GIFT OF AFRICAN ART COLLECTION TO BE EXHIBITED AT DUKE MUSEUM

DURHAM, N.C. -- Recent additions to the Duke University Museum of Art's permanent collection of African art are displayed in an exhibition that opens April 10.

"African Art from the Collection of Ambassador and Mrs. George McGhee," is being shown through June 14 in the museum's upstairs lobby gallery. Twenty of the 36 pieces of artwork donated by Trustee Emeritus McGhee and his wife, Cecilia, are featured in the exhibit.

Largely comprised of wooden masks, the collection provides examples of art from Zaire, Nigeria, Ghana, the Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso. The collection represents only a portion of McGhee's acquisitions that are the result of a lifelong fascination for travel and art collection.

"I am a veteran collector," McGhee said. "Over my lifetime I have collected 16 different things. The first piece of African art I purchased when I was ambassador to West Germany. The Governor of Zaire came to Berlin with an exhibit of [African] art. When he left, he left the objects for sale and I bought the best piece in the collection."

In 1949, McGhee became assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern, South Asian and African affairs. During this time McGhee said he visited all of the countries in Africa, but "didn't take advantage of the opportunity to collect African art."

It wasn't until 1975 when attending a board meeting for Mobil Oil held in the Republic of South Africa that McGhee was able to vastly expand his African art collection.

"While I was there I visited 13 countries and bought everything I could," he said. "Old artifacts were more common at that time and I found the most interesting pieces in the Ivory and Gold coasts, Nigeria and Zaire. The oil company helped me get permission for exportation and arrange packing for the items." McGhee's collecting was timely, because now it is illegal to remove many of these objects from their countries.

The wooden masks that dominate the collection were carved by hand and made to wear during ceremonial dances. Alone, the masks cannot be viewed in their entirety because, according
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to McGhee, a mask was traditionally worn with a robe that covered the dancer's body. Some
masks fit completely over the head and others are tied or held in place.

One of McGhee's favorite pieces in the collection is a Benin bronze head. It is a
smallish (6 inches in diameter), bullet-shaped head with an ivory quill attached to it. Others
include a wooden staff figure carved in Baule, a mask from Zaire that is covered with chips of
copper, and a set of 39 Ashanti geometric gold weights that are actually made of brass but
were used to weigh gold. McGhee also mentioned an Ashanti passport mask that was carried
in the pocket of a Poro Society member to prove his membership in the leadership
organization.

When collecting art, McGhee said it is best to acquire the works locally. He said it is
also particularly important to make sure the objects were made for use, not for tourists.
McGhee always examined the holes in the masks (used in tying them on the head) to see if
they were well-worn before he purchased them.

"It takes practice, but you can understand that if the edges of a carving are sharp, then
it is new," McGhee explained.

Each time McGhee became interested in another culture's art, he would study books
on the subject, noting examples of the different types of works. Then he would know what to
look for when forming his collection, McGhee added.

One of McGhee's most prized private collections is his assembly of Mexican folk art.
His Turkish firman is now housed in the Washington, D.C. Freer Gallery and he plans to
donate his Luristan bronzes to its neighbor the Sackler Gallery. His collection of ceramics,
statuary and small figures from Cyprus were given to the University of Virginia. Frequently,
McGhee has loaned parts of his collections to the Smithsonian for exhibition but he recently
donated his assortment of Papua New Guinea pieces to the institution's permanent holdings.

"Collecting is an instinct people have or don't have," McGhee said. "Some people own
many objects, but the objects don't have a pattern. In essence, when you collect you focus
on one thing, study it -- and then you usually lose interest in it. Being able to purchase very
good objects at very good prices was part of my enthusiasm."

McGhee held a trustee position at Duke for 27 years and several of his family members
are university alumni. He said he knew of the museum's interest in improving its "already
good, small collection" of African art and believes this addition will help to do so.

The opening for this exhibit and for two others -- "Diaghilev's Ballets Russes from the
Collection of Robert L.B. Tobin, San Antonio, Texas" and "Peter Goin Nuclear Landscapes:
Photo Exhibition" -- will be held on April 10 from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. Available at the door opening
night, tickets are $5 for the general public and free to Friends of the Art Museum and full-time
students.

For more information about museum events or to arrange a group tour, call (919) 684-
5135.

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