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### **Fowler Museum to Debut the Traveling Exhibition *Central Nigeria Unmasked: Arts of the Benue River Valley***

*Central Nigeria Unmasked: Arts of the Benue River Valley*—on display at the Fowler Museum from February 13–July 24, 2011—is the first major international exhibition to present a comprehensive view of the arts produced in the region, which include some of the most abstract, dramatic, and inventive sculpture in sub-Saharan Africa. The exhibition features more than 150 objects used in a range of ritual contexts, with genres as varied and complex as the vast region itself.

“The exhibition will demonstrate how the history of central Nigeria can be ‘unmasked’ through the dynamic interrelationships of its peoples and their arts,” said Marla C. Berns, Fowler director and lead exhibition curator.

The Benue River Valley occupies a geographical and historical “in-between” zone in Nigeria, too far south for Sudanic Arab chroniclers to have visited and too far north for coastal European traders and explorers to have penetrated before the mid-nineteenth century. The peoples and arts of the Benue are thus less studied than the more accessible ethnic groups of northern or southern Nigeria. Yet, they can lay claim to equal importance as one of sub-Saharan Africa’s great artistic legacies.

Diverse and remarkable artworks from central Nigeria include full-bodied maternal images, sleek columnar statues, helmet masks adorned with naturalistic human faces, horizontal masks designed as stylized animal-human fusions, imaginatively anthropomorphized ceramic vessels, and elaborate regalia forged in iron and cast in copper alloys. These objects had meanings and purposes that were vital to the ways Benue Valley groups faced life’s challenges and to the dramatic ritual activities conceived to solve them.

Produced in association with the Musée du quai Branly in Paris, *Central Nigeria Unmasked* features many works that have never before been on public display. Important loans come from major collections around the world, including those of the British Museum, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Art Institute of Chicago, Barbier-Mueller Museum in Geneva, Berlin’s Museum of Ethnology, Musée du quai Branly, and the Fowler Museum at UCLA as well as a number of significant American and European private collections.

“*Central Nigeria Unmasked* is designed to take you on a journey up the Benue River to introduce the major artistic genres and styles associated with more than twenty-five ethnic groups living along its Lower, Middle, and Upper reaches,” Berns said. “This broad regional view highlights the distinctiveness of particular community traditions and the ways artists have innovated freely within the parameters of local styles. Yet, more importantly, through their often surprising resemblances, artworks associated with neighboring peoples can bear witness to historical communication and interaction *across* communities, something not often ‘unmasked’ in exhibitions on African art.”

### Lower Benue

The exhibition begins in the Lower Benue region, and includes numerous examples of the predominant figurative genre: maternal shrine sculptures, often depicting mothers with one or more children, which were used to honor women and protect the young. A great variety of masks were performed in the Lower Benue, including dramatic helmet masks honoring the royal lineage of the Igala peoples, and white-faced masks, some with stunning stacks of two, three, or even four heads. In addition, cast copper alloy head crests, bells, staffs and figures testify to the diversity of arts from this region.



Horniman Museum

Video footage from the 1960's to the present, some never-before-seen, offers a rare look at magnificent ancestral masquerades that follow the path of the Benue River. Representing resurrected ancestors, performers are concealed within burial shroud-like textiles to create cloth apparitions that leap, twist, and twirl.

### Middle Benue

Sculptures in human form were the focus of ritual activities across the Middle Benue region, where figurative styles are decidedly different from the favored maternal image of the Lower Benue. They are geometric in approach, and many examples have long held special appeal for modernist artists and collectors, who admired especially the abstraction and dynamic postures of Mumuye figurative sculpture. The highly stylized circular horns of the "buffalo" crest masks of the Kantana and Kulere peoples are also notable for their bold minimalist elegance.



Collection of James and Laura Ross

Another dramatic genre from this sub-region is the tall vertical mask used by several neighboring peoples. Their enigmatic form—some of them clearly cannot be "worn"—means that these objects were likely to have functioned less like conventional "masks" than as "walking sculptures." They appeared during agricultural festivals or to incarnate ancestors, lumbering forward slowly with their heads towering over those of the living.

This section of the exhibition also includes Super-8 footage of several masquerade genres where performers wore voluminous raffia capes along with animal-human hybrid masks. The films were taken in 1965 and 1970 by UCLA art historian Arnold Rubin, whose fieldwork laid the foundation for this exhibition. Rubin, a major scholar on the arts of the Middle Benue region who died in 1988, was a mentor to Fowler director Marla C. Berns, the lead curator on this project. At the time of Rubin's death he had conceived a large-scale exhibition on the arts of the Benue Valley, and Berns assured him that this exhibition would one day debut at the Fowler Museum.

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## Upper Benue



Fowler Museum at UCLA

Due to its relative isolation, the Upper Benue is distinct from other areas of the river valley. The predominance of sculptural ceramic vessels in Upper Benue religious practices represents a marked departure from the wood figures and masks typical of the other two sub-regions. These highly decorated and anthropomorphized vessels, made primarily by women artists, exploit the expressive capacities of clay.

Ceramic vessels acted in various ritual capacities, including healing the sick, safeguarding hunters and warriors, and activating the presence of various ancestral and protective spirits. Vessels meant to “contain” specific illnesses often are crafted to look like the diseases they help combat; for example, a pot that plays a role in healing back problems has a barbed structure resembling a spine. A media presentation in this section will show Ga’anda ritual priests describing the use and meaning of these vessels. This new video—taken in 2010 by Ga’anda men to whom the Fowler Museum sent Flip cameras to record their elders—provides first-person accounts of how these traditions transform over time.

In a stunning deviation from the norm, this section also includes three life-size male figures carved in wood, which may be the only vestiges of an abandoned memorial tradition that persisted primarily in clay.

### Additional Information

This exhibition is organized by the Fowler Museum at UCLA in association with the Musée du quai Branly, Paris. After the world premiere at the Fowler Museum, *Central Nigeria Unmasked* will travel to the Smithsonian’s National Museum of African Art, Stanford University’s Cantor Arts Center, and the Musée du quai Branly. The exhibition is co-curated by Marla C. Berns (Shirley and Ralph Shapiro Director, Fowler Museum at UCLA), Richard Fardon (Professor of West African Anthropology, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London) Hélène Joubert (Curator of African Collections, Musée du quai Branly), and Sidney Kasfir (Professor of Art History, Emory University, Atlanta).

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*Central Nigeria Unmasked: Arts of the Benue River Valley* is presented by American Express.



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Official hotel sponsor: Hotel Angeleno

**The Fowler Museum at UCLA** is one of the country’s most respected institutions devoted to exploring the arts and cultures of Africa, Asia and the Pacific, and the Americas. The Fowler is open Wednesdays through Sundays, from noon to 5 p.m.; and on Thursdays, from noon until 8 p.m. The museum is closed Mondays and Tuesdays. The Fowler Museum, part of UCLA Arts, is located in the

**4-4-4** Fowler Museum to Present *Central Nigeria Unmasked: Arts of the Benue River Valley* Feb 13-Jul 23, 2011

north part of the UCLA campus. Admission is free. Parking is available for a maximum of \$10 in Lot 4. For more information, the public may call 310/825-4361 or visit [fowler.ucla.edu](http://fowler.ucla.edu).