



# ReCollecting Dogon

The Menil Collection February 3–July 9, 2017

## Components of the World (Adouron Bew)

On view in Arts of Africa gallery

**C**omponents of the World (Adouron Bew), 2007, is an installation by Malian artist Amahigueré Dolo. Originally from the farming village of Gogoli—near the village of Sangha on the Bandiagara escarpment made famous by Marcel Griaule in the 1930s—Dolo currently lives and works in the town of Ségou on the Niger River.

Components of the World is composed of eighty-six seemingly indistinguishable wood figures planted in a bed of red-ochre earth. Dolo carves the figures from wood he scavenges, collects, and stockpiles next to his studio. They recall the heavily worked wood sculptures (*dege*) of figures with raised arms and animals that often function as memorials and shrines to specific people or events in the Bandiagara region. Close inspection, however, reveals unaltered natural elements. Knots, burls, twists, and curves in the wood generated by a tree’s reaction to light and water are integral characteristics of Dolo’s figures. They draw our attention to the life of the wood, the tree’s recorded responses to the natural world. “Make it as it is,” Dolo says. “It’s in that way the tree guards its force.”† Accenting existing organic forms, the artist produces figures that evoke the histories of sculpture among Dogon peoples and their recognition of metaphysical and therapeutic properties of trees.

Agricultural concepts that are part of the cycle of life and death in the Bandiagara region are pronounced in *Components of the World*. As an installation, the group of figures echoes the shape of the large, rectangular wooden vessel (*aduno koro*) on display in *ReCollecting Dogon*. Used during ceremonies that celebrate the planting and harvest of millet, a staple crop in the Bandiagara region, these vessels are typically decorated with carved figural images and scenes associated with the creation of the universe. Emerging from the soil, the figures suggest the vertical reach of millet stalks and trees. Planting objects in the spiritually animated, cultivable earth is an extremely symbolic aesthetic and religious practice. “One must be grounded in order to stand, to grow, to live,” Dolo says. “At death, one is often buried in the earth. If there is not death, there is not life... The earth is a part of the sculpture. It is obligatory. It’s the base.”

—Jessica Hurd

† All quotes are from interviews with the artist conducted by Jessica Hurd between 2006 and 2011 in Ségou, Mali.

*ReCollecting Dogon* is curated by Curator of Collections Paul R. Davis.

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## PUBLIC PROGRAMS

### Of the World: In Conversation with Amahigueré Dolo

Thursday, February 16, 7:00 p.m.

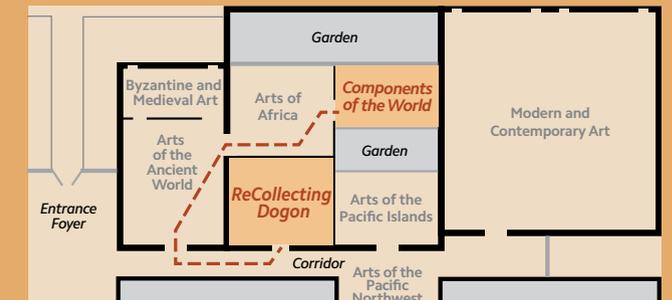
Malian artist Amahigueré Dolo is joined by exhibition curator Paul R. Davis and art historian Jessica Hurd in a conversation about Dolo’s installation at the Menil and the multivalent works of Dogon visual culture in *ReCollecting Dogon*. Discussion in French and English.

### Masks and Modernité: Dogon Now

Thursday, April 27, 7:00 p.m.

Exhibition curator Paul R. Davis presents a selection of film excerpts of danced Dogon masks and moderates a panel discussion with scholars Polly Richards and Isaïe Dougnon about the masks’ visual history and contemporary significance.

The above programs are free and open to the public. Menil members enjoy access to additional events, including a noontime gallery talk with exhibition curator Paul R. Davis on Friday, March 3.



West galleries

Beginning on February 20, an e-publication on *ReCollecting Dogon* can be found at [menil.org/read/online-features/dogon](http://menil.org/read/online-features/dogon).

Cover: Huib Blom, Yougo Dogorou village’s late chief Aborko Doumbo standing on the edge of the Bandiagara escarpment in Mali, 2009. © 2009 Huib Blom

## THE MENIL COLLECTION

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Dogon peoples, Mask (*Emina, Kanaga*), early to mid 20th century. Mali, Bandiagara Circle. Wood and pigment, 37¾ x 20¼ x 7⅞ inches (95.9 x 51.4 x 18.1 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston. Photo: Paul Hester.

The Dogon peoples are celebrated for their acrobatic performances of masks, deftly carved figural sculptures, architecture, and rich cosmology. Their visual culture is one of the most studied, documented, collected, and mythologized from the continent of Africa. *ReCollecting Dogon* showcases works attributed to these peoples and collected by museum founders John and Dominique de Menil from the late 1950s through the 1970s. The arresting sculptures, body adornments, architectural elements, masks, and other works represent indigenous aesthetic philosophies in which the materiality and manipulation of objects are vital to the continuity of daily life and the sacred. They also, however, recall the formidable legacies of colonialism and the complex power dynamics that made the culture of Dogon peoples accessible to the imaginings of Western audiences. Recognizing the limitations of presenting these peoples through decontextualized objects collected by and for Euro-Americans, the exhibition strives to destabilize the historical authority of ethnographic display. Critical publications by Marcel Griaule (1898–1956); field recordings by André Schaeffner (1895–1980); photographs by Walker Evans (1903–1975), Germaine Dieterlen (1903–1999), and Mario Carrieri (b. 1932); and other archival materials make visible the colonial and collecting histories that

shaped current understanding. Contemporary voices in the form of newly commissioned masks, videos by Sérou Dolo of recent mask performances, and works by artists Amahigueré Dolo (b. 1955) and Alaye Kene Atô (b. 1967) serve as counterpoints to the conception of Dogon peoples as a homogeneous and historical ethnographic subject.

Not only is the cultural landscape of the Dogon peoples multifaceted, but it is important to recognize that the term “Dogon,” applied to those living in more than 1,500 rural villages and urban centers throughout the Bandiagara, Mopti, and Douentza regions of Mali, is historically constructed. Though a convenient handle, it consolidates multiple groups speaking over thirty languages and whose social institutions vary tremendously. The substantial diversity in the region has prompted anthropologists and linguistic specialists to question the predominant use of Dogon as a unifying category of cultural identity or “tribe.”<sup>1</sup> The use of the word “peoples” is an acknowledgment of this complexity.

Oral histories and archaeological findings suggest that the Dogon peoples migrated to the area in waves and settled in the region between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, displacing and likely intermixing with existing inhabitants. Islamic rulers of the Mali and Songhai Empires, as well as smaller localized kingdoms, controlled much of West Africa during this period, and the steep cliffs that separate the arid Séno-Gondo plain from the rocky formations on the plateau of Dogon Country (*Pays Dogon*) are thought to have provided refuge for the newcomers. By the late nineteenth century, France occupied parts of the Bandiagara region. Introducing taxation, forced labor, military recruitment, and French-language education, colonial administrators declared in 1910 that “from this point forward the Habé [Dogon] can be considered subdued.”<sup>2</sup>

In the following decades, the society and visual culture of the Dogon peoples captured the imaginations of Europeans and Americans. Marcel Griaule, a defining figure in the European history and popular reception of the Dogon peoples, directed multiple ethnographic collecting expeditions to the Bandiagara region beginning with the Mission Dakar-Djibouti in 1931. He and his team, which included Surrealist writer Michel Leiris (1901–1990) and ethnomusicologist André Schaeffner, amassed several thousand objects and popularized elaborate accounts about the peoples they encountered. Today, numerous publications, films, and exhibitions chronicle, and in some instances invent, histories of the Dogon peoples, and more than four million internet sites are devoted to them.

The collection and display of objects is an integral part of existence in the Bandiagara region. Hunters accumulate the skulls of their kills, exhibiting them embedded in the earth facades of their homes. The spectacle is a favorite photographic opportunity for tourists, but more importantly it affirms the hunter’s proficiency in a precarious natural world. Interviewed about traditions of inheritance, women in the area explained, “it was important that their most treasured possessions were displayed in this way [as part of the funerals] and subsequently inherited by their sisters, daughters, and even grand-daughters, as this would be how they were remembered.”<sup>3</sup> For the Dogon peoples, collected objects define an individual’s social identity and can elicit powerful memories.

The history of collecting art from Africa in the West, however, often reveals more about how peoples in Europe and America perceived and valued objects than the changing artistic practices of their creators. There are over seventy works attributed to the Dogon peoples in the Menil’s holdings, a significant portion of the museum’s art from Africa. As with many other public and private collections formed during the twentieth century, wood sculptures predominate. Ceramic vessels and figures, wall paintings and bas-reliefs, indigo-dyed cotton textiles, lost-wax cast bronze figurines, and other objects that play fundamental roles in daily life in the Bandiagara region are few or not present. The museum’s collection is exemplary of the vogue for sculpture from West Africa—works that appealed to European artists, ethnographers, and explorers.

Reflecting on the reception of art from Africa in the United States, art historian Carol Magee likened the collected object to the souvenir, a thing kept or cherished as a reminder. The term derives its meaning from the French word *souvenir*, which translates as “memory” or “recollection.” Magee writes: “The souvenir, then, serves as the object of longings. It is the thing that is focused on in re-presenting the past or in imagining the future.”<sup>4</sup> Works in *ReCollecting Dogon* epitomize the powerful role objects play in the creation of knowledge, the imperfections of remembering, and the slippages that occur between cultures and languages.

A compelling example of the transmutations often generated by ethnographic collecting is the unassuming phonographic record in the exhibition. Included by Griaule in his 1938 thesis *Masques Dogons*, it supposedly introduced readers to syncopated drums that would accompany funerary performances of the *kanaga*, one of the most highly regarded masks. The music on the record, however, is a simulation of Dogon music played by European musicians, who were working from musical notations made by Schaeffner. Illustrated with steps from the associated dance, the record is displayed next to examples of old and new *kanaga* masks, suggesting the



Dominique and John de Menil with Dogon figure, 1967. Menil Archives, The Menil Collection, Houston. Photo: Hickey-Robertson, Houston.



Dogon peoples, Ceremonial Trough with Horse’s Head and Tail (*Aduno Koro*), between 1700 and 1820. Mali, Bandiagara Circle. Wood, 18 x 76¾ x 19½ inches (45.7 x 194.9 x 49.5 cm). The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Gift of D. and J. de Menil. Photo: Thomas R. DuBrock.

layered histories of interpretations that impinge on Euro-American understandings of the Dogon peoples. To counter the fiction of the record, digitized versions of Schaeffner’s wax cylinder recordings made in the area of the village of Sangha during the early 1930s play in the gallery.

The waves leave shells on the beach. The child collects the shells, because to him they are beautiful and mysterious... treasures from the depth, from an unknown world. Wave after wave has brought to our shores beautiful and mysterious treasures...

This quote from Dominique de Menil’s introduction to the catalogue for a 1962 exhibition of the de Menils’ expanding collection of art from Africa, the Pacific Islands, Asia, and the Americas at the Museum of Primitive Art in New York is an apt metaphor for the colonial history and selective processes of collecting through which the acquisition of Dogon visual culture occurred during the twentieth century. Waves transform the sandy landscape, erasing and making new, each one mixing newly arrived shells with ones deposited much earlier. The photographs, films, sound recordings, and other archival materials in *ReCollecting Dogon* are traces of this imperfect, evolving history.

—Paul R. Davis

#### NOTES

1. Jacky Bouju, “Qu’est-ce que l’ethnie dogon?” *Cahiers des Sciences Humaines* 31, no. 2 (1995): 329–63.
2. “Désormais les Habé peuvent être considérés comme soumis...” Quoted in Robert Arnaud, *Le roman vrai de Tabi: Journal d’une expédition en pays Dogon (18 septembre–26 décembre 1920)*, ed. André Brochier (Aix-en-Provence, France: Association des amis des archives d’outre-mer, 2016), 24. Until the 1930s, most Europeans and Americans knew the Dogon peoples as the Habé or Habbe (sing. Kado), a term borrowed from the Islamized Fula peoples (Peuhl in French), who used the name to derogate neighboring Dogon peoples as peasants and infidels.
3. Paul J. Lane, “Household Assemblages, Lifecycles, and the Remembrance of Things Past among the Dogon of Mali,” *South African Archaeological Bulletin* 61, no. 183 (2006): 49–50.
4. Carol Magee, *Africa in the American Imagination: Popular Culture, Racialized Identities, and African Visual Culture* (Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 106–07.