African Art In An American Home By Linda Harris

Senufo . . . Yoruba . . . are all there, in their new home at the National Museum of African Art. They are African groups and their creations are part of the Smithsonian Institution's new \$73.2 million complex on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

Some 600 art objects, from the practical to the mystical, from the gentle to the warlike, are displayed in a four story building that is itself a work of art.

Additions to the 4.2 acre quadrangle on the Mall include the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, the International Center and the Enid A. Haupt Garden, but, for black Americans who have followed the more than twenty year odyssey from its first modest home on Washington's Capitol Hill, it is the National Museum of African Art that inspires special pride.



This wood, fiber and metal mask was made by the Cholcwe peoples of Zaire and Angola.

The Museum was founded in 1964 by Warren M. Robbins as an educational institution housed in a group of Washington townhouses in the Northeast part of the city that included the Frederick Douglass house. The museum became part of the Smithsonian Institution in 1979 but was still physically separated from the heart of the National Institution's complex until 1986. Finally, in September, 1987, nestled comfortably close to the Smithsonian's venerable "castle" on one side and providing an anchor for the Enid A. Haupt garden on the other side, the National Museum of African Art (NMAfA) was finally, permanently, at home.

Despite pleasure in the presence of the first museum in America dedicated solely to the collection and study of African art, not all of us are museum goers. It is nice to know that all those wonderful relics are tucked safely away somewhere but the urge to see them with our own eyes can remain dim and distant unless relatives from out of town are visiting, the television set goes on the blink and it's raining, or we can only avoid embarrassing questions about what we did on our vacation by making a quick assault on every "must see" exhibit.

There is another reason to visit some museums if it is February and you are afroamerican. For museums across the country, Black History Month means increased attendance to the special, mostly temporary exhibits set up especially to honor black Americans. For NMAfA public affairs officer, Maggie Burtin, Black History Month is a mixed blessing. "We are busy in February and that's good but we want people to know we are here all year." There is always something interesting and exciting going on at the

Because some visitors enter the museum underground through the passage that connects it to the Sackler Gallery it is impossible to know exactly how many people, black or otherwise, make a trip specifically to the NMAfA, but Burtin believes word of mouth is paying off. "It's wonderful to see the crowds on Sunday after church," she says. "We see whole families, with grandmothers, grandfathers, parents and children all sharing a special experience." Edgar Sorrells-Adewale, of Silver Spring, Maryland, visiting the museum with his wife Raine and sons Ayo and Chike agrees: "It's a nice kind of rallying point for the whole family. The kids are asking questions about where are we from."

Whether it is to celebrate Black History Month, as part of a visit to your nation's capital, or the beginning of a regular habit, the developers and creators of the National Museum of African Art have worked hard to make you feel welcome and to help you understand and appreciate sub-Saharan

For Director Sylvia H. Williams, it is the Museum's most important mission. "It's our hope that people for whom African art is a new experience will suspend their initial judgments, relax and simply absorb the art,"

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A visit to the museum actually begins in the cozy, ever-changing Haupt garden. Before you go in, stop to visit the ground level fountain on the North side of the museum. Your trip to Africa begins here with one of any continent's most important and hopeful sounds, running water. Even though the museum is devoted to the art of sub-Saharan Africa, the fountain is patterned after those found in North Africa. This one not only sets the tone for your visit, it invites even the most serious adult to slosh through it.

If the fountain makes you happy and pulls you along into the museum it is possible that your first sight once inside will be less inspiring. The ground floor is a gigantic, 60 by 90 foot entrance pavillion that is barren except for a few large potted plants, a floor to ceiling window over-looking the garden, and against the far wall, a long information desk. Like most new residents, for creative and financial reasons, the National Museum of African Art can't fill every empty space right

Don't be discouraged. There is much to see on the three levels below the pavaillion. Ninty-six percent of the Museum is underground to conform to city ordinances on building height and allow for maximum space without obstructing the Smithsonian's castle or overwhelming the Haupt garden.

Before you head down the stairs to the main exhibition area stand for a moment on the landing and look around. Behind you, peeking regally over the wall of a small courtyard is the Arts and Industries Building, part of the original Smithsonian Institute. Look-

ing out through the high, round window of the NMAfA, the dark red building looks impressive and more than a little imposing. Turn and look the other way and you see the elegant, sophisticated Sackler Gallery. Even from this distance it's pyramid style and banker's grey stone reflects the wealth of its extensive collection of Asian art.

And in the middle, neither victorian and familiar nor rich and assured, is the National Museum of African art, with its rounded windows and curved staircase. If the Sackler Gallery is grey, the NMAfA is an earthy rose. For Sackler, clear glass windows are perfect, and for the NMAfA tinted glass adds the texture and color needed to tell its story.

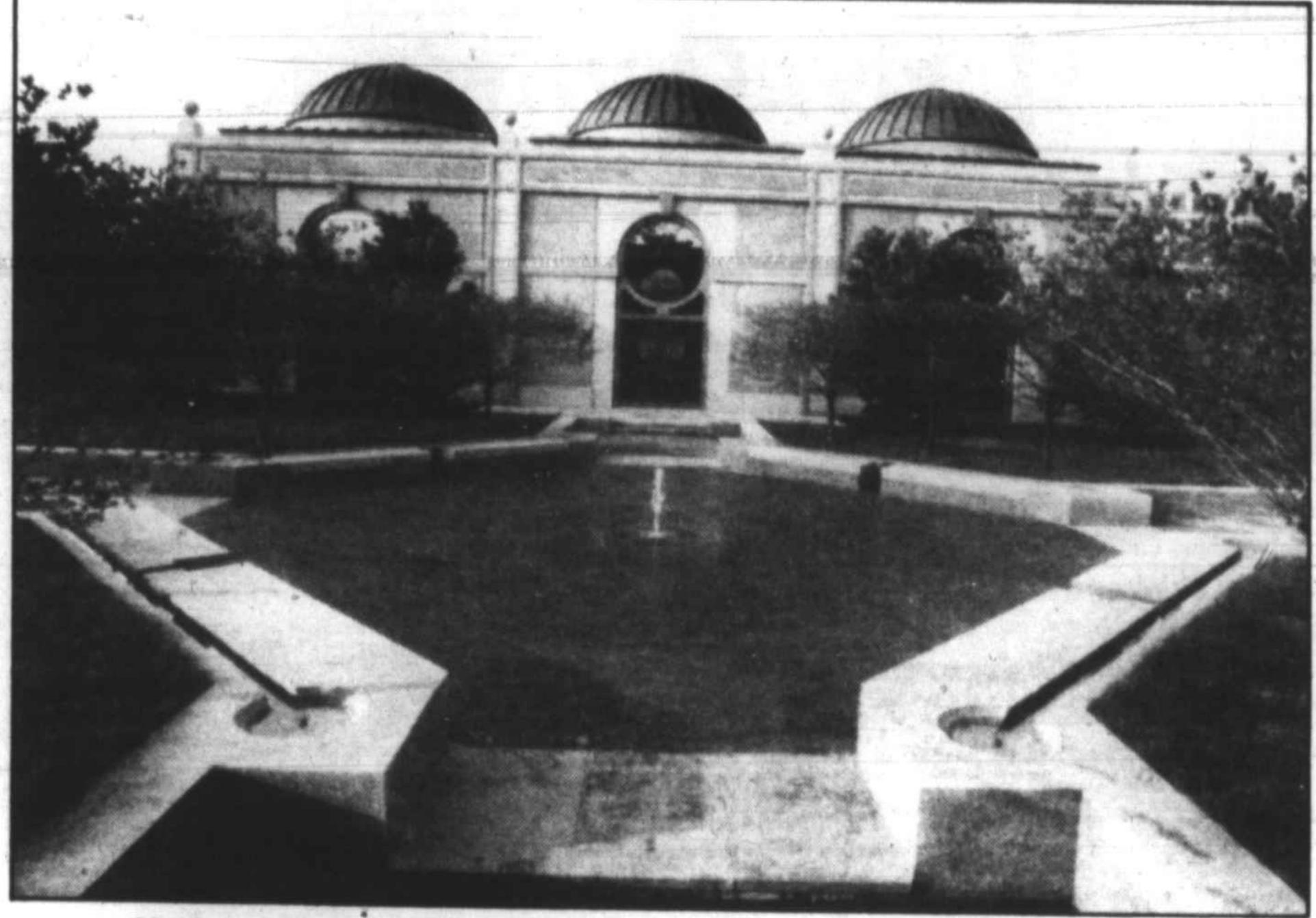
There are probably nearly as many approaches to hearing that story as there are museum visitors. For some it is a quick walk from room to room, stopping only at those pieces and exhibits that catch the eye. That works and only takes about fifteen minutes. Then it is on to the museum store. Maddeningly for ardent shoppers, at the NMAfA you will be able to see the museum shop on the first below the ground level but you won't be able to reach it until you've seen most of galleries on that level. Clever design.

For those of us who insist on reading the descriptions of items, the NMAfA may provide the first opportunity to re-learn art appreciation. Don't look for the year the piece was made in order to figure out how much respect you owe it and don't get upset if all the information you are used to isn't there. Those old standards don't always work here for good reason.

Much of the Museums 6,000-piece collection was gathered over the last century by individuals and groups ranging from missionaries to royalty. Often the artifacts were bought, or taken, with little thought given to history. An african masterpiece — the Museum has 125 — was often no more than a quaint conversation piece to its liberator. As a result, the process of researching and cataloging African art is an on-going and lively process.

But much is known, and it is organized for even the laziest among us to begin to understand some of the differences in the art of at least a few of the people chosen from 900 distinct cultural groups in Sub-Saharan Africa.

As important as uncovering the history of an object is telling the public about it in a simple, direct way that is in tune with Africa's non-western visual tradition. Making Africa's



National Museum of African Art on the Mall in Washington, D.C.

art more accessible in a culturally unbiased format is an obligation the Smithsonian Institution and Sylvia Williams take seriously. She says "We are looking for other technology and other approaches in helping visitors understand the context of the imagery they're seeing. Fewer words may give people wider understandings."

The center piece of the Museum's five main exhibition areas is "African Art in the Cycle of Life." The international exhibit is the culmination of nearly a lifetime of the work of the Museum's Associate Director, Roy Sieber, considered one of the world's foremost authorities on African art, who, with NMAfA curator Roslyn A. Walker created the seven stage exhibit which leads the visitor from birth to death with dramatic masks, household goods, ceremonial artifacts and life-size sculpture leading the way.

Dominating the middle of one area is King Shyaam a Mbul Ngwoong the ruler in the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century of the Bushoong Kingdom in the Sankuru region that is now Zaire. Distinguished history aside. many of us will recognize a beloved, or not so beloved relative, in his beautiful, old wood

The other five exhibits include the museum's permanent collection, Royal Benin Art, a collection of everyday objects and a weaving exhibit.

The 36 wall hangings from West Africa that make up the textiles exhibit are especially sensual. Walking along the curved room

that holds them, with its own twists and turns is like being inside a musical instrument. Each piece of cloth has its own rhythm. One five foot long blue, red, beige and yellow piece from Ghana is like sixties jazz, with lots of different parts that seem perfect together. while another, black and white wall hanging from The Ivory Coast feels more like Ellington. Each piece plays a different song.

This textile exhibit leaves at the end of February but happily, this spring a collection of one hundred textiles from the Shoowa peoples of Zaire will be at the Museum from June I through August 7, on loan from the University of Michigan Museum of Art.

The process of borrowing and collecting works of art for the museum is a complicated one. Even though the NMAfA is part of the Smithsonian family and receives its share of a federal budget that is essentially to keeping the lights on, the staff of 54 paid and the endless other household obligations of any institution taken care of, it doesn't allow for all the purchases any museum, and especially a new one, needs and wants to make. Gifts, grants and fund-raising must take care of those extras.

One of the most important aspects of Sylvia Williams' job is helping the NMAfA find the money to allow the Museum to buy the world's best African art. She says, "A piece may appear on the market the Museum may be very interested in and may want to pur-

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