



**NIGERIAN
SCULPTURE**

RON O'REILLY COLLECTION

FOREWORD—A Collection of African Sculpture may seem contradictory for an art gallery whose collection centres around contemporary work, however, much of contemporary art has its roots in primitive and symbolic art. Therefore, it is with sincere gratitude that we are able to house this collection and without the co-operation of the Canterbury Museum and Mr. Ron O'Reilly it would not be possible. The Collection is an excellent source of reference and an important aesthetic statement in itself.

INTRODUCTION—The Ron O'Reilly Collection of Nigerian Sculptures are on loan to the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery from the Canterbury Museum for a three year term and total 64 works which are included in this exhibition. They were collected by Mr. O'Reilly while working for the United Nations at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria. The loan collection consists of pieces mainly in wood and bronze.

Mr. O'Reilly was an early and dedicated collector of paintings by Colin McCahon and Toss Woollaston and has one of the largest and finest private collections of works by these artists in New Zealand.

The Nigerian Collection complements the work of these artists, particularly McCahon, where one can see the same use of powerful elemental abstracted forms, black silhouettes etc. These sculptures have also the sense of mystery and magic found in the best of McCahon's works.

It was about 1904 that African art first made its great impact on European artists. Maurice Vlaminck showed Derain a mask, he records that Derain was "speechless" and "stunned" when he saw it, bought it from Vlaminck, and in turn showed it to Picasso and Matisse who were greatly affected by it. The sculptors Epstein and Lipchitz also made large collections of primitive art including African works.

The revolution of 20th Century Art was under way.

Questions put to Mr. O'Reilly by Don Driver and his answers:

- (1) Did you collect all these works yourself, by actually going out to the different tribes, or did you purchase them from a dealer in Nigeria?

O'Reilly—Neither. Most of the carvings were brought to the door of my flat on the University campus in Ibadan by itinerant salesmen, who lugged such things around with them, usually in flour-bags. I gathered that they did not own the works they carried, but that the owner set a price on each which they should pay him if they quit it and that anything above the price was theirs. There were however a few houses in one of the suburbs where these owners lived and conducted their business and where I was taken sometimes by the salesmen. Here there would be a room with carvings piled all over the floor. In either case one was expected to bargain and I got known as someone who named a price and stuck to it, and as often as not eventually got a carving for that price.

As to the 'various tribes', all these carvings are Yoruba, which is a people or nation of some 8-9 million, though they come from most of the various divisions or 'tribes' of the Yoruba in Western Nigeria. The Yoruba are the most aesthetically gifted people in the world.

- (2) Do you have any idea of the age of the works collected?

O'Reilly—Rarely would the carvings be old—the only really old Nigerian wood carvings are those in Museums outside Nigeria (e.g. the British Museum) which were obtained in earlier times. The genuine carvings are such because they were done in the traditional manner as objects used to invoke the various gods and spirits in religious ceremonies. They were left in shrines in the bush or in priests' houses and were duly attacked and destroyed by termites and then replaced. No particular care seems to have been taken to preserve them and the authorities suggest that few would survive longer than 30 years, most not that. On the other hand, carvers, knowing the market that exists amongst Europeans in Nigeria for carvings, kept up a supply of what looks like the genuine ones but which were done with Europeans' tastes in mind. Most newcomers, including myself, start by buying these, but after a while one begins to sense the ju-ju (or power) of genuine ones, which come on to the market usually because of conversions from the old religion to Islam.

One kind of carving is a partial exception: the Ibeji. These represent twins, which are revered by the Yoruba people because they are a reincarnation of beneficent ancestral spirits. I gathered that an Ibeji is carved after the death of a twin, or perhaps both twins (they tended to come in pairs, though I seldom acquired both) and held and revered by the family because it represents him and because through it they may invoke the spirit.

1. Large cup mounted on leopard, with tail giving extra support
6½" x 4¼", Wood
2. Covered container, supported by three human figures, traces
of colour
11" x 6½" x 6", Wood
3. Female figure, with bronze ring
12½" x 4½", Wood, metal
4. Female figure holding container to waist, with double axe
blade symbol on head. Abo Sango
20½" x 6½" x 6", Wood
5. Wrought iron bird forms with large spike for standing into
the ground
14" x 6", Iron
6. Large grotesque mask, with attached fibre
20" x 8", Wood, dried grass
7. Carved stick with kneeling figure on top holding object to chin
11" x 2", Wood
8. Top of staff with head
7" x 1¾", Bronze with steel core
9. Peg with female figure kneeling and holding two objects
17½" x 12½", Wood and beads
10. Arm-band with repetition of 4 embossed designs and rim at
both ends
3¾" x 3½", Bronze
11. Male figure, Abo Sango (sango Worshipper) striped shorts
and satchel on back coloured with Blue Bag Pigment
19" x 5" x 4", Wood
12. Female figure seated with hands on breasts, Osangin
11½" x 3¾", Wood
13. Female figure with beads and shells
8¼" x 2½", Wood, beads and shells
14. Male figure
11" x 2½", Wood
15. Male figure with beads
8½" x 3¾", Wood and beads
16. Female figure
8½" x 2¾", Wood
17. Female figure holding breasts, with baby on back
7½" x 2¼", Wood
18. Male figure with bead necklace
11" x 2¾", Wood and beads
19. Whip handle, with two human heads and double axe blade
symbol
8½" x 2", Wood
20. Male figure with Blue top and carving on waist and base
11¾" x 3½", Wood, blue bag pigment
21. Male figure with beads, shells, bronze rings and fittings
10½" x 3", Wood, beads, shells etc.
22. Small mask, Egungun
8½" x 5½", Wood
23. Egungun Mask with blue scarification
8" x 4½", Wood
24. Spoon with decorative handle. Human figure mounted on horse
14¾" x 3¾" x 2", Wood
25. Two faces on chain
12", Bronze
26. Bracelet with half circular section and incised decoration
3½" x 1¼", Bronze
27. Male figure with short legs
9½" x 3", Wood
28. Male figure
10" x 3", Wood
29. Male figure with bead necklace and traces of blue bag
pigment—Ogbmosho
11" x 3½", Wood, beads
30. Female figure with hands on hips, traces of blue bag pigment
—Owo
12" x 3½", Wood
31. Male figure with beads
10½" x 3", Wood and beads
32. Female figure—Ila
11" x 3", Wood
33. Male figure with Beads—Iwo
11" x 3½", Wood and beads
34. Male figure
10½" x 3", Wood
35. Male figure, holding two objects—Esu
12" x 4", Wood
36. Male figure on rod, with two birds, fitted with brass ring
8", Bronze
37. Female figure—twin figure
(Twin not in exhibition)—Iresi
11" x 3", Wood
38. Bottle stopper—Male figure with one arm
6" x 1¼", Wood
39. Bird form
6½" x 2½", Wood
40. Kneeling figure, holding object
5½" x 4", Wood
41. Male figure, kneeling with container on head, holding snake
and cleaver. Agere Ifa
Used for holding (maize, beads or berrys) used in conjunction
with Ifa divination trays
See: 42, 43, 44
8½" x 4½", Wood
42. Tray. For Ifa Divination. Iwo
These trays are used to tell fortunes by casting down onto the
board maize, beads or berrys
5", Wood
43. Large coloured Ifa tray—Opon
15½" x 13½", Wood

44. Large Black Ifa Tray—Opon
13", Wood
45. Double figure—back to back. Possibly decorative posts
12" x 5", Wood
46. Head mask
13½" x 8", Wood
47. Human head on stand, with shell necklace
6" x 3", Wood and shells
48. Many strings of shells, beads attached to a small carved
ivory object—Oro
24", Shells and beads, ivory
49. Mask with human head, two snakes and a tortoise
10½" x 10½" x 8", Wood
50. Mask with rope like form framing the face.
This mask and numbers 46, 49, 51, 52 are worn on top of the
head of the dancer, the face being covered by a curtain of
dried grass or raffia.
11" x 10¾" x 4½", Wood
51. Mask with human head
10½" x 8½" x 8", Wood
52. Mask with human head and animal skin
11" x 9½" x 6¾", Wood and skin
53. Mask with four human heads on top and animal skin.
Traces of Blue bag pigment—Oberi, Egungun
12" x 9½" x 9½", Wood and skin
54. Male figure standing and holding 2 staffs, possibly a stopper.
Ode
20" x 6" x 5", Wood
55. Ifa Divination Tray
11" x 10", Wood
56. Carved Bowl with Bird on top—Opun Eye
8½" x 8¼" x 5½", Wood
57. Carved Ifa Bowl with Bird—Agere
6" x 5½" x 5½", Wood
58. Crocodile container with fish in mouth
9¼" x 2¾" x 2½", Bronze
59. Lidded container with human and animal figures, four divisions
—Opan Ifa
13" x 13" x 6", Wood
60. Female seated figure with container on head, Arugba Sango
26½" x 12" x 12", Wood
61. Drum in female form, kneeling on a stand, drum skin on head
fixed by 6 pegs. Surface covered with dried blood
28" x 17" x 16", Wood and skin
62. Cat-o-Nine Tails with 72 leather lashes and human kneeling
figure as handle
26", Wood and hide
63. Male figure with beads and shells—Ire
10" x 3", Wood, beads and shells
64. Head with Blue top—Ori—Egungun
9½" x 5" x 4½", Wood



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