



FEBRUARY 2016

Four Prestigious Hats

Unrecorded artists from west and central Africa



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and see all four hats in
*New Arrivals: Gifts of Art
for a New Century*,
February 7–May 8, 2016.

Artist unidentified. *Man's Special Hat*. Early 20th century. Cameroon Grasslands. Fiber, feathers. 8½ x 8¼ inches. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Gift of Ed DeCarbo, New York, BMA 2012.69

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Why do we wear hats? To be sure, they keep us warm and dry and protect us from rain, snow, cold winds, and burning sun. But hats may also be helpful in ways that have nothing to do with the weather. A hat can tell us who is in charge, who has power, who is respected, or who is wealthy. Some hats let us know who belongs to our own community and who is an “outsider.” The bird feathers, snail shells, elaborate needlework, and shiny bits of metal displayed on these four hats from Africa reveal that they were prestigious items, worn by prominent dignitaries, chiefs, and kings.

One cap, dyed the color of earth, may have been worn by an esteemed spiritual or political leader who lived in the Sahel, a dry shrubby region of Mali where the sun beats down all day. Nearly 2,000 tiny pieces of thin aluminum were fastened to strips of cloth to make the hat glisten in brilliant sunshine.

A brightly colored cloth hat from a small kingdom in Cameroon probably belonged to a dignitary who was required to cover his head in the presence of the king. Its bold design represented the frog, a royal symbol for fertility and abundance.

Another hat is decorated on two sides with dense swirls of blue and white feathers. This type of hat was worn by high-ranking men who lived in the Cameroon Grasslands.

A chief was the only person permitted to wear the raffia hat decorated with clusters of snail shells. Such shells were used as money throughout the Democratic Republic of the Congo and were seen as a sign of wealth and high status.

CHALLENGE FOR STUDENTS

A hat may also serve as a prize awarded to the winner of a competition. Read about the BMA's *Champion Brush Cutter's Hat* from Liberia: bit.ly/1QUbEbr

Use Google to find pictures of leaders who have authority over others such as an admiral, bishop, fire chief, or queen. Discuss how the height, width, color, sparkle, or decoration of their head coverings makes them look important.

A single feather, shell, or bit of shiny aluminum can have a big impact when there are enough of them to form a continuous surface. Use a large number of a single inexpensive item (such as a paper clip, seed pod, or pencil) to create your own “prestige hat.”

PRINT THE IMAGES ON PAGES 2 AND 3 FOR YOUR STUDENTS.



Man's Prestige Hat (Gorowije Ine)

Artist unidentified. Mid-late 20th century. Dogon culture. Mali. Cotton, aluminum alloy. 13¼ x 11¼ x 1½ in. Purchased as the gift of the Friends of the Arts of Africa, the Pacific and the Americas. BMA 2010.29

This bonnet is made of thin strips of cloth woven on a narrow loom. The strips are sewn together to form the hat. Thinner strands are wrapped with pieces of shiny aluminum.



Dignitary's Hat (Ashetu)

Artist unidentified. 20th century. Bamileke culture. Cameroon. Cotton, wool, plant fiber. 8 x 7 inches. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Gift of Robert and Mary Cumming, Baltimore, BMA 2010.67

The diamond-shaped motif on this hat represents the body and legs of a frog, a symbol of fertility and abundance in Cameroon.

Man's Special Hat

Artist unidentified. Early 20th century. Cameroon Grasslands. Fiber, feathers. 8½ x 8¼ inches. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Gift of Ed DeCarbo, New York, BMA 2012.69

Crocheted chains of fabric create dark and light stripes that separate dense areas of bird feathers.



Chief's Hat (Mpu a Nzim)

Artist unidentified. Early 20th century. Mbala culture. Democratic Republic of the Congo. Fiber, nzimbu shells, pigment. 5 x 11½ inches. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Gift of Ed DeCarbo, New York, BMA 2012.72

In the Congo, nzimbu shells were used for decoration as well as money. Similar shells are called “cowries” in other parts of Africa.

