

Wooden carvings unlock ancient African history

By Brenda Kirkpatrick
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A sage once said, "They gave us the shortest, coldest month of the year in which to celebrate Black History Month."

Though this statement smacks of both truth and irony, it's how we choose to acknowledge, commemorate and celebrate our culture that gives bearing to the importance of this month and enables us to circumvent an allotted time period and appreciate ourselves, our ancestors, always. Confining this singular experience limits exposure to what can be a delightful exercise in knowledge.

Cultural events like the Tribal Art Exhibit, slated Feb. 4 through Feb. 28 at the Las Vegas Fine Arts Museum, 9600 W. Sahara Blvd., will provide an excellent venue for exploring black history.

On Saturdays, at 2 p.m., docents at the museum will guide parents, children, teachers, students and guests through the black experience using eye-catching,

intellectually-stimulating art work. The exhibits will offer museumgoers a glimpse into sub-Saharan history and the lives of Black Africans. School children will be able to view the exhibit for free.

Labeling art from sub-Saharan Africa tribal is purposeful. Since it is not possible to identify each work by its artist, as is done in the Western hemisphere, art is categorized by its geographical or tribal origins.

The earliest pieces on exhibit at the museum are only from 1200 A.D., museum officials estimate. The earliest documented examples of African art are rock paintings and engravings in Namibia at Apollo, circa, 27,000 B.C., according to researchers. Scientists have had difficulty attaching ages to wooden artifacts since Africa's climate speed deterioration and makes carbon dating — the process used in estimating the ages of fossil or clay, stone and other mineral artifacts — difficult.

Art is also identified by and for the use of a specific tribe or tribal ceremony. Carvings,

though used for entertainment, decoration, or to sell or trade, often served a specific purpose: to promote fertility, to cure impotence, to bring a fine harvest, to make rain, and for weddings, funerals and ceremonies, the crowning of new chiefs, rites of male circumcision, initiations, the provision of food, religious purposes, good fortune, divination or forecasting the future and for rites of passage. Dance and music often accompanied these occasions.

Judging by the carvings, body language began centuries before it was "discovered" in the western world. For example, a carving with two hands raised with palms directed outward was made to implore a god to make rain. Similarly, a carving with only hand raised in a similar fashion is the one before which a person on trial would swear to before testifying. On such occasions, it is more likely that the individual would not be tried by the king, but by the kadi who represents the king in trials. He is considered a wise man in the tribe.

George L.
Sturman
Collection of
African Art



Some figures are ancestral, used to protect the tribe from any bad spirit and to keep the tribe together. Some pieces were shrines that were worshipped as gods.

Often, decorative materials embellished carvings, the fanciful design usually being symbolic. Any piece made with imbedded cowrie shells is considered good luck. At one time cowrie shells were used as currency.

Pieces of art were frequently buried with chiefs or kings. The body was buried in a garden-like setting next to other tribesmen, who had died before the chief. Thus, the king's most

beloved people would be there to protect and serve him in the after-life.

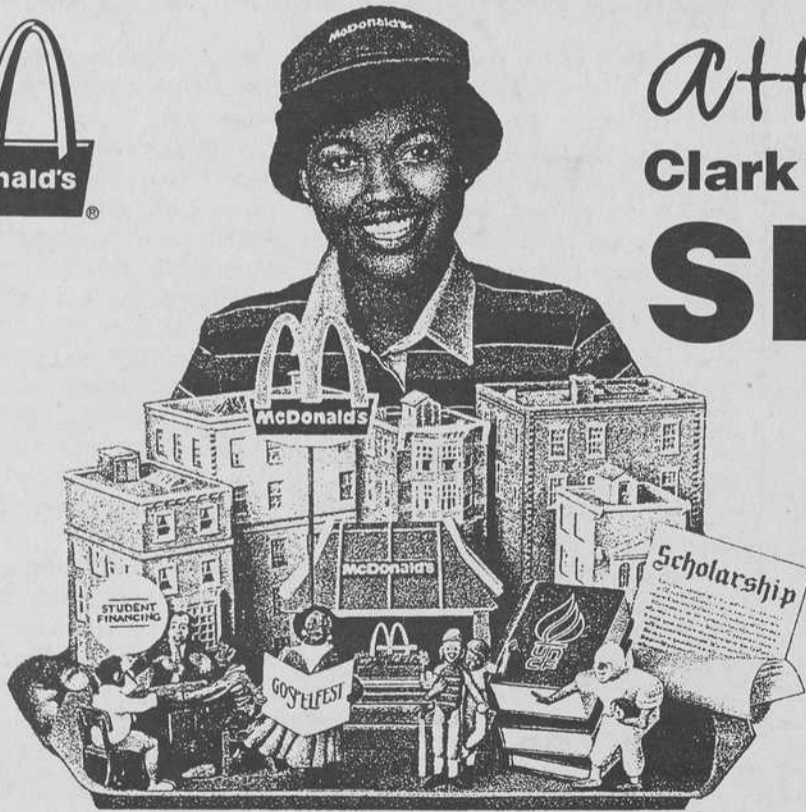
The artists used fellow tribe members as models to carve facial features and headresses. Artists like Max Ernst and Picasso often copied African art, especially masks, to enhance their own work.

The exhibit's wood work comes from all over Africa; the following tribes and countries specifically: Conini, *Bisago Island*, *Bamaleke*, *Bamun*, *Cameroon*; *Mahongwe*, *Gabon*; *Fanti*, *Koma*, *Ghana*; *Baule*, *Senufo*, *Senufo*, *Ivory Coast*; *Bamana*, *Dogon*, *Jenne*, *Kanaga*, *Marka*,

Tellum, *Mali*; *Ekad*, *Gelede*, *Ibbio*, *Ibo*, *Ifa*, *Montol*, *Mumuye*, *Yoruba*, *Nigeria*; *Fon*, *Republic of Benin*; *Mende*, *Sierra Leone*; *Makonde*, *Tanzania*; *Benaluluwa*, *Bacongo*, *Chokwe*, *Hemba*, *Yaka*, *Zaire*.

The more than 100 carvings are arranged mostly according to the country or tribe. Maps of Africa behind each section highlight the geographical origin.

Though wood was a popular art medium, artisans also used African trade beads (glass), animal fur and hair, brass studs, burlap, copper, cowrie shells, (Continued Art, Page 13)



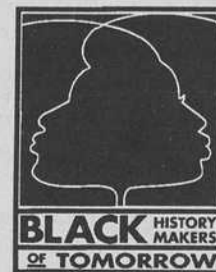
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