



Earthy Vessels: African Ceramics

September 12, 2009 – February 7, 2010 / South Balcony Gallery

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LAWRENCE— The development of African ceramic traditions in agricultural and pastoral societies has yielded a diversity of vessels with unique forms, functions, and symbolic meanings. A new exhibition at the Spencer, ***Earthy Vessels: African Ceramics***, shows how these vessels are not just or containers for food, water and other necessities of life—they also symbolize life itself from creation to culmination. Selected from a promised anonymous gift to the Spencer's collection, this exhibition of African ceramics investigates the form, function, and meanings of ceramic vessels from across the continent.

“Contemporary cultures across Africa, like cultures around the world, are undergoing rapid transformation,” says SMA Curator of the Arts & Cultures of the Americas, Africa, & Oceania Nancy Mahaney, who organized the exhibition. “Beliefs and practices change as meanings are renegotiated in the face of shifting economies, the introduction of new materials, and the adoption of new systems of knowledge. The significance of pottery, on both practical and symbolic levels, is continually being reinvented through an increasingly globalized process of exchange. The museum itself is a place where meaning is reinterpreted through an exchange of goods and information.”

The pottery vessels in ***Earthy Vessels: African Ceramics*** represent diverse living cultures with deep roots in the agricultural and pastoral heritage of traditional African societies. These traditions reflect the knowledge, lives, and beliefs of the people who mastered the potter's art unique to their culture. The symbolism associated with the creation, ornamentation, ceremonial use, and ritual destruction of pottery is evidence of the belief systems of these ancestral cultures, passed down through the generations.

Earthy Vessels: African Ceramics explores these material and ideological transformations. The section **Clay, Vessel, Shard** presents the life cycle of the vessel beginning with the physical transformation of the clay into a durable vessel. The transformation of functional vessels into cultural symbols through ritual use provides a window into the cultures of the African potters. The ritual destruction of pottery completes the cycle as the pottery is returned to the earth or recycled in the process of creating a new vessel.

The section **From Market to Museum** presents the trans-global transformation of cultural objects into museum collections. Transitions in African economies are revealed through the market transformation of personal and ritual objects into elite possessions, while a de-contextualized presentation illustrates the vessel's transformation into a museum object. We invite you to participate in considering and defining the museum's transformative role in the dialogue segment of the exhibition.

The African vessels in this exhibition are selections from a promised gift to the Spencer of more than 100 objects. This collection was assembled over several decades beginning in the 1970s and includes heritage pieces handed down within families for generations, as well as more contemporary pieces made for local or foreign markets. The Spencer gratefully acknowledges the astute and generous collector who has sought to preserve the traditions of these African potters through this anonymous gift.

The Spencer also extends special thanks to Eugene Skeef for allowing the Museum to present his unique video on the udu, and for sharing information about the udu project. Research for the exhibition was conducted by Megan Ampe, the Arts and Cultures intern for the 2008-2009 academic year, Spencer volunteer Elise Stella of the University of British Columbia, and Associate Collections Manager Angela Watts. SMA Public Programs Coordinator Amanda Martin-Hamon contributed greatly to the concept development and facilitation process.

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