

THE ART OF DAILY LIFE

PORTABLE OBJECTS FROM SOUTHEAST AFRICA



CONSTANTINE PETRIDIS

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with an essay by Karel Nel



Published on the occasion of the exhibition *The Art of Daily Life: Portable Objects from Southeast Africa*, April 17, 2011–February 26, 2012, at the Cleveland Museum of Art.

THE CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART

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Map: Carolyn K. Lewis

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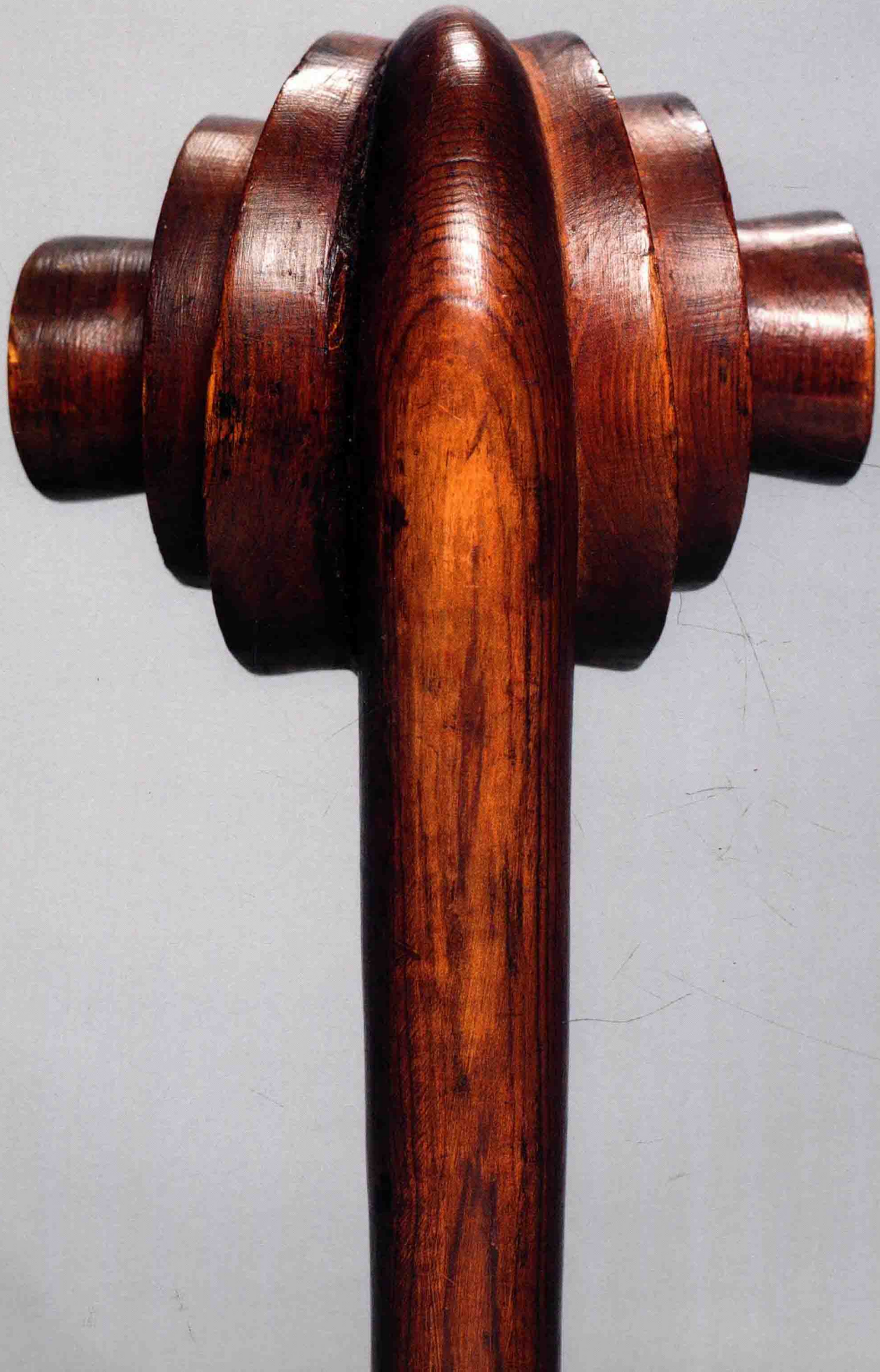
PAGE 2: *Knobkerrie* (rear view) (cat. 46)

PAGE 8: *Staff* (cat. 55)

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FOREWORD

David Franklin, Director
The Cleveland Museum of Art

When I look at the objects illustrated in the following pages and admire their striking beauty and often “modern” design, it is hard to believe that this publication accompanies the first exhibition focusing on the arts of southeast Africa organized by an encyclopedic art museum in this country. Certainly, the arts of this part of the continent were well represented in *African Furniture and Household Objects*, the touring landmark exhibition Roy Sieber organized in collaboration with Cleveland native Katherine C. White for the American Federation of Arts in 1980. However, an exhibition exclusively devoted to portable objects of daily life from southeast Africa presented by an art museum like ours proves to be a first. Interestingly, the only exhibition on American soil that could be considered a precursor to our pioneering undertaking, *African Elegance: The Traditional Art of Southern Africa* (1983–84), had a strong Cleveland connection. It was on view in nearby Canton, and all of the more than 500 items on view derived from the extensive collection of Rhoda Levinsohn, a South African-born expert on the topic who happened to live in Cleveland.

What distinguishes *The Art of Daily Life* from *African Elegance*, however, aside from its size, are its multiple lenders—two museums and twenty-two private collections—and, not the least, this handsome catalogue. It has greatly benefited from the contributions of Karel Nel of the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, who wrote an enlightening essay and shared his vast knowledge with our museum’s African art specialist, Constantine Petridis, who served as the exhibition’s curator. Through various loans from American public and private collections, *The Art of Daily Life* celebrates the stunning formal diversity and deep cultural meanings of the rich artistic heritage of southern Africa. It introduces a wide range of personal and domestic objects created in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by highly talented artists from different pastoral cultures whose descendants inhabit present-day South Africa, Lesotho, Swaziland, Botswana, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe. The exhibition and its companion catalogue aspire to elucidate how these works were much more than exquisitely designed functional objects.

Yet, *The Art of Daily Life* also celebrates an important new development for the Cleveland Museum of Art as a collecting institution. Indeed, the museum’s permanent collection of African art, like those of most of our sister institutions, was drawn heavily from West and Central Africa. Most of the masks and figures that have been recognized as “art” since the dawn of the 20th century originated in that part of sub-Saharan Africa. To this date, the peoples of the vast regions of eastern and southern Africa have created few masks and figures, and thus were hardly represented in the collection, if at all. It gives me great pleasure to inform you, however, that this past September the museum’s accessions committee agreed to acquire a select group of 11 high-quality objects from different parts of southeast Africa. I take advantage of this opportunity to express my gratitude to Dori and Daniel Rootenberg, who bestowed on the museum four works in appreciation of this significant expansion of our collection. I believe it is fair to say that, as a result of these acquisitions and the added gifts, the Cleveland Museum of Art now ranks among the most important repositories of art from southern Africa in this country. I hope you will share my enthusiasm as you discover these 15 additions to our collection in the following pages. I also sincerely hope that, thanks to the efforts of Dr. Petridis and Dr. Nel, and especially the generosity of our many lenders, you will be as captivated and intrigued by the universal beauty of the works illustrated here as I was when I first encountered them.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A collaborative endeavor in the real sense of the term, many people have contributed to the successful realization of this exhibition and its companion publication. First and foremost, I would like to thank Interim Director Deborah Gribbon, Director David Franklin, and Chief Curator Griffith Mann, for their confidence. I am also grateful for the support of my colleagues in various museum departments, in particular Heidi Streaan and Emily Marshall (Exhibitions), Mary Suzor and Lauren Turner (Collections Management), Jeffrey Streaan, Jim Engelmann, and Andrew Gutierrez (Design), Caroline Goeser (Education), and Mary Wheelock (Development). I also thank my colleagues in the Ingalls Library, under the direction of Elizabeth Lantz, for locating and gathering countless resources. At an early stage of the organization of the exhibition, I was aptly helped in my library research by my former curatorial assistant, Lisa Simmons. In more recent months, I have enjoyed the same support from Katherine Flach, a PhD candidate in African art at Case Western Reserve University. I also owe a great debt to Barbara Bradley, director of Curatorial Publications, for her meticulous editorial work and close supervision of the production of this catalogue.

It has been a privilege to collaborate on this publication with 5 Continents Editions, Milan, and I wish to thank its founding director, Eric Ghysels. I am particularly honored to have had the chance to discuss various matters at length with Karel Nel of the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. Not only did he write an excellent essay for this publication, he generously shared his vast expertise and offered advice in the selection process. I should emphasize, however, that our tastes did not always coincide and I alone am responsible for the final choices as well as any remaining mistakes in the attribution or identification of this or that object.

Of course, the exhibition on which the catalogue is based would not have been possible without the objects, primarily borrowed from a large number of private collectors, some of whom are mentioned by name on page 111. I herewith express my sincerest thanks to all of them. My colleagues Bryna Freyer and Amy Staples deserve special mention for facilitating the 13 loans from the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C., the only other institutional lender aside from the Cleveland Museum of Art. Other colleagues who have kindly contributed in one way or another to the exhibition and/or its catalogue are: Lisa Binder and Carol Braide (Museum for African Art, New York), Jan Calmeyn (Sint-Niklaas, Belgium), Bernard de Grunne (Brussels), Els De Palmenaer (Ethnographic Museum, Antwerp, Belgium), Udo Horstmann (Zug, Switzerland), Steven Morris (Donald Morris Gallery, Michigan/New York), Fiona Rankin-Smith (Wits Art Museum, Johannesburg), James Ross (New York), Marguerite de Sabran, Alexis Maggiar, and Heinrich Schweizer (Sotheby's, Paris/New York), and Gary van Wyk (Axis Gallery, New York). My deepest gratitude, however, goes to Dori and Daniel Rootenberg (Jacaranda Tribal, New York), who benevolently acted as consultants to this project. They triggered my interest in the fascinating world of art from southeast Africa, helped shape my eye by guiding me through collections and the literature, and spared neither time nor effort to find the answers to my (too many) questions along the way.



PERSONAL AND HOUSEHOLD ARTS IN SOUTHEAST AFRICA

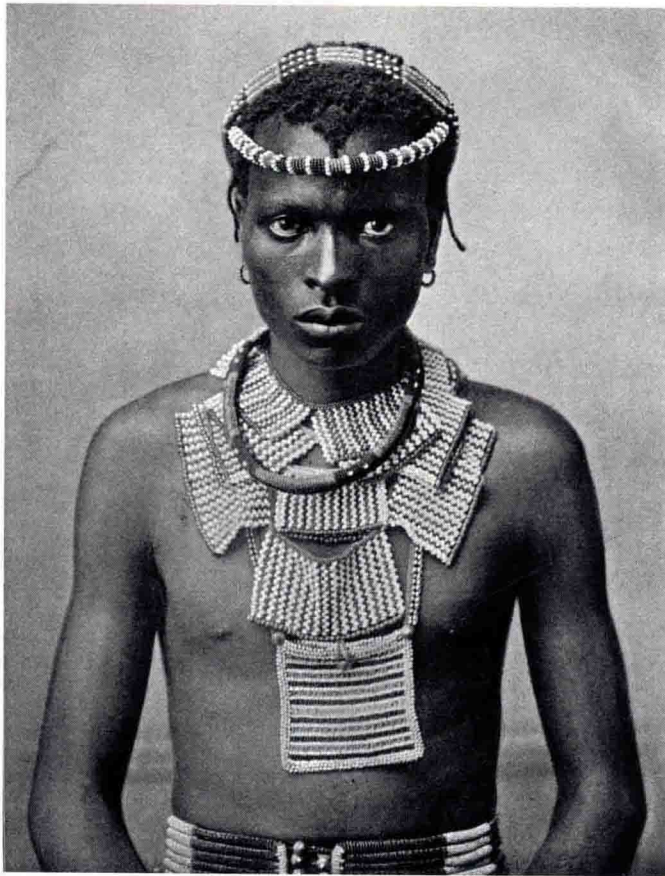
The exhibition attempts to show the diversity of material and to dispel the notion that little of any consequence was produced in southern Africa." Christopher Till used these words in his preface to the landmark exhibition *Art and Ambiguity* at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 1991. This catalogue and the exhibition it accompanies share the same ambition, which is not to say that nothing has changed since 1991. Scholars generally invoke the 1995 exhibition *Africa: The Art of a Continent* at the Royal Academy of Arts in London as one of the first events to bestow worldwide recognition to southern Africa in a survey of the arts of the entire continent.¹ The London show was followed by several more focused exhibitions, among which are the monumental projects organized in Tervuren, Belgium, on Zimbabwe, and in Linz, Austria, and Paris on South Africa.²

In fact, with the notable exception of the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C., objects of art from southern Africa are rarely found in art museums in this country.³ Of course, it is remarkable that our trustees had the foresight in 2010 to pursue the acquisition of 15 masterful works from the southeastern part of this vast region, elevating the Cleveland Museum of Art to one of the very few significant repositories of its kind in the United States. Yet here, too, one would hope that this is only a beginning. Compared to the fields of West and Central Africa, the research on the arts of southern Africa is still in its infancy, despite some major contributions to our knowledge over the past two decades.

The two reasons typically offered to explain this neglect are the complex history of migrations that has characterized the region for many centuries and the nature of the objects themselves—"small, domestic and personal"—that has led them to be perceived as ethnographic in nature rather than artistic (Nel 2002: 13). That argument closely follows the distinction between the categories of fine and applied art, between art and craft. Further, objects from southern Africa are ephemeral—made from organic materials that deteriorate quickly—not the durable sculptural forms of the masks and ancestor figures of West and Central Africa that have long been assimilated with the Western notion of "art." Another contributing factor is that art from southern Africa is primarily associated with beadwork (figs. 1, 2 and cats. 65–74). The paucity of scholarly sources necessary to contextualize the material only reinforced the misconception that there was no "real" art south of the Zambezi River.

Thanks to the growing research of the past few decades, and Susan Vogel's seminal theoretical discussion of the issue (Vogel 1988), however, the artificial distinction between "art" and "artifact" has been largely abandoned with regard to Africa in general (Davison 1991: 12–13; Nettleton 1991: 39). As Karel Nel's essay and the object entries in this volume amply demonstrate, viewing the objects illustrated here as merely decorative or strictly utilitarian would be a mistake. Aesthetic sensibilities are actually most often expressed in forms that integrate art and usefulness while simultaneously bridging the secular and sacred realms (Davison 1995: 180). A case in point is the ubiquitous headrest. Aside from serving as a pillow with the practical purpose of safeguarding complicated hairstyles during sleep, this type of object more often than not also functioned as a medium through which the ancestors could be contacted (Becker 1991: 74–75). Even the seemingly simple act of smoking tobacco or taking snuff had ancestral implications (Wanless 1991: 130–31). Indeed, while the objects illustrated in this publication are organized according to broad functional categories—furniture, containers, weapons, and adornment—most if not all bridge the profane and

FIG. 1. A young Zulu man wearing various beaded adornments, KwaZulu Natal, South Africa, c. 1886. From Mayr 1907. *Through compositional and stylistic comparisons, Virginia-Lee Webb determined that this photograph had been taken by George Taylor Ferneyhough (Webb 1992: 52–54).*



the sacred, acting as intermediaries between humans and spirits.

Yet the complex migratory history of the region persists as an impediment to understanding and appreciating its arts. Of course, this history of human interrelationships is intimately related to the semi-nomadic culture of the cattle-herding peoples who traversed the southeastern part of the African continent. This peripatetic life-style has not only contributed to the portable nature of their material culture, it has also led to their truly regional worldview and a coherent artistic legacy that transcends and defies fixed “tribal” boundaries and attributions. Indeed, the mobility that defines the history of peoples in this part of Africa also defines the history of their objects. Moreover, here, perhaps more than elsewhere in Africa, allegedly discrete ethnic identities such as Xhosa, Swazi, Sotho, or Tsonga are largely political constructs (see also Becker 2002).

The “Zulu” label that until very recently was attached to almost every object stemming from

southern Africa is especially telling in this regard.⁴ Although details about the specific provenance of this or that object are rarely available, most of these so-called Zulu works were collected or, rather, appropriated, during the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879. It seems the Zulu people’s “powerful defiance and capacity to rally against the strength of the British Empire had so imprinted itself on the European consciousness that everything that came from the distant southern end of Africa had to be ‘Zulu’” (Nel 2002: 13). As a result, many works in collections are misattributed, especially the wooden objects and early curios that were among the favorite souvenirs soldiers and early visitors brought back from their journeys.

Moreover, erroneous identification of a particular Nguni-style coiffure sometimes also resulted in a Zulu label (Nettleton 1988: 48; 1991: 38–39). One of the most cherished figurative genres from southeastern Africa, namely, carved wooden staffs or sticks surmounted with human heads or full figures, sometimes in combination with animals, suffered such a fate. This publication includes two such staffs, both attributed to the hand of an artist nicknamed the “Baboon Master” (cats, 54, 55), where a Nguni coiffure—whether the so-called heading typical of men or the peaked

FIG. 2. A Zulu man sporting a fancy coiffure. KwaZulu Natal, South Africa, possibly late 19th century. Photographer unidentified. Postcard published by Sallo Epstein & Co., Durban. *While white observers described young Zulu men with extravagant hairdos as "dandies," people living in the Zulu kingdom referred to them derogatorily as "those with strange hairstyles" (Klopper 2000: 32).*

hairstyle proper to women—has conventionally been treated as a diagnostic trait of Zulu origin. In reality, however, these works were probably carved by not one but several itinerant Tsonga carvers in KwaZulu Natal (Klopper 1991: 90–97; Klopper, in Sotheby's 2005: 160). Interestingly, this question of "ethnic origin" has provoked a debate about the "authenticity" of such figurative sculpture. Following this flawed reasoning, the lack of a Nguni coiffure on a Zulu staff would have made it inappropriate for "traditional" Zulu use and naturally turned it into a piece of tourist art (Van Wyk 1994: 65).

We should also remember that the notions of "ethnicity" and its corollary "tradition" have been exploited and manipulated by the ideology of segregation that marked the apartheid regime until it was abandoned in the early 1990s (Davison 2002: 17; see also Klopper 2004: 23–24). To identify an object as "Zulu" is therefore perhaps even less innocent than the previous paragraph may suggest. It is definitely not a coincidence that the landmark exhibition *Art and Ambiguity*,

which proclaimed the rich artistic heritage of southern Africa at the Johannesburg Art Gallery—the "new" country's premier temple for the arts—took place in 1991 (Schneider 1992: 93; Davison 1995: 180). The victory of the African National Congress and the election of Nelson Mandela as president of the Republic of South Africa in 1994 would further enhance the pride over "indigenous" African cultural traditions. While regional or group identities may be more accurate than monolithic ethnic labels in that they reflect the multiple, related local histories that have united the various inhabitants of the region, objects in the following pages are still accompanied by attributions attempting to connect peoples and styles. Obviously, the use of a question mark or the suggestion of alternatives in the identification of illustrated works shows that these names often remain tentative and always imply dynamic and fluid borders.

The map on page 26 locates the various peoples whose artistic creations are represented in these pages within the geopolitical reality of today. Occupying the southernmost part of the continent, what we call southeast Africa encompasses an enormous region south of the Zambezi River. The modern state of South Africa, bordered by the Atlantic Ocean to the west and the Indian Ocean to the east, and the enclave of Lesotho, are at the heart of

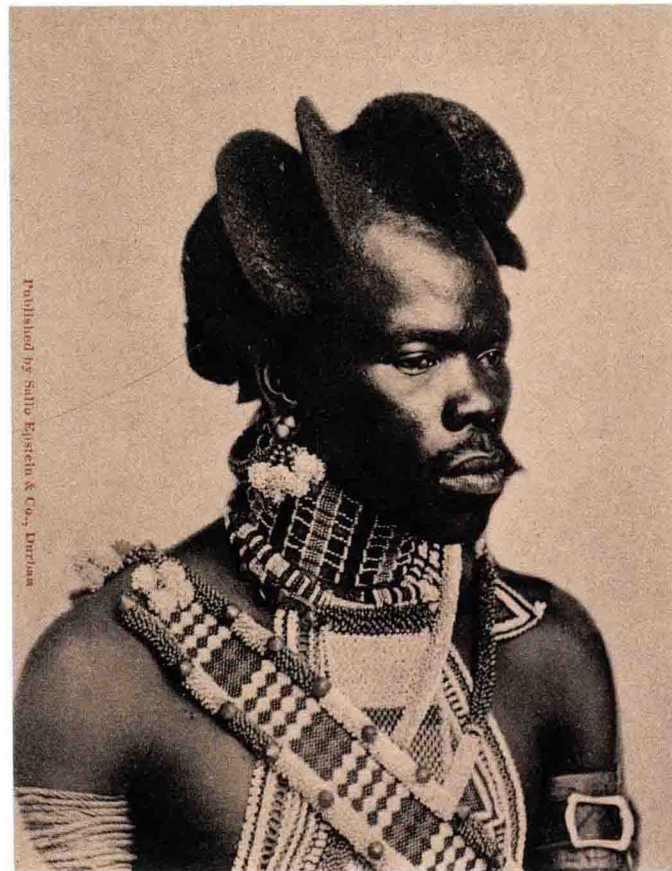


FIG. 3. Puppet. Possibly Tsonga people, South Africa and Mozambique. Wood, glass beads, sinew, metal, feathers, animal hide; H. 14.1 cm (5½ in.). Collection of Laura and James J. Ross, New York. *This puppet once formed a pair with another one now in the collection of Kevin Conru in Brussels (see Klopper and Nel 2002: pl. 30a).*



our regional focus. Some of the artists whose work is featured here were native to present-day Zimbabwe, Botswana, Swaziland, and Mozambique to the north and northeast of South Africa. The major Bantu-speaking peoples who inhabit this area, whose distribution is also indicated on the map, are divided into five major linguistic and cultural groups: Nguni, Sotho-Tswana, Tshwa-Ronga, Venda, and Shona (Vogel and Nettleton 1985: 52; Valentin 2002: 30–32; Gowlett 2003: 609–10). The Nguni are further subdivided into northern and southern groups. Strictly speaking, the Xhosa belong to the Southern Nguni, along with the Tembu, the Mfengu, and the Bhaca among others, but the name “Xhosa” is often used to denote the totality of these populations living in southern KwaZulu Natal. The Northern Nguni encompass the different Swazi, Ndebele, and Zulu groups. The Sotho-Tswana extend from Lesotho to Botswana. Three groups are distinguished on a geographical basis: Southern Sotho, Western Sotho (Tswana), and Northern Sotho. The

Tshwa-Ronga group includes the Tsonga, a name that refers to different communities that have gradually emigrated from southern Mozambique since the second quarter of the 19th century and are currently mostly located in the province of Mpumalanga. The Venda, culturally closely related southern neighbors of the Shona people of the Zimbabwe “highveld,” inhabit northern South Africa and southeastern Zimbabwe.⁵

Most of the works depicted and discussed in the following pages were made and used by cattle herders in the 19th or 20th century. Their materials and size reflect the migrant culture of these peoples, while their symbolism and meaning reveal the centrality of belief in the ancestors and the value of cattle. However, the area south of the Zambezi is also home to some of the oldest expressions of human creativity in Africa. Unlike the portable objects illustrated here, the rock paintings and engravings discovered more than a century ago in the mountainous regions of the southern subcontinent have long been recognized as art, even though they were misunderstood until very recently. They were made by the predecessors of the modern San—sometimes still referred to by the derogatory “Bushmen”—and most likely functioned in a ritual context (see Lewis-Williams 1983 and 2002). The oldest known

paintings of this nature, charcoal drawings on rock slabs found in the so-called Apollo 11 Cave in southern Namibia, date back to 27,000 BC and are thus as old as the well-known rock art of Spain and France. Closer to our time, the most spectacular works of art from what archaeologists call the Early Iron Age are without doubt the seven terracotta heads from the site of Lydenburg in the eastern Transvaal, which have been dated between AD 500 and 700 (see Patricia Davison, in Phillips 1995: 194–95, cat. 3.10a-b; Van Schalkwyk 1996). Of course, mention should also be made of Great Zimbabwe, which from 1250 to about 1450 was the capital of a kingdom constituted by the forebears of the present-day Shona people (see Garlake 2002: 146–62). It is known for its monumental stone architecture, as well as for a variety of stone carvings. The decline of the Zimbabwe kingdom is believed to have stemmed from its loss of control of the Indian Ocean trade. By the early 16th century this trade was entirely in the hands of the Portuguese.

Most of the works illustrated in this volume were made and used when much of the region was under British rule. In fact, as mentioned earlier, many objects were taken to Europe as souvenirs, and sometimes as loot, following the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879 or the South African War of 1899–1901. British colonization beginning in the late 18th century had a much more lasting negative effect on the pastoral societies that had produced such personal and domestic objects since well before domination by foreign powers from the early 16th century onward. The imposed political regime changed the power relationship between rulers and their subjects, while missionaries eradicated local beliefs and practices. As a result, the material culture associated with these “traditional” contexts often changed profoundly and sometimes disappeared altogether.

Whether household or personal objects, the works related to these pastoral cultures are typically small and easy to handle and carry. As such, the rapport between object and owner is often very intimate. Resulting from many years of direct contact with the human body, objects show traces of wear and tear, their edges softened; they also acquired a shiny or even lustrous patina. It is perhaps this physical or even bodily nature—both in terms of scale and use—that distinguishes the arts of southeast Africa. Against this background it is also easy to understand the pre-eminence of beadwork in the artistic legacy of the region. Despite the low esteem it still holds among many African art amateurs—probably due in part because it is a product of cross-cultural contact (the earliest glass beads were imported from Europe) and the work of women—beadwork is of central importance to the peoples of southern Africa. Ironically, much of this beadwork is actually textural and sculptural in form, and, when viewed in conjunction with a human body in movement, the aesthetic effects of beadwork are usually kinetic (Van Wyk 1994: 64).

Regretfully, space constraints did not allow including more examples of the many different regional beadwork traditions in this exhibition and its catalogue. However, because the selection was limited to those object types that fit within our broad category of applied or decorative art, the freestanding figure sculptures used by the Tsonga and Venda in initiation rituals were consciously excluded. Still, other object types are much more difficult to classify, and their retention or rejection was therefore sometimes arbitrary. In this respect, perhaps the marvelous Tsonga puppet with movable limbs from the collection of Laura and James J. Ross—which was possibly used in a divination context (fig. 3)—should have been included.