



PRESS PHOTO/ADAM BIRD

Functional art: A game board by the Dan people of Liberia is among the attractions in the new exhibit opening today.

Art of Africa exhibit debuts

Items play
a more prominent role
in lives than Americans
may be used to

BY RACHAEL RECKER
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GRAND RAPIDS — Art is part of life in most African cultures, whether in food bowls or carving tools.

Art of Africa, which opens today at Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park, features 80 objects that depict how art and life come together.

"Every part of their culture has a creative slant," said Laurene Grunwald, Meijer Gardens' assistant curator for exhibitions. She was working Thursday to apply plexiglass covers to displays.

"That's so different for many people that live in Europe or America, (where) art is seen as being something more docile — something for the wall, something for a mantle. It tends to be a little bit more decorative," said director of exhibitions and curator of sculpture Joe Be-

cherer, also a professor of art history at Aquinas College.

"And although many of us like to live and work around art, it's not the same kind of thing that you see through the objects in this exhibition."

A cooking bowl called "Food Bowl with Lids," for example, sits among a collection of 20th- and 21st-century African staffs, masks, head-dresses, Kente cloths, carvings, tools and beaded objects.

The exhibit allows visitors to view the artifacts closely, which helps in the appreciation of the artistic qualities of each object.

"I think that many of the carved figures, actually being so close to them, really heightens my appreciation of the ways in which the different sculptors, the different carvers were working. Because they didn't work from models like we would do maybe in America, but they carve directly into the wood," Becherer said.

The traveling exhibit features items from the private collection of Warren Robbins, who was the founding director of the National Museum of African Art, which is part of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.

Becherer said he and staff



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On the wall: A ceremonial elephant headdress made by the Ball people of Cameroon is on display in a new gallery show at Meijer Gardens.

Overseas art

When: Opens today and continues through May 4

Where: Frederik Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park, 1000 East Beltline Ave. NE

Hours: 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday, Wednesday-Saturday; 9 a.m.-9 p.m. Tuesday; noon-5 p.m. Sunday

Admission: \$12 adults ages 14-64, \$9 seniors age 65 and older and students with ID, \$6 children ages 5-13, \$4 children ages 3-4, free for ages 2 and younger
More information: 957-1580, meijergardens.org

have been looking for five years for just the right African art exhibit to bring to West Michigan.

The exhibit contains video, information placards and photo documentation. Meijer Gardens also has provided five themes — including function, spirituality and figure — with which to help approach each item for better understanding.

"We felt that it was very important to try to bring these objects to life, as it were," Becherer said. "We really tried to expand ways in which people can connect with the objects other than simply looking at them."

"It's not something by any means that's only for specialists or only for arts enthusiasts."

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