

THE BRITISH MUSEUM, THE SAINSBURY AFRICAN GALLERIES

On the 4th November 2002, I visited the Sainsbury African Galleries at the British Museum, with my art group. The trip was very interesting and a great opportunity to sketch some African art first hand, instead of having to copy from books or photos.

The collection consists of over 200,000 objects and includes both archaeological and contemporary material, which includes both unique masterpieces and objects of everyday life. Highlights of the collection include a magnificent brass head of a Yoruba ruler from Ife, Nigeria, Asante gold work from Ghana and the Torday collection of Central African sculpture, textiles and weapons. There was also a great amount of other masks, pottery, woodcarving, textiles and jewellery. Below is a bit about each of these:

Masks

Masks are used at masquerade. Masquerade is the art of transformation which often occurs during changes in the seasons and rites of passage such as initiation and death. Masquerades use many different materials and techniques. Masks can be made of cloth, metal, basketry, leaves, plastic, resin, calabash and clay as well as wood.

Within the gallery there is a video clip which shows a rehearsal of the *Bekinarusibi* ('big ship on head') and Otobo (*hippopotamus*) masquerades that the men will perform when possessed by the relevant spirit.

This masquerade (right) represents a hippopotamus dancer. A hippopotamus is seen as a dangerous creature, causing the death of travellers by upsetting the ir canoes. The hippopotamus masquerade is also seen as wild and unpredictable. When it performs in the towns, it may attack and injure spectators.

Pottery

Pottery is one of the oldest arts of Africa. Pots are usually made by women. Though cheap and functional, African pots combine utility with great beauty. Pots can also have spiritual symbolism and may contain the spirits of ancestors, deities or even diseases. Marriage often involves making new pots, while old ones are smashed when someone dies.

A video within the gallery shows key stages of pottery manufacture in the Gwari village of Ushafa in Central Nigeria.

Woodcarving

The familiar carved figures serve many purposes. They may represent dead ancestors, act as images for controlling magical powers, reflect the wealth and power of their owner or be sold as souvenirs for tourists and art collectors. The skill of the sculptor is to shape such objects from a single piece of wood with an adze (a small axe with a horizontal blade), expressing his own creativity within the bounds of conventional local styles.

Stools, thrones and formal arrangements of seating are connected to the display of prestige, as are implements for public smoking, eating and drinking. These items are powerfully associated with the individual and often must be destroyed or hidden on the death of the individual.

Textiles

Textile arts flourish in many parts of Africa, using both manual and mechanised technologies. Local and imported materials are used to produce cloth for practical and symbolic purposes.

African textiles and costume communicate important religious, historical and social information about the cultures to which they belong. They act as markers of status indicating wealth and conferring prestige, enabling members of specific social or cultural groups to be identified. They also play a significant part in ceremonies relating to initiation, marriage and death as well as a functional role in domestic items such as blankets, mosquito nets, tents, hammocks and baby carriers.

Jewellery

Both men and women in Africa wear a striking array of jewellery and other accessories made from diverse materials. In addition, tattooing, scarification and body painting, elaborate hairstyles or hair shaving, the insertion of lip plates or ear plugs and exaggerating the shape of the head or neck are all means of adorning and transforming the body.

An impressive array of objects on display includes a lip plate from Sudan, beaded boots and a beaded crown from Nigeria, hinged silver anklets and an elaborately decorated lyre from Sudan, which is elaborately decorated with strings of glass beads, cowry shells, coins, rosaries, amulets and miscellaneous metal objects.