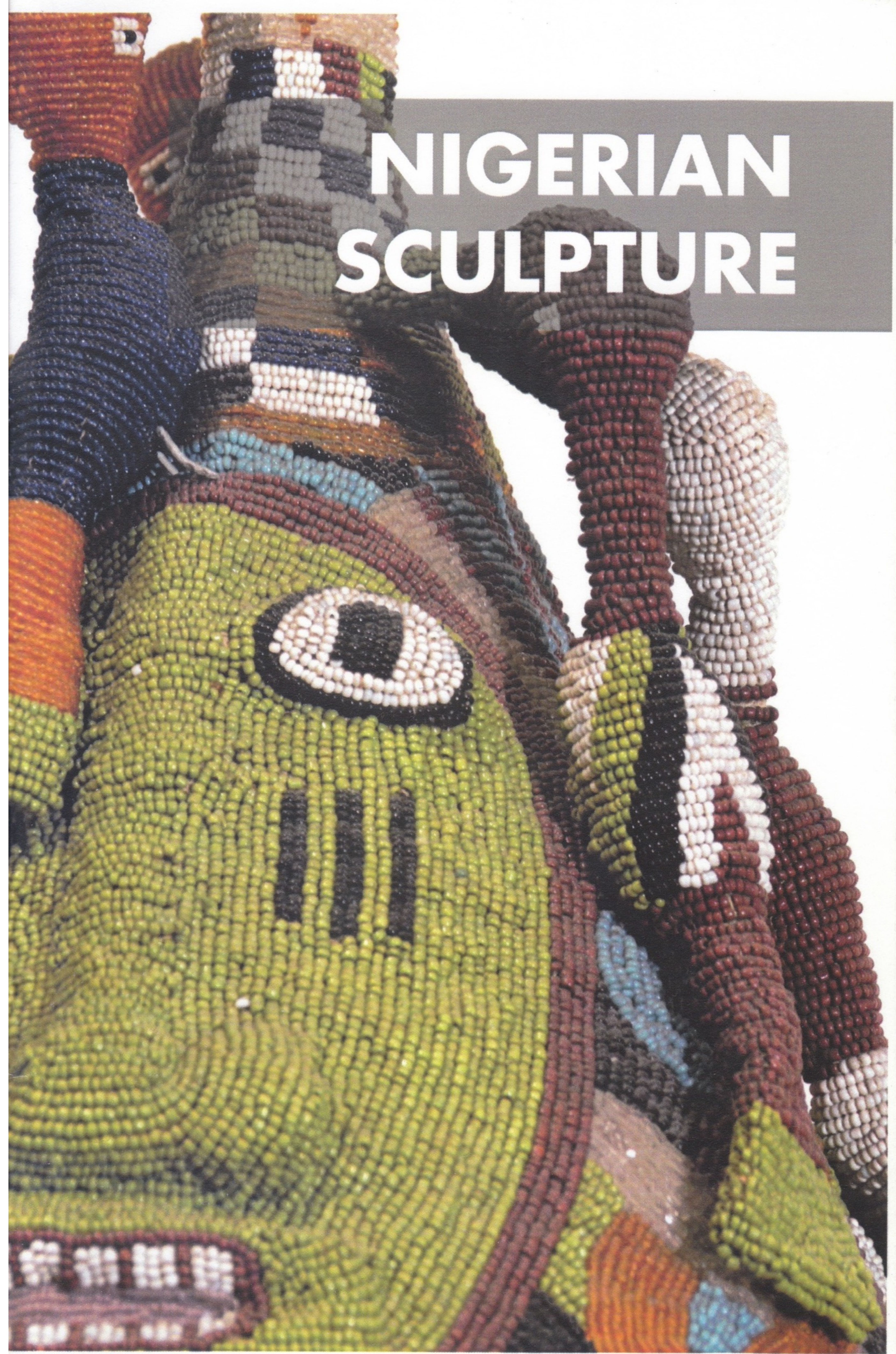


# NIGERIAN SCULPTURE





Photographs © Jacob Burckhardt

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Cover image: Yoruba Crown, detail.

This page: Menorah by Chaim Gross with Yoruba staffs

All objects c. 19th–20th centuries and collection of the Renee and Chaim Gross Foundation, New York

# NIGERIAN SCULPTURE

**December 2, 2012–August 9, 2013**

Nigeria, with a population estimated at 160 million, is the most peopled country in Africa. About one African in five is Nigerian. Like most countries in Africa, Nigeria is a purely colonial construct. Its national borders bear no relation to historical or ethnic realities. The British created three regional governments, which roughly corresponded to the three largest ethnic groups: the Hausa-Fulani in the north, the Yoruba in the southwest and the Igbo in the southeast. Dozens of small ethnic groups found themselves assigned to one of these regions. After independence in 1960, thirty-six states were created from these regions, and a federal system of government was installed. The primarily Muslim north and the once animist, now mostly Christian, south, find themselves locked together in an uncomfortable union, whose tensions are exacerbated by the fact that Nigeria's huge oil reserves are all in the southeast of the country.

Nigeria contains hundreds of ethnic groups, speaking different languages and with political systems that vary from centralized kingdoms among the Yoruba to acephalous groups whose largest political unit is the village. Religious and social systems are very different. The traditional arts of Nigeria, which are linked to the religious and political systems, are equally varied. They range from the polished naturalism of Yoruba art to the wild expressionism of some peoples on the northeast border with Cameroon. While much archaeological research remains to be done, we know that some of the oldest and most refined bronzes in sub-Saharan Africa were found in Igbo Ukwu in the South East and that the bronzes of Benin and Ife reflect a highly advanced technology and a very complex society. The oldest known art in sub-Saharan Africa, the Nok terra-cottas, which date to about 1200 BCE, come from the north.

The exhibition presents a selection of sculptures from Nigeria, though one could dispute whether there is such a thing as "Nigerian" art.

*Jerry Vogel, Guest Curator*

**With thanks to**

Susan Fisher, Mimi Gross, Zak Vreeland, Sasha Davis, Joyce Greene, Tom Slaughter, and Mike Levy for their kind assistance with this project. Special thanks to Dana Elmquist.



Mask  
19th-20th Century  
Nigerian  
Culture: Igbo  
Polychrome Wood

## Masks

Igbo  
polychrome wood

## THE IGBO

The largest group in East-Central Nigeria is the Igbo people, who are divided into a number of sub-groups. The Igbo were essentially acephalous, having no political unit larger than the individual village. They had important social distinctions based on membership in prestige, title societies, entrance to which was based on purchase (wealth) rather than on aristocratic inheritance.

The Igbo were particularly open to Western education and were consequently dominant in the colonial administration and successful in business. They were very mobile and spread across the entire Nigerian federation. Their success created great ill will among other groups, particularly in the Northern Region, and led to a coup d'état in 1966, massacres and the attempted secession of the Eastern Region as the Republic of Biafra. In the ensuing Biafran war, millions died before the Federal government regained power. During the desperate famine of the war period, large quantities of Igbo sculpture were sold and exported to western countries in exchange for badly needed foreign currency. The psychological scars of the Biafran war are still a factor in Nigerian politics.

The Igbo masks, called Maiden Spirit Masks, are popular with western collectors because of their gentle naturalism, soft white surfaces, and elaborate decorated coiffures. Balancing them are the *ikenga* figures, often called altars to the power of a man's hand, that is to his masculine courage and power. The exhibition shows a variety of these objects, along with masks showing the effects of sickness, and a specialized extremely stylized "yam" mask. Igbo art also included an important ceramic tradition and large (almost life-size) wooden figures displayed at marketplaces. Men's meetinghouses (called *Mbari*) featured entire sculptural scenes.

At the site of Igbo-Ukwu in Igboland, tombs were discovered containing astonishingly refined and elaborate bronzes, which have been dated to the 8th century. Different in style from other African bronzes, these remain the earliest known such objects from Western Africa. There is no certainty that they were made by the ancestors of present-day Igbo people, though this seems probable.

## THE YORUBA

The Yoruba are probably the largest ethnic group in Africa—their population is greater than that of any West African country except Nigeria. They are estimated at forty million people, of whom about thirty-five million live in Nigeria and the rest in neighboring Benin and Togo. The Gross collection is particularly rich in Yoruba art, and has a good cross-section of the many styles and kinds of objects. Masks, statues and other wooden objects are presented in the exhibition, along with a number of works in iron, beadwork and other materials.

The Yoruba were divided into a number of kingdoms, which we call by the names of their capital cities. These were centralized monarchies, with a king, an aristocracy and a highly developed art associated with prestige and social rank. Their religion centered around a hierarchy of deities with their own cults and ceremonies, and with particular kinds of sculptures associated with them. The rites of *Ife* divination also produced many sculptural objects.

They have rich and varied masking traditions, many of which are still in use.

Yoruba sculpture is characterized by a relative naturalism, smoothly finished surfaces, and a plentiful use of color. It exaggerates those parts of the body (particularly the head) that are considered most important. It varies in size from the huge *Epa* masks and the carved columns that decorated the courtyards of royal palaces to small prestige objects of daily use. The large number of Yoruba objects has made it possible for scholars to identify the hands of individual artists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, providing us with a kind of knowledge not yet available for most parts of Africa.



### Crown

Yoruba  
Beads, fabric

Twins were greatly valued in Yoruba tradition, and treated with special consideration. The Yoruba have the highest rate of twin births in the world. In the case of the death of one or both twins, small statues, called *ibeji* were carved and cared for like living children. They were rubbed with oil, and often dressed in robes of beads or cowry shells that were symbols of wealth and prestige. Due to the large number of *ibeji*, it has been possible to identify the styles of individual cities and workshops.



### ***Ibeji* (twins)**

Yoruba

Polychrome wood, beads

## **THE MAMBILA**

The Mambila people live in the plateau area of the north-east. The inaccessible area had been little explored by Europeans until the 1960s and 70s, when dealers discovered the Mambila style and essentially brought a flood of sculptures onto the Western market. Much Mambila art was painted in bright red, white and black. The sculptures show an astonishing freedom and variety of style, which often seems whimsical to the non-Mambila.



### **Headdress**

Mambila

polychrome wood

## THE EJAGHAM

These masks by the Ejagham peoples are unique in Africa in that they are made of skin stretched over a carved wooden base. Fresh skins are stretched over the base and as they dry and shrink, they conform to the wooden form underneath. These masks are both animal and human: they belong to both men's and women's associations, though they are always danced by men. They dance at initiations and at funerals of association members.



### Three Headdresses

Ejagham

leather or skin over wood





### **Mask**

Ogoni  
polychrome wood, cord

## **THE OGONI**

**T**he Ogoni are one of many small groups living in the Niger Delta area. Their tiny masks were danced in an extremely acrobatic style before a sacred drum. Often their masks have movable jaws and show signs of western influence like the European hat. Living in the midst of the highly polluted oil fields, the Ogoni have seen their culture virtually destroyed and their economy devastated.



## THE WURKUN

These figures are made by the Wurkun peoples who live in the Benue River Valley in the East-Central part of Nigeria. They represent an extreme form of abstraction of the human form, which is the tendency of art from this area. Male figures have a crest on the head, thought to represent a helmet. Most figures lack legs, but terminate in an iron bar, which was inserted in the earth. These figures are made for individuals by blacksmiths at the advice of a diviner.

**Figure**  
Wurkun  
wood, encrustation

## THE EDO (BENIN KINGDOM)

The Kingdom of Benin goes back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century and was one of the first states to have direct contacts with Europeans, trading at an early date with the Portuguese. The so-called British "Punitive Expedition" seized Benin City in 1898 and uncovered a huge stock of bronze objects including figures, wall plaques, altar sculptures, etc. These were seized and taken to Europe where they created a sensation and forced a rethinking of "savage" African society and art. Most were sold and are now in European and American museums. The bronze-casters were a royal guild in Benin City, where they still work in the traditional style for both local and foreign clients.



**Figure**  
Benin  
bronze



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