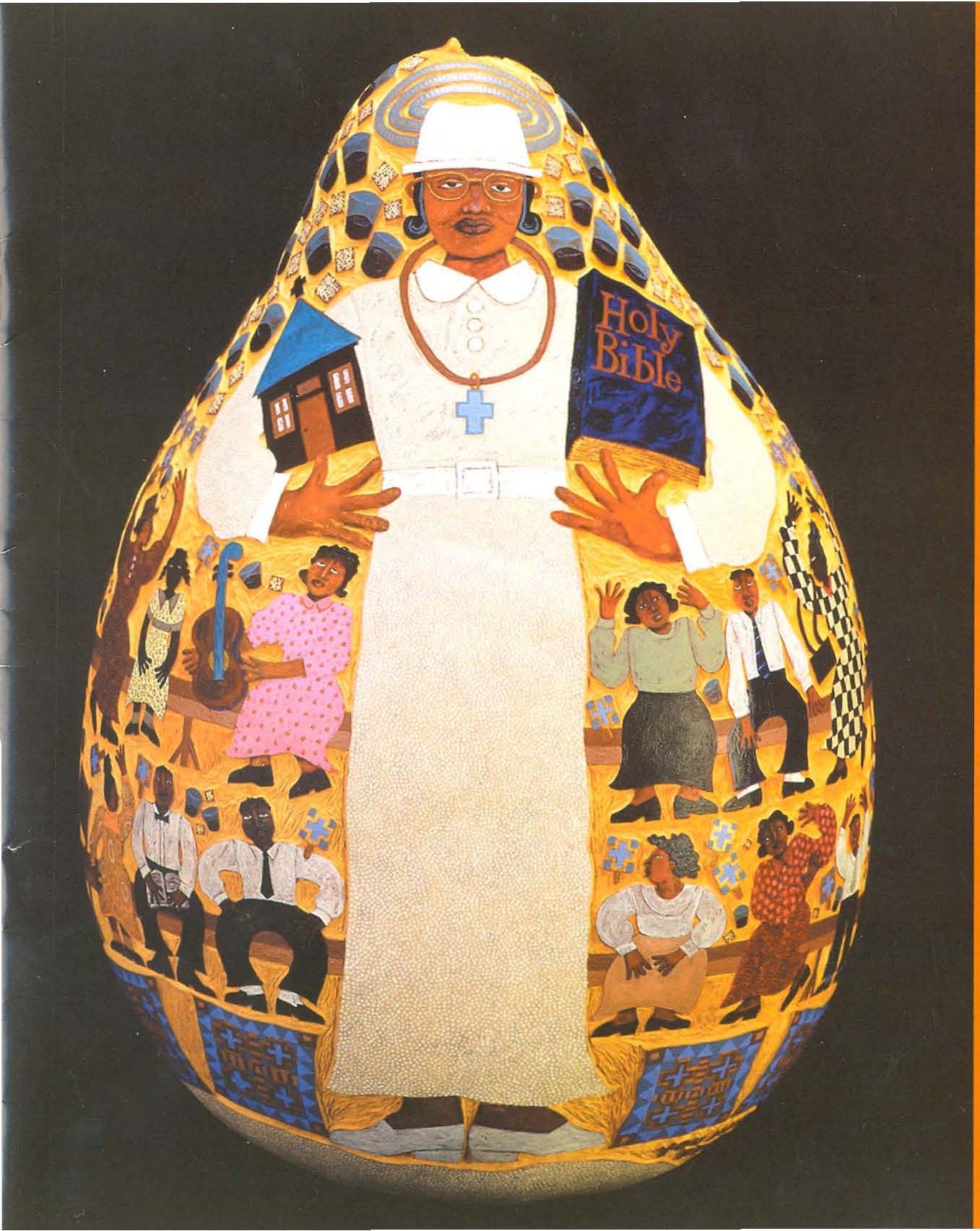

MICHELE TEJUOLA TURNER:

IN PRAISE OF OUR MOTHERS

MICHELE TEJUOLA TURNER:
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EXHIBITION SCHEDULE:

April 21 - July 14, 2002
Louise Wells Cameron Art Museum
Wilmington, North Carolina

January 31 - April 15, 2003
Diggs Gallery, Winston-Salem State University
Winston-Salem, North Carolina

February - April, 2006
Denver Art Museum
Denver, Colorado

"I'd like to thank my mother, Eva Louise Spindle, for her continued inspiration and support over the years."

– Michele Tejuola Turner

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LOUISE WELLS CAMERON Art Museum

Director's Statement

My excitement upon seeing two of Michele Tejuola Turner's gourds in 1996 in the **North Carolina Arts Council Visual Artist Fellowship Award Exhibition** is still fresh in my mind as I view her work today. It was apparent to Anne Brennan, Curator of Collections and me that a solo exhibition of the artist's work would be an important program for the Museum. During the planning stages of the Louise Wells Cameron Art Museum we concluded that the work of Tejuola Turner would be one of the premier exhibitions opening the new museum.

Thanks to Anne Brennan, Curator of Collections and Dr. Anthony Janson, essayist for **Michele Tejuola Turner: In Praise of Our Mothers**, these intentions became reality and the Museum is able to bring this exceptional artist's work to a greater audience.

C. Reynolds Brown
Director, Louise Wells Cameron Art Museum

Curator's Statement

The organization of this exhibition has been an honor and a delight. From my first approach up the dirt road to Tejuola's home in Midland, North Carolina, four years ago, I was warmed by rural surroundings tumbling with sun-dried gourds, golden pups and goats. Finding Tejuola carving in her tiny work interior, the walls brilliant in robin's egg blue, she pulled herself free from protective bandana and goggles to show her first gourds in the Gelede series. It was then confirmed, this would be the series to present in her first solo museum exhibition. We are grateful to Tejuola, her husband Obakunle Akinlana and daughter Irie, for a fulfilling experience working together on all aspects of the exhibition, including the creation of a video documentary of the artist.

The absolute success of this venture is due to the leadership of Ren Brown, Director and the Board of Directors of Louise Wells Cameron Art Museum.

The conscience and guiding force of the entire project has been Anthony Janson. Tony saw her work in a group show at St. John's Museum of Art (now Cameron Art Museum) in 1996 and immediately volunteered to serve as essayist in the earliest planning stages of this exhibition. Well past the culmination of this endeavor, Tony's belief in Tejuola and her work continues as her mentor and friend. Tony, thank you as well for that same friendship and guidance freely offered to this institution. We are made better professionally and personally by knowing you.

Others excited by the exhibition have given generously with all manner of creativity and resource. We sincerely thank the following: filmmaker John Goist for enthusiastically creating *Tejuola Turner: Documentary of a North Carolina Artist*; Goist Art Conservation for partial sponsorship; Madafo Lloyd Wilson for writing and performing original music for the documentary; Michael Hanson for assistance with recording, mixing and performance. We acknowledge the excellence of of master carpenter Dave Peters, for exhibition installation and Mitchell Kearney for photography. I am particularly indebted to Julie Macie, for her innovative, thoughtful catalogue design and many caretaking hours of work.

Not the least gratitude is extended to fellow staff members of Cameron Art Museum directly involved with this exhibition: Alan Monteath, Associate Registrar, Bob Unchester, Exhibition Coordinator, Daphne Holmes, Curator of Education; Richard Sceiford, Communications and Outreach Coordinator, Pamela Jobin, Assistant Director, Lynn Lowder, Museum Shop Manager and Roberta Hawkins, Security.

With thanks to Belinda A. Tate, Director, Diggs Gallery, Winston-Salem State University, Winston-Salem, NC and to Moyo Okediji, Assistant Curator, Department of Native Arts, Denver Art Museum, this exhibition will travel and introduce the artist to a wider audience.

Anne Brennan
Curator of Collections, Louise Wells Cameron Art Museum

MICHELE TEJUOLA TURNER:
IN PRAISE OF OUR MOTHERS

By Anthony Janson

Michele Tejuola Turner defies all established categories and all preconceptions. She carves gourds, which is a traditional craft in many parts of the world, including Africa, the source of her inspiration. In Africa itself, however, gourd-carving is practiced almost entirely by men, although women are the main carvers in some areas of northeast Nigeria. As the many societies devoted to gourd-carving attest, the craft is popular in this country. Turner, however, is an artist, not an artisan. Her work, unlike that of all but a handful of American practitioners, is primarily figurative, although this is not the main feature that distinguishes it as art. Even when she works in a decorative manner, her carvings have an intricacy and sophistication that are exceptional. Although Turner is largely self-taught in gourd-carving, she has a professional artistic background and makes her living as a freelance graphic designer. Thus she is hardly an outsider artist. While Turner's audience is still limited, her work has received professional recognition from museum curators, and she has been the recipient of several arts council fellowships.

Turner was born the fourth of five children in Detroit in 1956. Family and community life centered on the Pentecostal Church. In 1971, she entered the Cass Technical School but chose the visual arts program after realizing that she wanted to become an artist. Three years later Turner enrolled in the Columbus College of Art and Design in Ohio. She started out studying industrial design but found it too technical. Consequently, she switched to retail advertising while taking a variety of art courses. After graduating with honors in 1978, she began work as an advertising designer in Toledo and Detroit, then took a position at Rich's department store in Atlanta, a move that proved decisive in her life and career.

In the *Atlanta Constitution*, Turner saw a photo of a shekere gourd in a news item about an African dance troupe at one of the African-American community centers established under Mayor Maynard Jackson. It was at that center (which no longer exists) that Turner received her first exposure to African culture through Yoruba performances, and traditional African craft, story-telling, music, and dance. There she also encountered Senegalese Griots playing koras (stringed gourds) to accompany their stories. She also met Abu Mahdi, who carved and played shekeres. In 1980 Turner studied dance with Atlanta's African Dance Ensemble. After one of these classes she met Obakunle Akinlana, who was raising goats in nearby Covington while studying for the Yoruba priesthood. They were married in 1982 and had a daughter, Irie, a year later. In 1984 the family moved to Orlando, where Turner worked at Ivey's department store.

The turning point in Turner's career was her husband's initiation into the Yoruba priesthood in 1985. The dancing and singing at the initiation ceremony had a profound effect on her, which rekindled her fascination with African myths and folktales

that had first been nurtured in Atlanta. She began to carve images on gourds in 1986 as a way of remembering and understanding these stories, which her husband helped her to discover. Turner soon began studying African calabash carving in library books. At first she was content with using basic shapes and copying existing examples. Soon, however, she began adding colors from the paints and dyes her husband used in making African leather handbags.

fig. 1

After moving to Charlotte in 1988 to work at the local Ivey's, she took up gourd-carving in earnest on nights and weekends. When she received a substantial severance pay as part of a corporate buyout three years later, Turner decided to pursue freelance design work in order to devote more time to her gourds. The family settled on some rural acreage in nearby Midland, where Obakunle raised goats and she built a small studio for her design work and gourd-making.

In 1991 Turner received a Folklife Project Grant from the North Carolina Arts Council to complete a series of gourds documenting Yoruba "power myths" told in the oral cycle *Ancient Warriors of Ife-Ife*. The following year she was asked to exhibit at the World Gallery in Asheville. For the first time, she began to think of her gourds as works of art, not simply the material expression of an oral tradition. The breakthrough came in 1993 when Ken Bloom, the director of Spirit Square in Charlotte,

gave Turner her first one-person exhibition. That year she was also awarded an Arts International Travel Grant to study calabash-carving in Nigeria and Ghana. (She returned in 2001 on another fellowship.)

Visiting Africa was a pivotal event for the artist. It is one thing to know a different culture at second hand, but quite another to experience it directly on its native soil. Turner found Nigeria and Ghana real eye-openers. Despite the fascination with Africa as the Motherland she shared with other American blacks, she quickly discovered the vast differences in life and outlook between the two worlds. Rather than finding it disturbing, she saw the experience as affirming her own identity and her role in bridging the cultural gap. Her study with master carvers also made her appreciate how different her art is from African traditions.

fig. 2

Gourd-carving is hard, physical work. The gourd must first be hung out to dry slowly and completely. It is usually then cut open and any pulp remnants scraped out, so that it can be used as a vessel for containing water, food, or objects. Gourds thus fulfill the same function as vases and baskets. Like them, gourds have decorations that consist mainly of large, abstract forms, but with gourds it is a matter of necessity as well as style. Like a vase that has been dried before kiln-firing, the surface of a dried gourd is tough and leathery. While they can be incised with intricate patterns, most gourds are worked quickly, in part because they are utilitarian and commercial objects, in part because carving takes considerable strength, especially to use the large hand-tools that are common to African craftsmen.

After Turner completed her studies in Africa, the artists she worked with there presented her with a complete set of tools of which she is extremely proud. However, she is a petite woman

who readily acknowledges that it would be difficult, if not impossible, for her to work in a traditional manner, just as making metal sculpture proved prohibitive for her as an art student. Even small hand chisels tax her strength. For that reason, she prefers to use a small power tool, with various tips, to carve out her designs. This technique has the additional advantage of permitting her to create more complex, detailed designs and to work them with greater refinement. Even though it might seem dishonest to a purist, Turner's art could not readily exist without this mechanical aid, since it enables her to overcome the physical and technical challenges of her chosen medium.

fig. 3

The real contribution of Africa to Turner's art was thus not so much technical as aesthetic and experiential. It is all too easy to mythologize the personal, nearly mystical impact of a "Return to Africa" for black Americans seeking their "roots." What we can safely say is that it affected Turner's art in a number of tangible ways. Instead of studying African decorative forms from books, she now had the opportunity to observe them in person—not just those on gourds but textiles and other everyday objects—and in their original context. As a result, there was an immediate expansion of her visual vocabulary. Even more important, this initial visit brought her work into sharper thematic focus. In 1994, soon after her return, Turner began work on a series of gourds on the Yoruba myth of Gidigidi, a magical figure who can transform herself from a cow into a beautiful woman by shedding her skin. These were markedly more ambitious and coherent than anything she had previously attempted. That same

year she exhibited with the Nigerian bead artist Jimoh Burimoh at the Diggs Gallery of Winston-Salem State University, which has a long and extremely distinguished record of showcasing minority talent. In 1995 Turner received a North Carolina Arts Council Visual Artist Fellowship Award to begin work on a new series based on the theme of the Gelede festival. It was during the exhibition of fellowship recipients at the St. John's Museum of Art that the present show was conceived.

fig. 4

Gelede differs from *Gidigidi* in several important respects. It is far broader in scope. Even the individual pieces are larger. And instead of concentrating on a single tribal myth, it weaves life and storytelling together to create a more complex, yet unified, whole. Finally, it integrates the artist's understanding of herself as an American of African descent in a uniquely personal way.

Gelede is a nine-day festival held annually by the Yoruba people of Nigeria and Benin, usually when the first rains fall after the long dry season, as well as on important special occasions. Although its origins can be traced back to the late eighteenth century, Gelede became prominent during the height of the slave trade in the nineteenth century. It celebrates the power and wisdom of women through music, dance, costume, poetry, and storytelling. The Yoruba believe that the creator god put women in charge because everyone is born of their bodies. Organized by women, Gelede is a collective event, gathering people from miles around and featuring a market filled with goods. Besides its obvious economic importance, it also serves to reaffirm social ties and values. The festival is divided into nightime (Efe) and daytime (Gelede) events. Efe is a night of song, dance, poetry, and fun in which men appear in masks and costumes. After the ceremony is initiated by a spirit bird, the humorist Oro Efe (also called Elefe) appears carrying the Efe mask. He is usually preceded by the female masquerader Tetede and followed by Ogun (the original hunter

and iron deity), Esu (the divine messenger), and finally Ila Nya (the great mother) in the guise of a bearded woman or ancestral spirit bird (Oro). Gelede, held in the afternoon, centers on *egbe*, which denotes Yoruba society as a whole; great-grandmothers (the gods of society); the secret society of older women who at night transform themselves into birds and hold meetings in the forest, where the spirits dwell; and the patron goddess of spirit children. Also known as "our mothers," the powerful senior egbes hold the secret of life, death, health, and longevity. The most important members are often compared to airplanes as a kind of larger and faster "super" bird. The water and fertility goddess Yemonja (the mother of all things) is also worshipped in a separate festival that sometimes precedes Gelede. (To Turner, it was she who cared for the slaves that were thrown overboard during the Middle Passage, when millions of Africans were shipped to America.)

This brief introduction is sufficient to decipher the main subject matter of the *Gelede* series. In **Oro Efe** *(fig. 1)* we see drums, complete with hands, flanked by heraldically arranged spirit

fig. 5

birds that open the evening of Efe in some places. The birds are Ososobi and stand for Ila Nya, the Great Mother. Oro Efe is represented by his name, in the middle of which grows a tree of life that seems almost to sprout decorated gourds. This motif is repeated with the same phrases in both English and Yoruba. **Oro Efe** is followed in **Esu Night Masquerader** *(fig. 2)* showing the white-capped Esu, dancing wildly in a colorful costume of raffia and cloth ties. Even more spectacular is **Oro – Spirit Bird** *(fig. 3)*, which depicts several dancers in the guise of Oro. The spiritual heart of the three gourds treating the afternoon of Gelede festival is **Egbe – Transformation** *(fig. 4)* showing a young woman clothed on one side; on the other side she is magically transformed into a nude egbe and sprouts feathers as she flies away to the forest. The idea is restated in a different way in **Egbe – Road Trip** *(fig. 5)*, where trucks carry women of the secret society to the forest, with arrows pointing the way. As the repetitions of the word egbe suggest, they, too, will undergo the same miraculous change. Circles denoting completeness fall neatly into a pair of basket gourds surrounded by a pattern of feathers. The air-

planes in **Egbe – Taking Flight** *(fig. 6)*, some sporting strips of fabric, are another allusion to egbe as the most senior members of the secret women's society. Both gourds are commentaries on the intrusion of Western society, which is often treated with wry humor in Efe poems.

It is important not to intepret these images too literally or to see the gourds as providing a comprehensive narrative. Rather, it is the visual expression and underlying theme that give the group its larger meaning. Turner selects the type of gourd and varies the treatment to suit the subject matter. There are hundreds of different gourds, each with a distinctive shape and texture. It requires considerable experience to gain the knowledge needed to choose the right one for each work. There is, in fact, a clear division within the *Gelede* series according to content and purpose, but all are of African origin.

Turner takes full advantage of the round calabash for **Oro Efe** *(fig. 1)* by creating three rings of words to separate and complement her images. Through their density and profusion, the letters acquire the same remarkable vitality as the imagery. Turner opted for a gourd with a small head that is ideal for containing the dancing figure of **Esu – Night Masquerader** *(fig. 2)*. What is most impressive is how she extends the stream of raffia and fabric around the surface while sustaining the flow of energy. The difference between the figure and a much earlier male dancer *(fig. 11)* is striking. The latter, nearly Pre-Columbian in appearance, is static in comparison.

Because of its close thematic relationship, **Oro – Spirit Bird** *(fig. 3)* makes use of a similar gourd. The swirling motion of the design captures the rhythm of the dancing to perfection. The excitement of the event is conveyed by the swaying drummers and the rapturous faces of onlookers that fill every nook and cranny. At first glance, we may see both gourds as depicting an actual event, but Turner has not so much described a Gelede festival as condensed it in order to evoke the sights and sounds as vividly as possible. No photograph, no video of the spectacle comes close to conveying the exuberance of the spectacle as it is portrayed in Turner's art.

The shape of the *Gelede* gourds is very different from those of the *Efe* group. They are distinguished by a large pommel-shaped head, which is decorated with leaves to evoke the forest where egbes go to be transformed into spirit birds. The three share certain compositional features as well. Whereas the *Efe* gourds require the viewer to walk around them in order to take in the entire composition, the *Gelede* gourds are divided into two sides that are treated more or less distinctly from each other. Turner makes masterful use of this device to capture the magical quality of the woman's transformation into an egbe *(fig. 4)*. The effect is so convincing that we experience the metamorphosis as no less astonishing than it would be in real life. The gourd is nevertheless unified by the way the flying figure bends around its curved surface, which guides the viewer back to the front. Of all the gourds in *Gelede*, Egbe series is closest in character and handling to the *Gidigidi* series, of which it is a direct outgrowth. The Egbe series represents Turner's storytelling at its best. She has that rare ability to capture the essence of myth, not simply its narrative content

but also its spirit. The image is filled with a sense of the supernatural, at once enchantingly innocent yet poetic in spirit and luxuriant in detail, which reveals its profound inner meaning. These are the very qualities that mark the African oral tradition, which characteristically takes a simple tale and embellishes it to plumb its full significance.

The remaining two gourds dealing with the afternoon of Gelede complement Turner's Egbe series symbolically and visually by relating the myth to the very real world of Africa, so that we see both as inseparable parts of a unified culture. They are linked by having the same shape and division between sides. The contrast is greatest in **Egbe – Taking Flight** *(fig. 6)*, which has airplanes encircling the base and feathers on the top, yet it serves to enhance the symbolism of the airplanes as egbes who, like the woman in **Egbe – Transformation** *(fig. 4)* take winged flight. Although the basket gourds separate the two faces in **Egbe – Road Trip** *(fig. 5)*, continuity is provided by the headlong forward motion of the trucks across the surface. In a delightful touch of whimsy, they are crammed with the faces of women eagerly heading off to the spirit-filled world of the forest.

fig. 6

A shift in style can be seen in the last of the series to be completed: the large gourd **Yemonja – Sea Goddess** with Yemonja surrounded by floating chains and fish *(fig. 7)*, which shows a new ampleness of form. This figure is the outgrowth of one of Turner's first figural pieces showing the same goddess *(fig. 8)*, but the later work is far bolder and more assured. Yemonja pays tribute to the many Africans who were sold as slaves and shipped to this country, as well as those lost at sea. She also provides the bridge to the most impressive gourd the artist has produced to date, **Grandma Nettie** *(cover)*. It represents her grandmother, Nettie Holston, an ordained minister at the Greater Grace Apostolic Temple of the Pentecostal Church in Reynolds, Georgia, and had a profoundly important influence on Turner's life. Her commanding haloed figure fills the entire height of the large gourd and dominates the scene. To her lower right is a large

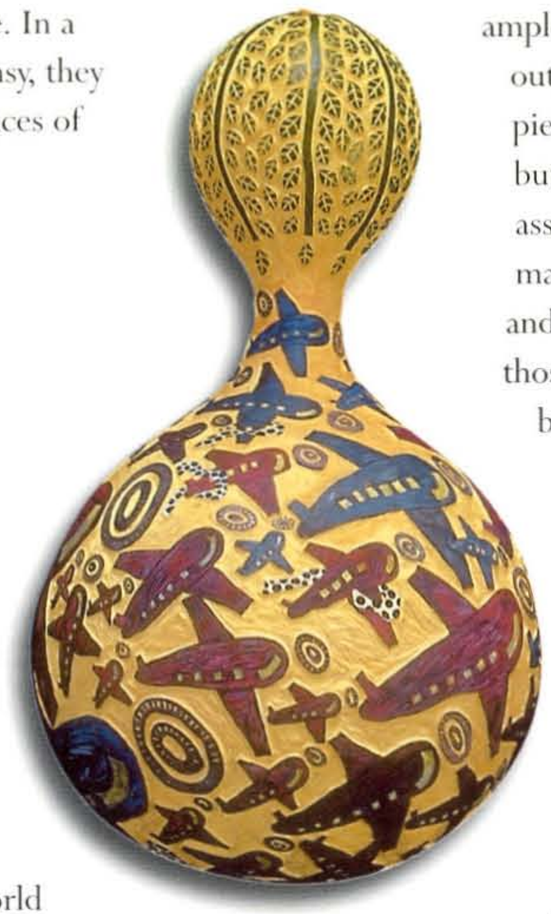


fig. 7

fig. 8

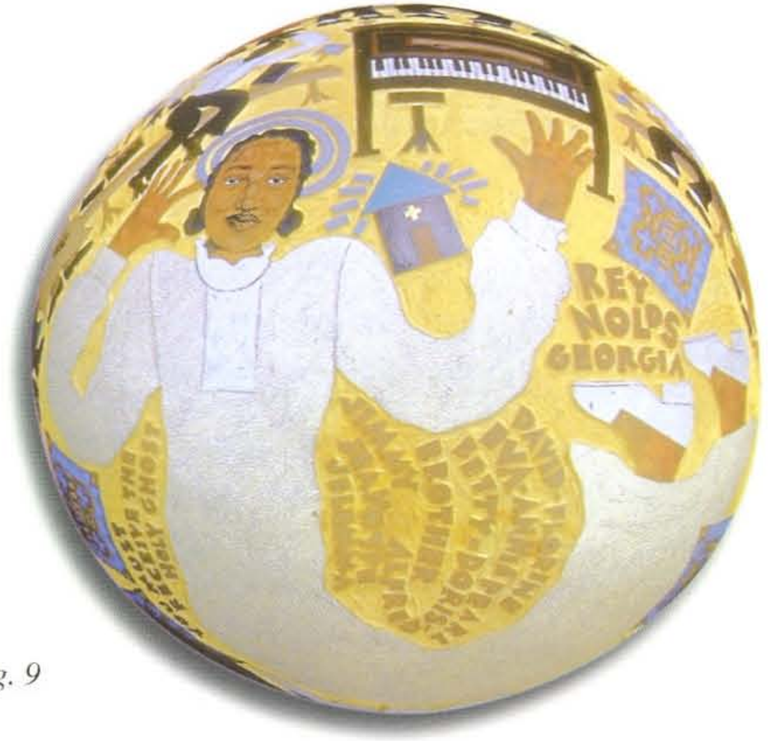


fig. 9

fig. 10

reclining Yemonja-like figure with double halo *(fig. 9)*. In effect, **Grandma Nettie** becomes an American egbe: a power figure who is a pillar of strength and a spiritual leader of her society. The gourd thus reconciles Turner's spiritual past with her spiritual present and her identity as an American with her African ancestry.

It accomplishes this end also through words, which float above the worshipers in block letters as bold and potent as the sermon itself: "Jesus On The Main Line. Call Him Up" *(back cover)*. Words play an important role in many of these gourds. They are prominent, for example, in **Oro Efe** *(fig. 1)*, with its combination of English and Yoruba phrases, or **Oro – Spirit Bird** *(fig. 3)*, with its extensive passage in Yoruba. But it is found perhaps most tellingly in one of the large "market" calabashes for carrying and displaying wares, which is ringed with a characteristic scriptural passage from sermons like her grandmother preached, **Acts 2:38** *(fig. 10)*.

Grandma Nettie is the most American of all Turner's pieces in both subject and style. She evokes the flavor of a church service at fever pitch with rare dignity, sympathy, and gentle humor. The work shows an awareness of the work of Jacob Lawrence,

fig. 11

whose instantly recognizable approach defined the essential qualities of the African-American tradition for many blacks. The debt is both appropriate in terms of content and unavoidable in terms of technique, given the hard surfaces of gourds and the strong, enamel-like colors of Turner's paints, which virtually dictate the kind of simplified, flat-colored shapes adopted by Lawrence.

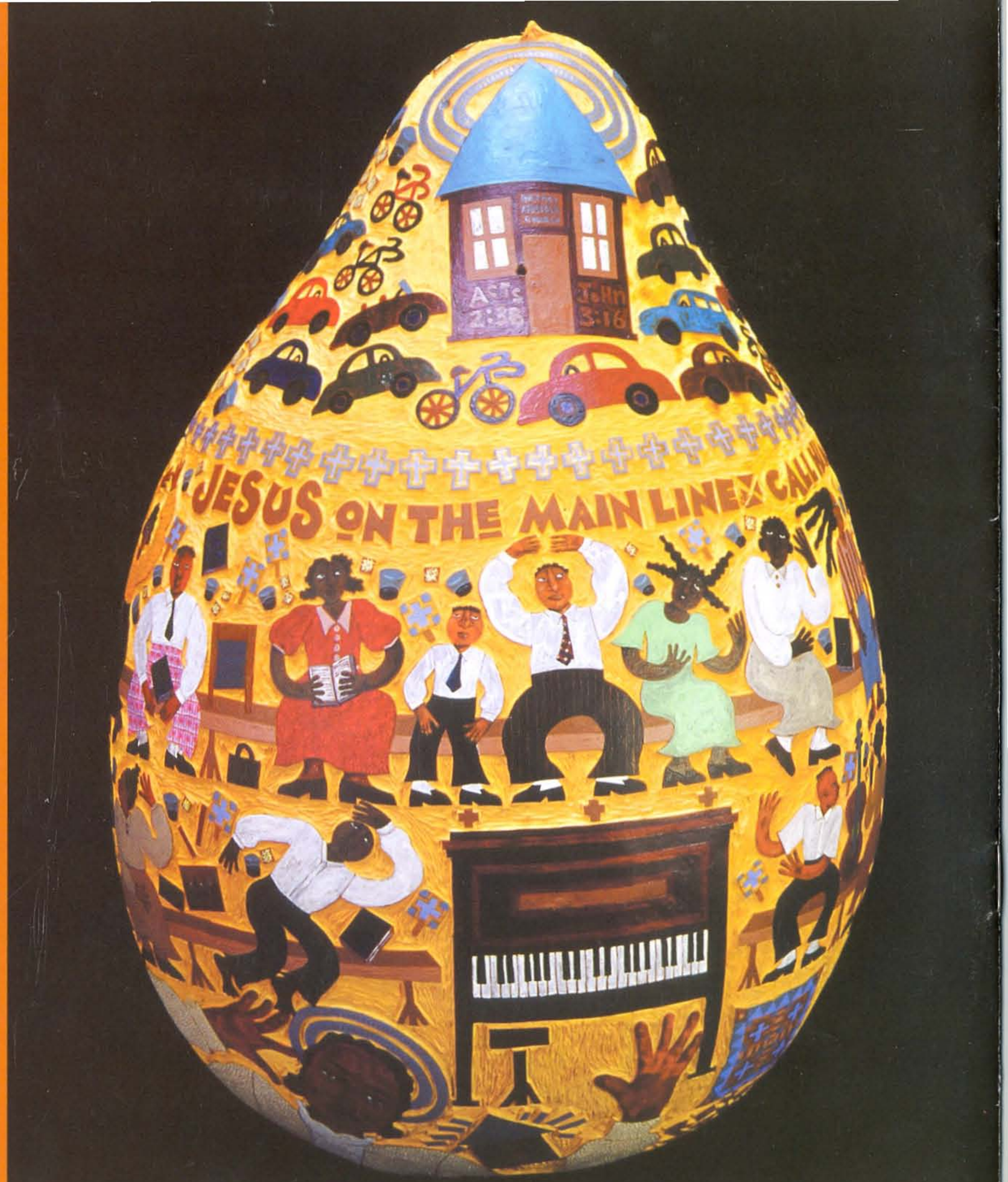
Grandma Nettie marks a transition toward a new content in Turner's work, one that centers on the life and history of Africans in this country. Even before finishing **Yemonja**, she began two gourds that indicate her future direction: one of the freedom fighter Harriet Tubman, the other of a black nanny protectively holding a white child while bees and butterflies attack her own infant lying on a quilt. Although the artist abandoned the Harriet Tubman piece as "just not me," they point to the continuing evolution of Turner as both an artist and as a human being engaged with larger issues of identity and memory.

Anthony F. Janson is best known as the co-author of the ***History of Art*** *written by his father, H.W. Janson, one of the standard texts in the field, which is universally regarded as having the most extensive treatment of minority art.*

CHECKLIST

All works are gourds carved with a small "dremel" power tool and/or a pyrographic instrument. All works are painted in combinations of acrylic, tempera, gouache and leather dye. Dimensions are given in inches, followed by centimeters in parentheses. Height precedes diameter.

1. **Grandma Nettie**, 2000
   18 x 13 (45.7 x 33)
   Collection of Louise Wells Cameron Art Museum, Wilmington, NC
2. **Egbe – Transformation**, 2000
   15 x 8 (38 x 20.3)
   Collection of the Artist
3. **Egbe – I've Been Changed**, 2000
   13 x 7 (33 x 18)
   Collection of the Artist
4. **Egbe – Road Trip**, 2000
   15 x 8 (39.4 x 21.6)
   Collection of the Artist
5. **Egbe – Taking Flight**, 2000
   14 x 8 (36.8 x 20.3)
   Collection of the Artist
6. **Esu Night Masquerader**, 2000
   20 x 12 (52 x 30.5)
   Collection of the Artist
7. **Oro Efe**, 2001
   11 x 11 (28 x 28)
   Collection of the Artist
8. **Oro – Spirit Bird**, 2001
   21 x 14 (53.3 x 35.6)
   Collection of the Artist
9. **Yemonja – Sea Goddess**, 2001
   18 x 18 (45.7 x 47)
   Collection of the Artist
10. **Market Bowl – Acts 2:38**
    (main bowl encircled in scripture with stacked bowl in pink, blue, orange and gray), 1999
    12 x 18 (30.5 x 45.7)
    Collection of the Artist
11. **Market Bowl #1**
    (white patterned main bowl with stacked bowl in gold and white), 2000
    14 x 18 (35.6 x 45.7)
    Collection of the Artist
12. **Market Bowl #2**
    (white main bowl with stacked bowl in gold, off white, green and blue), 1999
    12 x 18 (30.5 x 45.7)
    Collection of the Artist
13. **Market Bowl #3**
    (main bowl in circle motif with stacked bowl in red and yellow), 1999
    9 x 16 (22.8 x 42)
    Collection of the Artist
14. **Market Bowl #4**
    (main bowl in black knot motif with stacked bowl in blue, black and purple), 1999
    14 x 17 (35.6 x 43)
    Collection of the Artist
15. **Market Bowl #5**
    (main bowl in half circles and triangles with stacked bowl in gold, yellow and mauve), 1998
    11 x 13 (28 x 34)
    Collection of the Artist
16. **Market Bowl #6**
    (main bowl in white half circles with stacked bowl in purple, red, blue and black), 2001
    16 x 18 (40.6 x 45.7)
    Collection of the Artist


Acts 2:38
John 3:16
JESUS ON THE MAIN LINE