

# Art of the Cameroon Grassfields

A Living Heritage in Houston



***Art of the Cameroon Grassfields, A Living Heritage in Houston*, presented in two different galleries at the Menil (SEE MAP ON BACK), celebrates enduring artistic traditions from the region and its diaspora in Houston. One gallery presents historical works held in local collections, highlighting the significant role of royal courts in the Grassfields and their centuries-long tradition of arts patronage that continues to the present day. The other features two recent artworks by Douala-based artist Hervé Youmbi (b. 1973), whose work engages with the region's rich artistic heritage, the legacies of colonialism, and the international circulation of historical African art.**

Situated in the west and northwest of Cameroon, abutting the southeastern border of Nigeria, the Grassfields is a verdant landscape of mountains and highland plateaus. Scholars have divided the region into three major stylistic areas—Bamileke, Bamum, and North-West Region—but it is home to some 200 independent monarchies (*chefferies*) distinguished by their origin stories, languages, and cultural practices. Each is governed by a paramount ruler, generally referred to as *fon* or *fo*, and a council of nobles. Many of the kingdoms date to the 17th century or earlier, while others developed more recently as political power and economic centers shifted because of European colonial occupation.

The Duala and other coastal peoples of Cameroon had encountered European maritime explorers by the 17th century. Kamerun was a German colony by 1884; England and France took over its administration during the First World War. The League of Nations mandated the colony to England and France in 1922, which split the territory into English- and French-speaking regions. Cameroon achieved national independence in the 1960s with a unified federal government. While ruling monarchs retain a measure of regional political influence, they remain the cultural and spiritual center of their communities.

The headdresses, beaded prestige objects, and other works on view date to the late 19th and 20th centuries. During this transformational period, European colonization and missionary activities profoundly affected the political and social fabric of the Grassfields. Alliances between colonial administrators and ruling monarchs could be mutually advantageous. *Fon* with European military support were able to subjugate neighboring territories and generate wealth by providing conscripted labor for colonial industrial and agricultural projects. Relationships with Europeans exacerbated preexisting tensions, and colonial administrators routinely took action against Grassfields rulers. In the early 1900s, for example, German forces aided by recruits from neighboring areas attacked the Bafut kingdom and provisionally exiled its ruler, Fon Abumbi I, to the coastal city of Douala. Similarly, French colonists systematically diminished the governing authority of Ibrahim Njoya, a powerful ruler and German ally, after they took over administration of the Bamum kingdom.

Colonialism also transformed the centuries-old systems of royal artistic patronage in the Grassfields in many ways. Some entrepreneurial monarchs, artists, and intermediaries seized on the profound changes brought by colonialism to participate in larger markets of foreign traders, missionaries, colonial administrators, museum professionals, and artists. Scholars of Cameroon's art history have demonstrated how art-making during this period shifted towards European commercial demand for "African" items. The works in the exhibition therefore represent entangled histories of visual art concurrently produced by workshops for royal palaces, ritual institutions, diplomatic exchange, or commercial sale.

Two commemorative sculptures from Batoufam, a Bamileke kingdom founded in the 18th century, exemplify the relationship between artistic traditions and the display of royal authority. The figures represent Fon Pokam, who ruled Batoufam at the turn of the 20th century, and his wife Yugang. She holds a nursing infant, indicating her senior status as bearer of future royal ancestors. Several other attributes, including his wife's maternal identity, convey Pokam's title as a *fon*. Seated on a throne (now missing), he wears an armband and cloth or beaded crown. In his right hand, he holds a

buffalo-horn drinking vessel. Examples of these types of prestige objects elsewhere in the gallery highlight the continuity of these royal attributes across different kingdoms.

In the mid-1920s, French missionary Frank Christol photographed these statues and several others staged at the entrance to a palace building in Batoufam (FIG 1). They appear ceremonially painted with spots, remnants of which are still visible. More than twenty years later, other European visitors to the palace photographed the display (FRONT). Their photographs reveal the continued use of the figures and natural disintegration of the wood over time. They also show how successive rulers commissioned artists to carve new doorframes, support columns, and sculptures to update palace buildings, sometimes replacing objects and architectural elements that were sold to support palace renovations. Artistic patronage for royal courts and international markets continues to shape the identities of Grassfields kingdoms. Today, Batoufam is one of many Grassfields kingdoms that make up La Route des Chefferies, a cultural heritage organization founded in 2006 to support a growing network of regional museums and royal collections.



FIG 1 View of *tchimla* building, with commemorative royal sculptures, Batoufam royal compound, ca. 1925. Photo: Frank H. Christol. Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, 1998.III.10



View of building, Batoufam royal compound, 2022.  
Courtesy of Paul R. Davis



**“One neither counteracts  
nor contradicts a mask”  
—Hans Joachim-Koloss**

**FIG 2** Mask (*tsesah*), early 20th century. Bamileke peoples. Cameroon, Grassfields. Wood;  $34\frac{13}{16}$  in. (88.4 cm). Collection of Laura and John Arnold

Performances of headdresses and masks are essential parts of religious, royal, and public ceremonies. They are associated with numerous initiation and regulatory societies (*mkem*) in the Grassfields, including *kwifon* (or *ngwerong*), *manjong*, *msop*, *kuosi*, and *ku'ngang*. Membership in the societies is a paid privilege. Regulatory societies safeguard ritual powers and maintain social cohesion, but they can also function as juridical institutions with the power to publicly ridicule and even depose unjust rulers. Worn on top of the head, normally with a loosely woven textile covering the face of the wearer, carved wooden headdresses can represent rulers and their wives, nobles, warriors, as well as other personages, forest spirit beings, and animals that symbolize political and religious power.

*Tsesah* (also *tsekom* or *tsemabu*) (**FIG 2**) is a type of headdress made in central Grassfields kingdoms since at least the late 19th century and associated with high-level members of regulatory societies. These large headdresses were worn during enthronement and funerary ceremonies of *fon*, but very little can be definitively said about their performance. They generally are thought to represent a hippopotamus with watchful eyes just above the water's surface. A notoriously territorial and dangerous animal, the hippopotamus is believed to possess supernatural forces (*ké*) that make it an ideal totemic animal (*pi*) and visual metaphor for a powerful *fon*.



**FIG 3** *Mabuh* Headdress of *Kwifon*, late 19th to mid-20th century. Possibly Aghem (Wum), Kom, or neighboring peoples. Cameroon, Grassfields, North-West region. Wood; 13 × 10 ½ × 7 in. (33 × 26.7 × 17.8 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston

With its split nose ridge, ballooned cheeks, and other expressive features, the *mabuh* headdress (FIG 3) can be stylistically attributed to the North-West region of the Grassfields although it was reportedly collected much farther south in Bansa. Motifs of frogs and spiders that reference local mythologies, proverbs, and divination practices make up the pattern of its hairstyle. *Mabuh* are "runners" who announce the public decrees of *kwifon* and warn audiences about the arrival of more perilous masked agents such as the *felingang* group of *kwifon*. Dressed in body-length tunics, often covered in dark feathers, *mabuh* move through town streets and ceremonial grounds wielding spears and batons. Occasionally they perform amazing, otherworldly feats. It is an active tradition; communities regularly record performances of *mabuh* and other headdresses with their mobile phones and other devices to share with members of the diaspora through their social media networks.

The static presentation of these masks and other works in museums is a clear departure from their dynamic performances during ceremonies. This dislocation and conceptual shift is a major theme of artist Hervé Youmbi's work. Partnering with regionally recognized specialists—beaders, carvers, initiated ritualists—he designs masks and other artworks that move between the ceremonial spaces in the Grassfields and aestheticized displays of museums or art galleries.



**FIG 4** Fon Ngangoum Sylvestre of Balassié Kingdom with beaded tortoise throne by Hervé Youmbi, commemorative sculptures, and members of *ku'ngang* society wearing *yégué* masks. Courtesy of Hervé Youmbi

Youmbi's *Celestial Thrones* (*Les trônes célestes*) consists of five beaded transport thrones that are typical of those commissioned by *fon* for public appearances and diplomatic visits to other kingdoms. Youmbi's thrones depict zoomorphic analogues (*pi*) for the ruler: panther, buffalo, rhinoceros, elephant, and tortoise. Under the base of each throne, Bamileke proverbs in French have been beaded in reverse to be read in the mirrored pedestals. Three of the thrones are on loan to the exhibition from their majesties Simeu David (Bapa Kingdom), Gabriel Ndjiemeni (Fondanti Kingdom), and Ngangoum Sylvestre (Balassié Kingdom), who received them as gifts from the artist to use in their royal courts (**FIG 4**). A literal reference to the seat of a ruler's conscience, the imagery and proverbs of the thrones extoll humility, foresight, and the nature of principled leadership.

Youmbi's *Bamileke-Duala Nyatti Ku'ngang Mask* belongs to the artist's series *Faces of Masks* (*Visages de masques*), an ongoing project exploring the elasticity and limitations of African masking traditions. Youmbi mixes traditional iconography of the *yégué*—one of the main masks of the *ku'ngang* Bamileke regulatory society—with other mask forms from West and Central Africa historically foreign to the Grassfields. Here, he uses a buffalo headdress (*nyatti*) from the ritual institutions (*Josango*) of the Duala peoples in coastal Cameroon and suggests historical connections





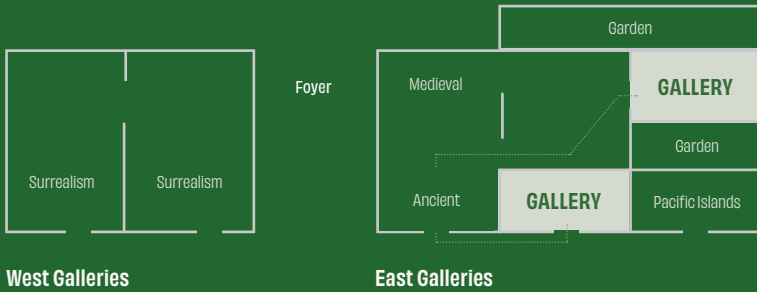
**FIG 5** Headdress Representing a Buffalo (*nyatti*), early 20th century. Duala peoples. Cameroon, Littoral region. Wood, paint, and metal; 29  $\frac{7}{8}$  in. (76 cm) long. © Barbier-Mueller Museum, Geneva. Photo: Studio Ferrazzini-Bouchet  
**FIG 6** Hervé Youmbi, *Field Photograph*, April 7, 2022. From *Bamileke-Duala Nyatti Ku'ngang Mask*, 2019. No. VII from the series *Faces of Masks (Visages de masques)*. Pigment print; 19 × 15 in. (48.3 × 38 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Axis Gallery, NY. © Hervé Youmbi

with buffalo and cow headdresses in the Grassfields (**FIG 5**). Despite mixing different traditions and styles, *ku'ngang* associations in Fondanti and Bakoven Meka (*Bafang*) accepted and ritually initiated the mask. For Youmbi, masks from the *Visages de masques* series generate new meanings as they move from one context to the next. His installations therefore include evidence of the objects' life experiences, such as ethnographic films and field photographs of the ritual activation of the masks, and related shipping manifests, certificates, and other official documentation (**FIG 6**).

Hervé Youmbi, born in the Central African Republic, moved to Cameroon at a young age to live with his maternal grandmother and grew up in the city of Douala. In 1998, he and four other Douala-based artists founded the community-engaged art collective Cercle Kapsiki. His extensive list of international residencies and exhibitions includes the Dakar Biennial (Dakar, Senegal), LWL Museum für Kunst und Kultur (Munster, Germany), Smithsonian Institution (Washington, DC), and Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac (Paris, France). His work is included in the collections of the Cleveland Museum of Art; Newark Museum, New Jersey; Smithsonian National Museum of African Art; and Royal Ontario Museum (Toronto).

*Art of the Cameroon Grassfields, A Living Heritage in Houston* is curated by Paul R. Davis, Curator of Collections.

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## PUBLIC PROGRAMS

**FILM SCREENING:** West African Film Festival  
Friday, February 24, 6:30–9 p.m.

**ARTIST TALK:** Hervé Youmbi in conversation with Silvia Forni  
Thursday, March 2, 7–8 p.m.

**CURATOR TALK:** Paul R. Davis  
Sunday, March 12, 3–3:30 p.m.

**LECTURE:** Paul R. Davis  
*Dynamic Form and Ambiguity: A Mabuh Headdress at the Menil*  
Wednesday, April 5, 7–8 p.m.

**LECTURE:** Dr. Victoria Massie  
*Refracting Biological Vision: The Poetics of Genetic Cameroonian Ancestry*  
Thursday, April 27, 7–8 p.m.

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## Exhibition Dates

February 17–July 9, 2023

**FRONT** View of *tchimla* building, with commemorative royal sculptures, Batoufam royal compound, mid-1950s.  
Photo: Michel Huet. Courtesy of Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images