

Artists



1989.48

In the West, African art is often wrongly conceived as communal and anonymous in authorship. Only recently have objects from sub-Saharan Africa been recognized as “artistic creations,” promoting growing interest in the life and work of the artists who produced the pieces assembled in Western collections.

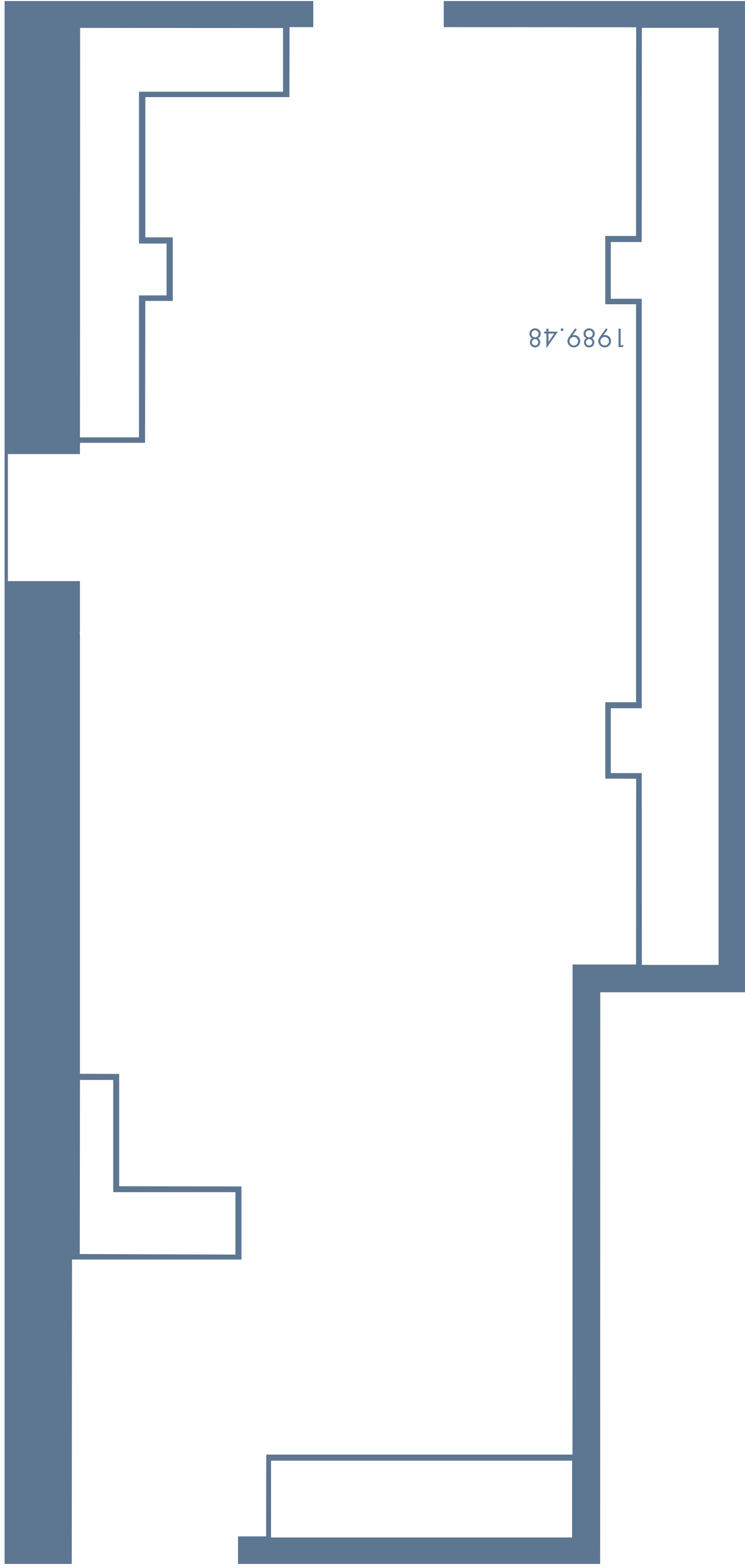
To date, male sculptors have received the most attention primarily because they are responsible for the wooden masks and figures dominating Western collections. Female artists, who work in such media as pottery and textiles, are much less studied.

The problem of artists’ identity is greatly complicated by the fact that traditional African artists do not sign their works. But individual artists can sometimes be recognized through their styles. In stylistic studies, the search for an individual artist’s hand is crucial to explaining and understanding the variety within certain types of objects. Following the practice of Western art-historical research, scholars have identified anonymous “masterhands” in some artistic traditions of sub-Saharan Africa. The number of named and known artists remains limited, though the

museum possesses a small number of works that have been tentatively attributed to historical individuals, such as the Senufo mask by Sabarikwo (see 1989.48).

Since the 1930s, some field research has been conducted on the careers and working methods of carvers in western and central Africa. Most carvers are part-time specialists and occupy a special place in society. However, whereas they are highly esteemed and even revered in some cultures, in others they are looked down upon or even hated. The carver’s status often depends on the activities he performs and the art he produces. In cultures in which the carver is also a blacksmith or a diviner, he is held in high regard. The same is true in kingdoms and other more centralized states, where artists work in service to the king. Indeed, sometimes the king or chief himself is a part-time artist.

Some men become carvers because they are born with talent or because they belong to a certain social or cultural group. African carvers as a rule do not follow a formalized or institutionalized training or educational regimen. More often, the carver acquaints himself with techniques and tools by observing and imitating a master. The time and content of the education differ widely, as do the kind of compensation, the relationship between master and student, and the age at which the instruction takes place. Typically, the training only involves technical aspects of art-making, rarely, if ever, addressing imagery or style.



Leadership

Much African artwork has a political dimension and is related to leadership.



1935.310

In sub-Saharan Africa, there is no clear distinction between the sacred and the profane, and many chiefs derive their worldly power from the supernatural. Thus, close ties exist between political leaders and religious authorities. In centralized societies, leaders are often seen as deities and hold the status of “divine kings.”

There are as many types of leaders in sub-Saharan Africa as there are political structures, the latter ranging from powerful centralized states to small-scale, non-centralized or headless societies. In the first type of organization, a dominant leader, whose central position is clearly visible, unites various political functions and rules with the advice of a surrounding group of advisors and counselors. In the second, power is shared by a group of people, either a council of elders or members of a secret association.



1938.6



1994.87

Political art forms are especially prominent in centralized societies such as kingdoms and empires. In these settings, the functions served by art are most often very public and characterized by drama and grandeur. Some political art, however, is defined by the secrecy that surrounds it, and it is rarely—sometimes never—exhibited in public.

Kings and other dominant rulers often directly control art production, choosing materials and even styles for the art. Valuable media, such as ivory, gold, brass, and silver, are frequently reserved for chiefs and title-holders. Royal arts are also distinguished by their complex forms, large sizes, and refined styles (see 1935.310, 1938.6, & 1994.87). Artists often work exclusively in the service of kings and their retinue, and occasionally the king himself is an established artist.

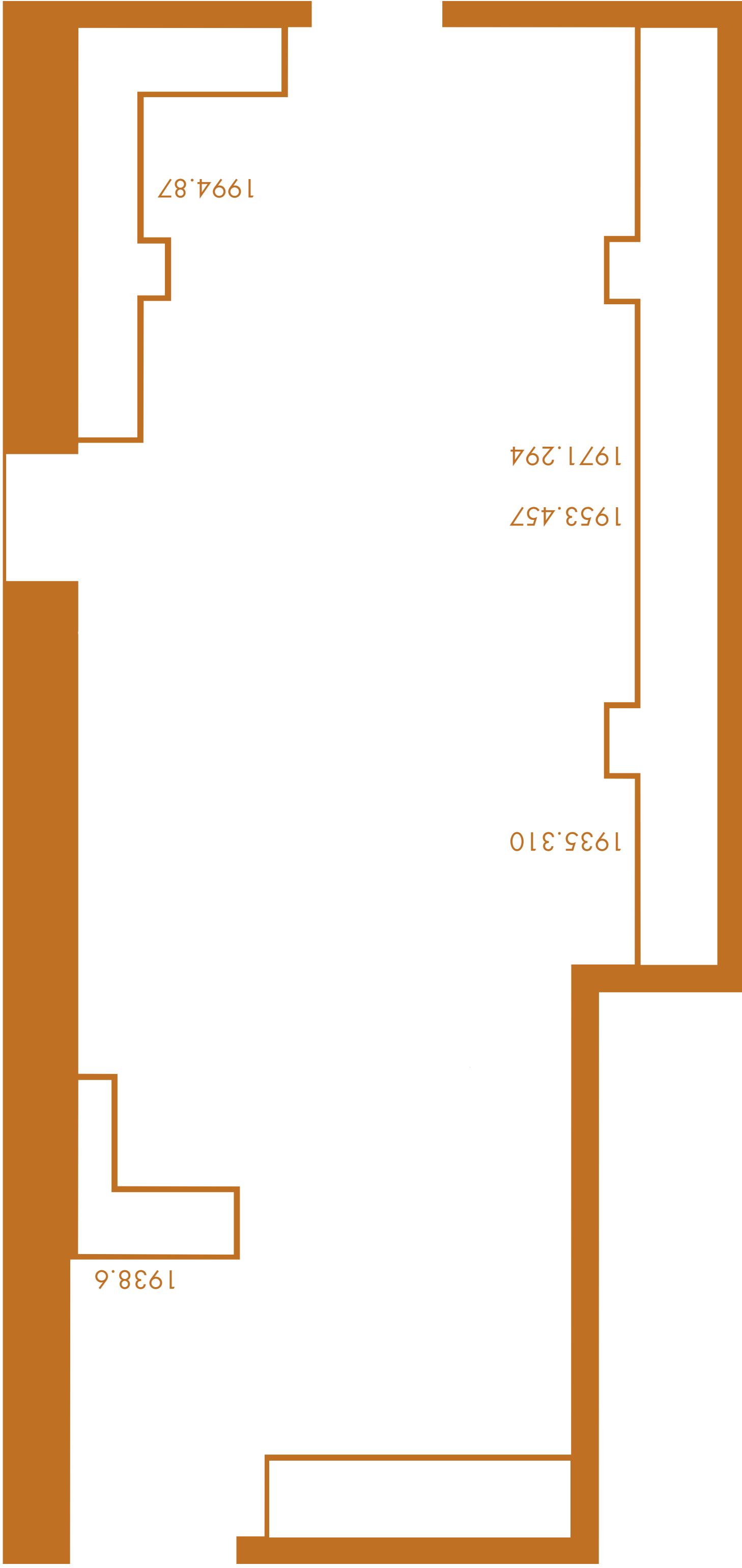


1953.457



1971.294

Many societies are democratically governed by men’s associations. Individual association members often own and display art objects to signal their rank and status. In many cases, members are likened to respected or feared animals, and these relationships are translated through the forms, imagery, and materials of the objects involved. In addition, these groups often use works of art as collective symbols in initiation rituals and public ceremonies. In some cultures, the association governs a mask organization, the tasks of which may include the initiation of new members, the exercise of social control, the enforcement of the law, or the punishment of criminals (see 1953.457 & 1971.294).



Masks and Masquerades

Masks occupy a preeminent place in the varied arts of many sub-Saharan peoples, and masquerades are one of the most significant and cherished artistic phenomena in this part of the world.



1975.152

Broadly speaking, a mask is a form of body disguise aimed at the invisibility of the wearer. As a rule, masquerades always imply some degree of transformation. Although head-coverings carved in wood usually come to mind, the concept behind masks is expanded in sub-Saharan Africa to include all kinds of physically transforming disguises. It is generally thought that the wooden mask is a relatively recent evolution, replacing perishable organic face and body disguises made of fiber, feathers, fabric, or animal hide. In many African languages, equivalent terms for the word *mask* also refer to the dancer, the costume that covers his or, occasionally, her body, the choreography of the performance, the accompanying music and song, and even the supernatural entity that the masked dancer makes tangible.



1971.296



1975.155



1989.48

Masks and masquerades in sub-Saharan Africa are impressively varied in their contexts and forms. However, even if some masking traditions are merely meant to entertain and divert, in most cultures masks have religious or spiritual dimensions. Masks usually incarnate spirit beings and reflect the belief in the influence of nature and ancestral spirits on human society. During the dance, the wearer does not simply represent the spirit but becomes it and sometimes is even truly possessed by it. Because the mask embodies a spirit rather than a real animal or human being, many mask faces and heads are conventionalized rather than realistic in style, and portraiture is rare. Often, the supernatural entity materializes as a conglomerate of animal and human features (see 1975.152 and 1971.296).



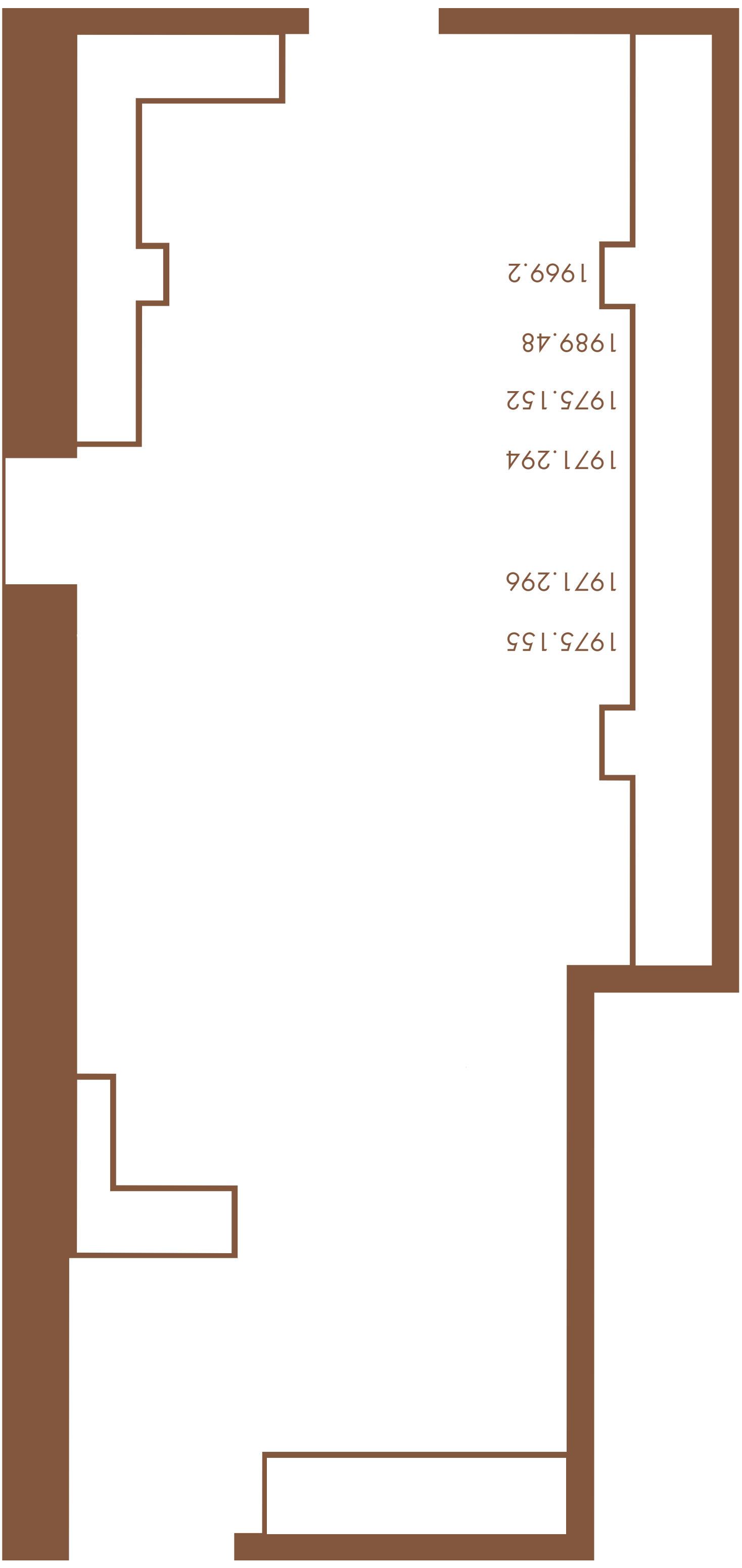
1969.2



1971.294

Masked spirits sometimes serve entertainment purposes only, in which major emphasis is placed on their aesthetic dimensions (see 1975.155). However, more often they relate to important aspects of life—politics, social organization, religion, economics, or legislation. Thus, they honor the dead during funeral ceremonies (see 1989.48); they perform in annual harvest festivals to acknowledge the beneficial intervention of the ancestral spirits (see 1969.2); or they are in charge of establishing peace, leading soldiers into the battle, or articulating justice (see 1971.294).

In their sub-Saharan African environment, masks are a dynamic and kinetic art form, an aspect that can hardly be emulated in the context of a museum display.



Styles

The term *style* refers to the formal structure of an artwork, including its overall shape and its details.



2003.35



1975.158



1990.22



1989.48



1931.426



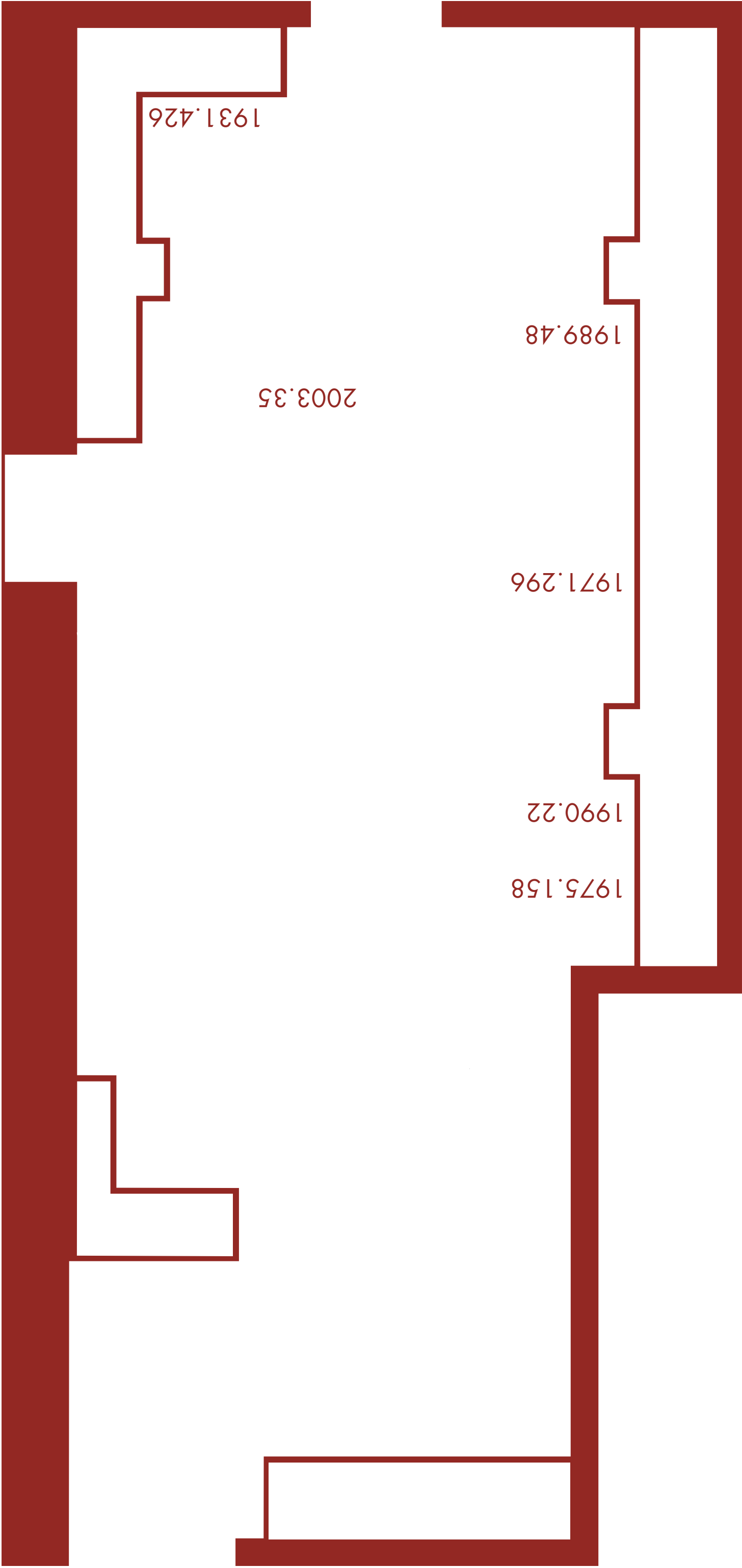
1971.296

Styles in Africa show a striking diversity and run along a continuum from naturalism to abstraction (see 2003.35 & 1975.158). Dominantly human-focused, many African art works are characterized by numerous conventions in the representation of the human figure. Portraits are rare in African art, and when they do occur, the individual's identification generally relies on the portrayal of scarifications (markings), tattoos, coiffures, headdresses, and jewelry (see 1990.22). Distortions of facial and body features usually have ideological motives; often they reflect local criteria for beauty and perfection. The African artist is clearly more interested in ideas and concepts than in the imitation of nature.

Until recently, every African ethnic group was thought to have its own specific artistic style, distinct from

that of its neighbors. In reality, the situation is much more complex. Most styles are shared across ethnic boundaries, and many ethnic groups produce objects in more than one style. Sub-styles and individual styles exist, creating variations within a certain style which ultimately suggests each artist's influence (see 1989.48). So-called supra-styles—or inter-ethnic styles—are shared by different peoples (see 1931.426), and mixed or blurred styles, especially common in border regions, demonstrate the fusion of the style traits of various peoples (see 1971.296). Today, it is generally agreed that the broad ethnic names given to African works of art, such as Dogon, Baule, Yoruba, or Kongo, indicate a particular style, but do not necessarily mean that an object carved in this style was actually made by an artist from that ethnic group.

In art historical studies, style is most often applied to a series of formally related objects and is used to determine an object's date and place of origin. Style analysis in African art studies has mainly focused on the geographical diffusion of styles, whereas little attention has been devoted to their historical diversity. Such neglect is partly due to the small number of older works that survive, but it also reflects the fact that until very recently it was assumed that African cultures have no history. Some scholars have attempted to reconstruct style sequences, an exercise especially successful for archaeological materials. Other scholars have looked into the relationship between style and political organization. In kingdoms and more centralized societies, a clear distinction emerges between the arts of the leading class of rulers and those of the commoners.



The Supernatural

African peoples believe in a supreme or high god who created the universe but who does not generally interfere in daily life and is never depicted in art. People are closer to a wide range of lesser divinities and spirits.



1969.10



1969.8



1969.2



1994.200



1971.297



1974.212

Most cultures believe that recent ancestors impact human existence and are responsible for the well-being of their living descendants. In exchange for their help and support, the ancestors must be honored through prayers and offerings. Often a shrine or altar serves as the place through which these ancestor spirit entities may be contacted. In some cases, such as among the so-called pre-Bembe hunters, these shrines contain figurative sculptures said to be idealized portraits of real, historical ancestors (see 1969.10).

The ancestor spirits are also dynamically incarnated through masked dancers. Among different peoples in the southern Congo Basin, masks are responsible for the safety of the adolescent boys who undergo a secret, long, and thorough initiation process (see 1969.8). The importance accorded the dead is also expressed in the

elaborate funerary rituals organized annually by the Bwa and their neighbors, in which masked spirits appear in great numbers (see 1969.2). The goal of these rituals is to escort the souls of the deceased to the otherworld and thus ensure their transformation into benevolent ancestor spirits.

Illness, infertility, and misfortune are rarely attributed to natural causes. More often they are seen as resulting from the supernatural influence of the spirits or the ancestors, or from the evil actions of sorcerers or witches. To determine the cause of any serious misfortune, a diviner is summoned. Occasionally, by using human-made objects (see 1994.200 & 1971.297) and entering a state of trance possession, this specialist, man or woman, will contact the otherworld to find answers to the client's questions. Once the origin of the problem has been identified, the

diviner recommends that the afflicted individual visit a healer for treatment.

Often, the healing process relies on the use of charms that were once called "fetishes." Sometimes, these charms or "power objects"—as they are generally called today—consist of a carved human or animal figure that serves as the container or support for medicines or magical substances. Many African cultures believe in the efficacy of these magically charged objects because they conceive the world, both the natural and the inanimate, as being permeated by a kind of force or energy. Because they can be made by either a specialized artist or by the clients themselves, power figures show a wide variety of styles and workmanship. Often, as part of the ritual process, they become real assemblages, and the added substances and accessories conceal the actual carvings (see 1974.212).

