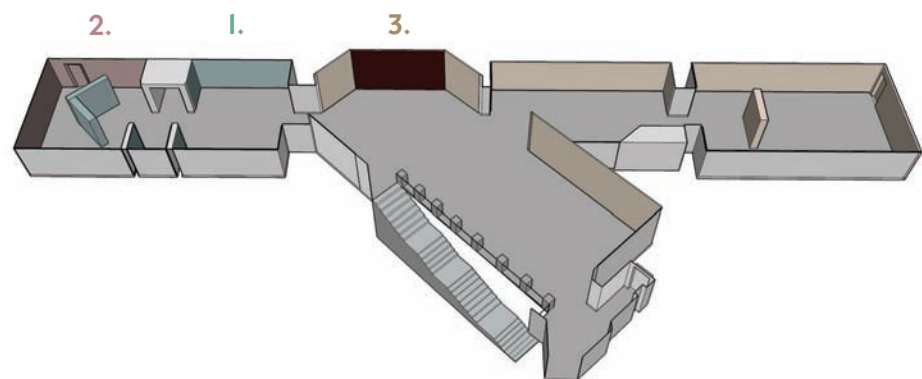
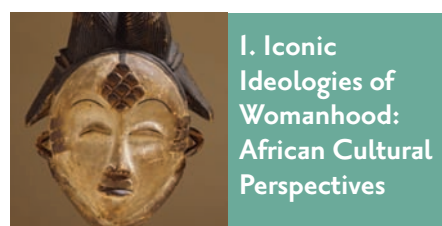


Black Womanhood: Images, Icons, and Ideologies of the African Body examines the historical roots of a charged icon, the black female body. It brings to light how contemporary artists are challenging old and often stereotypical images that present black women as the alluringly beautiful Other, the erotic fantasy, or the supermaternal Mammy.

While exhibitions of contemporary art have often engaged with issues of identity and race, *Black Womanhood* approaches these themes afresh by juxtaposing traditional African, Western colonial, and contemporary global perspectives in three discrete sections. It presents over one hundred works by African, European, American, and Caribbean artists, linking them through four common themes: ideals of beauty; fertility and sexuality; maternity and motherhood; and identities and social roles. Exploring these themes within and across the three perspectives demonstrates that while notions of black womanhood have been constructed differently over the past two centuries, they are often linked in unexpected ways. Most profoundly, familiarity with traditional African and colonial imagery clarifies how contemporary artists evoke or respond to earlier representations of the black female body in their attempts to challenge or break down stereotypical ideas and images.



THE SECTIONS



1. Iconic Ideologies of Womanhood: African Cultural Perspectives

The first section of the exhibition presents African art objects created within traditional cultural settings by both men and women. Past museum exhibitions have generally approached expressions of womanhood in African art through female

figures made primarily by and for men, leaving little place for the mostly abstract and nonfigurative representations of womanhood made by and for African women. *Black Womanhood* attempts to convey a more balanced view of how cultural and gender-specific ideologies are conveyed differently by men and women through the traditional arts, which in some cases continue to play a role in defining womanhood in Africa today.



2. Colonizing Black Women: The Western Imaginary

The second section features vintage postcards and other widely reproduced media created by both Western and African image-makers. These works demonstrate the popular representation of Africa's women simultaneously as "primitive" and "modern." *Black Womanhood* revisits these various colonial depictions in light of recent scholarship concerning how such images of African women—specifically the unclothed black female body—were mysticized, exoticized, and sexualized in the West. Such scrutiny has provided us with forceful and often disturbing evidence of the racism that informed their creation.



3. Meaning and Identity: Personal Journeys into Black Womanhood

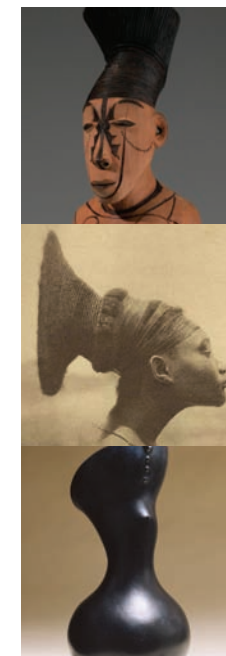
The third section of the exhibition features works by contemporary African and African-descended artists who consciously recycle and critique the sorts of images, icons, and ideologies presented in the previous sections. While some of these artists draw upon the feminist and black art movements, others begin anew with their multicultural experiences in today's global society. All of them address the impact that historical images have on current responses to images of the black female body.

THE CONNECTING THEMES

The works in this exhibition reveal a common preoccupation with four themes: ideals of beauty; fertility and sexuality; maternity and motherhood; and identities and social roles. The images and text below use one object from each section to illustrate some of the connections among the objects. You can make more connections by looking carefully at the objects and labels.

Use the following *looking questions* to help you identify thematic connections between works of art:

- Do you notice similar visual characteristics (shapes, patterns, poses) from one object to another?
- Do you see shapes and designs on nonfigurative (abstract) objects that resemble those of figurative works?
- Where do you see women depicted similarly in pose and adornment? Where are they depicted differently?
- What role does language or text play if it is included in a work?
- Which depictions appear natural? Which appear posed? Why?
- Are certain features of the female body overstated or understated? How might this elicit different responses in the viewer? How does this influence your response?
- How does each work of art represent the black female? What does the goal of the depiction seem to be?
- In what ways do some objects communicate similar ideas without sharing any physical resemblance?
- How might your cultural background influence your reading of specific images of the black female body?



Ideals of Beauty

Since the end of the nineteenth century, the Mangbetu woman, with her elongated forehead and halo-like coiffure, has become an icon of the seductive yet forbiddingly exotic African woman. This is due both to the Westerners who portrayed Mangbetu beauty in widely disseminated photographs and postcards and to the innovative African artists who capitalized on the European fascination by appending sculpted female heads onto otherwise nonfigurative arts. Today, some artists of African descent are recycling these historic images of the Mangbetu woman to celebrate their enduring beauty, as in Magdalene Odundo's ceramic vessel.

Fertility and Sexuality

The sexualized female body is one of the most popular icons of black womanhood in the West. In many traditional African cultures, the bodies of young female initiates (and objects that represent a woman's body, such as pottery) were inscribed and adorned with symbolic designs that marked the fertility and budding sexuality of a girl maturing into womanhood. Western colonial photographers were especially enthralled by young African women's beauty and "shameless" comfort with nudity, which they captured in photographs that were then marketed as postcards. These images, which evolved into stereotypical representations of black women, helped form Western misconceptions about African women's "primitivism" and "pathological" sexuality. Capitalizing on this Western voyeurism, Josephine Baker, an American entertainer in Paris, adapted these stereotypes in her own renditions of "savage" sexualized dances. Baker became an international icon of sexuality, epitomized by her posing nude in a banana skirt costume, thereby regaining power as a black woman in a white society. In his painting *Allegorie a la Banane*, the contemporary Sudanese artist Hassan Musa appropriates the image of Baker to critique the exploitation of Africa's natural resources and the commoditization of its women.

