

The Mali Empire

c. 1235 -1470 CE



THE EXHIBITION

The Mali Empire once stood among the great powers of the medieval world. Between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, its kings controlled the goldfields of the Niger and the trade routes linking West Africa with North Africa and the Mediterranean.

Cities such as Timbuktu and Gao flourished as centres of learning, where Islamic scholarship and commerce thrived.

Yet the terracotta figures that survive from this period tell a quieter, more troubling story. Far from celebrating wealth or conquest, they portray people marked by illness, frailty, and pain — hunchbacked, swollen, or emaciated. Others kneel in prayer, cradle infants, or bear offerings. These are not royal portraits but reflections of the human condition, created by artists whose names are lost but whose compassion endures in clay.

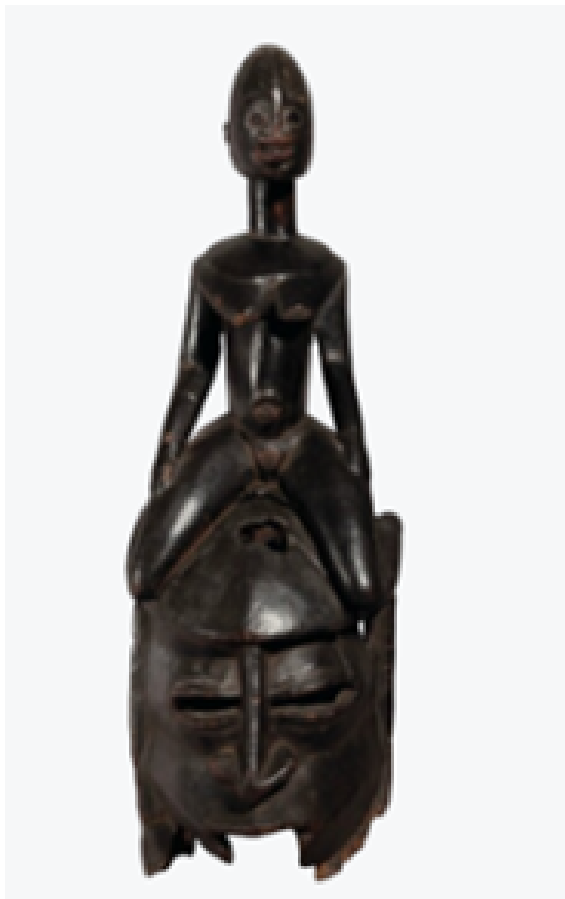
Today, Mali's heritage remains under threat. The courage of those who saved Timbuktu's manuscripts contrasts sharply with the looting and dispersal of its artefacts.

As conflict once again endangers Bamako and its museums, these terracottas stand as fragile witnesses — reminders that the measure of a civilisation lies not in its gold, but in its faith, its imagination, and the care it shows for what endures.

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FEATURED IN THE EXHIBITION



DOGON MASK WITH FEMALE FIGURE

Height 57cms

Wood

Auctioned by Christie's Paris, April 2017
for €2,370,500

This extraordinary mask combines bold geometry with lyrical grace. Carved in wood, this rare Dogon mask unites a male face with a kneeling female figure, thought to represent Yasiginè, the first woman. Worn during dama funerary rites by the Awa society, it symbolised rebirth and the restoration of harmony — a vision of balance between male, female, life, and death.

FIGURE WITH SMALLPOX

Terra-cotta

Height 24.5cms

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York,
USA. 1981.218

The small raised swellings covering this figure's back identify the illness as smallpox, a disease long present in West Africa. The artist conveys the weight of suffering not through expression but through the heavy, folded posture and the head resting on one hand — a study of endurance rendered in clay.



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KNEELING FIGURE HOLDING A RITUAL OFFERING

Terracotta

Height 44cms

Private Collection

This terracotta figure kneels upright, holding a vessel close to the chest. Armlets, anklets, and a beaded collar accentuate the body's rhythm, while the patterned skirt adds texture and balance. The gesture suggests control and deliberation, the work of an artist attentive to both human presence and sculptural order.



SEATED COUPLE

Terracotta

Height 30cms

Private Collection

Two figures sit side by side, joined by their elongated arms and similar ornamentation. Neck rings, armlets, and a plaited headdress are crisply defined, while a sinuous form draped over the left figure's shoulder may represent a snake or strand of cloth. The sculptor's focus is structural: symmetry, balance, and composure carved in clay.



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ARCHER

Terracotta

Height 61.9cms

National Museum of African Art,
Washington DC, USA, 86-12-1

This terracotta figure stands erect, a bow carried diagonally across the back and one hand resting at his side. The sculptor emphasised proportion and surface detail rather than movement: the braided hair, collar, and patterned armbands articulate rank and discipline. Strength here is expressed through calm vigilance, not combat.

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