



EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

PERFORMANCE AS SACRED

1. *Antelope Dance Headpiece (Male)*, twentieth century, wood. Gift of Joseph and Doris Gerofsky, 1994.6.3.a.
2. *Antelope Dance Headpiece (Female)*, twentieth century, wood. Gift of Joseph and Doris Gerofsky, 1994.6.3.b.
3. *Antelope Mask (Chi Wara)*, late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century, wood. Gift of Charles E. and Kathleen Myers, 1975.1.33.
4. *Granary Door with Chi Waras and Masks*, twentieth century, wood. Gift of Charles E. and Kathleen Myers, 1975.1.60.
5. *Mask*, twentieth century, wood. Gift of Joseph and Doris Gerofsky, 1997.6.28.

PERFORMANCE AS SOCIAL

6. *Standing Female Figure*, twentieth century, wood, fabric, cowrie shells. Gift of Joseph and Doris Gerofsky, 1996.9.3.
7. *Standing Female Figure*, twentieth century, wood. Gift of Joseph and Doris Gerofsky, 1996.9.15.
8. *Standing Female Figure*, twentieth century, wood. Gift of Joseph and Doris Gerofsky, 1995.8.25.
9. *Standing Female Figure*, twentieth century, wood. Gift of Joseph and Doris Gerofsky, 1994.6.4.
10. *Bogolanfini* (mud cloth), twentieth century, cotton. 2004.2.

PERFORMANCE AS ENTERTAINMENT

11. *Dance Headpiece (Segoni Koun)*, twentieth century, wood. Gift of Joseph and Doris Gerofsky, 1998.11.13.
12. *Female Marionette*, twentieth century, wood. Gift of Joseph and Doris Gerofsky, 1994.6.2.a-c.
13. *Figure, Janus Head*, twentieth century, wood. Gift of Joseph and Doris Gerofsky, 1976.1.3.

Video footage courtesy of Mary Jo Arnoldi (Smithsonian Institution) and Stephen Wooten (University of Oregon).

FURTHER READING

Arnoldi, Mary Jo. "Performance, Style, and the Assertion of Identity in Malian Puppet Drama," in *Performance in Contemporary African Arts*, ed. Ruth M. Stone. Bloomington: Indiana University, 1988, 87-100.

Ezra, Kate. *A Human Ideal in African Art: Bamana Figurative Sculpture*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1986.

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LaGamma, Alisa. *Genesis: Ideas of Origin in African Sculpture*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002.

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THE TROUT GALLERY

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Cover: *Antelope Dance Headpiece (Male)*, twentieth century, wood. Gift of Joseph and Doris Gerofsky, 1994.6.3.
Opposite Page: *Bamana Wood Dance Headpiece (Segoni Koun)*, twentieth century, wood. Gift of Joseph and Doris Gerofsky, 1998.11.13.

Mafilè Fèn: Something to Look at BAMANA Dance and Art

May 27, 2016–January 14, 2017



THE TROUT GALLERY The ART MUSEUM of Dickinson College

MAFILÈ FÈN AND PERFORMANCE IN BAMANA SOCIETY

The Bamana are among the oldest ethnic groups in what is today the Republic of Mali. Situated mostly in the central region of the country, Bamana villages occupy lands near the Niger and Bani Rivers. The Bamana maintain a culture that centers much of its festive and daily social activities on the concept of performance. A variety of performative genres can be seen in age, class, gender, religious, and social groups among the Bamana, representing an integral part of their identity. The Bamana utilize performance in a way that communicates cultural ideologies while reinforcing social structures and power dynamics.

Mafilè Fèn (“something to look at”) is anything that attracts your attention, focuses your eye, and guides your thoughts. *Mafilè Fèn* includes many artistic forms—costume, dance, music, theater, and sculpture—which come together in performance.

Anthropologists and scholars interpret performance as not only organized or ritualistic experiences, but also as constant interpretations and manifestations of identity that communicate specific societal structures and unify a culture. It is for the

performer to decide how he or she will enact this collective identity, and by examining these performances we can begin to see how individuals and objects come together to reinforce the ideologies of the culture. Although every aspect of Bamana life is interwoven with performance, the objects in this exhibition relate closely to three primary areas: the sacred, the social, and entertainment.

PERFORMANCE AS SACRED

Bamana spirituality focuses on performance and the body. Within Bamana religious beliefs, the universe is made up of energy, called *yo* or *nyama*, which created all things, including man. *Yo* is a life force that comes from a central god, Maa Ngala. One’s spiritual duty is to learn the ways in which *yo* unites the earth to man, the mind to the body, and man to the divine. To do this, a Bamana male undergoes an initiation into six sequential societies: *Ndômò*, *Komo*, *Nama*, *Kono*, *Chi Wara*, and *Koré*. As a child, each male first enters into the *Ndômò* society and then into the succeeding societies. Each society communicates its wisdom through performance, teaching the man about his relationship to the universe. In order to become enlightened, the initiate must undergo a set of performative rituals, some of which feature ritual objects and headdresses.

Chi Wara headdresses, for example, are used in performances that convey to initiates the importance of farming and man’s ability to work and move the earth. The *Chi Wara*, a mythical creature that is half human and half animal, is said to have taught the Bamana people how to farm and harvest. The Bamana society enacts *Chi Wara* performances as a plea for a good harvest. Two headdresses are needed to enact this performance: one represents a male, the other a female. This combination not only emphasizes the practical role of each gender in farming—men work during the planting season and women bring in the harvest—it also emphasizes the importance of the family unit within Bamana society.

Men are head of household and work to provide food and income; women bear children and raise the family.

Two men wear the headdresses and related garments for a *Chi Wara* performance. Raffia hangs from the headdress and covers each man’s face and is also used in the costumes. The *Chi Wara* performer dances around on all fours, mimicking the creature’s front legs with sticks. A caller leads the audience in song. Women are not allowed to wear the headdresses in the performance but instead sing in response to the caller.



Masked performer wearing vertical *Chi Wara* headdress, Bougouni village, Mali, 1970. Eliot Elisofon Field photographs, 1942-1972, Smithsonian Institution.

PERFORMANCE AS SOCIAL

Certain Bamana villages in the southern part of Mali have an initiation society called the *Jo*. The *Jo* originated as a sacred society, but over time it transformed into an age-based group. It conducts performances with costumes, masks, and sculptures. After the initiates have completed the society’s rituals, they participate in a festive celebration called *foo yira* (“to show the fibers”). In this performance, new initiates dance with small and large female figurines. These figurines are collectively known as *nyeleni* (“the beautiful ones”). In performances with *nyeleni*, boys either hold the figurines in their arms as they sing or place the figurines on the ground and dance in front of them. The beauty of these sculptures adds to the celebratory nature of *Jo* performances.

Nyeleni also serve as a physical reminder of the roles of young Bamana men and women. Marriage is an important life event in Bamana culture and a child is expected to begin looking for a spouse as soon as he or she reaches adolescence. *Nyeleni* remind young women what an ideal wife should look like and also young men of their future role as providers for their family.

After the *foo yira*, *Jo* initiates travel to different villages to perform for other communities. One purpose of this traveling, or *jobayaala*, is to enable young men to meet young girls. The female figurines are brought along on such visits to serve as a reminder of the qualities that men seek in potential wives. Certain physical features, such as the breasts, abdomen, and buttocks, are exaggerated and correspond to the Bamana notion of an ideal female form.

PERFORMANCE AS ENTERTAINMENT

The Bamana also conduct performances for entertainment. Some of these are masquerades, while others utilize puppetry. The sculptural forms used in these performances

include puppets, marionettes, figurines, and conventional masks. These artistic elements work together to create a spectacle that is lighthearted and fun. On a deeper level, by interweaving legends, parables, jokes, music, and dance, these performances communicate cultural morals and reinforce collective identity.

One type of entertainment performance is the *Sogo Bò*, which originated as a series of masquerades performed by the *Bozo* fishermen, neighbors of the Bamana. Eventually the Bamana adapted these masquerades to their own focus on the land. Although this performance is connected with the planting season and the harvest, many of its themes speak to man’s interaction with his cultural environment. *Sogo Bò* was prominent during colonial rule of Mali, and its performances incorporated the political and social relations among the Bamana and the French. The one-dimensional colonial character of *Sogo Bò* puppetry stands in contrast to the nuanced and intersectional identity of Bamana characters. Many of the skits demonstrate the importance of paternity, clan, gender, and age as identity markers. However, these markers are balanced by qualities of personality and skill believed to be given divinely at birth.

Collective identity is not only expressed in the stories and songs of the *Sogo Bò*, it is also taught. Young boys in the *Kamalen ton* act in this three-day performance, engaging in traditional dance and storytelling as well as acrobatics. By performing in *Sogo Bò*, younger males, who are seen as more ignorant and irresponsible than adults, learn how to work as a group in Bamana society. It is as much an educational experience for them as it is a source of entertainment for the audience.

Actors in *Sogo Bò* also have the opportunity to explore personal talent and gain recognition through their performance. Even though the *Sogo Bò* performance itself is considered less serious than others, the young men who exhibit great talent are viewed as local celebrities. If they are good enough, they might have the opportunity to travel to other villages and perform. In this way, the young performers not only are recognized for their contribution to a collective and performative practice, they are also appreciated for the creativity of their individual interpretations.

STATUS OF THE ARTISTS

Since the Bamana value *Mafilè Fèn*, the artists, particularly sculptors, are important in Bamana society. Wood carvers, or *yiri baarakèbagaw*, are the only craftsmen endowed with *bolliw*, the power to create divine objects. It is believed that all craftsmen, *nyamakalaw*, are born with a great deal of divine energy that enables them to create and to handle this energy in their work. Bamana craftsmen, specifically wood carvers, are seen as technologists and medicine men because they provide for all needs in Bamana culture—physical, psychological, and spiritual. The carver’s ability to harness divine energy positions him as one who remedies societal needs. These sculptures thus have a coded importance. They are not only power objects, but also necessary tools for communicating balance and clarity among the Bamana people.

Standing Female Figure, twentieth century, wood. Gift of Joseph and Doris Gerofsky, 1995.8.25.

Standing Female Figure, twentieth century, wood. Gift of Joseph and Doris Gerofsky, 1996.9.15.