

To Have and To Hold: African Containers.* Mathers Museum of World Cultures, Indiana University. May 2006-December 2007.

Reviewed by Elise DeCamp

The exhibit's title phrase "to have and to hold," a common utterance in Western marriage ceremonies, beautifully illustrates the broad significance of these African containers not only as objects for food, water, or money transport and storage, but also as meaning-bearing focal points in social interactions and gatherings. In the Mathers Museum of World Cultures, this small exhibition of almost sixty objects occupied the space of one modestly-sized gallery. Despite its reduced dimensions, the room still managed to allow plenty of space for multiple visitors either to gaze at the pots, bags, baskets, and bowls at their leisure, or to sit down on a bench in the center of the room. The social, economic, and ritual uses of these containers, as well as the relevance of environmental pressures and natural resources that limit the possible uses to which they are put, served as the guiding themes that tied together the regionally grouped artifacts. The introductory didactics stressed the importance of these issues with four large African maps; superimposed over national borders, ethnic boundaries, vegetation, and economic zones were indicated by a system of color coding.

With the exception of a few literally "out of place" ethnographic excerpts alongside the Central Africa display, the objects from each African region had an accompanying set of ethnographic field notes relating to how peoples of that region use and construct—socially and physically—these containers. For example, in the display case for the Sahara and Northwest Africa one of the more uncommon items, a quiver from the Fulani, hung above four intricately carved bowls. Adjacently located texts from two ethnographers supplied notes on both types of containers. One set of notes elaborated in detail the techniques one farmer from this region employs in crafting the bowls, the socializing frequently involved in this activity, and the stiff competition modern mass-produced items now present. A second excerpt explained the economic significance of the quiver to the Fulani, who sell bows and arrows and thus require a container to transport the arrows. Considering that both the bowls and the quiver have a share in this environmentally-conditioned regional economy, it became clear that the seemingly incongruously placed quiver was actually well-situated.

This carefully considered thematic and geographic organization of artifacts was supplemented by a few visual design elements. The backgrounds of the display cases (with only a couple of exceptions) were painted light blue. The object platforms used to add visual interest and maximize space were coated in a complementary orange color. The only change I would have suggested for this design was that the hues chosen for the backgrounds and platforms could have reflected the environmental contexts (arid vs. rainforest) to provide visitors with visual cues to enhance their ability to associate artifacts with their geographic regions. The two cases that deviated from the blue/orange color scheme—with either white or terracotta—also lacked any lighting making it difficult to fully appreciate the finer signs of "patina," or other indications of age and wear. This might have been for reasons of conservation; the exhibit introduction

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mentioned that some of the artifacts are nearly a hundred years old. Such an explanation seems improbable, though, due to the geographical—not chronological—organization of the objects, unless, of course, only those two regions contained such aged containers.

Aside from these minor concerns, questions, and suggestions, the conceptual flow and unity of the regionally-divided display cases provided an overall enlightening experience. The ethnographic labels had the potential to be daunting to read for the casual museum patron who rarely spends more than nine or ten seconds on a label. However, the affiliation of the Mathers Museum with Indiana University encourages individuals with academic and research interests to view their exhibits. For these visitors, thick cultural description such as that found in the labels for the African containers probably better addressed their interests. Despite their length, the labels' omission of anthropological jargon allowed persons with little understanding of the discipline or African regions to grasp the social, economic, and symbolic significance of these objects. This exhibit, then, appealed to an audience with varying levels of interest and educational backgrounds, ranging on a continuum from a passing layman's curiosity to a scholar's research focus on the subject.

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