

Exhibition Guide

Odwindifuor Expressions

This exhibition, created through a partnership with the Chicago Heights Sister Cities Program, features works by artists and artisans from Aburi in the Eastern Region of Ghana, Africa. Works include wood carvings, masks, textiles and beaded jewelry.

The Eastern Region of Ghana, located on the peninsula of Ashantiland, is one of ten administrative regions in Ghana. It is bordered on the east by the large Lake Volta. The mountainous area is highly forested, and is often used as an area for peaceful retreat because of its physical beauty. There are resorts for vacationing, and the town of Aburi is well known for its Botanical Gardens. In industry the area is a center for diamond mining and for fish farming, as well as for its renowned wood carving market.

Carving in Ghana began as a communal form of expression reflecting the ideas and ideals of a particular ethnic group or community. Carving was done under the strict oversight of priests, clan leaders and chiefs, so that there was little variety in expression during the early development of carving. Wood carving sustained communal cultural life as various functional objects were created. Carving began in forested areas, and fully developed in an area like Aburi because of its rich assortment of trees and wood. Carvers became specialists in carving so that carving became an occupation, with only a few carvers in each small community. Carvers were treated as special because it was seen that their talent was God-given and they were considered a privileged minority. This gave the artisans special status within a community. Akan wood carvers who were versatile in the production of all kinds of wood carvings were called "Ohene Dwumfuor", which literally translates as "the Chief's carpenter". Akan traditional carvers were greatly feared, respected and admired for their ingenuity and the practicality of their stylizations. The word "odwindifuor," used in the title of the exhibition, refers to the sacred wood carver.

Women were not allowed to carve, so that carving became an exclusively male activity as the profession grew. Following tradition required that when a tree was to be felled to carve, a ritual took place to purify the tree. This was seen as necessary to remove any potential malevolent spirits that might inhabit the tree. Early carvers produced many types of utensils for the home, including stools, masks, beds, combs, rattles and special utensils for the use of chiefs.

Figurative sculptures were created for ethnic religious practices. Because there were superstitions suggesting that the spirit of unfinished carving could affect individuals such as pregnant women, carving was done in a private location. This added to the idea that the act of carving and carvers were sacred, and also allowed the carvers utmost concentration at their craft.

Contemporary creations in wood follow symbolism from the past, but there have been inventions in techniques and ideas in the objects such as those seen here. Many carvers still create functional objects used in buildings and in daily life and ritual, but much of the work is created for sale through tourism. The wood carving industry is a craft based in tradition but happily has retained its cultural and economic importance. Markets such as that in Aburi are throughout the country, but Aburi is known as a center for wood carving considered the best in all of Africa. The objects shown in this exhibition exemplify the quality of what is being created by contemporary artisans, and much of the work is being collected in the United States by African American collectors.

There is a melding of the sacred and profane as a central feature of African aesthetics. Subject matter is often focused on the family when the work is not functional, and frequently depicts the tender relationship of a mother with her child. At times, work has as its subject the daily activities found in Africa, but is always depicted with strong use of pattern, sophisticated color relationships, and forms that are exaggerated for maximum expression. In fact, traditional African art was fetishized and “aesthetically cannibalized” by European modernists like Picasso and Modigliani. *1 Many western artists have responded to the elongated forms found in masks, with human features made more abstracted than realistic. This aesthetic became an important part of the Modern Art movement in the USA, helping to move Realism and Naturalism into Abstraction.

The collection of works exhibited here belong to the African aesthetic, and have many traits found from various areas of Africa. But the country of Ghana became a mecca for wood carving, allowing the craft of wood (“dua” in the Akan language local to this area) in sculpture to develop into an art form that is both highly aesthetic and meaningful in its continuance of traditions and culture through its use of symbolism.

*1. Lauren DeLand, Review of Sanford Biggers at Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago in **Art in America**, May 2016.

Also exhibited in this exhibition are several examples of textiles and wearable art. This region of Ghana is best known for the cloth known as Kente cloth, an intricately hand-woven and bright colored textile. There are two types of Kente cloth, the Ewe and the Asante Kente. Weaving of Kente cloth is highly laborious and takes many years to learn, so that the cloth can be very expensive. Each pattern or color is distinguished by its own symbolism. These cloths have become very collectible.

Beading is another craft found in the Aburi area, with beads as an integral part of Ghana's culture. The beads are made of glass and comprise three types: powder glass beads, translucent beads (probably made from recycled bottles) and painted glass beads. The liquid glass is set into ceramic molds and baked in a kiln made of termite clay. Once they cool and are removed from the molds, beads are washed and polished. Beads were worn by African women around their waist and were considered an ornamental and symbolic adornment, often representing wealth and aristocracy.

Beads were used to represent social status, and were said to be symbolic of sacred knowledge. Traditionally, different colors represented different tribes, but in modern times, beads are used more decoratively, and for sale as a craft.

We are very fortunate here at Prairie State College to have the opportunity to exhibit these works of high craftsmanship, creativity and beauty. The exhibition has been made possible by the following, for whom we extend special thanks:

Asuogyaman District Assembly Sister Cities Organization:

Rev. Samuel Adjei-Debrah, Chairman

William Asare-Gyapong, Secretary

Aburi Industrial Art Centre:

Nana Krobea Asante, President

Opoku Dijan Daniel, Vice President

Chicago Heights Sister City-African Diaspora Initiative, Inc. (CHSC-ADI, Inc.)

Kevin Perkins, Chairman

