Ancestral Altar Screen (Duein Fubara)
Early 20th century
Kalabari, Nigeria
The Kalabari people of West Africa dwell among the islands, creeks, marshes, and inlets of the lower Niger Delta on the Atlantic coast of the modern nation of Nigeria. A Kalabari sculptor created this Ancestral Altar Screen as a memorial sculpture after the death of a trading house chief. It is one of many such screens made since the 19th century that memorialize deceased leaders, and their production is still an active practice today, although the role of trading houses continues to shift due to changing economic practices. The Art Institute of Chicago's screen, which depicts a deceased house chief and his supporters, reflects the historical context of transatlantic trade and intercultural exchange between Kalabari and predominantly British peoples from Europe. Serving as a status symbol, the screen functioned as an instrument of communication or exchange with the spirit of this ancestor.

The arrangement and characteristics of the figures on the front of the Art Institute's Ancestral Altar Screen evokes the organization, or hierarchy, of members within a Kalabari canoe house. These and other trading houses were the principal contributors to the Kalabari economy from the 17th through the early 20th century. During this time, members of canoe houses acted as middlemen in trade between Europeans and African ethnic groups further inland, using canoes as the primary mode of transportation to travel to interior parts of the continent and move cargo. A canoe house had one central male leader at the top of the organization and lower-ranking members supporting his position. Each of the bodies within the frame of the Ancestral Altar Screen visually demonstrates the wealth and power of this male leader and ultimately conveys that he is an ancestor with whom a living member would want to maintain a relationship.

At the center of screen's square wooden frame is a large, seated male figure with his arms extended perpendicular to his upright torso. His larger scale, in relation to the figures that surround him, demonstrate his elevated status as the former house chief. The screen also emphasizes this figure's head, which prominently stretches beyond the upper border of the frame. According to Kalabari belief, each person upon birth has an unchanging spirit called teme located in the forehead of the body. This fixed spirit guides and controls the behavior of the individual, ultimately creating the person's will and destiny. When this trading house leader died, living members of the house commissioned a memorial sculpture to serve as a new vessel for the spirit of the chief (the Ijo name for an altar screen is duein fubara, meaning “foreheads of the dead”). The scale of the central figure's head accentuates its use as a vessel for the leader's spirit and locates the screen as the site and vehicle through which a living member of the house would communicate with the house ancestor.

The four other figures that appear to the left and right sides of the trading house ancestor collectively reflect other aspects of the trading enterprise between Europeans and Kalabari merchants and further pronounce the wealth and power that the ancestor obtained during his life. The heads of the figures immediately adjacent to the central figure reach only his shoulder, and there are two isolated heads in the bottom left and right corners of the sculpture's frame. As a group, these assert a visual hierarchy in which the flanking
figures have diminished levels of importance based on their relative size and distance away from the centrally placed chief. Scholars speculate that the figures adjacent to the chief might depict child members of his trading house whose inclusion communicates the chief’s elevated status as a Kalabari ancestor who has been the benefactor to many children. Similarly, some scholars also believe that the isolated heads are those of enemies, and their presence on the screen pronounces his prowess in conflict.

Complex networks of transatlantic trade between people of the Niger Delta region and European merchants provided Kalabari traders with access to a multicultural urban environment in which certain materials, techniques, and activities gained new significance. For instance, European traders brought photography to coastal West Africa as early as the mid-19th century, and it was a popular form of imagery amongst European visitors. The trend caught on with the Kalabari peoples who developed their own conventions for photography, including formal, frontal poses for the sitters. The production of altar screens, which developed concurrently with the rise of photography, adopted a similar overall composition. They featured a shallow space, horizontal ordering of figures, and rigid poses. Thus, the ancestral altar screens were a form with roots in both local and global contexts.

During their mercantile interactions with European traders, Kalabari house members observed and learned carpentry techniques practiced on European ships. They then employed them to construct altar screens. As in ship construction, the screens are constructed of multiple pieces of wood that are attached together using joinery, ties, pegs, and nails. For example, each figure’s limbs are tied to its torso, which in turn is mounted on horizontal strips of wood. Pegs hold the projecting feet to the screens base.

Kalabari merchants amassed large quantities of European manufactured goods as a result of trade, including brassware, alcohol, firearms, and fashionable clothing. These items, endowed with new Kalabari meanings, appear in ancestral altar screens. The dead trading house leader on the Art Institute’s altar screen holds a long, cylindrical walking stick in his left hand. Amongst the Kalabari, walking sticks became signs of prestige. It is likely that at one time his right hand grasped a similarly shaped object; earlier screens suggest that this might have been a carved tusk or another symbol of status such as a knife or a sword. Similarly, the central figure wears a British-style black top hat on his head. For Kalabari men, European headwear such as top hats, fedoras, and bowlers were, and continue to be, attributes of power and achievement3.

Furthermore, the three central figures wear wrappers made from textiles imported from Europe4. These items all display the immense social rank that this chief garnered while living. They establish him as an ancestor and mark him as a source of good fortune for living trading house members.

The materials used to produce the Ancestral Altar Screen allow it to function as a vehicle of interaction between ancestral spirits and the living. The Kalabari, who believe that wood relates to the forces that govern life, set aside wood for the production of masks and sculptures because they understand this material as an instrument through which one can access the power of spirits and deities in order to exercise control over political and economic activities. Here, the sculptor used wood to house the spirit of a dead chief. Additionally, the square wooden frames above the heads of the two figures adjacent to the deceased chief represent mirrors, which are understood as portals to another world. These forms build on the symbolic significance of wood, as they represent literal sites of exchange between spirits and the living.

As a vessel for the spirit of an ancestor, an altar screen is an active entity that gives and receives through required and prescribed interactions. Living trading house members place the screens in the house on a low altar made of earth. Visitors must remove their shoes before approaching the screen in order to demonstrate respect for the ancestral spirit and to avoid angering it. The inauguration of a new altar screen is a major public event involving sacrifices and offerings of goats, roosters, fish, plantains, and gin to the ancestor. Afterward, however, the screen exists in relative privacy as members of the house keep altar screens in a special side room and carefully control entry to this space. By making regular offerings to the spirit inhabiting the altar, the new leader of the trading house petitions the ancestor for good fortune in the house’s commercial activities. Additionally, house chiefs make special offerings to the altar screen during the ancestral period of their ritual cycle; in the past, they made offerings before engaging in war. Although women affiliated with house members cannot make offerings and usually cannot enter the special side room, they can offer their gratitude to spirits for an easy labor or the safe birth of a child.

The Art Institute of Chicago’s Ancestral Altar Screen reflects an ongoing practice in the Kalabari culture, whereby exchange occurs between the spirit of the former chief and the living chief, his family and dependants, and house members. The existence of such screens continues to reinforce social boundaries in trading houses across Kalabari society by communicating the roles of house members. The conditions of trade and intercultural exchange in the 19th century influenced the creation of altar screens and help account for the specific attributes of European origin that appear on the Art Institute’s screen, identifying the central figure as a Kalabari person of immense achievement and social rank.
Notes:

1 Albin Benney Oelmann, “Nduen Fobara,” African Arts 12 (1979): 38; From the 16th through the 19th century, the Dutch, French, and Portuguese also traded along the coast of West Africa, infusing those areas with their cultural products as well. For more information, see Martha Anderson and Phillip Peek, Ways of the Rivers: Arts and Environment of the Niger Delta (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 2002), 68.


4 The textiles on the Art Institute’s screen are contemporary facsimiles based on existing textiles found on other screens.

Glossary

**altar:** A block, pile, table, stand, or other raised structure dedicated to a deity; in some cases, people make sacrifices or offerings at these sites.

**attribute:** A conventional symbol added, as an accessory, to denote the character or show the identity of the personage represented.

**commission:** To give an individual the authority to act; to empower, authorize, or entrust with a duty or office; artists are commissioned by patrons to create works of art.

**duein fubara:** The Ijo term for an altar screen, literally meaning “foreheads of the dead.” Kalabari peoples who follow local belief systems believe that every person is born with an unchanging spirit called the teme, which resides in the forehead.

**hierarchy:** A body of persons or things ranked in grades, orders, or classes, one above another.

**Ijo:** The name of a people inhabiting the Niger delta, on the coast of Nigeria; a member of this people; the language of this people.

**joinery:** The process of joining or fitting wooden parts together.

**memorial:** The preservation of the memory of a personal or a thing; often an object set up or a festival instituted to commemorate an event or a person.

**middleman:** A person who occupies a position of an intermediate relationship between two parties; a person who handles an object between its producer and consumer.

**Nigeria:** A modern nation on the southern Atlantic coast of western Africa, Nigeria is the most populous country on the continent of Africa; its population includes over 250 ethnic groups and over 500 living languages.

**Niger Delta:** The physical location where the Niger River branches into many small rivers and creeks before draining into the Atlantic Ocean.

**offering:** The presentation of something to a divine being in worship or devotion; a sacrifice; often made at an altar.

**sitter:** The person or persons depicted in a portrait (drawn, painted, photographed, or sculpted); refers to the act of sitting down or standing while an artist creates the image.

**wrapper:** A piece of fabric or another material usually wrapped around the body.
Classroom Activities & Discussion Questions

Exploring With Our Eyes, Thinking About What We See
Illinois Learning Standards: 3, 4

Objective: The Kalabari Ancestral Altar Screen is an object that is rich in ideas. Visually examine its construction, materials, and forms, as well as the relationships between forms; think about what you see. How would you describe it? What types of ideas and information can we obtain from looking at it? And what are other ways that you can investigate the object? Have students use the attached Kalabari Ancestral Altar Screen worksheet in this packet to think about these questions. After students have done further research and investigation, ask them to go back to their visual observations and compare what they have seen with what they have read.

Connecting Histories: Coastal West Africa and Western Europe
Illinois Learning Standards: 5, 16

Part I
Transatlantic trade and intercultural exchange are critical elements of a global economy. Learning more about the history of trade and exchange between coastal West Africa and Western Europe gives students an opportunity to enrich their understanding of world history. Use your school’s library and other texts to consider questions such as:

• Who were some of the first European countries to explore and initiate contact with coastal West Africa by ship?

• What were the Slave Coast, the Gold Coast, and the Ivory Coast? How did these areas acquire these names?

• What types of materials did West African ethnic groups trade with Europeans other than enslaved laborers?

• How did merchants in the Niger Delta region benefit from trade with European merchants?

• What kinds of trade do Nigerian citizens participate in today?

• What resources do West African nations possess today that are valuable in the local and world economy?

Part II: Timeline
Using artworks from the Art Institute of Chicago, including the Ancestral Altar Screen (see http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/afr), as well as people, places, historic events, and examples of commercial goods, create a timeline of the relationship between Britain and coastal West Africa during the second half of the 19th century. In addition to other resources, you may want to refer to the timeline created for the gallery of African art at the Art Institute (see http://www.artic.edu/aic/timeline/african_timeline.html).

Part III: Synthesis
Working in small groups, use the information compiled in the timeline to discuss the following questions:

• How would you tell the story of West African history?

• How would you tell the story of British history?

• How does looking at these two histories together influence your understanding of the 19th century?
Reading the Cultural Encounter

Illinois Learning Standards: 1, 16

Objective: To practice reading skills, especially analyzing meanings of words and phrases in context; to build a greater understanding of interactions between African and British peoples; to interpret textual information; to make and support inferences from interpretations about main themes and topics.

Part I:

Explain to students that Mary Kingsley was a wealthy British woman who traveled by herself to Africa in 1893. At the time, it was unorthodox for a woman to take such a journey without her male spouse. Have students read the following passage and answer the questions below. It is suggested that students read the essay in this artwork resource packet and complete classroom activities one and two before answering questions four and five.

Part II: Close Reading

“In the houses were set up Nbakim—large, grotesque images carved of wood and hung about with cloth strips and gew-gaws. Every November in Creek Town (I was told by some authorities it was every second November) there was a sort of festival held. Offerings of food and spirits were placed before these images; a band of people accompanied by the rest of the population used to make a thorough round of the town, up and down each street and round every house, dancing, singing, screaming and tom-toming, in fact making all the noise they knew how to—and a Calabar Effik is very gifted in the power of making noise. After this had been done for what was regarded as a sufficient time, the images were taken out of the houses, the crowd still making a terrific row, and were then thrown into the river, and the town was regarded as being cleared of spirits.”

– Mary Kingsley, Travels in West Africa: Congo Francais, Corisco and Cameroons (1898), 347.

Part III: Discussion Questions

1. What type of role does Mary Kingsley have in her interactions with the Kalabari peoples? (Is she a participant or an observer?) How do you know?

2. What are the main ideas in this text? What do you understand about the Kalabari event that she describes?

3. How does she view the West African peoples? What language gives you this impression?

4. How does Kingsley’s description intersect with your understanding of the relationship between the British and the Kalabari in the 19th century?

5. How does Kingsley’s description intersect with your understanding of the Kalabari Ancestral Altar Screen?

Forming an Identity

Illinois Learning Standards: 27
Illinois Social and Emotional Learning Standards: 1

Objective: To consider how personal possessions can reflect the construction of one’s identity.

Based on what they have learned about the Ancestral Altar Screen, ask students to think and write about the role of exchange in forming identity. The following questions can help direct their work.

1. How would you describe Kalabari identity?

2. What are some of the components of the screen that represent this identity? Which of these components came from trade with Europeans? How did exchange with other cultures help to form Kalabari identity?

3. Think about your own identity. What are some things that you own that you might use to represent yourself? Why? How did you get these things? Did they come from other people?

4. Who has helped to form your identity? How did they help? What ideas or things have you received from these people that influenced your identity?

5. Do you think you have influenced someone else’s identity? Who? How?

After students have written responses to these questions, ask them to share their answers with another student. Based on the information shared, have each student write a description of his or her classmate. As an extension, ask students to bring in or draw a picture of one or two of the objects that they feel represents them and take a picture of them with those objects. Then attach the picture to the written descriptions.
Kalabari Ancestral Altar Screen Worksheet

1. The first parts or qualities that I notice are:

2. I noticed this because:

3. How do individual parts relate to each other?

4. Can you tell how the sculptor attached the body parts together? Give specific details.

5. Other objects that appear on the screen include:

6. ____________, ____________, and ____________ are very small; whereas ____________, ____________, and ____________ are very large. I think these differently sized parts mean ____________.

7. Based on what I see, I think that ____________ and ____________ were important to the sculptor and to the people who used this object. I think this because ____________.

8. Based on your observations above, what can you begin to say about the figures on the screen? Can you make any inferences about possible functions of the screen?

9. Based on your observations, what are some other questions that you might ask about the screen?

10. Beyond our visual observations, what other ways can we find out more about this work of art and answer our questions?
Related Resources for Teachers


Related Resources for Students


Websites

*Columbia University Libraries*

*Internet Resources for K-12 Teachers of Africa*

www.ias.columbia.edu/IAS_teachingResources/Teaching%20Home.htm
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