

Traditional and Contemporary Decorated Gourds

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TRADITIONAL AND CONTEMPORARY DECORATED GOURDS

American Cultural Center, Nairobi
January 23-27, 1984

This exhibition, the first of its kind in Nairobi, presented the current gourd art of Peter Nzuki (see *African Arts*, November 1978) and his former student Wilson Mwangi within the broad context of traditional gourd use and decoration. In part the show was a tribute to the gourd's unique place in Kenya's cultural heritage. It provides a link both with the past—decorated gourd remains of the neolithic pastoralists date back 2,800 years—and between regions—the versatile gourd is the most frequently cited object in the country's diverse material culture. The realization of this exhibition reflected the cooperative efforts of the artists, the staff of the American Cultural Center (especially Director Greta Morris), and many individuals. Contributing organizations included African Heritage, the Kenya Institute of Education, the Material Culture Collection of the University of Nairobi, the National Archives, and the Undugu Society Shop.

The center's large display area was divided into two to reflect the dual focus. Nearly three hundred works by Nzuki and Mwangi appeared in a typical gallery setting. The initial impression was stunning, fostered by the large natural variety of the gourds, arranged primarily by size and shape, with their colors ranging from pale yellow to deep maroon. Particularly dramatic was the floor-to-ceiling display of calabashes against the dark brown wall separating the areas. The mode of arrangement helped the viewer to focus on the artists' imagery and superb technique.

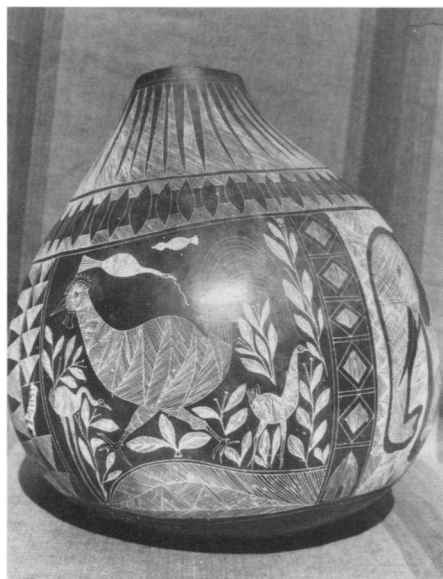
In the second area, a central incising workshop and various displays along the adjoining walls provided the context for understanding the artists' work. Throughout the exhibition, the artists and their apprentices explained and demonstrated the methods involved in the preparation and decoration of gourds, encouraging visitors to try their hand at incising.

The main display was a selection of traditional decorated gourds from different regions of Kenya. It included some fine old Kamba examples, incised in the traditional all-over style using stippling, symbolic imagery, and geometric patterns. These are recognized as the prototypes for contemporary incising. Most of the examples showed other decorative techniques: pyrography, embedding of metal bits, fiber stitchery and attachment of beads and shells (either on fibers or leather straps). These objects were borrowed from the collections of the National Archives and Dr. and Mrs. Igor Mann.

The smaller displays focused on the uses of gourds, demonstrating the link between usage, size, and shape—between function and form. Eight typical kinds of plain gourds were presented, each with information about its use and several of its local language names. These ranged from large, wide-bodied fermentation vats to small, half-gourd spoons. Viewers were asked to comment on and add to the information, an approach that illustrated the diversity and longevity of gourd usage in Kenyan culture. During the exhibition nearly eighty words for "gourd" or "calabash" were informally recorded. This certainly exposes the limitations of thinking about these objects in English.

The juxtaposition of contemporary with traditional served to elucidate the transformation occurring in both gourd function and design. Nzuki and Mwangi have extended the artistic purpose of gourd incising as a medium of personal expression. Their skillful and imaginative works show how new meaning has revived an ancient craft. While their impulse is distinctly modern—to create pleasing works of art for display—their inspiration flows strongly from the past. Accordingly, these artists interpret or re-present themes from traditional culture in a contemporary visual idiom. Their holistic, often pictorial, imagery can be understood by a wide audience. The excellent local support of and response to this show seems to indicate the renewed significance of the gourd in the definition of Kenya's national culture.

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MBARI ART

California College of Arts and Crafts, Oakland
January 18-February 3, 1984

This exhibit displayed works on fabric by a number of Nigerian artists. It was mounted as part of the Visiting Artist's Program, a project supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. The California College of Arts and Crafts is one of the nation's oldest and most prominent art institutions and a leading member of the Association of Independent Colleges of Art, which sponsored the exhibition.

All of the pieces were on loan from Mbari West, the San Francisco branch of Mbari Art in Washington, D.C., an organization run by Jean Kennedy of San Francisco and Miriam Wolford of Washington that has arranged over one hundred exhibitions of the works of artists from Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean. The history of Mbari Art as an organization closely parallels the emergence, during the 1960s, of a period of intense artistic activity in Oshogbo, Nigeria. Partly because of the summer workshops run by Georgina Beier and the efforts of Suzanne Wenger, another European artist, a creative synergy developed between European and African artists. Kennedy and Wolford, residents of Nigeria at that time, began an informal open house to provide a place where these painters, sculptors, and printmakers could show their work and meet other artists. The open house grew in popularity, attracting a variety of artists and writers as well as other interested Nigerians.

The success of the open house is evidenced by the fact that it is still extant, having been maintained over the years by other interested parties. Kennedy returned to the United States in 1968, bringing with her the works of many of the artists she came to know in Nigeria. Mbari Art was formed to provide an avenue for exhibition of these works. Its first landmark shows at the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles and the Studio Museum in Harlem were both held in 1969. After these early successes, more artists began to send their works to Mbari, and the organization evolved and expanded. (Mbari West was formed when Kennedy moved to San Francisco.) Today it is run as an exhibition service primarily for African, Haitian, and Asian artists.

Many represented in the CCAC exhibit came to prominence during the Oshogbo years, and, as they are known outside Nigeria primarily for their paintings, prints, bead mosaics, and repoussé sculpture, these fabric pieces were an interesting new visual dimension for Western viewers. As a group, these artists bring to batik, embroidery, and appliqué the same sensibility that is to be found in their work in other media—a sensitivity to form and composition combined with a sureness of execution and clarity of personal vision.

One of the most interesting aspects of contemporary art in Africa has been the continuing endeavor of the artist to create a traditional/contemporary synthesis in his work, given the pull of traditional culture and the pervasive influence of rapid change. This