



Kimbell Art Museum presents *The Language of Beauty in African Art*,
April 3–July 31, 2022

Exhibition explores art spanning the African continent through the perspectives and languages of the
local communities

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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FORT WORTH, TX—The Kimbell Art Museum presents the world premiere of *The Language of Beauty in African Art*. This remarkable exhibition of African masterpieces challenges traditional concepts of aesthetics by presenting the works of art through the perspectives and languages of the people in West, Central and Southern Africa who made and used them. With more than 200 objects from public and private collections around the world — including captivating masks, powerful figures, impressive sculptures and exquisitely crafted prestige objects — the exhibition will be on view from April 3 through July 31, 2022.

Organized by the Art Institute of Chicago, *The Language of Beauty in African Art* is the Kimbell's first major exhibition in 25 years to focus solely on works from Africa and includes three objects from the museum's permanent collection: the Chokwe *Chibinda Ilunga*, the Hema *Warrior Ancestor Figure* and the Ife *Head, possibly a King*.

“At the Kimbell Art Museum, we are committed to showcasing great works of art from around the globe, so we are pleased to work with the Art Institute and curator Constantine Petridis to present this magnificent exhibition of African art,” said Eric M. Lee, director of the Kimbell Art Museum. “What sets this exhibition apart — and why we felt it was vital to bring it to Kimbell audiences — is its focus on the ideas of the artists and communities that created the objects rather than on outside perspectives.”

The Kimbell is the only venue apart from the Art Institute of Chicago where visitors can experience this diverse grouping of objects, many of which have never been on view to the public. Following its presentation at the Kimbell, the exhibition will travel to the Art Institute of Chicago in fall 2022.

The Language of Beauty in African Art underscores how the makers’ ideas about beauty and ugliness typically extend beyond the physical appearance of objects to reveal both the meanings and the functions of these works. By learning the words that artists themselves used to describe and praise their creations — their language of beauty — visitors to the exhibition can understand these works in a new way.

“By shedding light on the highly sophisticated — yet still often overlooked — aesthetic vocabularies from different cultures across sub-Saharan Africa, we look forward to reflecting the preferences of the makers and of the cultures where the works were created,” said Constantine Petridis, Ph.D., chair and curator of the arts of Africa at the Art Institute of Chicago. “*The Language of Beauty in African Art* will also explore how the appearance of a work of art is an integrated combination of appearance and being, of form and meaning.”

Organized in eight sections, the exhibition focuses on masks, figures and sculptures created by cultures located primarily in West, Central and Southern Africa, most dating to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In this vast area south of the Sahara Desert, there seem to be shared conventions that transcend the particularities of a given culture or period.

The exhibition begins with an examination of the interaction between art and language, featuring several examples of the widely admired art of the Chokwe people. A male figure of the culture hero Chibinda Ilunga, long lauded for its refinement and relative naturalism, perfectly embodies the Chokwe term *utotombo*, which describes a sculpture executed with skill and care. This idealized rendering of male power also expresses the concept of *cibema*, the Chokwe word for an object that combines formal beauty with moral integrity.

The next section of the exhibition looks at how, beginning in the early 1900s, Western appreciations of African art focused on the visual appearance of objects divorced from their original contexts instead of seeking and sharing knowledge about how originating cultures understood, viewed and experienced them.

In fact, understanding this original linguistic context can shift our estimations of objects. In many African cultures, the connection between beauty and morality is expressed by a single term that combines “beautiful” with “good.” For instance, the Lega term *busoga* applies to what is visually pleasing as well as to praiseworthy character and virtuous behavior. Across sub-Saharan Africa, beauty and morality are linked in many ways: jewelry and other accessories are worn by men and women not only to enhance their visual beauty, but to highlight the wearer’s exceptional personality and deeds. Notions of moral and formal beauty can be embodied in venerated images of powerful men — like the Kimbell’s sculpture of a dignified male representing a Hema warrior ancestor — or in representations of caring women, typically shown as mother-and-child figures.

A main section of the exhibition highlights the meanings and functions of the beauty of African art. African artists, patrons and critics conceive and appraise their local arts according to their own communities’ collective standards of excellence. Assessing their artist’s achievements, cultures across the sub-Saharan region apply aesthetic criteria regarding clarity or visibility achieved through stylization, abstraction and reduction; youthfulness or the representation of the body in the prime of life; moderation (or the avoidance of exaggeration); and balance and symmetry.

The Language of Beauty in African Art also examines how an outsider might infer local taste based on an object’s physical appearance and cultural context. For example, unusual size, complex formal features, expensive materials and complicated techniques typically point to qualities prized by makers and patrons alike. The fact that some personal objects, such as fancy stools and headrests or figurative axes and adzes, were never actually used confirms that they primarily served aesthetic functions.

Additional themes addressed in *The Language of Beauty* include the religious functions of beauty demonstrated through sculptural representations of the human form meant to entice the spirits, which contrast with instances of intentional ugliness, often created to trigger reactions ranging from terror to humor. The final section of the exhibition features objects that convey ideas and feelings of force, vigor, fascination and terror by combining beauty and ugliness in a way that makes them at once irresistibly compelling and profoundly repelling. This aesthetic inspires what the Kongo people refer to as *ngitukulu*, an experience of astonishment or awe.

“I am thrilled to have the opportunity to present this extraordinary exhibition at the Kimbell,” said Jennifer Casler Price, curator of Asian, African and Ancient American art. “It not only recognizes the richness and variety of African art, it demonstrates that despite the wide cultural diversity of a vast continent, there is also unity that speaks to a shared humanity and explains why art matters. That beauty has meaning and is related to the purpose and function of the art. This is art for life’s sake.”

DATES

April 3–July 31, 2022

Subject to change

EXHIBITION CREDITS

This exhibition is organized by the Art Institute of Chicago.

SUPPORT

The Kimbell is supported in part by Arts Fort Worth, the Texas Commission on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts. Promotional support is provided by American Airlines, NBC5 and PaperCity.

VISITOR INFORMATION

Admission to *The Language of Beauty in African Art* is \$18 for adults, \$16 for seniors, K–12 educators, students and military personnel, \$14 for ages 6–11, free for children under 6 and \$3 for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) recipients. Admission is half-price all day on Tuesdays and after 5 p.m. on Fridays. Admission to the museum’s permanent collection is always free.

The Kimbell Art Museum is open Tuesdays through Thursdays and Saturdays, 10 a.m.–5 p.m.; Fridays, noon–8 p.m.; Sundays, noon–5 p.m.; closed Mondays, New Year’s Day, July 4, Thanksgiving and Christmas. For general information, call 817-332-8451.

ABOUT THE KIMBELL ART MUSEUM

The Kimbell Art Museum, owned and operated by the Kimbell Art Foundation, is internationally renowned for both its collections and its architecture. The Kimbell’s collections range in period from antiquity to the 20th century and include European masterpieces by artists such as Fra Angelico, Michelangelo, Caravaggio, Bernini, Velázquez, Vigée Le Brun, Monet, Cézanne, Picasso and Matisse; important collections of Egyptian and classical antiquities; and the art of Asia, Africa and the Ancient Americas.

The museum's 1972 building, designed by the American architect Louis I. Kahn, is widely regarded as one of the outstanding architectural achievements of the modern era. A second building, designed by Italian architect Renzo Piano, opened in 2013 and now provides space for special exhibitions, dedicated classrooms and a 289-seat auditorium with excellent acoustics for music. For more information, visit kimbellart.org.

IMAGES

Female Face Mask (detail), Chokwe, Angola, 19th–early 20th century, wood, pigment, metal, and fiber. Private collection. Courtesy of Schweizer Premodern, New York; *Female Face Mask (Kambanda)* (detail), Eastern Pende, Democratic Republic of the Congo, 20th century, wood, pigment, fiber, and metal. Museum Rietberg, Zurich, gift of Barbara and Eberhard Fischer, HH 21a; *Face Mask (Agbogho Mmuo)* (detail), Igbo, Nigeria, 20th century, wood and pigment. Detroit Institute of Arts, Bequest of Robert H. Tannahill, 70.99

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FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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