloth.

## COSTUME

Most African ritual costumes camouflage the identity of the wearer, who acts for the community rather than himself when he takes on the character of a supernatural force during a ceremony. Other costumes enhance individuality, symbolizing status and prestige as well as a personal sense of fashion. Decorative additions.

(more

such as embroidery or applique, indicate the owner's wealth and taste. At times high style consists of accumulation: a robe may not only be larger and of finer cloth and much embroidered; it may also be combined with several other garments to declare the wearer's importance. In hunters' and warriors' clothing the addition of amulets, written spells, and symbolic objects produces sinister effects related more to sculpture than to textiles.

#### JEWELRY

Decorative art in Africa extends from ornament worn on the body as adornment, or as a badge of distinction, to such transformations of the body itself as scarification, paint, and elaborate semi-permanent hair styles. Iron, bronze and gold have always been highly prized, but many other materials have been used: glass, stone, bone, and even beetle wings. Many of the metal objects are cast by the lost-wax process, a technique probably imported along the Saharan trade routes. In areas where gold was in short supply, even in major kingdoms such as Benin, brass was as rare or rarer than gold and became the metal of royal prerogative.

#### EXHIBITION CREDITS

Material was selected for the exhibition by its Guest Director, Professor Roy Sieber of Indiana University; Katherine White Reswick, Consultant to Professor Sieber; and Arthur Drexler, Director of the Museum's Department of Architecture and Design; with research and special assistance by Rosalyn Walker Randall and Kathryn Eno.

The exhibition was designed by Arthur Drexler; lighting and special settings are by Gene Moore.

The exhibition is accompanied by a publication, African Textiles and Decorative Arts, with text by Roy Sieber and a bibliography by Rosalyn Walker Randall.