

The Essential Gourd: Art and History in Northeastern Nigeria

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THE ESSENTIAL GOURD

Art and History in Northeastern Nigeria
Wight Art Gallery, UCLA
March 25-May 8, 1986

"The Essential Gourd" is a visually striking and highly informative exhibition—both enjoyable and educational as well as aesthetically and art historically significant. Organized by the UCLA Museum of Cultural History and curated by Marla C. Berns, it will be traveling to several museums in 1987 and 1988. In its presentation at UCLA, the show began with an introduction to the gourd as a plant product and the various ways it has been used in Africa, with especially good material on musical instruments and containers for such beverages as milk, beer, and palm wine. One wall in this section of the gallery even displayed gourds used as masks, an unusual and fascinating phenomenon. The scope of the exhibition was increased by this introductory section, which contained decorated gourds and objects made from gourds from different regions of Africa as well as a superb slide-tape presentation in a small open room near the entryway.

Beyond the introductory area, the central theme of the exhibit became clear: the diversity of calabash decoration in northeastern Nigeria. A selection of decorated gourds or calabashes attached to a large map demonstrated the distribution of styles. Next there was a well-structured presentation on the techniques of gourd decoration such as pyroengraving, pressure engraving, carving, and

painting. Each technique was carefully explained by object, photograph, and text, reinforced by a finely edited videotape. Another section focused on the social and sacred context of gourds in northeastern Nigeria. It included an impressive display featuring a Ga'anda wickerwork basket piled with gourds for bridewealth. The basket was situated in front of a large photograph of a married woman's room containing stacked pottery and decorated gourds. In northeastern Nigeria, as in other parts of Africa, large collections of decorated calabashes are an essential part of bridewealth payment and dowries. A slide presentation showing production, sale, and use was located in this area as well. Another section dealt effectively with motifs and their meanings. Finally some aspects of modern change were featured. For example, three pictorially decorated gourds displayed at the 1924 British Empire Exhibition at Wembley were shown next to recent gourds covered with enamel paint. A large photograph of gourd bowls and spoons being decorated with red, blue, and white enamel dramatically demonstrated the change.

At first, the idea of doing a major exhibition of the decorated gourds of a particular region of Nigeria might seem limited. However, the impact of this display was far reaching. It provided the viewer with a good glimpse of the wide range of decorative techniques as well as the diversity and richness of embellishment associated with a common yet essential African object. Decorated gourds are an important item of household equipment, serving a variety of functions, and at times they carry widespread sociocultural and economic messages. In fact, the trend toward more thematic and focused exhibitions is a positive development in the field of African art.

The visual and didactic effectiveness of the show resulted, in part, from the extensive use of both color and black-and-white photomurals

and the use of different types of labeling, ranging from basic identification to short essay. The majority of the photographs were taken by Marla Berns and Barbara Rubin Hudson. Berns and Betsy Quick, Curator of Education at the Museum of Cultural History, prepared the excellent label copy. The creative layout, the effective use of color, and the overall look of the installation were a credit to Jack Carter and Tom Hartmann, the designers. One hopes that many of the installation techniques will be utilized by the other museums hosting this exhibit. All too often the quality of an outstanding show is diminished by a mediocre installation.

A few minor concerns should be noted. The relationship between the gourd and women, especially in the areas of production, use, and gender identification, could have been stressed more. Additional regions and functional categories might have enhanced the general African section. The exhibition seemed somewhat structured according to available material. In terms of the installation, the lighting was a little problematic. There seemed to be no clear design rationale for some of the spots: a few of the works were over lit while others were under lit. Moreover the use of non-gourds items was, at first glance, a little confusing. In spite of these flaws, "The Essential Gourd" is outstanding and should be visited by anyone interested in the arts of Africa.

The exhibition is scheduled to travel to the Honolulu Academy of Art (March 25-May 3, 1987), the Center for African Art, New York City (June 10-September 10, 1987), and the National Museum of African Art, Washington, D.C. (January 26-May 22, 1988). A well-illustrated and well-written catalogue (192 pp., 239 b/w & 38 color photos), by Marla C. Berns and Barbara Rubin Hudson, is available for \$19 paper and \$35 cloth from the Museum of Cultural History, University of California, Los Angeles, CA 90024. Outside the U.S. add \$2 per volume.

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ABOVE: BOTTLE GOURD MADE FOR THE BRITISH EMPIRE EXHIBITION, WEMBLEY, 1924. RIGHT: WAJA AND TERA DECORATED BOTTLE GOURDS, NORTHEASTERN NIGERIA. MUSEUM OF CULTURAL HISTORY, UCLA.

