

# ART OF PUPPETS AND MARIONETTES

## *Tales of the Ashanti*

**Art Form: Theatre**

**Style: Contemporary/Classical**

**Culture: West African**

### MEET THE ARTIST:

Jim Gamble, founding director of the **Art of Puppets and Marionettes**, is an internationally respected puppet designer and performer known for his appealing productions and beautifully crafted puppets. His dynamic company, founded in 1972 and composed of accomplished puppeteers and puppet makers, has an eclectic repertoire that includes *Peter and the Wolf*, *Carnival of the Animals*, *The Nutcracker*, *Hansel and Gretel*, *Tales of the Ashanti* and *Myths of the Aztecs*. Each production features familiar classical music or an original score. Strongly committed to education, the company performs in hundreds of California schools annually and in theatres and festivals throughout the U.S., Europe, Asia and the Middle East. In 2001, Jim Gamble was the only American to perform at the Obratsov Puppet Theatre in Moscow in celebration of 100 Years of Russian Puppetry. National appearances include the Children's Theatre Series in Hawaii and the International Children's Festival in San Diego. Among the company's many awards are the *Parents Choice* and *Golden Apple* awards for their video series, and the *President's Award* from the *Puppeteers of America*.

### ABOUT THE PERFORMANCE:

*Tales of the Ashanti* is an inspired rod and hand puppet production of two African folk tales depicted through the actions and speech of life-sized puppets. Working in full view of the audience, two puppeteers perform stories whose characters are based on the aku'ba figures of the Ashanti and Baule. The striking character designs and vibrant stage settings were influenced by the distinctive artwork of the Ashanti tribe including carvings, figures, and patterns found on printing stamps and gold weights. Roger Mara, a Master Puppeteer and principal contributor to many Jim Gamble productions, conceived of *Tales of the Ashanti* and scripted the folk tale adaptation of "Talk." "The Elephant and the Rhinoceros" was adapted by award-winning children's book author Gail E. Haley.



### PREPARING FOR THE EXPERIENCE:

Puppet theatre, as we know it, has its early roots in 17th century Italy. At that time, troupes of traveling actors created standard characters and those characters evolved into standard puppet characters. The most popular, a bragging, comic fellow who made audiences laugh because of his clumsiness and foolishness became the forerunner of the modern circus clown. Like the puppets in *Tales of the Ashanti*, rod puppets are manipulated by sticks, frequently combined with the puppeteer's hand which is used inside the body to cause the mouth to move or the eyes to close. "The Elephant and the Rhinoceros" and "Talk" are legends from the Ashanti people, a West African tribe whose culture has existed for hundreds of years. Their homeland, the southwestern part of what is now the country of Ghana, is rich in minerals and fertile farmland. Much of the region is forested and home to animals such as buffalo, leopards and monkeys. Crocodiles swim in the rivers, pythons hang from trees, and parrots, herons and other birds fly over the land. Most Ashanti believe that animals, objects and places have a life of their own. This belief is the basis for the folk tale "Talk."



Today, much of what we understand as the traditional art of western Africa was actually art made for religious purposes that were closely connected with activities of daily life: planting, harvesting, having children, etc.

Sculptures, cast from bronze or carved from wood, were stylized and represented the human figure. Masks, made by confidential societies, were carved in secret and used only for special ceremonies. Originally, masks and sculptures were not meant to hang on walls or rest on tables. Rather they were used in a religious or ceremonial context and became powerful symbols that the community understood. The art of the West African people was expressed in many other ways, including the decoration of their homes, the weaving of cloth, their pottery and musical instruments.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Which was your favorite folk tale, "Talk" or "The Elephant and the Rhinoceros"? Why?
- One of the ways that a culture maintains its traditions is by passing on its wisdom through stories or proverbs. Were there specific messages or values expressed in "Talk" or "The Elephant and the Rhinoceros"? What were they?
- "Talk" is based on the Ashanti belief that animals, objects and places have a life of their own. What does this mean? Is this different from our culture? How?
- Do you know any folk tales? Where did you learn them? Are they from a particular culture or heritage? Do they share wisdom, advice, or teach lessons?
- What did you think about the puppets in this performance? How did they enrich the story? Have you seen or heard anything like them before?

## FRAMEWORK FOCUS - SOCIAL STUDIES:

As early as the 1500s, Portuguese explorers found the Ashanti to be a rich and powerful people. Their land yielded a variety of crops such as yams, sunflowers, millet, squash and cacao, and their forests provided abundant supplies of timber. And the region was so rich in gold that it came to be known as the Gold Coast. Still abundant with farmland and minerals, Ghana has a number of big cities but most people live in small villages. Look at a map of the continent of Africa and find the country of Ghana. Have students work in groups to discover what life is like in Ghana. Ask each group to select and research one or two of the following subjects: Ghana's climate, geography, agriculture, plant life, animal life, sports, music, and the history and art of the Ashanti people. After students report on their discoveries, have them think about and discuss the ways in which the fertile, mineral-rich land affected the Ashanti's lifestyle. What are the connections between the Ashanti agricultural lifestyle and their art, or music, or stories?

Legend:

- 🌀 Artistic perception
- ❖ Creative expression
- ▶ Historical & cultural context
- ⇒ Aesthetic valuing
- \* Connections, Relations, Applications

## ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE THE EXPERIENCE:

❖ Everyone has stories to tell whether they come from one's cultural heritage, their family, a book, an actual event, or the imagination. Regardless of the source, storytelling is an important part of sharing and understanding the human experience. Hold a storytelling session in which each child shares a story. Begin each story in the African tradition featured in the *Tales of the Ashanti* in which the storyteller proclaims: "Here is a story!" Before the storyteller may continue the audience must respond: "A story it is ..."

⇒ In *Tales of the Ashanti*, the king wears a very special cloth called kente cloth, woven of bright threads. Each cloth design has a name. One, which is mostly yellow, is called "Gold Dust." Another, a favorite of many Ashanti women, is called "When the Queen Comes to Accra." The way people dress can express or project something about their personality, profession, or cultural background. Discuss examples of such instances in the American culture and make a list on the chalkboard detailing students' ideas.



⇒ Interwoven throughout *Tales of the Ashanti* are specific lessons or values. What are they? Do you think they contain good advice? Why or why not? Have students share a proverb they know, its source, and reflect upon the same questions.

🌀 Tribal cultures used masks as part of their ceremonies, sacred rites, and entertainment. Each mask represented a specific god, entity, or concept with vivid imagery and detail. Myths and legends of the specific tribes help explain the significance and purpose of their masks. Study the various designs of African masks, then have students use the designs to inspire original artwork for their own African-style mask. Using brown paper bags, allow students to create a mask, making sure that sufficient eye, nose and mouth holes are cut for safety and ventilation. Use a variety of seeds or dried beans to embellish them.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY:

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Courlander, Harold. *A Treasury of African Folklore*. Marlowe and Company Publishing, New York, NY, 1995.