



PEABODY MUSEUM
of ARCHAEOLOGY & ETHNOLOGY

PRESS RELEASE

New Exhibition: Masked Festivals of Canton Bo, Southwest Ivory Coast

Opening Reception:

Wednesday, May 27, 2009

5-7 PM Exhibition Opening & Reception

Free and Open to the Public

Exhibit Dates: May 27, 2009–March 31, 2010

Where: Peabody Museum and Tozzer Library,
Harvard University, 11 and 21 Divinity Ave.

Cambridge.



Cantankerous masked warrior spirit and its guardians, 1989.
Photo by Monni Adams.

Through rare drawings and photographs, along with masks from the Peabody Museum collections, Masked Festivals explores the important role of masked spirit dancers, singers, and performers at festivals in eastern Liberia and western Ivory Coast.

(Cambridge, April 13, 2009) Anthropologist and art historian Dr. Monni Adams was warned by villagers as she awaited the arrival of a masked forest spirit during a festival. “Stand back,” they told her, “we are not responsible for its behavior. It might knock your camera down.” She watched the masked spirit enter the village, brandishing a long stick and surrounded by three guardians with their own sticks.



Judge mask similar to those from Canton Bo, wood with fiber. Liberia. PM 48-36-50/7373.

Adams had traveled to western Africa to decode the distinctive costumes, masks, and behaviors of the masked spirits, and to discover the meaning of their roles in the festivals and the region.

The Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology and Tozzer Library, Harvard University present a new exhibition by Dr. Adams, *Masked Festivals of Canton Bo, Southwest Ivory Coast*. The exhibition opens Wednesday, May 27, 2009 and will remain on view through March 31, 2010.

The African masks that inspired painters like Picasso in the early 20th century were only a small part of a larger cultural context and spectacle. The festivals of Canton Bo, located in the dense forest region of eastern Liberia and western Ivory Coast, centered on the spirit forms of ancient ancestors who appeared in post-harvest festivals

wearing carved masks, paint and bulky skirts of straw, animal hide, and textiles. Until the 2002 Ivory Coast civil strife, the Bo people invited the masked spirits each year to protect their village against unknown threats, and to stimulate fertility for both women and crops. With such protection and fertility, the whole community would prosper.

Adams' research reveals how men of Canton



A masked spirit during a festival in Canton Bo, 1986. Photo by Monni Adams.

Bo assume different masked spirit roles, including male, female, young, old, singer, dancer, comic, judge, and adulterer. Adams' initial puzzlement in some cases led to a more complete understanding of the spirits' roles and how they served the community. For example, she found the cantankerous masked spirit baffling until she learned that it was supposed to suspect animosity and attacks. "People loved that. It made them feel that the spirit would defend their community against any slight or unseen threat." Adams' investigations shows that while some masked spirits helped the community feel protected, others created opportunities for increased fertility among the women, two of the most important features of the festivals.

About Dr. Monni Adams

Dr. Monni Adams is an anthropologist and art historian who has studied visual arts and ritual in sub-Saharan Africa and eastern Indonesia. Adams is currently Peabody Museum Research Associate for Africa and Oceania. She is the author of the catalogue for her exhibition at Harvard's Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, *Designs for Living: Symbolic Communication in African Art*.

About the Peabody Museum

The Peabody Museum is among the oldest archaeological and ethnographic museums in the world with one of the finest collections of human cultural history found anywhere. The Museum holds superb materials from Africa, ancient Europe, North America, Mesoamerica, Oceania, and South America in particular. In addition to its archaeological and ethnographic holdings, the Museum's photographic archives, one of the largest of its kind, hold more than 500,000 historical photographs, dating from the mid-19th century to the present and chronicling anthropology, archaeology, and world culture.

Location: The Peabody Museum is located at 11 Divinity Avenue in Cambridge. Tozzer Library Gallery is next door at 21 Divinity Avenue. They are a short walk from the Harvard Square MBTA station.

Tozzer Gallery Hours: 9 AM to 5 PM, Monday through Friday, with some evening and weekend hours which vary with the academic schedule. Consult <http://hcl.harvard.edu/libraries/#tozzer> or call 617-496-1027.

Peabody Museum Hours: 9 A.M. to 5 P.M., seven days a week. The Museum is closed on Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and New Year's Day. Admission is \$9 for adults, \$7 for students and seniors, \$6 for children, 3–18. Free with Harvard ID or Museum membership. The Museum is free to Massachusetts residents Sundays, 9 A.M. to noon, year round, and Wednesdays from 3 P.M. to 5 P.M. (September to May). Admission includes admission to the Harvard Museum of Natural History. For more information call 617-496-1027 or go online to: www.peabody.harvard.edu.

Media Contact: Faith Sutter, Communications Coordinator
Peabody Museum
11 Divinity Ave.
Cambridge, MA 02138
Tel: (617)495-3397; Fax: (617)495-7535, sutter@fas.harvard.edu
Additional images available on request.