Welcome to the Art History of the African Calabash lecture series! Please tell me about your experiences with gourd art! Are you a gourd artist? Are you just interested in the object’s role in African cultures? Do you like gender studies and courses that celebrate artists of color and women artists? Are you just eager to be taken to far away places and learn something new? I can’t wait to explore this topic with you!

A little bit about me, when I am not working on private African art collections or putting on exhibit of African, Oceanic, and Latin American art in the community, I teach African art history courses at DFW universities. I teach courses on African Textiles, Sub-Saharan African Art, Redefining African Crafts, Contemporary African Art, African Ceramic Art and Gender, and African Memorials and Symbolic Space. I love traveling to Africa and did my preliminary and Fulbright-Hays dissertation research in Mali, West Africa.

During my field work, I studied the symbolic meaning of different art materials used by Dogon artists (wood, cotton, indigo, clay, and paper). I am now exploring the medium of the calabash (gourd) with you! This earth-friendly, versatile, waterproof, highly functional artistic medium that is overlooked in the field of art history. You will find that calabashes serve as musical instruments, hats, baby bonnets, spoons, masks, and, most importantly, containers for both ritual and everyday activities. We will travel from different regions of Sub-Saharan Africa, starting in West Africa, then Central Africa, and then East and Southern Africa. I would like you to learn the different techniques and artistic expressions of a number of African artists, especially women artists. Women are the key producers of calabash art in Africa. I will introduce you to some star pieces found in art museum collections, their ritual and secular uses, and the philosophical meaning of their artistic processes and motifs.

Thank you and I look forward to meeting you!

Important themes we will cover:

- The meanings of certain motifs, spatial layouts, and associated rituals found in Calabash art
- Different creative techniques used by calabash artists
- Calabash art as a reflection of local philosophies and histories
- Calabash as an extension of self or a means to construct a positive self image
- The calabash as it relates to gender identities and gender relations
- The broader meaning of the term ‘container’
- Calabash as a spiritual and social tool
- The place of the calabash in the craft vs. art, authentic vs. commercial debate
- The calabash’s relationship to kingship
Today’s visit to our local museum (Dallas Museum of Art):

Akobi Ogun Fakeye (1865 - 1946), Caryatid vessel (Arugba Sango), Yoruba, late 19th century – 1940. Wood and pigment, 41 1/2 × 16 × 14 1/2 in. (105.41 × 40.64 × 36.83 cm). Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, 1981.138.A-B.FA

Curator’s Description:

Shrines dedicated to Shango (also spelled Sango), the Yoruba god of thunder, are furnished with mortars turned upside down to support large-lidded calabash bowls. Shango priests store the deity’s thunderbolts (neolithic celts or axe heads), kola nuts, food offerings, oshe Shango (dance wands used to honor the deity), and other ritual paraphernalia in the bowls, which are placed on an upturned mortar.

In the Igbomina and Ekiti areas, Shango shrines are adorned with large sculpted arugba, or bowl carriers, like this arugba Shango, carved by Akobi Ogun Fakeye (c.1870-1946), that depicts a seated female holding a lidded bowl above her head. The central figure in a caryatid vessel is always female, depicted either kneeling or seated on a mortar, holding a large-lidded calabash
above her head with both hands. She represents a successful petitioner whom Shango blessed with children, one of which holds a bowl while the other one carries an *oshe* Shango in one hand and a dried stockfish in the other. The bowl itself is thought to be a metaphor for the womb, which Shango can fill with a new life if the devotee is faithful to him. The front and lid of the bowl are embossed with faces painted dark blue in reference to one's *ori inu* (inner head or personal destiny). Devotees touch the heads with their own foreheads while making an offering to Shango.