

Exploring Stories through the Galleries: A Scavenger Hunt

Read the African folktales, then find the works of art on view at
the National Museum of African Art!

"The Farmer, the Snake, and the Heron"

There was once a man hoeing away on his farm, when along came some people chasing a snake, meaning to kill it. And the snake came up to the farmer.

Says the snake "Farmer, please hide me." "Where shall I hide you?" said the farmer, and the snake said "All I ask is that you save my life." The farmer couldn't think where to put the snake, and at last bent down and opened his anus, and the snake entered.

Presently the snake's pursuers arrived and said to the farmer "Hey, there! Where's the snake we were chasing and intend to kill? As we followed him, he came in your direction." Says the farmer "I haven't seen him." And the people went back again.

Then the farmer said to the snake "Righto - come out now. They've gone." "Oh no" said the snake, "I've got me a home." And there was the farmer, with his stomach all swollen, for all the world like a pregnant woman!

And the farmer set off, and presently, as he passed, he saw a heron. They put their heads together and whispered, and the heron said to the farmer "Go and excrete. Then, when you have finished, move forward a little, but don't get up. Stay squatting, with your head down and your buttocks up, until I come."

So the man went off and did just exactly as the heron had told him, everything. And the snake put out his head and began to catch flies. Then the heron struck and seized the snake's head. Then he pulled and he pulled until he had got him out, and the man tumbled over. And the heron finished off the snake with his beak.

The man rose and went over to the heron. "Heron" says he, "You've got the snake out for me, now please give me some medicine to drink, for the poison where he was lying."

Says the heron "Go and find yourself some white fowls, six of them. Cook them and eat them - they are the medicine." "Oho" said the man, "White fowl? But that's you" and he grabbed the heron and tied it up and went off home. There he took him into a hut and hung him up, the heron lamenting the while.

Then the man's wife said "Oh, husband! The bird did you a kindness. He saved your life, by getting the trouble out of your stomach for you. And now you seize him and say that you are going to slaughter him!"

So the man's wife loosed the heron, but as he was going out, he pecked out one of her eyes. And so passed and went his way. That's all. For so it always has been - if you see the dust of a fight rising, you will know that a kindness is being repaid! That's all. The story's finished.



Rainbow Serpent

Maker: Romuald Hazoumè, born 1962, Benin

MEDIUM: Mixed media and found objects

DIMENSIONS: Installed: 375.9 x 449.6 x 106.7 cm (148 x 177 x 42 in.)

TYPE: Sculpture

GEOGRAPHY: Benin

DATE: 2007

DESCRIPTION: Monumental, circular sculpture of a **serpent** swallowing its tail. The sculpture is made with a multi-part metal interior framework of interlocking metal pipes and an exterior 'skin' of repurposed plastic jerry cans joined together in sections with copper wire;

an iron open-topped box to hold weights for counter-balance serves as the interior of the **serpent's** head, which can be attached to a steel plate for stability.

The Lucky Fisherman

In the olden days there were no hooks or casting nets, so that when the natives wanted to catch fish they made baskets and set traps at the river side.

One man named Akon Obo, who was very poor, began to make baskets and traps out of bamboo palm, and then when the river went down he used to take his traps to a pool and set them baited with palm-nuts. In the night the big fish used to smell the palm-nuts and go into the trap, when at once the door would fall down, and in the morning Akon Obo would go and take the fish out. He was very successful in his fishing, and used to sell the fish in the market for plenty of money. When he could afford to pay the dowry he married a woman named Eyong, a native of Okuni, and had three children by her, but he still continued his fishing. The eldest son was called Odey, the second Yambi, and the third Atuk. These three boys, when they grew up, helped their father with his fishing, and he gradually became wealthy and bought plenty of slaves. At last he joined the Egbo society, and became one of the chiefs of the town. Even after he became a chief, he and his sons still continued to fish.

One day, when he was crossing the river in a small dug-out canoe, a tornado came on very suddenly, and the canoe capsized, drowning the chief. When his sons heard of the death of their father, they wanted to go and drown themselves also, but they were persuaded not to by the people. After searching for two days, they found the dead body some distance down the river, and brought it back to the town. They then called their company together to play, dance, and sing for twelve days, in accordance with their native custom, and much palm wine was drunk.

When the play was finished, they took their father's body to a hollowed-out cavern, and placed two live slaves with it, one holding a native lamp of palm-oil, and the other holding a

matchet. They were both tied up, so that they could not escape, and were left there to keep watch over the dead chief, until they died of starvation.

When the cave was covered in, the sons called the chiefs together, and they played Egbo for seven days, which used up a lot of their late father's money. When the play was over, the chiefs were surprised at the amount of money which the sons had been able to spend on the funeral of their father, as they knew how poor he had been as a young man. They therefore called him the lucky fisherman.



Simon George Mpata

1942–1984, Tanzania

Untitled

1971–73

Enamel paint on fiberboard

61.6 x 61.6 cm (24 1/4 x 24 1/4 in.)

Gift of Ambassador and Mrs. W. Beverly Carter, Jr., 79

28 55

Simon George Mpata's style of painting is often referred to as Tinga Tinga, a reference to his half-brother Edward Tingatinga who organized a group of self-taught artists in Dar es Salaam. Distinguished by bright colors on fiberboard, the majority of the group's paintings focus on animals in curvilinear decorative patterns. Here, Mpata depicts a scene of fishermen with their catch on

Africa's east coast.



Ijo artist, Nigeria

Mask

Mid-20th century

Wood, paint, nails

14.6 x 26 x 81.6 cm (5 3/4 x 10 1/4 x 32 1/8 in.)

Museum purchase, 79-13-11

Masquerades celebrating water spirits are popular in Nigeria's Niger Delta region. Though playful, mischievous, and linked with the wilderness, Niger Delta water spirits are generally considered more

benevolent, kind, and beautiful than other denizens of the wild that inhabit dry land. Water spirit masks take a variety of human and animal forms. This pink fish can be identified as a guitarfish, a type of ray, because of the gills, the mouth on the underside of the body, and the shape of its fins.

Head, Body, Legs

Once upon a time... (the class should repeat, "time!")...

Long ago, Head was all by himself. He had no legs, no arms and no body. He rolled everywhere. All he could eat were things on the ground that he could reach with his tongue.

At night, he rolled under a cherry tree. He fell asleep and dreamed of sweet cherries.

One morning, Head woke up and thought, "I'm tired of grass and mushrooms. I wish I could reach those cherries." He rolled himself up a little hill. "Maybe if I could get a good head start I can hit the trunk hard enough to knock some cherries off," he thought. He shoved with his ears and began to roll down the hill. "Here I go!" he shouted. Faster and faster he rolled. CRASH! "OWWWWWW" he cried.

"Who's there?" someone asked.

Head looked up. Above him swung two Arms he had never seen before.

"Look down here," Head said, "and you'll see."

"How can we look?" asked Arms. "We don't have eyes."

"I have an idea," said Head. "Let's get together. I have eyes to see, and you have hands for picking things to eat." "Okay," said Arms. They dropped to the ground and attached themselves to Head above the ears.

"This," said Head, "is perfect."

Hands picked cherries, and Head ate every single one.

"It's time for a nap," said Head, yawning. Soon he was fast asleep.

While Head slept, Body bounced along and landed on top of him. "Help!" gasped Head. "I can't breathe!" Arms pushed Body off. "Hey," said Body. "Stop pushing me. Who are you?" "It's us, Head and Arms," said Head. "You almost squashed us. Watch where you're going!" "How can I?" asked Body. "I can't see."

"Why don't you join us?" said Head. "I see some ripe mangoes across the river. If you help us swim over there, I'll help you see where you're going." "Okay," said Body. So Head attached himself to Body at the belly button.

"This," said Head, "is perfect."

They bounced down the bank into the river. "Pull right....Pull left," Head shouted to Arms, who paddled frantically against the current.

Soon they reached the far bank and bounced up against the mango tree. "Pick some," Head ordered. Arms stretched as high as they could, but they couldn't quite reach. Head looked around for a stick.

Standing near the tree were two crossed Legs with feet on the ends. “Get those,” Head said to Arms. Arms grabbed them. “Let us go!” shouted Legs.

“Who are you?” asked Head. “We’re Legs. We were walking but we bumped into this tree.”

“Join us,” said Head. “I have eyes. I can show you where to go, and you can help us reach those mangoes.” “Okay,” said Legs. So Legs attached themselves to the hands.

“No there,” said Arms. “The hands need to be free to pick mangoes.”

“I should be in the middle,” said Body, “because I’m the biggest.”

“That’s right,” said Head. “You should be at the bottom, Legs. I’ll swing around on top of Body so I can see everything. And Arms, you move to the shoulders.”

Everyone slid into place. Legs stood on tiptoe. Body straightened out. Arms stretched up, and the hands picked a mango. Head took a bite, and smiled.

After some time together, Legs thought about what it was like walking around on his own, but he realized that without Head he couldn’t see where he was going and thus could not move around very well. Arms and Body also noticed that while they could not move any longer on their own as they did previously, it was much better this way—when they were by themselves they couldn’t accomplish much. And Head especially appreciated being able to reach those delicious mangoes and cherries that he couldn’t reach before. Together, Head, Body, Arms and Legs could travel anywhere, do almost anything, and most importantly they were safer together, able to outrun and outthink any big animals that might try to eat them.

“I think we should stay this way,” said Head in between juicy mouthfuls of mango.

“I agree,” said Arms as he picked more fruit from the tree.

“Absolutely,” agreed Body, stretching to help Arms reach the mangoes.

“Me too,” replied Legs, standing on tiptoes. “Mmm, delicious,” Head said. “Now THIS is perfect!”



Iké Udé
b. 1964, Lagos, Nigeria
Works in New York
Untitled #3
1997
Iris print mounted on aluminum

101.6 x 76.2 x 3.5 cm (40 x 30 x 1 3/8 in.)

Museum purchase, 2003-21-1

Fashion ink. As much a performance artist as a photographer, Iké Udé stages elaborate studio portraits. Udé has developed a style he calls “post-dandyism,” reviving the 19th-century term for precise and theatrical self-fashioning by men. In so doing, he celebrates his freedom to move in glamour circles that stretch from Lagos to Los Angeles to depict fabulous subjects—including himself.

Untitled #3 comes from a series in which Udé directly engages with his Igbo heritage—specifically, the genre of female body painting known as *uli*. Igbo women have historically used *uli* designs as symbols of beauty and status at important events. In this photograph, *uli* designs meld with global fashion aesthetics to create a lyrical interplay of pattern, shadow, and skin.

The Family

A Folktale from Northwest Cameroon, West Africa

Once upon a time, there lived a large family of many siblings who had all manner of diverse character traits humanity could ever imagine. They always moved in pairs, given their number. They had such a rapport with one another that none could come between them, whether in good or bad times; through thick and thin, they learned to stick around for each other. They lived during the colonial period, characterized by high moral and intellectual standards, and class distinction, where the rich got richer and the poor poorer. This social gap only grew wider as time went by. The peculiarity of this family was its size. They were known by a few rich folks but more widely amongst the commoners. Having a large family at the time was perceived by the upper class as a characteristic of the poor. They were considered commoners and peasant farmers, who spent more time in activities considered to be solely for the ordinary man and further characterized by high birth rates. Often these children served as work force in the farms, during times of war as soldiers, and as collateral for unpaid debts and pledges. Sixteen children were born to John Benedict Bates and Mary A. Bates, who belonged to the middle class. John Benedict was an outstanding craftsman who acquired his renown through the arts and was known amongst aristocrats as well as commoners. Wherever any of the children went, people referred to them as “the family” or as “society in miniature” instead of going by the Benedict name legacy that their father left behind after his passing. Peculiar to the “Bates” was changing their business name from Benedict to Tate. This they did to represent the fact that each of them was an embodiment of an important trait in the human life, whether it be a flaw or a strength, within the context of avarice, hate, materialism, ego, love or wisdom, to name a few. They didn’t leave others indifferent wherever they passed. Instead, they ensured that people took notice of them, especially those who hadn’t heard about them. The decision to change the legacy that John Benedict had worked so hard to raise was done collectively so that each person could be represented in the newly formed company, named “The Bates.” The day usually started with the eldest son, “Dictate,” seeking to order everyone around as a means of making his position as the eldest son known and to attempt to make everyone to do things his way. Such orderings usually enraged “Irritate,” who got angry at the slightest instruction because he, like his brother, also liked things done his way. The twin sisters “Devastate and Agitate” were known for their troublesome and disruptive nature by the other siblings in such a manner that one would think they wanted the ruin of all, given that they always connived together. The outcome would usually stir up a fight or attempt to make void any constructive ideas for the continuity of the family business. The triplets “Vegetate, Hesitate and Mutate” often put on a reluctant and indifferent attitude that wasn’t quick to adapt to any changes made in the business. They were of the opinion that things should remain as their father had left them. They thought together,

“Why stress to change anything?”

Potentate, being the Benjamin who knew the extreme love of her parents for her, considering she was the most pampered of the children, thought that, as her name, “Potentate” implied, she should rule over everything and her voice should be heard because of her witty ideas. She considered herself the “queen” of the Benedicts, or should I say, “The Tates.” Imitate and Mimitate (also nick-named “Mimic”) understood just how to swap modes, going by the person who at the end of the day led the siblings as the occasion presented itself. Possessing no stable opinion of their own, coupled with indecisiveness, they followed the person who oftentimes won at the end of the day irrespective of the decision, whether right or wrong. In summary, each person’s trait, once put together with the rest, served a great purpose when they all acted for the common good of all in unity, thereby complementing one another in strength. Cogitate and Meditate, nick-named “the twins of wisdom” as they were very reflective, spoke with great wisdom in few words, which often calmed down the tensions amongst them. They were of vital importance to the family, being the third and second to the last children of the Benedicts. After listening to the wisdom of the twins, Rotate knew how to turn things around for the better, reminding each of their uniqueness and participation no matter how small. It was significant for the furtherance of the enterprise and the family at large, nothing taken for granted. At the end of the day, it was Facilitate, Necessitate and Orientate who always related everything in such a manner that made the case for cooperation amongst the siblings. Facilitate made it easy for everyone to be happy to disagree on lighter issues in order to agree on the weightier ones. In their unity in diversity and their disagreeing to agree, they loved each other and valued the strength and uniqueness of each, bearing in mind that, in times of adversity, each looked out for the other.

Eventually they learned after a tough time to value each other rather than magnify each other’s faults based on who didn’t do what or what whosoever did. They learned to minimize the lesser and insignificant things and to emphasize the major things together.

In the end, the Benedicts, now changed to the Tates, prospered all the more and stood the test of time, emerging into the upper class of society as they now understood the following:

“United we stand, divided we fall.”

The story of the Tates became a legend among the Bafut people in colonial Cameroon.



Stella Osarhiere Gbinigie and her sisters
Left to right: Imarayi Gbinigie, Helen Uzzi, Stella, and Helen
Diagonya Uwaifo
1950
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