
Fulani artist, Nigeria, Milk Vessel, early 20th century, Gourd, pigment, 33.3cm x 36.2cm. Fowler Museum at UCLA, gift of Barbara Rubin-Hudson, X83.785 (Photo: Don Cole).

Dogon widows breaking a calabash as an expression of mourning, Mali, 1980. (Photo: Walter van Beek)

Fulani Woman with calabash vessels, Nigeria, date unknown (Photo: Giles Mobely).

Peul Woman pouring milk in calabash, Burkina Faso, Fulani Art and Life, 2014 (Film: Chris Roy).


Art History of the African Calabash
Summer Course
Dr. Jessica Hurd

The History of the Calabash
Art History of the African Calabash
Lagenaria Vulgaris genus “bottle gourd”

Cucurbitaceae family
Unknown artist, *Man and woman with a calabash*, Yoruba culture, Nigeria, before 1850. Ivory, 6 x 2 1/4 in. (15.2 x 5.7 cm) Minneapolis Institute of Art.

*Igbas nla meji s’oju der’ra won.* (Two halves of a gourd create one universe.) — Yoruba adage


“*I feel like a calabash without my lid.*” common Saying for those kept apart from their lover.

“The calabash lid does not fit.” – An unhappy marriage

Royal Couple from the back, linked arms and legs (thought to be Moremi and Obalufon II demonstrating a Union between lineages). Image reflects Yoruba concept of twoness an odù.
In response to increasing military concerns in the 13th century, Ile Ife was surrounded by a wall and a moat similar to this one at the former kingdom of Benin.

Ife stone monoliths speak Of the kingdom’s former glory.

Ile-Ife blossomed into a multi-ethnic, urban metropolis by the 11th century. The region’s paved roads and courtyards are reflective of that urban transformation.

King (Ooni) Obalufon II of the indigenous Obotala lineage in Ile Ife was the last ruler of Ife’s first dynasty. This was followed by a period of exile and a civil war. He then returned as the first ruler of Ife’s second dynasty.

Rosettes — speaks of the value of plants (flowers) and the ownership of ancient lands for the Obotala lineage. Increased petals = elevated rank.

Truncated head of Ife Queen (possibly Moremi?), 12th-15th CE. Ita Yemoo site, Ife, Nigeria. Ceramic, once painted in different pigments, 2/3 life size (9 1/8"), buried with figures without headdresses (servants?), 7 incomplete figures total.
Unknown artist, lidded gourd vessel, Oyo, c. 19th century. Gourd, D: 24.1cm (9¾"). Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde, Munich.

Asè – energy that keeps the cosmic gourd in the sky, supplied by Olórun, the supreme deity. Beneath Olórun are a series of deities or natural forces called Òrìsà who are associated with certain towns, culture heroes, queens, and kings of the past.

Oduduà – Once acknowledged by Olórun as Supreme Goddess, a creature of independent existence, and the mother of the gourd. Among certain Yoruba believers, she now takes her place as an Òrìsà of divine kingship.

“T’ako, t’abo, èjiwàpò” (“The male and female in togetherness”)
Yemoja festival in Nigeria, Iyalorisa Omitonade guides Yemoja priestesses as they bring the closed calabash to the King (Photo: Kala Kshetram)

17-day festival
Yemoja priestess - Ibadan

“May she carry it safely and put it down.”

‘The world is a marketplace we (òrisà) visit, the other world is home.’
Yemoja festival in Nigeria, Iyaloris Omitonade guides Yemoja priestesses as they bring the closed calabash (igba aje) to the King (Photo: Kala Kshetram)

“May she carry it safely and put it down.”

Crowned Yoruba Ruler (Oba)

‘The world is a marketplace we (òrìsà) visit, the other world is home.’

Sango red/white costuming. Sango priests must be female or wear female dress.

The Agbeni Sango Shrine, Ibadan, Nigeria
(Sandbags, vessels, and other ritual objects for sacrifices. Palace-style posts with depictions of devotees communicate the orisa's regal status).

Sango Shrine at Ààfin Òyó (right)
Oluorogbo shrine, Ile Ife, Nigeria
Murals often painted by female devotees during ceremonial occasions in accompaniment with dance and sacrifice. They serve as the “clothing of the gods.” Vegetal dye/dung combination also serves as an insect repellent.
White beaded gourd and lid, Yoruba culture, date unknown, Nigeria

Pupa
Funfun

leke ku u i kale (Welcome beads, welcome wealth)
Ilẹkè l'omo (Children are beads)

White beaded gourd and lid, Yoruba culture, date unknown, Nigeria
Yoruba peoples. Gourd, beads, cloth, thread, 17 cm (6.5 in). Fowler Museum at UCLA, X96.3.2b,c
Covered Gourd, Fon, Republic of Benin, 2nd half of the 19th century. Gourd, 27.5 x 27.2 x 27 cm. Musée du Quai Branly, Paris, 71.1895.16.2.1-2.


Covered Gourd, Yoruba, before 1954. Gourd, 25 x 22.5 x 22.5 cm. Musée du Quai Branly, Paris, 71.1954.68.1.1-2

Covered Gourd, Fon culture, Republic of Benin. Gourd, D 27.5 cm. Musée du Quai Branly, Paris, D96.211.493

Unknown artist, illustration, 1900-1950, Musée du Quai Branly.
Knives for making incised designs

Adze is used for removing bumps
White powder and brown powder
A rod is used to beat off surplus powder

Scrapers
For scraping the rind off the Concave part of the calabash

Scrapping off rind
Scraper out pulp

Fina knife is used to carve incised lines
Pulp powder is rubbed into the incised designs
Photo, Yoruba Carver, Oyo, Nigeria, 1950s (photo: John Hinde).

Gourd "basket", late 20th century, Yoruba, Oyo, Nigeria. Gourd, graphite, brown rind powder, white pulp powder, 29.1 x 23 x 22.8 cm. Smithsonian Museum of African Art, 2000-29-41.

Gourd lid, late 20th century, Yoruba, Oyo, Nigeria. Gourd, graphite, brown rind powder, white pulp powder, 6.5 x 40.3 x 39.7 cm. Smithsonian Museum of African Art, 2000-29-43.
Adiré alabáré. Two alternating patterns on resist-dyed cotton; created with raffia running stitches; 20th century. Measurements: 70.5" x 65.5"
The figures carved on the post and doors are various, but principally of a boa snake, with a hog inside its mouth…” (Clapperton, 1826).

Suggested Reading for this week:
