



**4a,b** Osun shrine jar, early/mid-20th century Osogbo or vicinity, Nigeria, Yoruba Terracotta, 59.7cm x 31cm (23½" x 12¼") Gift of Keith Achepohl, 2005.277. PHOTO: ROBERT LIFSON. © THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

Elaborate raised and pierced decoration articulates the entire surface of this long-necked jar, while the application of stylized eyes, ears, nose, and mouth transform it into a half figure. In the region of Osogbo, in the Osun River Valley, jars like this may be placed on shrines dedicated to the diety Osun, the mother of life-giving waters.

with many of the most spectacular made specifically to be placed on shrines (FIG. 4). Robert F. Thompson's seminal 1969 article on the Egbado-Yoruba potter *Àbátàn* remains the most in-depth study of an exceptional potter's work and the meaning and significance of a particular kind of shrine vessel. In 1972 Maude Wahlman published a valuable comparative study of pottery techniques in two Yoruba regions. This was followed in the 1980s and 1990s with multiple publications (including Beier 1980, Ojo 1982, Isaacs 1988, Fatunsin 1992, Ibigbami 1982 and 1992, and Allsworth-Jones 1996) which survey various techniques and uses for pots; however, none of these studies approach the depth of critical inquiry presented in Thompson's work. Likewise, the captions for the four shrine vessels illustrated in the catalogue of the landmark exhibition *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought* reveal intriguing details that remain unexplored in larger studies (Drewal et al. 1989:161, fig. 177, and 226, figs. 267-9). We are told for instance, that the shape of one lidded pot is found most often on Erinle shrines, but its iconography is usually associated with Sango (ibid., 160-61). Another describes "a ritual vessel possibly for Yemoja, goddess of the river Ogun ... transformed into a woman's body whose breasts sustain life in feeding a child" (ibid., p. 226). These tantalizing descriptions suggest the great, untapped potential of Yoruba pottery as an area of research, just as the remarkably varied vessels in the Achepohl collection hint at the artistry that can be found in pottery from many other parts of Africa.

#### FIELD RESEARCH AND MAKING OBJECTS SPEAK

by Barbara E. Frank

If we wish to understand better the social and spiritual meanings of individual pots, then we need to know something of the women and men who made them and the social, economic, and spiritual contexts within which they were conceived, created, and

used. As already suggested, all too often objects enter museum and private collections with their unique histories silent. Making objects speak requires the concerted and collaborative efforts of art historians, anthropologists, and other scholars from a wide range of disciplines.

Some of the most intense, sustained, and interdisciplinary research on ceramics in Africa has been in the Inland Niger Delta region of Mali, where pottery production remains a major industry (FIGS. 5-6). Following a number of important individual studies (Gardi 1985, LaViolette 1987, 2000) and in close collaboration with the Musée National du Mali and the Institut des Sciences Humaines, Allan Gallay led a team of archaeologists on a series of ethnoarchaeological projects in the Inland Niger Delta region between 1988 and 1994, in an effort to link styles of technology and object styles and types with demographic information about gender, family heritage, and ethnicity (Gallay and Huysecom 1989; Gallay, Huysecom, and Mayor 1998; Gallay et al. 1996, 1998). In these studies careful recording of individual artist by patronym as well as artisan class, ethnic affiliation, and location provides evidence of the structured coherence of different social systems, as well as revealing instances of the variability of identity and status (see LaViolette 1995). They have identified distinct technologies used to form pots and located them within specific regional and ethnic contexts<sup>10</sup> and documented the range and depth of ceramic assemblages. Similarly, art historian Christopher Roy (1975, 1989, 2000a, 2000b, 2003) has focused much of his research defining different forming technologies and identifying them with particular ethnic contexts in Burkina Faso. His recent DVD *African Pottery Techniques* (2003) offers nine distinct forming and firing sequences, remarkable for the skill and dexterity of the artists who make what they do seem effortless. What emerges from these studies is not only insight into the archaeological record, but also an unusually rich picture of the relationship between ethnic diversity, craft specialization, and the technology of production.<sup>11</sup>