

# Encountering Art from Africa

## An Introduction



THE MENIL COLLECTION

Introducing the arts from Africa, this section of the galleries explores shared visual histories of Africa and Europe after the 15th century. European imagery of Africa and African artists' representations of Europeans evidence a long and often violent history of encounters. The paintings, sculptures, and works on paper in this section are intended to evoke more nuanced conversations about the corrosive histories of slavery, colonialism, and racism and to foster a deeper appreciation for the West and Central African headdresses, sculptures, and other powerful art forms seen in adjacent galleries.

Many of the works on view in this and neighboring galleries were acquired by John and Dominique de Menil as part of the *Image of the Black in Western Art*, a research and publication project started in 1960 in response to the enduring racist practice of segregation they witnessed in Houston and the American South. Collecting and sharing imagery of black Africans and peoples of African descent, the project aspired to counteract the invisibility of Africa in the Euro-American narrative of art history and to undermine obstinate, erroneous stereotypes of skin color.

One of the early African representations of Europeans on view is an exquisitely detailed 18th-century copper-alloy sculpture of a Portuguese foot soldier. Cast by the Igun Eronmwon, a high-ranking hereditary guild among the Edo-speaking peoples of the Benin Kingdom in present-day Nigeria, the figure is an idealized representation and appropriation of foreign power. Trading slaves, ivory, and other commodities for European goods imported by Portuguese merchant sailors, the Oba or divine king secured a commanding military and economic advantage over neighboring kingdoms. The Edo artist's close attention to the armor, iron flintlock, and saber visually underscores the foreign attributes with which the Oba enhanced his regional authority and prestige. In 1897, a punitive British military expedition overthrew the Oba, looting and destroying his palace. The ivories and copper-alloy sculptures and plaques they seized were later sold at European auctions to museums and collectors.

Other works illustrate related histories of the African acculturation of Christianity on the continent. Among the Kongo peoples in Central Africa, indigenous and Christian religious traditions have been interwoven since the monarch Nzinga a Nkuwu of the Kongo Kingdom (r. 1470–1509) chose to convert to Christianity in the late 15th century. This long history is personified by the 18th–19th century sculpture of Toni Malau, or Saint Anthony of Padua, who is identifiable by his tonsure, Capuchin robe, and the Bible held in his left hand. Images of Toni Malau functioned as devotional objects that provided spiritual guidance and protection, as did the Orthodox Christian icons in the museum’s Byzantine gallery, the haunting power figures (*minkisi*) on view in the Central African section of this gallery, and the Coptic Christian healing scroll (*tälsäm* or *yä branna ketab*) from Ethiopia in an adjacent wall case.

Paintings and works on paper by British and French artists from the same period illuminate European preoccupations with the African continent and its people. Prominent in the gallery is the 18th-century portrait of William Ansah Sessarakoo (ca. 1735–1770) by British painter Gabriel Mathias (1719–1804).



Portuguese Musketeer (detail), mid 18th century. Edo peoples, Nigeria, Kingdom of Benin. Copper alloy, 17 ½ × 9 ¾ × 7 ½ in. (44.5 × 24.8 × 19.1 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston. Photo: Paul Hester

Dressed in a vibrant red coat trimmed with ornate silver braid, Sessarakoo holds a tricorne hat under his left arm; his dark hair is fashioned in the style of a European gentlemen's wig. Mathias painted Sessarakoo in the tradition of so-called Grand Tour portraiture, a genre employed by aristocratic white men to project a well-traveled, enlightened personage. This sitter's confident and defiant gaze is similarly provocative.

Sessarakoo was the son of Eno Basie Kurentsi, a wealthy Fante *caboceer* or middleman controlling the lucrative commerce of slaves and European imports in Anomabu, Ghana. Sent by his father to London, in an ironic twist of fate Sessarakoo was kidnapped and enslaved while transferring ships in the Caribbean. This painting marked his celebratory arrival in London following his emancipation orchestrated by his father's European associates. Sessarakoo's tour of London included attending theatrical performances, lessons in Christianity, and several high-profile social events. He returned to Anomabu in 1750 with great local fanfare and, despite the trauma of having been enslaved, he became an influential *caboceer* during one of the most active periods of the Atlantic slave trade.

Portraits like Sessarakoo's reveal a long and multifaceted visual history of African encounters with Europe, which later developed into comprehensive systems of European colonial exploitation on the African continent during the 19th to mid-20th century. This complex and painful history infuses the creative energy and affective power of the headdresses, figural sculptures, and other works from Central and West Africa on view nearby. Mostly acquired by the de Menils in the mid-20th century, during a period of African intellectual and political movements that culminated in the disintegration of European colonial occupation, they are powerful evocations of African artistic innovation and perseverance.

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