



**RUTH DAVIS DESIGN GALLERY**

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# Whirling Return of the Ancestors: Egúngún Arts of the Yorùbá in Africa and Beyond

Ruth Davis Design Gallery, Nancy Nicholas Hall

**January 24 – April 8, 2018**

Opening reception: Thursday, January 25, 5 – 7 pm



The Ruth Davis Design Gallery hosts the exhibition *Whirling Return of the Ancestors*, a dynamic, multi-sensorial exhibition of sights, sounds, motions ... and emotions, January 24 – April 8, 2018, with an opening **Reception Thursday, January 25, 2018, 5 – 7 pm**. The exhibition presents the rich and varied artistry of Egúngún masquerades and other arts inspired by a tradition that honors and celebrates the power and eternal presence of ancestors among Yorùbá peoples of West Africa. This connection between the living and the departed is expressed in a Yorùbá saying: “The world is a marketplace [we visit], the otherworld is home.” (*Ayé l’ojà, òrun n’ilé*).

*Whirling Return of the Ancestors* was researched, organized, and curated by students in the fall 2017 Art History Curatorial Studies-Exhibition Practice class taught by Evjue-Bascom Professor Henry Drewal. The project was developed in collaboration with the Ruth Davis Design Gallery in the School of Human Ecology (SoHE) and resonates closely with SoHE’s vision to inspire global intercultural experiences, reach new audiences, and welcome creativity through synthesizing research, outreach, and engagement.

Egúngún masquerades are collaborative family and community creations involving reflection, remembrance, and renewal. Such masquerade pageantry celebrates the spirits of ancestral hunters and warriors, legendary heroes and heroines, founding fathers and mothers, and a pantheon of uncountable deified ancestors (*òrìṣà*) – all of whom influence and guide the living.

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Egúngún multi-media ensembles range from the fearsome to the fashionable. Cloth is the primary medium of Egúngún. Yorùbá say, “cloth only wears to shreds,” that is, it never disappears, like ever-present ancestors. Egúngún are made of layers upon layers of disparate fabrics, some locally woven and re-worked, others industrially manufactured from all parts of the planet. Each three-dimensional Egúngún ensemble materializes the fourth dimension: the spiritual realm of the departed. Its varied media enclose and activate the trance-formation of the masquerader who becomes the spirit of an ancestor and embodies the infinite cycle of birth, life, departure and return.

Gallery visitors will encounter two dazzling Egúngún ensembles that create a “breeze of blessing” when they whirl in performance. The exhibition also includes two historic Egúngún ensembles from the [Helen Louise Allen Textile Collection](#), cloth and carved wooden headdresses, and carved memorial figures representing departed sacred twins. Several works are on loan from the [Chazen Museum of Art](#) and private collectors. Powerful contemporary traditions are represented through photographs by Phyllis Galebo, textile works by Agbo Folarin and Koffi Gahou, a painting by Wole Lagunju, and a painted ensemble in motion by Moyo Okediji. The gallery is filled with sights, sounds, and motions in a documentary film of the annual Egúngún festival in Porto Novo, Republic of Benin, and Oyótunji Village, South Carolina.

**A series of monthly public programs supplement the exhibition:**

- **March 7, 2018:** Lecture-demo about African American Second-Line funeral processions in New Orleans
- **April 5-8, 2018:** Performances by a troupe of Egúngún masqueraders, singers, and drummers from Oyótunji Village, South Carolina, who will give workshops at UW-Madison, the Madison Children’s Museum, and a Madison public school
- **April 6-7, 2018:** Two-day Symposium on the theme *Honoring Ancestors in Africa: Arts and Actions*
- **Date to be determined:** Program about different cultural funeral traditions in Madison

Credits: UW-Madison Anonymous Fund, the African Studies Program, and the Evjue Foundation

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**All Ruth Davis Design Gallery events are free and open to the public**

**Gallery hours:** Wednesday – Friday 10 am – 4 pm, Thursday evenings until 7 pm  
Saturday – Sunday, Noon – 4 pm

**How to get to the [Ruth Davis Design Gallery](#) in Nancy Nicholas Hall**

**Parking:** Click parking lots on map for real time availability <http://map.wisc.edu/>  
If [Nancy Nicholas Hall Lot 27](#) is not available, [University Avenue Lot 20](#) or [Observatory Drive Lot 36](#) are the nearest visitor parking ramps. See more parking and bus information [here](#).

**News and Events:** [Join the email list](#) to get notices about upcoming events and exhibitions. Get the most up-to-date information and interesting items about design and textiles by liking the Ruth Davis Design Gallery page on Facebook.

**About the Ruth Davis Design Gallery:** The [Design Gallery](#) organizes exhibitions and public programs that strive to educate and engage diverse audiences in design within its historical and cultural contexts. It is a resource of the Center for Design and Material Culture (CDMC), one of five Centers of Excellence within UW-Madison’s School of Human Ecology (SoHE) that promote human-centered scholarship.

