

**THE BMA PRESENTS TWO EXHIBITIONS OF AFRICAN ART  
*SUBVERTING BEAUTY: AFRICAN ANTI-AESTHETICS*  
AND *KUBA: FABRIC OF AN EMPIRE***

BALTIMORE, MD (June 22, 2018)—The Baltimore Museum of Art (BMA) is opening two new exhibitions of African art this summer. ***Subverting Beauty: African Anti-Aesthetics***, on view July 15, 2018–June 2019, presents nearly two dozen works from sub-Saharan Africa’s colonial period (c. 1880–c. 1960). This focus exhibition highlights how artists used unattractive or disturbing visual characteristics to give works social and spiritual power. It is presented in one of the galleries adjacent to the BMA’s African collection. ***Kuba: Fabric of an Empire***, on view August 19, 2018–January 20, 2019, features 20 breathtaking textiles that show how art and design in central Africa’s Kuba Kingdom were used as a political and diplomatic tool to navigate the increasingly complex world of the 19th and 20th centuries. These works are presented in one of the Cone Collection galleries, surrounded by Matisse’s bold figures and patterns.

“The ingenuity of 18th-, 19th- and 20th-century African artists is superbly represented by the works in these two exhibitions,” said BMA Dorothy Wagner Wallis Director Christopher Bedford. “I am extremely pleased to present an exhibition of world-class Kuba art in the Cone Collection galleries to show the distinctive but parallel approaches to modernism on the African and European continents.”

Both exhibitions are curated by BMA Associate Curator of African Art Kevin Tervalá.

**SUBVERTING BEAUTY: AFRICAN ANTI-AESTHETICS**

In the 19th and 20th centuries, artists across the African continent intentionally produced works that people found disagreeable, unnerving, or even frightening. These figures, masks, and adornments were designed to engage viewers and incite change in the world. From chasing away the forces of evil to memorializing the dead, each of the works in this exhibition played a critical role in the lives of the people who created them. The unidentified artists who created these objects are from Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, Guinea, Kenya, Liberia, Mali, and Nigeria.



The works in *Subverting Beauty: African Anti-Aesthetics* are grouped by visual characteristic to highlight the techniques used by the artists and the purposes behind them. “Composite” works merge the features of two or more animals to create frightening, otherworldly creatures designed to ward off evil forces. The early-20th-century *Kòmòkun* (*Kòmò Society Helmet Mask*), made of wood, animal horns, a bird skull, plant fibers, porcupine quills, earth, and glass, is one outstanding example of such composite sculpture. “Accumulative” objects radiate power with expensive and eye-catching adornments that speak to the spiritual and political authority of those who wear them. “Crude” objects privilege emotion over realistic representation of the human form and were created to memorialize the dead and heal the sick. “Uncanny” works mimic the human form, but do not have any facial features. These unsettling figures are meant to carry the spirit of a deceased or yet-to-be-born human. “Disproportionate” masks have exaggerated facial features such as wide, bulging eyes that refer to supernatural authority and the ability of those associated with the spirit world to see things that humans cannot.

### **KUBA: FABRIC OF AN EMPIRE**

Founded in 1625, the Kuba Kingdom on the southern edge of the Congolese rainforest is the only central African empire to survive into the 20th century. These “people of the king” developed one of the greatest civilizations in the history of the continent. Art and design were central to life in the kingdom. In addition to developing an elaborate and varied masquerade tradition, Kuba men and women were prolific textile artists who created dazzling and eye-catching designs.

The 20 textiles in *Kuba: Fabric of an Empire* were created for aristocrats and would have been worn or displayed during the kingdom’s important ceremonies. The creation of the finest textiles frequently involved the participation of an entire community. Men stripped palm fiber and wove the cloth, while women softened it and added embroidery. Works produced in the 18th and early 19th centuries are defined by repeating patterns and subtle details. As the kingdom grew richer and more powerful in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the designs created by Kuba men and women became increasingly geometric and abstract so that they could be recognized from a distance and stand out in crowded state gatherings. Their rich colors and intricate designs convey the wealth and power of these high-status individuals, who were sometimes known as *Bambala* (people of the cloth).



*Kuba: Fabric of an Empire* explores the reasons motivating these aesthetic changes. Using state-of-the-art carbon dating analysis, it establishes a definitive timeline of Kuba artistic innovation. It also showcases how the increasing complexity of Kuba textile design was linked to the political and economic changes wrought by colonialism and globalized trade.

Most of the works in the exhibition are loaned from one of the finest private collections of Kuba textiles in the United States.

The exhibition is generously sponsored by the Estate of Margaret Hammond Cooke. The Baltimore Museum of Art is proud to partner with the Historic Textile Research Foundation in researching and presenting this exhibition.

### **THE BALTIMORE MUSEUM OF ART**

Founded in 1914, The Baltimore Museum of Art is a major cultural destination recognized for engaging diverse audiences through dynamic exhibitions and innovative educational and community outreach programs. The BMA’s internationally renowned collection of 95,000 objects encompasses more than 1,000 works by Henri Matisse anchored by the famed Cone Collection of modern art, as well as one of the nation’s finest holdings of prints, drawings, and photographs. The galleries showcase an exceptional collection of art from Africa; important works by established and emerging contemporary artists; outstanding European and American paintings, sculpture, and decorative arts; significant artworks from China; ancient Antioch mosaics; and exquisite textiles from around the world. The 210,000- square-foot museum is also distinguished by a grand historic building designed in the 1920s by renowned American architect John Russell Pope and two beautifully landscaped gardens featuring an array of 20<sup>th</sup>-century sculpture. The BMA is located in Charles Village, three miles north of the Inner Harbor, and is adjacent to the main campus of Johns Hopkins University. General admission to the BMA is free so that everyone can enjoy the power of art.

### **VISITOR INFORMATION**

General admission to the BMA is free. Special exhibitions may be ticketed. The BMA is open Wednesday through Sunday from 10:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. The museum is closed Monday, Tuesday, New Year’s Day, July 4, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. The BMA is located at 10 Art Museum Drive, three miles north of Baltimore’s Inner Harbor. For general museum information, call 443-573-1700 or visit [artbma.org](http://artbma.org).

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**Image 1:** Unidentified Manding or Minianka Artist. *Kómó Society Helmet Mask (Kómókum)*. Mali or Guinea. Early 20th century. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Gift of Robert and Mary Cumming, Baltimore, BMA 1983.79

**Image 2:** Unidentified Kuba Artist. *Overskirt*. 1912-1950. Democratic Republic of the Congo. Private collection.