EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

PERFORMANCE AS SACRED

PERFORMANCE AS SOCIAL
7. Standing Female Figure, twentieth century, wood. Gift of Joseph and Doris Gerofsky, 1996.9.15.

PERFORMANCE AS ENTERTAINMENT
13. Figure, Janus Head, twentieth century, wood. Gift of Joseph and Doris Gerofsky, 1976.1.3.

FURTHER READING
Pulichesty: by Andrew Bale
Graphic design by Amanda DeLorenzo and Neil Mills, Dickinson College Design Services
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THE TROUT GALLERY
The ART MUSEUM of Dickinson College
240 West High Street, Carlisle, Pennsylvania 17013
717–245–1344 www.troutgallery.org
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Mafilè Fèn: Something to Look at
BAMANA Dance and Art
May 27, 2016–January 14, 2017
Ndòmò—divine. To do this, a Bamana male undergoes an initiation into six sequential societies: some of which feature ritual objects and headdresses. In order to become enlightened, the initiate must undergo a set of performative rituals, and then into the succeeding societies. Each society communicates its yira, which is a life force that comes from a central god, Maa Ngala. One's spiritual duty is to learn the ways in which the universe is made up of energy, called nyama, or energy. Bamana spirituality focuses on performance and the body. Within Bamana religious beliefs, the sacred, the social, and entertainment. Anthropologists and scholars interpret performance as not only organized or ritualistic experiences, but also as constant interpretations and manifestations of identity that communicate specific societal structures and unify a culture. It is for the performer to decide how he or she will enact this collective identity, and by examining these performances we can begin to see how individuals and objects come together to reinforce the ideologies of the culture. Although every aspect of Bamana life is interwoven with performance, the objects in this exhibition relate closely to three primary areas: the sacred, the social, and entertainment.

PERFORMANCE AS SACRED

Bamana spirituality focuses on performance and the body. Within Bamana religious beliefs, the universe is made up of energy, called yo or nyama, which created all things, including man. Yo is a life force that comes from a central god, Maa Ngala. One’s spiritual duty is to learn the ways in which yo unites the earth to man, the mind to the body, and man to the divine. To do this, a Bamana male undergoes an initiation into six sequential societies: Ndémò, Kono, Nono, Kono, Chi Wara, and Kori. As a child, each male first enters into the Ndémò society and then into the succeeding societies. Each society communicates its wisdom through performance, teaching the man about his relationship to the universe. In order to become enlightened, the initiate must undergo a set of performative rituals, some of which feature ritual objects and headdresses.

Chi Wara headdresses, for example, are used in performances that convey to initiates the importance of farming and man’s ability to work and move the earth. The Chi Wara, a mythological creature that is half human and half animal, is said to have taught the Bamana people how to farm and harvest. The Bamana society enacts Chi Wara performances as a plea for a good harvest. Two headdresses are needed to enact this performance: one represents a male, the other a female. This combination not only emphasizes the practical role of each gender in farming—men work during the planting season and women bring in the harvest—it also emphasizes the importance of the family unit within Bamana society.

Men are head of household and work to provide food and income; women bear children and raise the family. Two men wear the headdresses and related garments for a Chi Wara performance. Raffia hangs from the headdress and covers each man’s face and is also used in the costume. The Chi Wara performer dances around on all fours, mimicking the creature’s front legs with sticks. A caller leads the audience in song. Women are not allowed to wear the headdresses in the performance but instead sing in response to the caller.

PERFORMANCE AS SOCIAL

Certain Bamana villages in the southern part of Mali have an initiation society called the Jo. The Jo originated as a sacred society, but over time it transformed into an age-based group. It conducts performances with costumes, masks, and sculptures. After the initiates have completed the society’s rituals, they participate in a festive celebration called foo yira ("to show the fibers"). In this performance, new initiates dance with small and large female figurines. These figurines are collectively known as nyelëni ("the beautiful ones"). In performances with nyelëni, boys either hold the figurines in their arms as they sing or place the figurines on the ground and dance in front of them. The beauty of these sculptures adds to the celebratory nature of Jo performances.

Nyelëni also serve as a physical reminder of the roles of young Bamana men and women. Marriage is an important life event in Bamana culture and a child is expected to begin looking for a spouse as soon as he or she reaches adolescence. Nyelëni remind young women what an ideal wife should look like and also young men of their future role as providers for their family. Since the Bamana value Ndè-mè-Fèn (“something to look at”) is anything that attracts your attention, focuses your eye, and guides your thoughts. Ndè-mè-Fèn includes many artistic forms—costume, dance, music, theater, and sculpture—which come together in performance.

Collective identity is not only expressed in the stories and songs of the Sogo Bò, it is also taught. Young boys in the Kamalen also have the opportunity to explore personal talent and gain recognition through their performance. Even though the Sogo Bò performance itself is considered less serious than others, the young men who exhibit great talent are viewed as local celebrities. If they are good enough, they might have the opportunity to travel to other villages and perform. In this way, the young performers not only are recognized for their contribution to a collective and performative practice, they are also appreciated for the creativity of their individual interpretations.

STATUS OF THE ARTISTS

Since the Bamana value Ndè-mè-Fèn, the artists, particularly sculptors, are important in Bamana society. Wood carvers, or yiri bali-bali, are the only craftsmen endowed with boliw, the power to create divine objects. It is believed that all craftsmen, yamoke-low, are born with a great deal of divine energy that enables them to create and to handle this energy in their work. Bamana craftsmen, specifically wood carvers, are seen as technologists and medicine men because they provide for all needs in Bamana culture—physical, psychological, and spiritual. The carver’s ability to harness divine energy positions him as one who remedies societal needs. These sculptures thus have a coded importance. They are not only power objects, but also necessary tools for communicating balance and clarity among the Bamana people.