



Works left to right: James Van Der Zee, *Nude by Fireplace* (c. 1920); James Van Der Zee, *American Legioner, D.C. Division* (1937); James Van Der Zee, *Undeclared War* (1927); Africa, Kongo, Royal fly whisk (late 18th-early 19th century); Africa, Fang, Head from a reliquary ensemble (19th century); Africa, Fang, Reliquary figure (19th century). Photo: Bonnie Morrison.

This exhibition presents a selection of African and African diasporic artworks from The Soloviev Foundation collection in observance of Black History Month. The display includes masterpieces of sculpture from the Ashanti, Cameroonian, Chokwe, Ekoi, Fang, Kongo, Luba, Sapi, and Yoruba peoples of continental Africa and a group of photographs by the renowned Harlem Renaissance photographer James Van Der Zee. Oriented by the concept of portraiture, this focused selection considers how multifaceted representational and expressive practices have given form to Afrodiasporic lifeways and sensibilities. On the one hand, artworks from the continent emphasize the diverse roles of traditional African sculpture in rituals and ceremonies, expressions of authority, and cycles of birth and death. Virtuoso transformations of materials like wood, beads and ivory testify to the integration of creative expression with political and spiritual life — syntheses of form and function often historically obscured. On the other hand, the spotlight on Van Der Zee explores the relationship between Black New Yorkers and the photographic image in the early-twentieth century. Addressing the intertwined yet distinct legacies of European colonialism and New World slavery, the objects featured in the exhibition not only reflect these histories but also transcend and reshape them.

A number of the African works included in the display would initially have been used in complex performance environments to activate political and religious ceremonies. For instance, the ivory fly whisk comes from the Kongo people in present-day Angola, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Gabon. Fly whisks, like ivory staffs and scepters, functioned as handheld regalia that added to the visual presence of a ruler and accentuated the ruler's gestures during rites. The elephant hair fibers of the whisk component would sometimes be dipped in medicine to enhance the ritual. The use of ivory for the finial conveys the status of the user, which is reinforced by the carving's elaborate headdress and neck encircled with carved beads. The hypnotic, expressive eyes convey capacity for divine wisdom and political insight.

By contrast, the Ekoi people in the Cross River region of present-day Nigeria and Cameroon traditionally made skin-covered masks, typically carved



Works left to right: Africa, Yoruba, Oba's formal crown (late 19th-early 20th century); Africa, Sapi, Oliphant (1490-1530). Photo: Bonnie Morrison.

from wood and covered with antelope hide. Known as a cap mask, the variety shown here would have been worn atop the head of a dancer during festive occasions and sacred ceremonies such as initiations or funerals. A series of holes at the base of the neck secure the head to a basketry base, which could be affixed to a gown that extended from the top of the dancer's head to the ankles. Circular metal ornaments at the temples and natural pigments applied to the forehead and cheeks evoke Ekoi scarification and tattoo practices. An array of small wooden pegs is used to represent hair. The understated facial features on the mask suggest a plaintive and contemplative expression.

Conical beaded crowns (*ade*) were the traditional regalia for ruler kings (*oba*) of the Yoruba people in present-day Nigeria. Worn during public ceremonies,

colorful diadems invested the wearer with divine authority and status. In this Oba's formal crown, made of beads and plant fibers, the abstract faces that adorn the headpiece refer to previous rulers in the king's ancestral line and identify him as a descendant of *Oduduwa*, the mythic founder of the Yoruba people. Protected by a female attendant or wife of the king, the crowns themselves were revered as divinities (*orisha*) and were stored in palace shrines when not in use. The magnificent, beaded veil (*iboju*) would have obscured the face of the king from view, redirecting attention to the iconography on the headpiece and protecting his subjects from the intensity of his divine gaze. The small glass beads known as seed beads used on objects like this were imported from Europe beginning in the seventeenth-century and frequently used as currency; however, Yoruba beadwork traditions predate colonial encounters. Ornamental use of seed beads conveyed political and economic power. Constructed by the bead worker on a conical basket base made of palm reeds, the crown exhibits a variety of intricate geometric patterns and interlacing motifs in vibrant hues.

The objects in the exhibition also testify to the syncretism of African and European history at various stages of the world economy. The courtly hunting scene intricately depicted on this late fifteenth or early sixteenth-century ivory horn was presumably modeled after a two-dimensional sample image such as a woodcut or drawing provided to Sapi carvers in present-day Sierra Leone by Portuguese sailors. Known for this reason as an "Afro-Portuguese" oliphant, the object depicts the encounter of African material culture with European visual motifs through the emerging trade networks of Atlantic slavery. The dynamic interplay of figure, ornament, surface, and volume achieved by the carver brings about a syncretic pictorial space outlined by heraldry, crocodiles, serpents as well as lace and vegetal motifs. Riders on horseback pursue European rather than African animals such as stags and boars accompanied by hunting dogs. The animal-headed mouthpiece distinguishes the object for European use, as indigenous African mouthpieces are typically side-facing.

By comparison, the impressive wooden carving produced in the 19th century by the Chokwe people in present-day Angola, Zambia, and Democratic

Republic of the Congo depicts a chief figure, identifiable as such from the grandeur of his distinctive headdress. By the nineteenth century, the Chokwe had become important trading partners with Europe and the New World in the trade of enslaved people, ivory, and rubber. Their sculptural traditions reflect this courtly wealth and power. This muscular figure conveys authority and strength with his intense stare, oversized hands and feet, and powerful frontal stance. The sculptor achieves dynamic visual effects through dramatic interactions of curve and volume. Swooping arabesques running from ear to eyebrow describe the face, and the wood's patina imparts a lacquer-like shine.

Sculptures in the show were also used to commemorate the passage of the dead. This pair of wooden figures would have originally been situated atop cylindrical bark reliquaries used in political and religious ceremonies by the Fang



Works left to right: Africa, Fang, Head from a reliquary ensemble (19th century); Africa, Fang, Reliquary figure (19th century). Photo: Bonnie Morrison.

people in present-day Cameroon and Gabon. These ensembles often contained the remains of deceased ancestors and were thought to provide access to the divine in rituals of veneration and initiation. The plaited hair on this gracefully sculpted head identifies the figure as female, while the half-closed almond-shaped eyes and gently pursed lips provide the face with a certain specificity, though subtle, in expression. One of the earliest works of art from equatorial Africa to circulate through Europe, the work was once held in the collection of Helena Rubenstein and photographed by Walker Evans. Its fetishization by European and American artworlds exemplifies the politics of circulation of African art in Western culture, which divorced these works from their social function and devotional context. The nineteenth-century mother and child figure produced by the Fang (Ngumba) people in present-day southern Cameroon was likely placed atop a reliquary structure used in the rites of the Fang *bieri* (ancestor cult). An idealized guardian of the relic rather than a portrait of a specific individual, the carving visualizes the matrilineal connections through which the *ndebot* (house family or primary social group in Fang culture) was established; the object also promotes fertility. The elongated torso, clearly articulated limbs, and squat lower body are typical of Fang-Ngumba sculpture. The eyes of the maternal figure are emphasized with brass roundels affixed to the wood, and a mouth with a rectilinear opening. The frontality and bilateral symmetry of the sculpture suggests its protective function.

The presentation additionally includes a group of furniture from both quotidian and ceremonial contexts. One stool comes from the Ashanti people in present-day Ghana. Typical in form with its upwardly curving seat, four supporting legs with jagged edges, and cylindrical central column, the stool is carved from a single block of wood in an open-work design. In Ashanti culture, stools are central to political and social life, ranging from quotidian household objects to sacred ceremonial seats that identify rulers and facilitate communication with ancestors. These objects are so central to Ashanti conceptions of authority that kings and queen mothers who take office are said to have been “enstooled.”





Works left to right: Africa, Luba, Attributed to “Buli Master,” Ceremonial stool (19th century); Africa, Cameroonien, Stool (19th-20th century); Africa, Ashanti, Ashanti stool (19th-20th century).  
Photo: Bonnie Morrison.

Another stool—a shallow seat supported by a kneeling female figure—was made by the Luba people of present-day Democratic Republic of the Congo. Rather than a utilitarian object used for everyday sitting, it would likely have been reserved for an esteemed ruler during ceremonial rites, functioning symbolically as a receptacle for the ruler’s spirit. For this reason, such stools were considered sacred and protected with great secrecy. This object was most likely produced by a renowned sculptor referred to as the Buli Master—possibly an individual named Ngongo ya Chintu or a group of artists working in the same style—so-called for the village where a number of these works were gathered. The Buli Master is celebrated for conveying emotionality and pathos through representational vocabulary, a reputation confirmed here by the female figure’s

subtle facial expression, elongated fingers, and cicatrized belly. Luba society is patriarchal, but succession and inheritance are determined matrilineally. The female support, literally holding a space for power above her head, references this logic of ancestry.

The material culture of the Cameroonian grasslands, meanwhile, often features abstractions of indigenous fauna, the most frequently encountered being the frog and the spider. This ceremonial stool, likely reserved for a person of status, seems to be a development of the spider motif into a geometric rosette pattern. In Cameroonian mythology, the spider functions as a mediator between life and death as well as between known and unknown worlds. Carved from a single piece of wood, the stool's open-work design demonstrates how cosmology is visually expressed through ornament.

Pivoting from the arts of Africa to the visual culture of the African diaspora in the United States, the gallery also showcases a stunning series of individual and group portraits produced by the American photographer James Van Der Zee. Van Der Zee rose to prominence as an astute observer of the everyday lives of Harlemites in the early 20th century. His studio practice blurred distinctions between vernacular and fine art photography and testified to the power of the photograph as a tool for reasserting Black identity and cultural pride during the harsh realities of Jim Crow. *Wedding Party* (1932), a group portrait of a Harlem wedding party, exemplifies Van Der Zee's role as an observer of Black life. Many of Van Der Zee's customers had recently moved to New York from the South or the Caribbean during the Great Migration. Coinciding with the Harlem Renaissance or the New Negro Movement, Van Der Zee's work testifies to the power of the photograph as a tool for refashioning the racial subject under Jim Crow. The production of images by Black people for Black people served to counteract the racial caricatures so prevalent in modern visual culture. Framed against Van Der Zee's signature neoclassical *trompe-l'oeil* backdrop, this group of partygoers strikes an equivocal chord between merriment and sobriety in their luxurious formalwear. As Kobena Mercer notes, "His images of large ensembles and public events often involve a compositional emphasis on serial rows and a





Wedding Party, 1932

Van Der Zee

James Van Der Zee, *Wedding Party* (1932). Photo: Tim Nighswander/Imaging4Art.

formal symmetry that accentuates the collective ethos that brought disparate individuals into a group identity.”<sup>1</sup>

In the summer of 1924, Van Der Zee was commissioned by the Jamaican political activist Marcus Garvey to serve as the official photographer for his transnational social movement the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). *Garvey Parade Along 7th Avenue*, (1924) is one in a series of photographs taken by Van Der Zee at the organization’s annual convention parade were subsequently published in the *Negro World*, its flagship newspaper. This mode of circulation demonstrates the insertion of Van Der Zee’s work into Black diasporic political mobilization, attesting to the dissemination of his photography across a wide range of platforms. The diagonal grid formations of marchers and onlookers seem to float on the horizon of the picture, while the lower half of the image



James Van Der Zee, *Undeclared War* (1927).  
Photo: Tim Nighswander/Imaging4Art.

consists almost entirely of fluctuations of light and shadow on the sidewalk. One of the signs reads, “The Memory of Our Dead Slave Grandparents Urge Us On.”

*American Legioner, D.C. Division* (1937), a studio portrait of a World War I veteran, demonstrates Van Der Zee’s post-production compositional manipulations such as negative retouching and photomontage. This subtle visual assemblage merges the sitter with images of soldiers in formation, a US flag, and a drawing of a serviceman at a veteran cemetery. Black military service during WWI was seen as a potential yet thwarted fore- runner of greater racial equality. This perhaps gives the image’s nationalist iconography a sense of irresolution. Van Der Zee’s photographs were aestheticizations rather than unmediated ethnographic documentations. He once commented, “If they had beauty, fine; if not, I made it.”<sup>2</sup>

Van Der Zee's meticulous control of photographic lighting imparts a sense of warmth and illumination to *Nude by Fireplace* (c. 1920), even though the roaring fire is a studio backdrop. Lighting and photographing black skin was historically problematized because early film development and calibration processes prioritized the accurate rendering of light skin tones. Originally produced as a calendar image, the portrait also foregrounds the question of pose and the photographer's directorial presence in the studio. The young woman's elegant stance demonstrates what photographer Dawoud Bey refers to as "Van Der Zee's ability to continually reinvent the vocabulary of human gesture."<sup>3</sup> Her pensive bearing and delicate turn away from the camera could be said to redirect the fraught genre of the female nude toward a more ambivalent and subtle representation.

The humorous tableau, *Undeclared War* (1927), also referred to as *Just Before the Battle*, was initially created for a calendar with the theme of wives waiting for their husbands to return home. As Van Der Zee remarked, "Her husband would get home that night late, and if his explanation wasn't satisfactory, well, she had all that ammunition there to blast him with."<sup>4</sup> The work exhibits Van Der Zee's transformation of pictorial space into a site of theatrical arrangement, resulting here in a fascinating interplay of violence and whimsy. The supplemental weapons in the sitter's arsenal include glass milk jugs, ceramic dishes, bowls, and teacups, metal irons, and a wooden rolling pin. The proto-cinematic dramatization of the sitter conveys the influence of the burgeoning film industry on Van Der Zee's photographic practice. Glamor and pathos arise from the stunning distillation of suspense and comedy into a single shot.

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 Kobena Mercer, *James Van Der Zee* (London: Phaidon, 2003), 8.
- 2 James Van Der Zee, "Interview with James Van Der Zee, in *Portrait Theory*, ed. Kelly Wise (New York: Lustrum Press, 1981), 157.
- 3 Dawoud Bey, "Authoring the Black Image: The Photographs of James Van Der Zee" in *The James Van Der Zee Studio*, ed. Colin Westerbeck (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 2004), 33-34.
- 4 James Van Der Zee, "Interview with James Van Der Zee," in *Portrait Theory*, ed. Kelly Wise (New York: Lustrum Press, 1981), 159. Quoted in Deborah Willis Thomas, *Van Der Zee, Photographer, 1886-1983* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1993), 14.