

AN ARTIST HONORS THE ANCESTORS

Epa Mask, 1930s | Bámgbóyè



Bámgbóyè (Nigerian, ca. 1885–1978). *Epa Mask*. 1930s. Yorùbá region (Nigeria). Wood, pigment, Reckitt's Laundry Bluing, metal. 50 1/2 × 21 × 18 1/2 in. (128.3 × 53.3 × 47 cm). The Shaikh/McNabb Family Collection, McLean, Virginia, on extended loan to The Baltimore Museum of Art. Photo by Mitro Hood.

A large man sits under a canopy, his hands resting on the arms of the two women at his sides. The kneeling women have distinctive hairstyles, here painted in a brilliant cobalt blue. Other women surround him, forming the first layer in this monumental headpiece. Perched atop the heads of these women are other figures, clothed in textured robes and holding circular fans. The fans, for the Yorùbá people who would see this mask danced, would immediately call to mind Oshun, a Yorùbá *orisha* (deity).

The man at the center represents a warrior from the past, an ancestor who went to battle bravely, ensuring the survival of his community and descendants. The women embody the Yorùbá understanding of women as those who confer power, thus the mutually life-affirming complement of women to the male warrior in this complex sculptural headpiece. When danced, the headpiece honors the sacrifice of these ancestral warriors.

Epa masks, as headpieces like these are called, can be relatively simple in design—for instance, depicting one figure of an ancestral woman to honor her role in the life, fertility, and flourishing of the community. However, this mask, with its elaborate, multitiered elements, reflects the artistic mastery of sculptor Bámgbóyè, who is considered one of the leading artists of his generation. Bámgbóyè was most active between the 1920s and 1950s, during a period referred to as the Yorùbá renaissance—when warfare had been quelled and the Yorùbá region of Nigeria experienced a period of peace and cultural richness.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

There are many ways to commemorate important figures in our family and national histories. After examining and discussing the *Epa Mask*, ask students to find different images (either from their own personal experience or through research) of artworks that reference a treasured ancestor or an important political leader. How are they represented? Are they alone or with other figures? What do you think the person/artist was trying to convey in these memorials? How might family/personal memorial objects be different from those made for metropolitan or national audiences?

Have students compare and contrast this *Epa Mask* with another made by Bámgbóyè, which now resides at The Cleveland Museum (clevelandart.org/art/1991.165). What are the similarities? What are the differences? Who is the central figure in The Cleveland Museum example?



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