Beauty stops us in our tracks. It makes us pause, look, consider. Frequently, it gives us pleasure. Sometimes, it overwhelms us. Whether it comes in the form of a painting, a person, or a flower petal, beauty forces us to visually engage with the world around us.

The same is true of beauty’s opposite. We are intuitively drawn to artworks that repulse us. Although we may not enjoy them, many of us cannot seem to look away. These pieces stick in our minds. They have a presence we cannot seem to shake. This response is at the heart of what we call Anti-Aesthetics.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, artists across the African continent intentionally produced work that their communities found disagreeable, unnerving, or even frightening. The figures, masks, and adornments that these women and men created were designed to act: to engage viewers and incite change in the world. From chasing away the forces of evil to memorializing the dead, each of the pieces in this gallery played a critical role in the lives of the people who created them.

This exhibition explores how the visual characteristics of an artwork relate to its function in society. Each of the five sections—uncanny, composite, accumulative, disproportionate, and raw—examines how African artists used Anti-Aesthetics to provoke emotional responses, convey information, and make artistic material come to life.