

## Masquerade portraits from West Africa on view at the Tang

The urge to dress in costumes--whether for celebration or ceremony--is a phenomenon that crosses cultures and frees the human spirit in ways that intrigue photographer Phyllis Galembo.

For the past 20 years, Galembo has traveled to Nigeria, Brazil, Cuba, Jamaica, and Haiti to photograph the visually stunning costumes worn by traditional priests and priestesses, carnival masqueraders, dancers, and Haitian vodou practitioners. *Art in America* praised her combination of a "careful, almost ethnographic observation with a deep sense of mystical wonder" and *The New York Times* noted the "dignity, conviction, and formal power" in her work.

Thirty-four large-scale color photographs from Galembo's most recent travels will be on view in *West African Masquerade: Photographs by Phyllis Galembo*, at the Tang Museum from July 14 to Dec. 30. The eye-catching portraits of masqueraders, taken in Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and Benin over the past three years are almost life-size, some measuring 50 inches by 50 inches. Their elaborate costumes--created for weddings and burials, initiations, chiefs' coronations, and holidays like Christmas and the New Year's are often made of inexpensive materials such as raffia, carved wood, coarse fabrics, crocheted yarns, flowers, grasses, leaves, and sticks.

The outfits run a gamut of dramatic designs and shapes, from striped-knit bodysuits to appliquéd fabric costumes as voluminous as tents. They might represent male or female entities, animals like elk and jaguar, or various spirits. As art writer Anne Doran pointed out, "Galembo's primary interest is the wearer's belief in the power of ritual costume to alter their everyday reality."

Galembo has taught photography at the University at Albany since 1978. Her numerous books include *Vodou: Visions and Voices of Haiti* (1998); *Dressed for Thrills, 100 Years of Halloween Costumes and Masquerade* (2002); and *Divine Inspiration from Benin to Bahia* (1993).

Her work has appeared at the International Center for Photography and the American Museum of Natural History in New York City and the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., among other venues, and her photographs are included in numerous public and private collections, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Houston Museum of Art, and the Polaroid Corporation Collection. She has been featured on CNN, National Public Radio, and NBC's *Today*. Her honors include a Fulbright Scholar Senior Research Award to Nigeria, and grants from New York State Council for the Arts and New York Foundation for the Arts.

The exhibition's public events will include an artist' lecture from 5 to 6 p.m. Saturday, July 14, followed by an opening reception from 6 to 7:30 p.m., featuring West African music by the New York City-based DJ Neva. Curator's tours start at noon July 17 and Aug. 14. All events are free. For more information, call the Tang at 518-580-8080 or visit the web site.