

recent exhibitions

ART FROM ZAÏRE

100 Masterworks

from the National Collection

The African-American Institute, N.Y.

October 9, 1975-January 21, 1976

The African-American Institute (New York) is to be congratulated for providing to the general public and to the scholar, artist, collector, and art lover alike, a remarkable collection of sculptures from Zaïre. The exhibition consists of 100 artworks from the National Collection of Zaïre, brought together in recent years by the Institute of the National Museum and rarely displayed in previous years. A handsome, well-illustrated, and bilingual (English and French) catalog entitled *Art from Zaïre: 100 Masterworks from the*

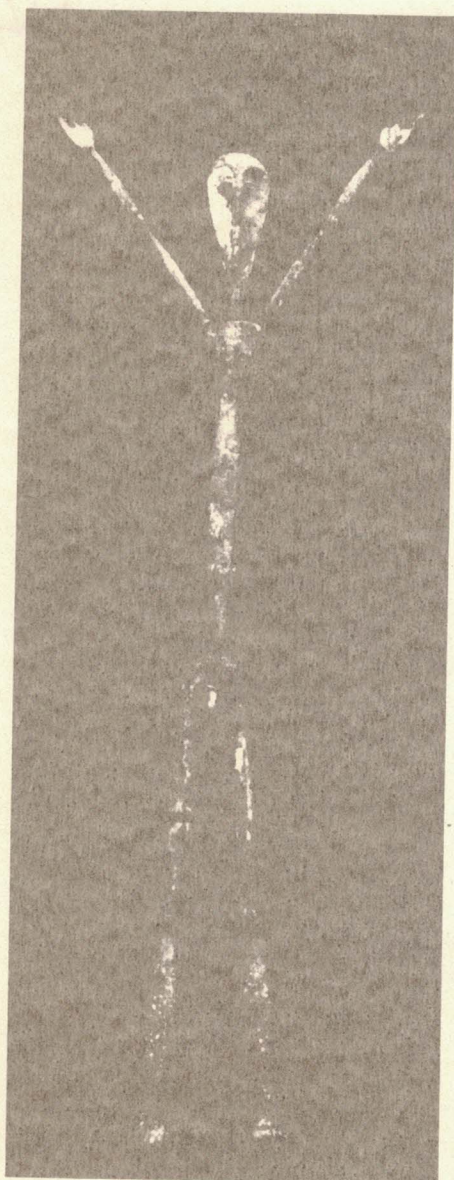
National Collection accompanies the exhibition. I want to discuss the exhibition itself, the significance of the objects, and the quality of the catalog.

The African-American Institute has only limited space for the display of collections. The two small rooms and the built-in cases in a corridor which house the Zaïre collection are sufficient in order for this small collection to be viewed in proper perspective. The sculptures are presented in a sober, careful and aesthetically pleasing manner. Each object is discretely and simply identified: ethnic area, type; size; and material. For the general public, this is just as useful as long descriptive statements which often distract from the aesthetic and cultural impact that such an exhibition intends to convey. No particular conceptual framework underlies the groupings and arrangement of the objects, neither ethnic nor stylistic nor typological nor functional. This procedure is probably effective in creating a certain aesthetic image. The vital cultural message, however, would be served better if a conceptual framework had been provided. Given the small number of objects and various limitations on space, this might not have been easy. The lack of photographs is regrettable. Photographs showing at least some of the artworks in their physical setting and in a context of usage or performance would have greatly increased the cultural impact of the exhibition. The masks hang against walls or from stands; some objects stand freely, while others are fixed onto metallic stands. I regret the latter procedure, for it unduly interferes with the forms and the aesthetic effects they are meant to convey. These artificial devices should be discarded and an attempt made to present the artworks in new ways, some of which might approximate the actual

manner in which they are viewed by their own users and patrons.

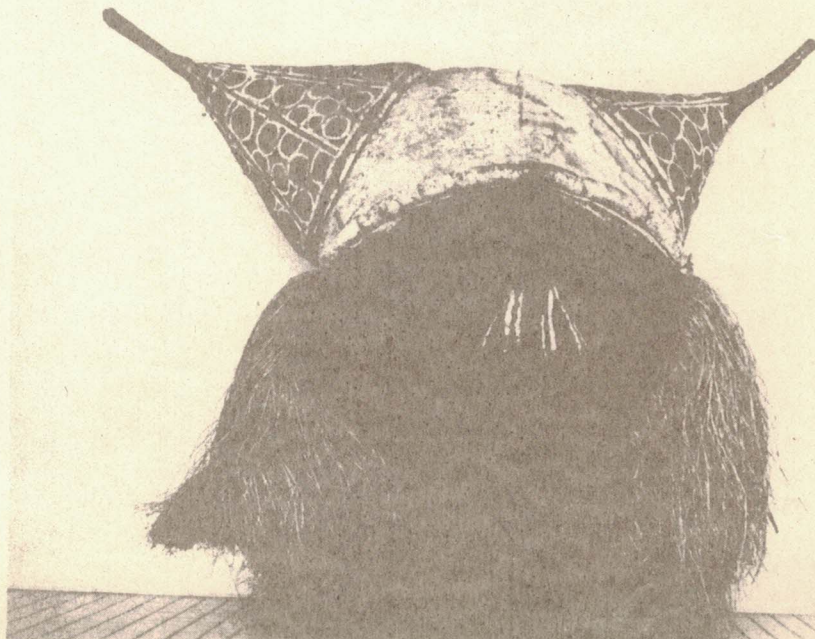
The sculptures themselves derive from many different ethnic groups. Some of these are well known in the literature of art, such as the Kongo, Kuba, Luba, Suku, Yaka, Pende, Teke, Cokwe, Salampasu, or Ngbaka. Others are less frequently or very rarely mentioned, such as Lela, Lula, Holo, Nkanu, Nkucu, Biombo, Lengola, Komo, and Ngombi. Half of the total collection illustrates forms from the Kongo, Kuba, Luba, and Hemba. Several areas of Zaïre artistic grandeur are not represented because the National Collection of Zaïre "simply do not have in its collection any major examples from these cultures" (p. 16 of the catalog). Cultures of northwestern and northeastern Zaïre and of the eastern forest region are almost entirely lacking, as are works from the Luluwa, Tabwa, Mbagani, etc. The artworks encompass great many categories and types, ranging from masks to figurines, drums to stools, scepters and staffs to fly-whisks, cups to boxes, etc. Within the areas illustrated, many categories of masks or figurines are obviously missing. The artistic quality of these sculptures is generally high; many are admirably patinated, showing also the traces of intensive usage and age. There are a few superb pieces from the Hemba, Kuba, and Kongo. Most of the objects from the Pende, Cokwe, Teke, Mbalu, and Salampasu, however, can hardly be placed in the category of "masterworks." The cultural and art historical significance of several of the objects displayed is outstanding (e.g., the large, jointed Lengola figure; the Kuba scepter; the Yaka and Komo masks; the Hemba, Lula, Biombo, and Binji carvings). Undoubtedly, the general aesthetic and cultural message of the exhibition is momentous.

The catalog is commendable. All objects displayed are illustrated in black and-white plates, and some of them ad-



JOINTED FIGURE. LENGOLA
WOOD, APPROX. 220cm. CAT. NO. 95

MASK. YAKA. RAFFIA, FIBERS, PAINT, METAL.
155cm. CAT. NO. 38



Traditional dress from Senegal, Mali, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, and Cameroon, collected by Susan Aradeon and presented to Howard University, was displayed at the Museum of African Art together with 175 carved hand loom pulleys from the collection of Harold Rome, representing the Dogon, Bambara, Senufo, Kulango, Baule, Guro, Ashanti, and Yoruba peoples. The exhibition was organized jointly by the Museum and the Howard University School of Ecology. Sponsored by a grant from the U.S. Department of State, the Museum's first artist-in-residence, weaver Bobbo Ahiagble from Denu, Ghana, worked daily for three months at a loom built under his supervision and set up in the galleries.

The exhibition of pulleys, the most comprehensive ever organized, presented special problems. Little previous catalogue documentation on the subject exists. Research on specific pulley representations has been scant from any area of West Africa, and since an intricately carved pulley is a rare sight on a weaver's loom today, the tradition is one that is all but lost to posterity. Therefore, the Museum's approach has been to present this collection of miniatures as a microcosm of both regional aesthetic and religious structure. Conventions reflecting various concepts of female beauty, for example, are compared using a selection of fifteen figures from one group as an index. The convexity of Guro faces contrasts with groups of flatter, less complicated Baule designs. Flat, sloping Ashanti heads, similar to the *Akua'ba*, hang next to the sharply linear faces of the Bambara, and the full-featured Yoruba heads.

Pulley forms, carved in styles familiar to scholars of dance and shrine iconography, represent the weavers' special understanding of the world-view shared by their communities. Thus the *kpelle*, the ancestor representation found in clan masks of the Senufo *Lo* society, and the *porpianong*, primordial animal and symbol of gestation for the neophyte males, are religious conceptions important also to the Senufo weaver. Dogon dual figures suggest the descent of the seventh *nommo* and the union of the two great gifts from God—weaving and the Word—with the *nommo* imparted simultaneously. Thus, the exhibition illustrates that spiritual figures within an ethnic group are not necessarily bound to one particular mode, such as the Baule *kplekple* to masked dance, or the Ashanti *Akua'ba* to a carried charm, but may be incorporated in different forms for assorted functions by believers with different interests or occupations. But weaver Bobbo advised caution in assign-



SCEPTER, KUBA. COPPER AND IRON
30cm. CAT. NO. 53



FIGURINE MOLDED WITH RED POWDER
BY A WOMAN KUBA. 23cm. CAT. NO. 66

Cornet, Associate Director General of the Institute of the National Museums of Zaïre. The catalog is arranged by ethnic groups, beginning in the conventional manner with the Kongo and ending with the Ngbaka, but special attention is given to various discrete units, such as the Lula, Leele, or Hemba. The short introductions are very general in content and add little to our knowledge, but the captions to the plates contain new evidence and information. Particularly striking is the fact that the African name (generic or specific?) for most objects is given, together with the exact locality and zone of their provenance (these are probably the places where the objects were collected, but there is no indication whether they were also carved there). This is a highly welcome addition to the caption style, which stands in sharp contrast to the space-filling jargon that often replaces the precise ethnographical ascriptions of usage, function, and meaning (See, for example, the captions to Plates 35, 41, 57, 61, or 98).

Finally, the purpose and scope of the bibliography which only includes eleven titles (seven of them without an author) and almost no first-hand sources, are a puzzle to me.

On the whole, this exhibition is a memorable event; it is certain to leave a deep imprint on the mind of its many viewers as it travels to various cities in the United States (See p. 59).

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MASK, KOMO. WOOD, 26.8cm.
CAT. NO. 96