Families in African Art

Who are the people in your family? What ties you together? Discover the importance of family and loved ones as expressed in art from many cultures in Africa. Begin your journey with these featured pieces in Gallery 137.

A Royal Family

Gallery 137

This sculpture of a king and his wife, completed in 1914, was made by the renowned Olowe of Ise specifically for the palace of the king of Ikere (a city in present-day Nigeria). Although the king sits on a throne and wears a crown, his wife is larger in size and stands behind him, showing her important role in upholding his power. Her position shows her devotion to him and her support for his role as the king of the Yoruba people.

Find

• the bird on the king’s crown
• the small figure playing a flute
• rhythmic patterns on their jewelry and elsewhere

Mother Love

Gallery 137

This drum celebrates mothers as protectors and guardians of their families. The drum is balanced on the head of a woman, showing that she is strong and able to support her family just as she supports the heavy drum. The animals on the drum symbolize the power and strength of mothers in Senufo culture.

Find

• a snake with a fish in its mouth on the drum
• a wooden door nearby
• crocodiles, frogs, birds, snakes, and horses
Love and Marriage

**Gallery 137**

Shiny, sparkling, and reflective materials are used in Thembu culture as a way to communicate with a family’s ancestors in the spiritual world. When two families join together in marriage, the bride and the groom wear shiny glass beads like these as a way to honor each family’s relatives from past generations. These outfits, made in the 1950s, include repurposed and recycled teaspoons to symbolize a sweet marriage. What other shiny items can you find?

*Some of this jewelry* is made of recycled wire and rubber tubing.

*How* might you make jewelry from recycled materials?

Rockabye Baby

**Gallery 137**

This figure was made more than 100 years ago. During this time the Luluwa addressed the health of mothers and children through a combination of medical and ritual practices. For women of means this included the making of a sculpture like this. It was believed that the favorable spirits of a family’s ancestors would enter the sculpture and make sure that future generations were safe and healthy.

*Do you have special objects in your life that help you feel strong and protected?*

*Continue exploring the galleries of African Art!*

Look for other sculptures of mothers carrying babies on their backs, a family of animals, and other objects that may remind you of your own family and the special bonds that families share.

For more family fun, visit the Ryan Education Center, where you can pick up a Family Programs brochure and explore family-friendly spaces, programs, and exhibitions. Be sure to sign up for our family e-newsletter. For more information or to register for programs, visit www.artinstituteofchicago.org and click on “families.” Questions? Call (312) 857-7161.