SMARTHISTORY OF ART IV - AFRICA



Smarthistory
Smarthistory

LibreTexts™

SmartHistory of Art IV: Africa

This text is disseminated via the Open Education Resource (OER) LibreTexts Project (https://LibreTexts.org) and like the thousands of other texts available within this powerful platform, it is freely available for reading, printing, and "consuming."

The LibreTexts mission is to bring together students, faculty, and scholars in a collaborative effort to provide an accessible, and comprehensive platform that empowers our community to develop, curate, adapt, and adopt openly licensed resources and technologies; through these efforts we can reduce the financial burden born from traditional educational resource costs, ensuring education is more accessible for students and communities worldwide.

Most, but not all, pages in the library have licenses that may allow individuals to make changes, save, and print this book. Carefully consult the applicable license(s) before pursuing such effects. Instructors can adopt existing LibreTexts texts or Remix them to quickly build course-specific resources to meet the needs of their students. Unlike traditional textbooks, LibreTexts' web based origins allow powerful integration of advanced features and new technologies to support learning.



LibreTexts is the adaptable, user-friendly non-profit open education resource platform that educators trust for creating, customizing, and sharing accessible, interactive textbooks, adaptive homework, and ancillary materials. We collaborate with individuals and organizations to champion open education initiatives, support institutional publishing programs, drive curriculum development projects, and more.

The LibreTexts libraries are Powered by NICE CXone Expert and was supported by the Department of Education Open Textbook Pilot Project, the California Education Learning Lab, the UC Davis Office of the Provost, the UC Davis Library, the California State University Affordable Learning Solutions Program, and Merlot. This material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. 1246120, 1525057, and 1413739.

Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation nor the US Department of Education.

Have questions or comments? For information about adoptions or adaptions contact info@LibreTexts.org or visit our main website at https://LibreTexts.org.

This text was compiled on 11/23/2025

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Licensing

1: West Africa

- 1.1: Burkina Faso
- 1.2: The art of Ghana
  - 1.2.1: Golden Stool (Sika dwa kofi), Asante peoples
  - 1.2.2: Linguist Staff (Okyeamepoma) (Asante peoples)
  - 1.2.4: Memorial Head (Akan peoples)
  - 1.2.5: Akua'ba Female Figure (Akan peoples)
  - 1.2.6: Asafo Flags- Stitches Through Time
  - 1.2.7: El Anatsui
  - 1.2.8: El Anatsui, Old Man's Cloth
  - 4.1.2.3: Kente cloth
- 1.3: Guinea
- 1.4: The art of the Ivory Coast
  - 1.4.1: Owie Kimou, Portrait Mask (Mblo) of Moya Yanso (Baule peoples)
  - 1.4.2: Pair of Diviner's Figures (Baule peoples)
- 1.5: The art of Mali
  - 1.5.1: Saving Timbuktu's manuscripts
  - 1.5.2: Seated Figure (Djenné peoples)
  - 1.5.3: Lost History- the terracotta sculpture of Djenne Djenno
  - 1.5.4: Great Mosque of Djenné (Djenné peoples)
  - 1.5.5: Dogon Couple (Dogon peoples)
  - 1.5.6: Mask (Kanaga) (Dogon peoples)
  - 1.5.7: Male and Female Antelope Headdresses (Ci wara) (Bamana peoples)
  - 1.5.8: Kòmò Helmet Mask (Kòmòkunw) (Bamana peoples)
  - 1.5.9: Seydou Keïta, Untitled (Seated Woman with Chevron Print Dress)
- 1.6: The art of Nigeria
  - 1.6.1: Benin Plaques
  - 1.6.2: The Kingdom of Benin
  - 1.6.3: Benin Art- Patrons, Artists and Current Controversies
  - 1.6.4: The Imagery of Power on Benin Bronze Plaques
  - 1.6.5: Benin and the Portuguese
  - 1.6.6: Queen Mother Pendant Mask (Iyoba) (Edo peoples)
  - 1.6.7: Benin ivory mask (Edo peoples)
  - 1.6.8: Benin plaque- Equestrian Oba and Attendants
  - 1.6.9: Ere Ibeji Figures (Yoruba peoples)
  - 1.6.10: Kingdom of Ife- Sculptures from West Africa
  - 1.6.11: Ife uncovered
  - 1.6.12: Olowe of Ise
  - 1.6.13: Olowe of Ise, Veranda Post of Enthroned King and Senior Wife
  - 1.6.14: Ikenga (Igbo peoples)
  - 1.6.15: Uche Okeke
  - 1.6.16: Yinka Shonibare, The Swing (After Fragonard)

- 1.7: Republic of Benin
- 1.8: The art of Sierra Leone
  - 1.8.1: Lidded Saltcellar
  - 1.8.2: Stone Head (mahe yafei), Kisi peoples
  - 1.8.3: Bundu / Sowei Helmet Mask (Mende peoples)
  - 1.8.4: Helmet Mask
  - 1.8.5: Cotton hammock (Vai peoples)
  - 1.8.6: Ceremonial Ladle (Dan peoples)
  - 1.8.7: Found accidentally

2: Central Africa

- 2.1: Cameroon
  - 2.1.1: Ceremonial Palm Wine Vessel (Cameroon Grasslands peoples)
  - 2.1.2: Elephant Mask (Bamileke Peoples)
- 2.2: Democratic Republic of the Congo
  - 2.2.1: Crucifix (Kongo peoples)
  - 2.2.2: Female (pwo) Mask
  - 2.2.3: Power Figure (Nkisi Nkondi), Kongo peoples
  - 2.2.4: Ndop Portrait of King Mishe miShyaang maMbul (Kuba peoples)
  - 2.2.5: Lukasa (Memory Board) (Luba peoples)
  - 2.2.6: Buli Master, possibly Ngongo ya Chintu, Prestige Stool- Female Caryatid (Luba or Hemba peoples)
  - 2.2.7: Double Prestige Panel (Kuba peoples)
  - 2.2.8: Figurative Harp (Domu) (Mangbetu peoples)
- 2.3: Gabon
  - 2.3.1: Kota reliquary (mbulu ngulu)
  - 2.3.2: Female Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble (Fang peoples)
  - 2.3.3: Female Reliquary Guardian Figure (Fang peoples)—video

3: North Africa

- 3.1: Algeria and Libya
  - 3.1.1: Rock Art in North Africa
  - 3.1.2: Rock Art in the Green Sahara (Africa)
  - 3.1.3: Running Horned Woman, Tassili n'Ajjer, Algeria
  - 3.1.4: Rock-Art Sites of Tadrart Acacus
  - 3.1.5: Rock-Art Sites of Tadrart Acacus
- 3.2: Egypt
- 3.3: The art of Tunisia
  - 3.3.1: The Great Mosque of Kairouan
  - 3.3.2: Kairouan (from UNESCO)

4: Southern Africa

- 4.1: The art of Namibia
  - 4.1.1: Origins of rock art in Africa
  - 4.1.2: Apollo 11 Cave Stones
- 4.2: The art of South Africa
  - 4.2.1: Married Woman's Apron (Ndebele peoples)

- 4.2.2: William Kentridge, drawing from Tide Table (Soho in Deck Chair)
  - 4.2.2.1: On the beach, but in a suit
- 4.3: Zimbabwe
  - 4.3.1: Great Zimbabwe

5: A beginner's guide

- 5.1: Peoples and cultures
- 5.2: Historical overview- to 1600
- 5.3: Historical overview- from the 1600s to the present
- 5.4: Aesthetics
- 5.5: The human figure, animals and symbols
- 5.6: Form and meaning
- 5.7: Religion and the Spiritual Realm
- 5.8: Art and politics
- 5.9: Rites of passage
- 5.10: Art and the individual
- 5.11: African art and the effects of European contact and colonization
- 5.12: The Reception of African Art in the West
- 5.13: Western appreciation of African art

6: East Africa and the Horn of Africa

- 6.1: Tanzania
- 6.2: The art of Ethiopia
  - 6.2.1: Aksumite Coins
  - 6.2.2: Illuminated Gospel
  - 6.2.3: Julie Mehretu, Stadia II
  - 6.2.4: Christian Ethiopian art
  - 6.2.5: An Ethiopian icon
  - 6.2.6: The kingdom of Aksum

Index

Glossary

Detailed Licensing

Licensing

*A detailed breakdown of this resource's licensing can be found in **Back Matter/Detailed Licensing**.*

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

1: West Africa

From rich textiles and elaborate masquerades to some of Africa's most well-known architecture.

13th century - present

West Africa includes Benin, Burkina Faso, the Cape Verde Islands, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, the island of Saint Helena, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Sao Tome, Principe and Togo.

1.1: Burkina Faso
1.2: The art of Ghana
1.2.1: Golden Stool (Sika dwa kofi), Asante peoples
1.2.2: Linguist Staff (Okyeamepoma) (Asante peoples)
1.2.4: Memorial Head (Akan peoples)
1.2.5: Akua’ba Female Figure (Akan peoples)
1.2.6: Asafo Flags- Stitches Through Time
1.2.7: El Anatsui
1.2.8: El Anatsui, Old Man’s Cloth
4.1.2.3: Kente cloth
1.3: Guinea
1.4: The art of the Ivory Coast
1.4.1: Owie Kimou, Portrait Mask (Mblo) of Moya Yanso (Baule peoples)
1.4.2: Pair of Diviner’s Figures (Baule peoples)
1.5: The art of Mali
1.5.1: Saving Timbuktu’s manuscripts
1.5.2: Seated Figure (Djenné peoples)
1.5.3: Lost History- the terracotta sculpture of Djenne Djenno
1.5.4: Great Mosque of Djenné (Djenné peoples)
1.5.5: Dogon Couple (Dogon peoples)
1.5.6: Mask (Kanaga) (Dogon peoples)
1.5.7: Male and Female Antelope Headdresses (Ci wara) (Bamana peoples)
1.5.8: Kòmò Helmet Mask (Kòmòkunw) (Bamana peoples)
1.5.9: Seydou Keïta, Untitled (Seated Woman with Chevron Print Dress)
1.6: The art of Nigeria
1.6.1: Benin Plaques
1.6.2: The Kingdom of Benin
1.6.3: Benin Art- Patrons, Artists and Current Controversies
1.6.4: The Imagery of Power on Benin Bronze Plaques
1.6.5: Benin and the Portuguese
1.6.6: Queen Mother Pendant Mask (Iyoba) (Edo peoples)
1.6.7: Benin ivory mask (Edo peoples)
1.6.8: Benin plaque- Equestrian Oba and Attendants
1.6.9: Ere Ibeji Figures (Yoruba peoples)
1.6.10: Kingdom of Ife- Sculptures from West Africa

1.6.11: Ife uncovered
1.6.12: Olowe of Ise
1.6.13: Olowe of Ise, Veranda Post of Enthroned King and Senior Wife
1.6.14: Ikenga (Igbo peoples)
1.6.15: Uche Okeke
1.6.16: Yinka Shonibare, The Swing (After Fragonard)
1.7: Republic of Benin
1.8: The art of Sierra Leone
1.8.1: Lidded Saltcellar
1.8.2: Stone Head (mahe yafei), Kisi peoples
1.8.3: Bundu / Sowei Helmet Mask (Mende peoples)
1.8.4: Helmet Mask
1.8.5: Cotton hammock (Vai peoples)
1.8.6: Ceremonial Ladle (Dan peoples)
1.8.7: Found accidentally

This page titled 1: West Africa is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

1.1: Burkina Faso

Mask (Nwantantay) (Bwa peoples)

by DR. CHRISTA CLARKE



Figure **1.1.1**: Mask (Nwantantay), Burkina Faso, Black Volta River region, Bwa peoples. 19th–20th century, wood, pigment, and fiber, 182.9 x 28.2 x 26 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Among the southern Bwa peoples in Burkina Faso, large wooden plank masks are carved to represent various flying spirits that inhabit the natural world. These spirits, though largely invisible, are associated with water and can take physical form as insects that gather around a pool after a heavy rain or as a large water fowl, like an ibis. Some Bwa describe a mythological encounter in which a flying spirit appeared before a human, offering protection and service. A tall plank mask was created after this encounter to honor the spirit and ensure its continued beneficence.

This mask has a circular face and tall, vertical superstructure with a series of downward-curving hooks projecting from both the front and the back. The protruding, diamond-shaped mouth with jagged teeth is pierced to allow the wearer to see. Brightly painted patterns in red, black, and white enhance the bold geometric shape of the plank. These designs refer to important Bwa ideals of social and moral behavior that are taught over the course of initiation. Each symbol has multiple levels of meaning that older initiates reveal gradually to novices as they mature. The checkerboard pattern of black and white squares, for example, refers on one level to the animal skins on which people sit: white representing the clean, fresh hides assigned to youths and black suggesting the darkened skins owned by elders. On a less literal level, the juxtaposition of white and black squares suggests abstract concepts such as the separation of good from evil, and of light from dark.

Nwantantay masks are part of diverse ensembles of masks that represent animals, insects, humans, and supernatural creatures. The masks are commissioned and owned by large, extended families, or clans. The masks are used on several occasions throughout the year, including initiations, burials, annual renewal rites associated with planting and harvesting, and ceremonies celebrating the consecration of a new mask. These events are often competitive, with individual clans striving to present the most elaborate and inventive performance in the community. The mask is worn by a skilled dancer who secures it over his face by gripping a fiber rope on the mask's back with his teeth. His body is concealed by a bushy fiber costume, traditionally dyed red or black, but now also seen in the bright green, yellow, and purple of European dyes. Accompanied by musicians playing flutes and drums and women

singing songs, the masquerader moves rapidly, imitating the behavior of a flying spirit. With fiber costume twirling, he twists back and forth, then dips low to the ground, rotating the mask to suggest a disembodied apparition.

The tradition of carving and performing wooden masks is a recent one among the southern Bwa, adopted within the past hundred years from the neighboring Nunuma and Winiama peoples. Previously, the Bwa had created masks of leaves, vines, and grasses for use in ceremonies honoring Do, the earthly representative of the creator god. Resulting from the constant interplay of people and ideas, this example of cultural borrowing demonstrates the dynamism of masking traditions in the region and, in particular, the openness to innovation and adaptation that characterizes Bwa culture.

© 2006 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (by permission)

Additional resources:

This work at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Christopher D. Roy, The art of Burkina Faso on Art & Life in Africa (University of Iowa)

Do in Leaves and Wood Among the Bobo and the Bwa from Art and Life in Africa (University of Iowa)

This page titled 1.1: Burkina Faso is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

SECTION OVERVIEW

1.2: The art of Ghana

From Kente cloth to the metallic textiles of El Anatsui. **17th century - present**

1.2.1: Golden Stool (Sika dwa kofi), Asante peoples

1.2.2: Linguist Staff (Okyeamepoma) (Asante peoples)

1.2.4: Memorial Head (Akan peoples)

1.2.5: Akua'ba Female Figure (Akan peoples)

1.2.6: Asafo Flags- Stitches Through Time

1.2.7: El Anatsui

1.2.8: El Anatsui, Old Man's Cloth

4.1.2.3: Kente cloth

This page titled 1.2: The art of Ghana is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

1.2.1: Golden Stool (Sika dwa kofi), Asante peoples

by DR. PERI KLEMM and DR. BETH HARRIS



Video **1.2.1.1**: Golden Stool (Sika dwa kofi), Asante Peoples (Ghana), c. 1700 and Asante weights (University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology)

It took a miracle to bring this golden stool to Earth—and another one to keep it out of British hands.

This page titled 1.2.1: Golden Stool (Sika dwa kofi), Asante peoples is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

1.2.2: Linguist Staff (Okyeamepoma) (Asante peoples)

by DR. CHRISTA CLARKE



Figure **1.2.2.4**: Detail, Linguist Staff (Okyeame), 19th-early 20th century, Ghana, Akan peoples, Asante, gold foil, wood, nails, 156.5 x 14.6 x 5.7 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)



Figure **1.2.2.5**: Linguist Staff (Okyeame), 19th-early 20th century, Ghana, Akan peoples, Asante, gold foil, wood, nails, 156.5 x 14.6 x 5.7 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

This magnificent gold-covered staff was created to serve as an insignia of office for an *okyeame*, a high-ranking advisor to an Asante ruler. The position of *okyeame* encompasses a broad set of responsibilities, including mediation, judicial advocacy, political troubleshooting, and the preservation and interpretation of royal history. The *okyeame's* most visible public role is as principal

intermediary between the ruler and those who seek his counsel, leading to the popular characterization of his profession as being that of a linguist. Drawing upon vast knowledge and considerable oratorical and diplomatic skills, the *okyeame* eloquently engages in verbal discourse on behalf of the chief and his visitors. He relays the words of visitors to the king and transmits the king's response, often with poetic or metaphorical embellishment.

Imagery on the finial of linguist staffs typically illustrates Asante proverbs about power and institutional responsibilities. Here, a spider on its web is flanked by two figures, representing the proverb: "No one goes to the house of the spider to teach it wisdom." The spider is a fitting symbol for respect due to a person with great oratorical and diplomatic skills. In Ghana, Ananse the spider is the bringer of the wisdom of Nyame, the supreme creator god of the Asante, and is the originator of folk tales and proverbs. The staff is composed of a long wooden shaft carved in two interlocking sections and a separate finial attached to the base. It is covered entirely with gold foil, a material that alludes to the sun, and to the vital force or soul contained within all living things.

Although the institutional office of *okyeame* is believed to be centuries old, the use of figural wooden linguist staffs as insignia is probably a more recent development. Prior to the late nineteenth century, linguist staffs took the form of a simple cane, a tradition likely borrowed from European prototypes in the mid-seventeenth century. During the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, the British gave official staffs, often made with figural finials, to Akan chiefs who represented the colonial authorities. Since 1900, hundreds of figural linguist staffs have been carved not only for linguists but also for representatives of other institutions, such as associations of fishermen, carpenters, and musicians.

The Asante kingdom, part of the larger Akan culture, was formed around 1700 under the leadership of Osei Tutu. Osei Tutu brought together a confederation of states that had grown wealthy and powerful as a result of the area's lucrative trade in gold, sold to both northern merchants across the Sahara and European navigators. The centralized system of government that emerged was a complex network of chiefs and court officials under a single paramount leader. A variety of gold regalia was used to distinguish rank and position within the court.

© 2006 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (by permission)

Additional resources:

This work at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Art of the Asante Kingdom on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Gold in Asante Courtly Arts on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

---

This page titled 1.2.2: Linguist Staff (Okyeamepoma) (Asante peoples) is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

1.2.4: Memorial Head (Akan peoples)

by DR. CHRISTA CLARKE



Figure **1.2.4.15**: Memorial Head (Ntiri), 17th century (?), Ghana, Adanse traditional area, Fomena, Akan peoples, 31.3 x 19 x 14.5 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

Since the late sixteenth century, Akan women potters have created ceramic heads and sometimes complete figures to commemorate deceased royals and individuals of high status. During the funeral, family members placed the terracotta portraits of the deceased in a sacred grove near the cemetery, sometimes with representations of other family members. These sculptures served as the focal point for funerary rites in which libations and food were offered to the ancestors.

This example has a rounded face with protruding elliptical eyes that tilt downward and a delicately shaped nose. These circular shapes are repeated by the eyebrows, ears, and open, oval-shaped mouth which projects from the smooth surface of the face. An incised line curves around the forehead, indicating the hairline. The surface of the sculpture has been covered with a clay slip tinted black, a color linked to the ancestral world and spiritual power in Akan thought.

Like other examples of African portraiture, these commemorative sculptures are idealized representations that convey individuality through specifics of scarification and hairstyle. The artist would typically be summoned to the deathbed of the deceased in order to observe his or her distinguishing characteristics, which she would depict later, working from memory to capture the individual's essence. The figural terracotta sculptures vary enormously in style, ranging from fairly naturalistic and sculpturally rounded forms to examples that are solid, flat, and more dramatically stylized.

© 2006 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (by permission)

Additional resources:

This work at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Ghana on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

This page titled 1.2.4: Memorial Head (Akan peoples) is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

1.2.5: Akua’ba Female Figure (Akan peoples)

by DR. PERI KLEMM



Figure **1.2.5.1**: Akua’ba, n.d., (Asante people) Ghana, wood (The British Museum) © Trustees of the British Museum

According to Akan myth, in the distant past a woman named Akua could not conceive. Akua sought first the spiritual reason for her infertility. She went to a diviner. He told her to commission a carver to create for her a wooden child and to care for that child as though it were her own. Akua did as she was told and within a few months, she conceived.

Among the Akan peoples, women who had trouble becoming pregnant might utilize one of these figures in the same way Akua did, if a diviner—after ritual prophecy—ascertained that it might be helpful. A carver would then create a figure for her and she would carry it on her back, offer it symbolical food and drink, and honor it on a shrine in her home until she conceived a child (*ba*). The figure could be gifted to another female family member if she, too, sought spiritual help to bear a child.

Akua’ba figures were important fertility aids among Akan-speakers in Ghana in the past. They depict an abstracted female form in wood and were created by male carvers.

While this figure is called Akua’ba (Akua’s child), it is clearly not meant to resemble a child. Rather, it depicts a highly abstracted and idealized woman in the prime of life (example above left). African art almost always depicts figures in their prime. This time, just after puberty, when young people are generally healthy, strong, initiated, and fertile, is when humans are most ripe with potential—they have the knowledge to successfully pursue adulthood and the physical maturation to marry and procreate. For new parents, this is the stage one hopes for one’s child, especially since high infant and childhood mortality rates remain a formidable reality. The figure is also always female, since Akan culture is matrilineal.



Figure 1.2.5.2: Akua'ba, 19th-20th century, (Asante people) Ghana, wood, beads, string, 27.2 x 9.7 x 3.9 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

While meant to convey the prime of life, the *akua'ba* is also quite abstract. Her body has been reduced to a tubular form with small arms, a ringed neck, and a large, flat head. Some *akua'ba* also have a rectangular head and more recent forms include a more naturalistic body (example right). By emphasizing certain features, the artist has communicated the Akan ideal of female beauty. Her large, rounded forehead, understood as the place where knowledge resides, suggests the wealth of knowledge and intellectual maturity this child should have. Her ringed neck is intended to denote rolls of fat. Extra body fat at this lifecycle state suggests that the young woman is full-figured and capable of baring healthy children. Lastly, her high, protruding breasts suggest a woman who has not yet bore and nursed children. The *akua'ba* therefore demonstrates three important qualities of womanhood (wisdom, girth, and the prime of life) that relate to her physical and mental abilities.

Due to their unique look and portable size, a*kua'ba* figures have become marketable tourist items and are now part of the Western visual vocabulary. Images of *akua'ba* have become generalized icons of Africa in commercial settings and it is common to find them depicted in jewelry, greeting cards, print ads and mass media (one is **featured on the mantel** of the television sitcom Will and Grace). Taken out of the Akan context, altered by Western tastes (which might add beads and paint), and marketed as a universal symbol of Africa, the *akua'ba* figure is now part of Western popular culture.

Additional resources:

Akua'ba on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

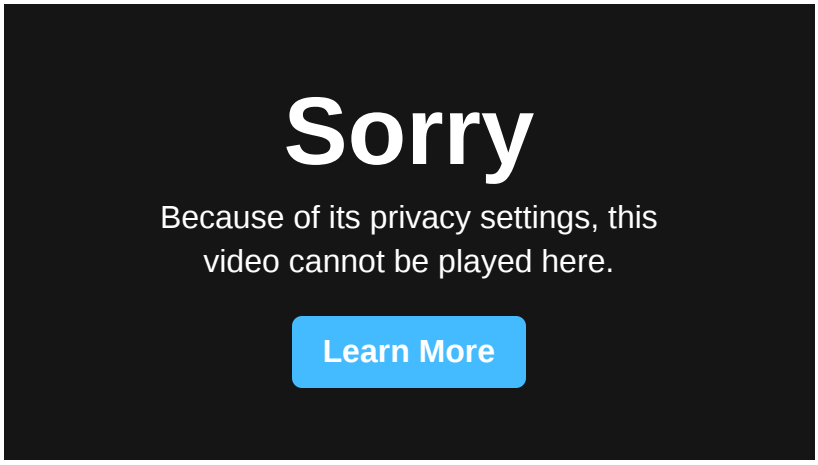
---

This page titled 1.2.5: Akua'ba Female Figure (Akan peoples) is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

1.2.6: Asafo Flags- Stitches Through Time

by HENI TALKS<



Gus Casely-Hayford - Asafo Flags: Stitches Through Time from HENI Talks on Vimeo.

Gus Casely-Hayford traces the history of Asafo Flags, unique textiles from Ghana. He draws upon his own personal and historical perspectives to help us understand the lasting relevance of these cultural artefacts.

Featuring national symbols alongside local motifs, Asafo Flags conjure a vibrant past. Whilst flagging familial identity, they also served to signal existing military allegiances with arriving European forces in the 16th century. In ‘a glorious defiance against time’, these flags provide ‘a visual metaphor for what community could mean.’

This page titled 1.2.6: Asafo Flags- Stitches Through Time is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

1.2.7: El Anatsui

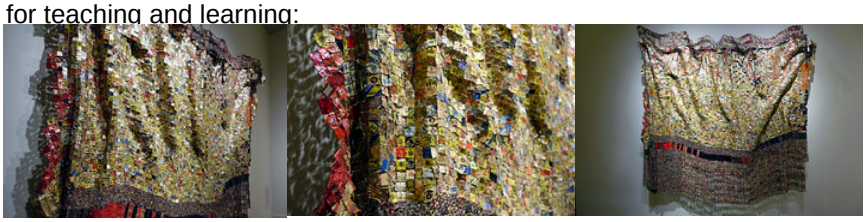
by DR. PERI KLEMM and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER



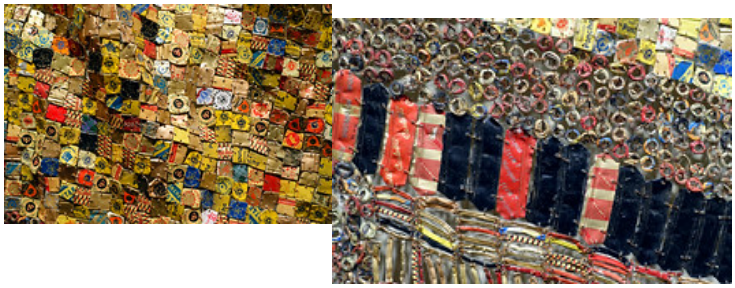
Video **1.2.7.1**: El Anatsui, *Untitled*, 2009, repurposed printed aluminum, copper, 256.5 × 284.5 × 27.9 cm as installed (Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, Washington D.C.)

The artist transforms metal from alcohol bottles into textiles that represent libations for ancestors.

SmartHistory images for teaching and learning:



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)

This page titled 1.2.7: El Anatsui is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

1.2.8: El Anatsui, Old Man's Cloth

by DR. ALLISON YOUNG

Old Man's Cloth hangs like a large tapestry, but when we look closer, it's easy to become captivated by the small metal fragments that comprise the work in hundreds. Arranged within a shifting grid of stripes and blocks of color, the components form their own internal maps across the surface, melding into vertical gold bands, interlocking black and silver rows, or a deviant red piece floating in a field of black. While *Old Man's Cloth* would have been laid flat during its construction, it is contorted and manipulated during installation, so that the individual metal pieces can catch the light from every angle. This brilliant visual effect makes its humble origins all the more impressive.



Figure **1.2.8.1**: El Anatsui, *Old Man's Cloth*, 2003, aluminum and copper wire, 16′ x 17′ 1″ / 487.7 x 520.7 cm (Harn Museum of Art, Gainesville, FL)

The Medium or the Message?

Old Man's Cloth has been constructed from flattened liquor bottle labels that the artist collects near his home in Southern Nigeria. While critics often write about Anatsui's metal wall hangings using the language of textiles, the labels and bottle caps are typically fastened together with copper wire and attached corner-to-corner. As such, the issue of medium is one of the first to inspire debate amongst viewers—are the wall hangings two-dimensional or three-dimensional? Are they sculptures, even as they hang against the wall like paintings? Are they individual works or immersive installations? Lastly, are they "fine art" or simply an innovative form of "craft"?

Purposefully disregarding the limited categories imposed by Western art history, Anatsui's practice emerges from a more expanded understanding of what art can be that stems from both the radical practices of the late-1960s, and from a vantage point outside of the Western tradition completely. As scholar Susan Vogel has explained, "such categories did not exist in classic African traditions, which made no distinction between art and craft, high art and low."

Anatsui's choice of discarded liquor bottle caps as a medium has as much to do with their formal properties as with their historical associations. As an African artist whose career was forged during the utopia of mid-century African independence movements, his work has always engaged his region's history and culture. The bottle caps, for Anatsui, signify a fraught history of trade between Africa and Europe. As he explained,

Alcohol was one of the commodities brought with [Europeans] to exchange for goods in Africa. Eventually alcohol become one of the items used in the transatlantic slave trade. They made rum in the West Indies, took it to Liverpool, and then it made its way back to Africa. I thought that the bottle caps had a strong reference to the history of Africa.



Figure 1.2.8.21: El Anatsui, *Old Man's Cloth* (detail), 2003, aluminum and copper wire, 16′ x 17′ 1″ / 487.7 x 520.7 cm (Harn Museum of Art, Gainesville, FL)

The luminescent gold colors also recall the colonial past of Anatsui's home country—modern Ghana was previously a British colony called The Gold Coast until its independence in 1957. The fluid movements of the work's surface remind us of the waters of the Atlantic Ocean, which carried slave-ships and traders between Africa, Europe and the New World. By bestowing his works with titles such as Man's Cloth and Woman's Cloth, Anatsui also makes reference to the significance of textiles in African societies, and their own historical role in trade networks.

Old Man's Cloth was included in one of Anatsui's first exhibitions of hanging metal sculptures. Held at London's October Gallery in 2004, the show was entitled "Gawu," which means "metal cloak" in Ewe. Old Man's Cloth is unique for its uneven and jagged edges as well as the "rough texture" of the recycled labels that are incorporated into the piece.

Modernism in Africa

El Anatsui was born in Ghana in 1944, and was trained in an academic European curriculum. In 1964, when he began his studies, many parts of Africa were experiencing a cultural renaissance associated with decolonization movements. Anatsui himself joined the unofficial "Sankofa" movement, which was invested in unearthing and reclaiming Africa's rich indigenous traditions and assimilating these with the European-influenced aspects of society. His earliest works, for example, included a series of wooden market trays into which he burned designs inspired by African graphic systems and adinkra motifs (symbols widely used by the Akan people of Ghana).

In 1975, Anatsui joined the faculty at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. Nsukka was a vibrant creative capital for African artists and writers in the 1970s, many of whom spearheaded the Zaria Rebellion in the early 1960s and revived the traditional art form of uli wall and body painting in their contemporary works.

Anatsui's work differed slightly from that of his colleagues in his insistence on abstraction. In some of his first mature works, he used an electric chainsaw to slash geometric patterns into wood. Though abstract, these works were metaphorically rich; Anatsui chose woods of different colors to represent the diversity of African cultures, while the violence of the chainsaw enacted the ruptures imposed by European imperialist expansion.



Figure 1.2.8.3: El Anatsui, *Hovor II* (detail), 2004 showing tiny bits of scrap tin, woven pieced together with wire (Photo: Amy M. Youngs, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Critical Reception: African or Contemporary?

When two of Anatsui's metal wall hangings appeared in the 2007 Venice Biennale, they were lauded by the public and swiftly cemented his place as a leading international contemporary artist. He had, in fact, already shown in Venice almost two decades earlier in 1990, when he participated in a small exhibition surveying contemporary African art. During the time that lapsed between the two exhibitions, the art world became more receptive to artists outside of its Western centers, and by 2007, Anatsui could exhibit not only as a representative of the continent, but as an individual artist whose work was significant in its own right.

As such, his work provides an excellent opportunity for discussion about the relationships between artists at the center and at the periphery, and between the West and the Global South. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, for instance, has now acquired two of Anatsui's metal wall hangings, but they are owned by two different curatorial departments: the Arts of Africa, Oceania and the Americas, and Modern and Contemporary Art. Both were recently on view at the same time, but in separate galleries. Visitors, students, and art historians should continue to ask themselves which designation seems more appropriate, and for what reasons. Should we understand his art as a product of its place, its time, or both? What do we see in Anatsui's work when it is placed among African masks and ritual objects, and how do our impressions change when this work is placed beside contemporary art from around the world?

There are no correct answers to these questions, but they are indicative of the changes that have taken place both in the art world, and in today's increasingly connected society at large.

This page titled 1.2.8: El Anatsui, Old Man's Cloth is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

4.1.2.3: Kente cloth

by DR. COURTNAY MICOTS



Figure **4.1.2.3.1**: Asante kente cloth, 20th century, silk and cotton (Vatican Museums)

Inspired by a spider's web

Among the Asante (or Ashanti) people of Ghana, West Africa, a popular legend relates how two young men—Ota Karaban and his friend Kwaku Ameyaw—learned the art of weaving by observing a spider weaving its web. One night, the two went out into the forest to check their traps, and they were amazed by a beautiful spider's web whose many unique designs sparkled in the moonlight. The spider, named Ananse, offered to show the men how to weave such designs in exchange for a few favors. After completing the favors and learning how to weave the designs with a single thread, the men returned home to Bonwire, and their discovery was soon reported to Asantehene Osei Tutu, first ruler of the Asante kingdom. The *asantehene* adopted their creation, named *kente*, as a royal cloth reserved for special occasions, and Bonwire became the leading kente weaving center for the asantehene and his court.

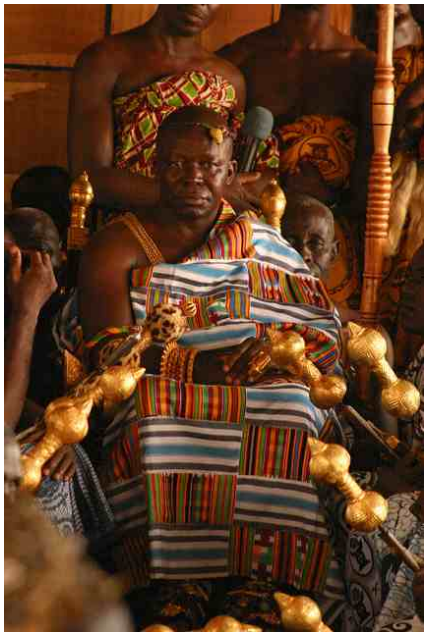


Figure **4.1.2.3.2**: Asantehene Osei Tutu II wearing kente cloth, 2005 (photo: **Retlaw Snellac**, CC BY 2.0)

A royal cloth

Originally, the use of kente was reserved for Asante royalty and limited to special social and sacred functions. Even as production has increased and kente has become more accessible to those outside the royal court, it continues to be associated with wealth, high

social status, and cultural sophistication. Kente is also found in Asante shrines to the deities, or *abosom*, as a mark of their spiritual power.



Figure **4.1.2.3.3**: Ewe kente cloth (detail), 1920-40, Ghana, cotton, 339 x 198 cm (The British Museum)

Historians maintain that kente cloth grew out of various weaving traditions that existed in West Africa prior to the formation of the Asante Kingdom. These techniques were appropriated through vast trade networks, as were materials such as French and Italian silk, which became increasingly desired in the 18th century and were combined with cotton and wool to make kente.

Kente cloth is also worn by the Ewe people, who were under the rule of the Asante kingdom in the late 18th century. It is believed that the Ewe, who had a previous tradition of horizontal loom weaving, adopted the style of kente cloth production from the Asante —with some important differences. Since the Ewe were not centralized, kente was not limited to use by royalty, though the cloth was still associated with prestige and special occasions. A greater variety in the patterns and functions exist in Ewe kente, and the symbolism of the patterns often has more to do with daily life than with social standing or wealth.

Weaving kente

Kente is woven on a horizontal strip loom, which produces a narrow band of cloth about four inches wide. Several of these strips are carefully arranged and hand-sewn together to create a cloth of the desired size. Most kente weavers are men.

Weaving involves the crossing of a row of parallel threads called the warp (threads running vertically) with another row called the weft (threads running horizontally). A horizontal loom, constructed with wood, consists of a set of two, four or six heddles (loops for holding thread), which are used for separating and guiding the warp threads. These are attached to treadles (foot pedals) with pulleys that have spools of thread inserted in them. The pulleys can be used to move the warp threads apart. As the weaver divides the warp threads, he uses a shuttle (a small wooden device carrying a bobbin, or small spool of thread) to insert the weft threads between them. These various parts of the loom, like the motifs in the cloth, all have symbolic significance and are accorded a great deal of respect.



Figure **4.1.2.3.4**: Kente weaver in Adanwomase village, Ashanti Region, Ghana (photo: **Shawn Zamechek**, CC BY 2.0)

By alternating colors in the warp and weft, a weaver can create complex patterns, which in kente cloth are valued for both their visual effect and their symbolism. Patterns can exist vertically (in the warp), or horizontally (in the weft), or both.

A cloth with a name

Patterns each have a name, as does each cloth in its entirety. Names are sometimes given by weavers who obtain them through dreams or during contemplative moments when they are said to be in communion with the spiritual world. Alternatively, chiefs and elders may ascribe names to cloths that they specially commission. Names can be inspired by historical events, proverbs, philosophical concepts, oral literature, moral values, human and animal behavior, individual achievements, or even individuals in pop culture. In the past, when purchasing a cloth, the aesthetic and social appeal of the cloth's was as important as—or sometimes even more important than—its visual pattern or color.

The King has Boarded the Ship, c. 1985, rayon (collection of Dr. Courtnay Micots)" aria-describedby="caption-attachment-20496" height="302" sizes="(max-width: 650px) 100vw, 650px"

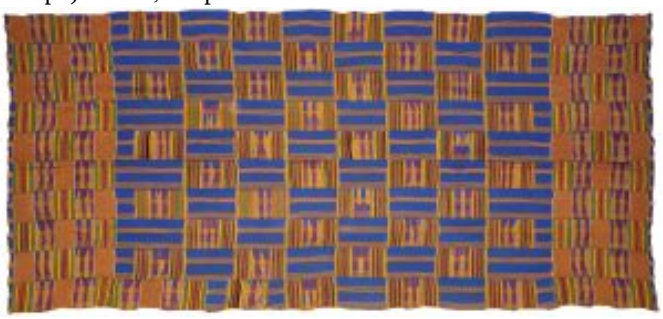


Figure 4.1.2.3.11: The King has Boarded the Ship (Asante kente cloth), c. 1985, rayon (collection of Dr. Courtnay Micots)

This cloth is named *The King Has Boarded the Ship*, and it includes both warp and weft patterns. The warp pattern, consisting of two multicolor stripes on blue, relates to the proverb "*Fie buo yE buna*," meaning the head of the family has a difficult task. The weft patterns vary throughout the cloth; these examples are "*NkyEmfrE*," a broken pot, and "*Kwadum Asa*," an empty gunpowder keg.



Figure 4.1.2.3.12: The King has Boarded the Ship (details), left: "Broken Pot" pattern; right: "Empty Powder Keg" pattern, c. 1985, rayon (collection of Dr. Courtnay Micots)

Wearing kente

There are differences in how the cloth is worn by men and women. On average, a men's size cloth measures 24 strips wide, making it about 8 feet wide and 12 feet long. Men usually wear one piece wrapped around the body, leaving the right shoulder and hand uncovered, in a toga-like style. Women may wear either one large piece or a combination of two or three pieces of varying sizes ranging from 5-12 strips, averaging of 6 feet long. Age, marital status, and social standing may determine the size and design of the cloth an individual would wear.



Figure 4.1.2.3.7: Men (left) and women (right) wearing kente at the Kente Cloth Festival in Kpetoe, September 2005 (photos: **John Nash**, CC BY-NC 2.0)

Social changes and modern living have brought about significant changes in how kente is used. It is no longer only the privilege of royalty; anyone who can afford it can buy kente. The old tradition of not cutting the cloth has also long been set aside, and it may be sewn into other forms such as dresses, shirts, or shoes. Printed versions of kente are mass produced and marketed, and both woven and printed versions are used by fashion designers in Ghana and abroad.



Figure 4.1.2.3.8: Kente print bag, 1990s (photo: **Huzzah Vintage**, CC BY-NC 2.0)

Kente is more than just a cloth. It is an iconic visual representation of the history, philosophy, ethics, oral literature, religious belief, social values, and political thought of West Africa. Kente is exported as one of the key symbols of African heritage and pride in African ancestry throughout the diaspora. In spite of the proliferation of both the hand-woven and machine-printed kente, the design is still regarded as a symbol of social prestige, nobility, and cultural sophistication.

Additional resources:

Videos of kente weaving: Kente Weavers of Asante, Bonwire Kente, Bonwire Kente weavers

“Wrapped in Pride” from the National Museum of African Art

“Asante Textile Arts” from The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

---

This page titled 4.1.2.3: Kente cloth is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

1.3: Guinea

Headdress: Female Bust (D’mba)

by DR. CHRISTA CLARKE



Video **1.3.1**: D’mba mask (Baga peoples, Guinea), 19th-20th century, wood, 118.1 x 35.3 x 67.5 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art) Speakers: Dr. Peri Klemm and Dr. Beth Harris

This massive headdress is an example of a regional artistic tradition that dates to at least 1886 and possibly to the early seventeenth century. Among Baga subgroups the headdress is referred to variously as D’mba or Yamban, an abstract concept personifying local ideals of female power, goodness, and social comportment.

Carved from a single piece of wood, this work takes the form of a large head and slender neck supported by a yoke with four projecting legs. Flat, pendulous breasts signify that the subject is a mature woman who has nursed many children. She is distinguished from ordinary Baga by her intricately braided coiffure with high central crest, a hairstyle associated with Fulbe women, who are renowned for their physical beauty. This coiffure is also a reminder of cultural origins, as the Fulbe live in the Futa Jallon mountains, the ancestral homeland of the Baga people.



Figure **1.3.2**: Headdress: Female Bust (D'mba), 19th-20th century, Guinea, Niger River region, Baga peoples, wood, 181.1 x 35.3 x 67.5 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

Incised linear patterns representing scarification marks decorate her face, neck, and breasts. Such monumental structures, carried on the shoulders of the performer, often weigh more than eighty pounds. In its original context, the headdress would have had a thick raffia skirt attached to the bottom of the yoke. A shawl of dark cotton cloth, imported from Europe, would be tied around the shoulders, hiding the legs of the yoke.

The ideals of womanhood expressed symbolically by the strong forms of the headdress are reinforced by the movement of the male dancer, who communicates a model of virtuous behavior for Baga women. Performances documented in the 1990s describe the dramatic entrance of the masquerader in a central plaza, preceded by a processional line of drummers. Despite its unwieldy size, the headdress is manipulated skillfully by the dancer, whose movements are alternately composed and vigorous. As the dancer twirls to the accompaniment of drums, the assembled audience of male and female onlookers participates actively. Some reach to touch the breasts of the headdress, affirming its blessings of fertility, while others throw rice, symbolizing agricultural bounty. Songs prescribing proper social behavior are led by women who are joined in the chorus by men. Beginning at sunrise, the celebration continues through sundown and sometimes over the course of many days.



Figure **1.3.3**: Detail, *Headdress: Female Bust (D'mba)*, 19th-20th century, Guinea, Niger River region, Baga peoples, wood, 181.1 x 35.3 x 67.5 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Historically, such masks were used in dances held at planting times and harvest celebrations, as well as at marriages, funerals, and ceremonies in honor of special guests. Following Guinea's independence from France in 1958 and its adoption of a Marxist government, the tradition was suppressed by Muslim leaders and state officials. In the 1990s, the lifting of decades of censorship was followed by a popular revival of earlier art forms. In Baga society, D'mba (or Yamban) now appears publicly on occasions marking personal and communal growth, including marriages, births, and harvest festivals, as well as celebratory occasions such as soccer tournaments.

© 2006 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (by permission)

Additional resources:

This work at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

This work on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Baga peoples from *Art and Life in Africa* (University of Iowa)

This page titled 1.3: Guinea is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

SECTION OVERVIEW

1.4: The art of the Ivory Coast

To the Baule people, sculpture serves many functions and these can shift over time and within different contexts. **19th - 20th century**

1.4.1: Owie Kimou, Portrait Mask (Mblo) of Moya Yanso (Baule peoples)

1.4.2: Pair of Diviner's Figures (Baule peoples)

This page titled 1.4: The art of the Ivory Coast is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

1.4.1: Owie Kimou, Portrait Mask (Mblo) of Moya Yanso (Baule peoples)

by DR. PERI KLEMM



Figure **1.4.1.1**: Owie Kimou, Portrait Mask (*Mblo*) of Moya Yanso, Baule peoples (Côte d'Ivoire), early 20th century C.E., wood, brass, pigment, 36.2 cm high (private collection)

The 400,000 Baule who live in central Côte d'Ivoire in West Africa have a rich carving tradition. Many sculpted figures and masks of human form are utilized in personal shrines and in masquerade performances. This mask was part of a secular masquerade in the village of Kami in the early 1900s.

Masquerade

The Baule recognize two types of entertainment masks, *Goli* and *Mblo*. To perform a *Mblo* mask, like the one depicted, a masker in a cloth costume conceals his face with a small, wooden mask and dances for an audience accompanied by drummers, singers, dancers, and orators in a series of skits. In the village of Kami, the *Mblo* parodies and dances are referred to as *Gbagba*. When not in use, the *Gbagba* masks were kept out of sight so it is unusual that we get to see a mask displayed in this manner.

To the Baule, sculpture serves many functions and these can shift over time and within different contexts. The *Gbagba* masquerade is a form of entertainment no longer practiced in Kami since the 1980s, replaced today by newer masks and performance styles. What is known, however, is that masks like this one were not intended to be hung on a wall and appreciated, first and foremost, for their physical characteristics. Sculpture throughout West Africa has the power to act; to make things happen. A carving of a figure,

for example, can be utilized by practitioners to communicate with ancestors and spirits. The physical presence of a mask can allow the invisible world to interact with and influence the visible world of humans. Scholar Susan Vogel mentions that *Gbagba* could bring social relief at the end of a long day and respite from everyday chores. It allowed residents to socialize, mourn, celebrate, feast, and even, court.[1]

Moya Yanso

In the case of this *Gbagba* mask, Vogel tells us that it was meant to honor a respected member of Baule society. This mask is unusual. Most older African carving come into Western collections without information about the artist or subject, but in this case, both the carver and the sitter have been recorded. In the photograph below we see an older woman seated next to the portrait mask. She is Moya Yanso and this is her image carved by a well-known Baule artist, Owie Kimou. The man holding the mask is her stepson who danced this mask in a *Gbagba* performance. It was commissioned and originally worn by Kouame Ziarey, Moya Yanso's husband and later his sons. Revered as a great dancer, Moya Yanso accompanied the mask in performances throughout her adult life until she was no longer physically able. This portrait mask tradition came to end in the early 1980s with the decline of *Gbagba* and while entertainment masks continue, they are no longer carved to represent specific individuals.

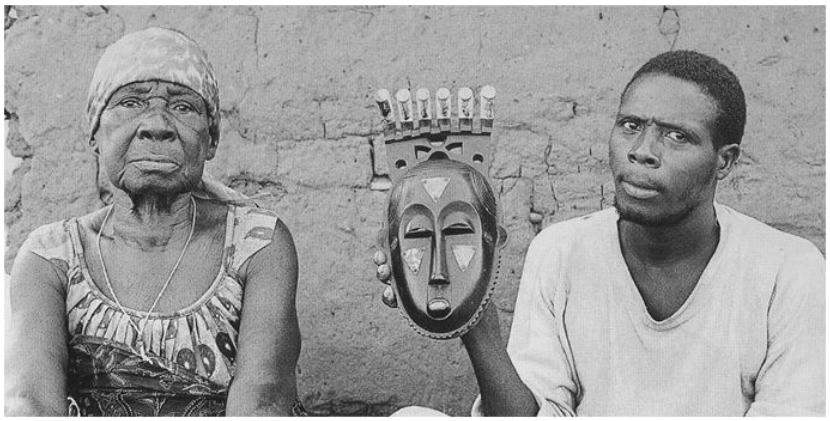


Figure **1.4.1.2**: Moya Yanso and her stepson holding the portrait mask, 1971

Portrait masks characteristically have an oval face with an elongated nose, small, open mouth, downcast slit eyes with projecting pieces that extend beyond the crest to suggest animal horns. Most also have scarification patterns at the temple and a high gloss patina. These stylistic attributes are actually a visual vocabulary that suggests what it means to be a good, honorable, respected, and beautiful person in Baule society. The half slit eyes and high forehead suggest modesty and wisdom respectively. The nasolabial fold depicted as a line between the sides of the nose to the outsides of the mouth and the beard-like projecting triangular patterns that extends from the bottom of the ears to the chin, suggest age. The triangular brass additions heighten the lustrous patina when danced in the sunlight, a suggestion of health.

An Ideal

The hairstyles of portrait masks are known to be quite realistic but other features, like the six projecting tubular pieces at the crown, are abstract. This is not a realistic representation of the woman in the photograph, rather, it suggests an idealized inner state of beauty and morality associated with Moya Yanso.



Figure 1.4.1.3: Owie Kimou, Portrait Mask (Mblo) of Moya Yanso, Baule peoples (Côte d'Ivoire), early 20th century C.E., wood, brass, pigment, 36.2 cm high (private collection)

Notice that Moya Yanso's portrait mask is in the hands of her stepson in the photograph. Masking is the prerogative of men. While women attend masquerades as audience members and can perform with masked dancers, they do not wear or own masks themselves. The performers and makers of masks as well as those who commission them are always men.

From West Africa to the Midwest

It is interesting to note the way in which African objects gather value in the West. This mask was acquired from the family of Moya Yanso in 1997 by a collector in Brussels, then sold to a French collector, and finally sold through the Sotheby's auction house in 1999 for 197,000 US dollars to a collector in Minneapolis. The mask has also been exhibited at the Yale University Art Gallery, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Museum for African Art in New York. It is featured on the front cover of *Baule: African Art, Western Eyes* (1997) by Susan Vogel, who has written extensively on Baule art and first conducted fieldwork in Kami village in the 1960s.

For many collectors in the West, it is the formal properties of the mask that are alluring. Like the avant-garde artists in the early 20th century who were looking for new stylistic avenues to represent the modern condition, collectors today value the abstract qualities of Baule art. Vogel aptly notes that "Baule believers first encounter the object's indwelling spiritual powers, or the metaphysical ideas it evokes, while the connoisseur begins with the visible forms, colors, textures—the artist's material creation."[2] Among the Baule up to the 1970s, this mask would remain hidden unless performed with musicians and dancers. To separate this mask from its masquerade is to give it new life as aesthetic object.

[1] Susan M. Vogel, *Baule: African Art, Western Eyes*, New Haven, 1997, p. 140
[2] Vogel, p. 18

Additional resources

Ravenhill, P. "Likeness and Nearness: The Intentionality of the Head in Baule "Art," *African Arts*, 33(2), 2002.

Susan M. Vogel, *Baule: African Art, Western Eyes*, New Haven, 1997.

Susan M. Vogel, "Known Artists but Anonymous Works: Fieldwork and Art History", *African Arts*, Vol. 31(1), 1999.

Sotheby's Auction Catalogue

This page titled 1.4.1: Owie Kimou, Portrait Mask (Mblo) of Moya Yanso (Baule peoples) is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

1.4.2: Pair of Diviner's Figures (Baule peoples)

by DR. CHRISTA CLARKE



Figure **1.4.2.1**: Côte d'Ivoire, central Côte d'Ivoire, Baule peoples, wood, pigment, beads and iron, 55.4 x 10.2 x 10.5 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

Carved by the same hand, these figures reflect and embody Baule ideals of civilized beauty. In Baule society, diviners commission such figures from artists to attract the attention of *asye usu*, or nature spirits. *Asye usu* are considered to be grotesque and volatile beings associated with the untamed elements of nature. The spirits are seduced from the wilderness by the figures' dazzling beauty and lured into inhabiting the sculptures, which embody the civilized values the *asye usu* lack and therefore find so desirable. The *asye usu* are then induced into sharing spiritual insights, conveyed through the medium of the diviner.

Such figures are prominently displayed during ritual sessions with clients who seek clarification about their difficulties, which can range from poor harvests to physical illness. The presence of the sculptures and the sacrificial material applied to their feet (never to the smooth surfaces of their bodies), along with repeated striking of a gong, help to induce the trance state that allows the diviner to communicate with the *asye usu*. The diviner can then gain insights and revelations regarding the source of the client's problems. The ownership of such extraordinary works also serves to further the professional standing of the diviner, who must impress potential clients with the caliber and sophistication of the instruments used in his or her practice.



Figure **1.4.2.2**: Côte d'Ivoire, central Côte d'Ivoire, Baule peoples, wood, pigment, beads and iron, 55.4 x 10.2 x 10.5 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Although depicted separately, the male and female figures are perfectly harmonized through their matched forms, gestures, stances, and expressions. Their elaborate coiffures, intricate scarification, and beaded accoutrements signify cultural refinement and status. Their erect, balanced pose and partially closed eyes imply respect, self-control, and serenity. The fully rounded muscles of their flexed legs suggest physical strength, youthful energy, and the potential for action. White kaolin accentuates the elegant arches of their eyebrows, reflecting the practice of diviners, who apply the fine clay around their eyes to facilitate communication with the spirits.

© 2006 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (by permission)

Additional resources:

This work at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

The Baule on *Art and Life in Africa* (University of Iowa)

Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:

This page titled 1.4.2: Pair of Diviner's Figures (Baule peoples) is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

SECTION OVERVIEW

1.5: The art of Mali

The art of Mali takes many diverse forms, but it all celebrates the bonds of the communities that create it. **13th century - present**

1.5.1: Saving Timbuktu's manuscripts

1.5.2: Seated Figure (Djenné peoples)

1.5.3: Lost History- the terracotta sculpture of Djenne Djenno

1.5.4: Great Mosque of Djenné (Djenné peoples)

1.5.5: Dogon Couple (Dogon peoples)

1.5.6: Mask (Kanaga) (Dogon peoples)

1.5.7: Male and Female Antelope Headdresses (Ci wara) (Bamana peoples)

1.5.8: Kòmò Helmet Mask (Kòmòkunw) (Bamana peoples)

1.5.9: Seydou Keïta, Untitled (Seated Woman with Chevron Print Dress)

This page titled 1.5: The art of Mali is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

1.5.1: Saving Timbuktu's manuscripts

by FATHER COLUMBA STEWART, OSB and DR. BETH HARRIS



Video **1.5.1.1**: A conversation with Father Columba Stewart, OSB, executive director of the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library (Collegeville, Minnesota) and Dr. Beth Harris

A heroic effort to save and preserve Mali's long manuscript tradition.

Additional resources:

"The Monk Who Saves Manuscripts From ISIS" (*The Atlantic*, February 23, 2017)

Hill Museum and Manuscript Library

This page titled 1.5.1: Saving Timbuktu's manuscripts is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

1.5.2: Seated Figure (Djenné peoples)

by DR. CHRISTA CLARKE



Video 1.5.2.1: Seated Figure, terracotta, 13th century, Mali, Inland Niger Delta region, Djenné peoples, 25/4 x 29.9 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art), 82nd & Fifth: “Bundle of Emotions” by Yaëlle Biro.

Among the earliest known examples of art from sub-Saharan Africa are terracotta figures like this one from the inland delta of the Niger River, near the present-day home of the Dogon and Bamana peoples.

In this region of Mali, the ancient city of Jenne-jeno (“Old Jenne”) flourished as a center for agriculture, trade, and art from the middle of the first millennium until about 1600. The terracotta figures associated with this civilization represent men and women, singular and in pairs, in a variety of attire and poses, including sitting, kneeling, and on horseback. The diversity of imagery and the skill with which they were modeled reveal the rich sculptural heritage of a sophisticated urban culture.



Figure 1.5.2.1: Mali, Inland Niger Delta region, Djenné peoples, 13th century, terracotta, 25/4 x 29.9 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

This figure sits, hunched over, with both arms clasping an upraised leg, its head tilted sideways to rest against its bent knee. The posture evokes a pensive attitude that is reinforced by the expressiveness of the facial features: the bulging eyes, large ears, and

protruding mouth are all stylistically characteristic of works from this region.



Figure **1.5.2.2**: terracotta, 13th century, Mali, Inland Niger Delta region, Djenné peoples, 25/4 x 29.9 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

The fluid contours of the body emphasize the long sweeping curve of the neck and back and the rhythmic play of intertwined limbs. Except for the barest suggestion of shoulder blades, fingers, and toes, the figure lacks anatomical details. On the back are three rows of raised marks and two rows of marks punched into the clay. These have been variously interpreted as scarification marks or symptoms of a disease.



Figure **1.5.2.3**: terracotta, 13th century, Mali, Inland Niger Delta region, Djenné peoples, 25/4 x 29.9 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Thermoluminescence tests indicate that this figure was fired during the first half of the thirteenth century. Other terracotta figures recovered (and, in many cases, looted) from various sites throughout the Inland Niger Delta have been dated from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century. Artists—either men or women—modeled the figures by hand, using clay mixed with grog (crushed potsherds). Details of dress, jewelry, and body ornament were either added on or incised. Once complete, the work was polished, covered with a reddish-toned clay slip, and then fired, probably in an open-pit kiln.

The surviving figures vary in style and subject matter, suggesting that the sculptors had considerable artistic freedom. Our understanding of the use and meaning of such works remains speculative. A few controlled archaeological digs have revealed similar figures that were originally set into the walls of houses. Oral history collected recently in the region supports the archaeological evidence, as the figures are said to have been venerated in special sanctuaries and private homes. There is little consensus, however, on the meaning of the various forms of the terracotta figures. Scholars have suggested that this figure conveys an attitude of mourning. Its seated pose, shaved head, and lack of dress recall mourning customs still practiced by some in this region of western Africa.

© 2006 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (by permission)

Additional resources:

Explore this object—360 view, from The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

This work at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

The Empires of the Western Sudan: Mali Empire on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Neil Brodie & Donna Yates, "Nok Terracottas" on *Trafficking Culture*

Holland Cotter, "Imperiled Legacy for African Art," *The New York Times* (August 2, 2012)

This page titled 1.5.2: Seated Figure (Djenné peoples) is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

1.5.3: Lost History- the terracotta sculpture of Djenne Djenno

by DR. KRISTINA VAN DYKE and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER



Video **1.5.3.1**: Seated figure, 13th century, Mali, Inland Niger Delta (Djenné peoples), terracotta, 25.4 x 29.9cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art) Speakers: Dr. Kristina Van Dyke and Dr. Steven Zucker

Are these little-understood figures representations of diseased people, or an attempt to ward off illness?

Additional resources:

This work at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Djenné on Art and Life in Africa (University of Iowa)

Works from Djenné at the Yale University Art Gallery

The Spread of Islam in West Africa (Stanford University)

This page titled 1.5.3: Lost History- the terracotta sculpture of Djenne Djenno is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

1.5.4: Great Mosque of Djenné (Djenné peoples)

by DR. ELISA DAINESE



Figure **1.5.4.1**: Great Mosque of Djenné, Mali, 1907 (photo: **Mark Abel**, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

As one of the wonders of Africa, and one of the most unique religious buildings in the world, the Great Mosque of Djenné, in present-day Mali, is also the greatest achievement of Sudano-Sahelian architecture (Sudano-Sahelian refers to the Sudanian and Sahel grassland of West Africa). It is also the largest mud-built structure in the world. We experience its monumentality from afar as it dwarfs the city of Djenné. Imagine arriving at the towering mosque from the neighborhoods of low-rise adobe houses that comprise the city.

Djenné was founded between 800 and 1250 C.E., and it flourished as a great center of commerce, learning, and Islam, which had been practiced from the beginning of the 13th century. Soon thereafter, the Great Mosque became one of the most important buildings in town primarily because it became a political symbol for local residents and for colonial powers like the French who took control of Mali in 1892. Over the centuries, the Great Mosque has become the epicenter of the religious and cultural life of Mali, and the community of Djenné. It is also the site of a unique annual festival called the *Crepissage de la Grand Mosquée* (Plastering of the Great Mosque).



Figure **1.5.4.2**: Great Mosque of Djenné, Mali, 1907 (photo: **herr_hartmann**, CC BY-NC 2.0)

The Great Mosque that we see today is its third reconstruction, completed in 1907. According to legend, the original Great Mosque was probably erected in the 13th century, when King Koi Konboro—Djenné's twenty-sixth ruler and its first Muslim sultan (king)—decided to use local materials and traditional design techniques to build a place of Muslim worship in town. King Konboro's successors and the town's rulers added two towers to the mosque and surrounded the main building with a wall. The mosque

compound continued to expand over the centuries, and by the 16th century, popular accounts claimed half of Djenné's population could fit in the mosque's galleries.

The first Great Mosque and its reconstructions

Some of the earliest European writings on the first Great Mosque came from the French explorer René Caillié who wrote in detail about the structure in his travelogue *Journal d'un voyage a Temboctou et à Jenné* (*Journal of a Voyage to Timbuktu and Djenné*). Caillié traveled to Djenné in 1827, and he was the only European to see the monument before it fell into ruin. In his travelogue, he wrote that the building was already in bad repair from the lack of upkeep. In the Sahel—the transitional zone between the Sahara and the humid savannas to the south—adobe and mud buildings such as the Great Mosque require periodic and often annual re-plastering. If re-plastering does not occur, the exteriors of the structures melt in the rainy season. Based on Caillié's description, his visit likely coincided with a period when the mosque had not been re-plastered for several years, and multiple rainy seasons had probably washed away all the plaster and worn the mud-brick.

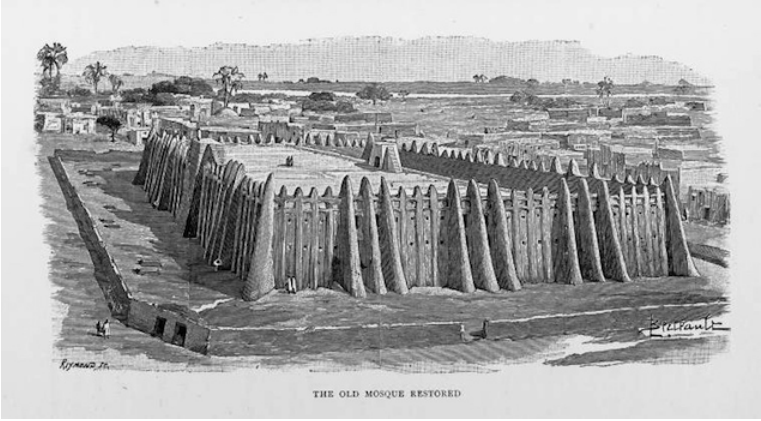


Figure **1.5.4.3**: "The Old Mosque Restored," from Félix Dubois, Timbuctoo the Mysterious (London: William Heinemann, 1897), pp. 157.

A second mosque built between 1834 and 1836 replaced the original and damaged building described by Caillié. We can see evidence of this construction in drawings by the French journalist Felix Dubois. In 1896, three years after the French conquest of the city, Dubois published a plan of the mosque based on his survey of the ruins. The structure drawn by Dubois (above) was more compact than the one that is seen today. Based on the drawings, the second construction of the Great Mosque was more massive than the first and defined by its weightiness. It also featured a series of low minaret towers and equidistant pillar supports.

The present and third iteration of the Great Mosque was completed in 1907, and some scholars argue that the French constructed it during their period of occupation of the city starting in 1892. However, no colonial documents support this theory. New scholarship supports the idea that the mason's guild of Djenné built the current mosque with the help of forced laborers from villages of adjacent regions, brought in by French colonial authorities. To accompany and motivate workers, musicians were provided who played drums and flutes. Workers included masons who mixed tons of mud, sand, rice-husks, and water and formed the bricks that shape the current structure.

The Great Mosque today



Figure **1.5.4.4**: Roof (detail), Great Mosque of Djenné, Mali, 1907 (photo: **un_photo**, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)



Figure **1.5.4.5**: Ostrich eggs circled in red (detail), Great Mosque of Djenné, Mali, 1907 (photo: **un_photo**, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

The Great Mosque that we see today is rectilinear in plan and is partly enclosed by an exterior wall. An earthen roof covers the building, which is supported by monumental pillars.

The roof has several holes covered by terra-cotta lids (above), which provide its interior spaces with fresh air even during the hottest days. The façade of the Great Mosque includes three minarets and a series of engaged columns that together create a rhythmic effect (below).

At the top of the pillars are conical extensions with ostrich eggs placed at the very top—symbol of fertility and purity in the Malian region. Timber beams throughout the exterior are both decorative and structural. These elements also function as scaffolding for the re-plastering of the mosque during the annual festival of the *Crepissage*. Compared to images and descriptions of the previous buildings, the present Great Mosque includes several innovations such as a special court reserved for women and a principal entrance with earthen pillars, that signal the graves of two local religious leaders.



Figure 1.5.4.6: Façade (detail), Great Mosque of Djenné, Mali, 1907 (photo: lhhais, CC BY-NC 2.0)

Re-plastering the Mosque

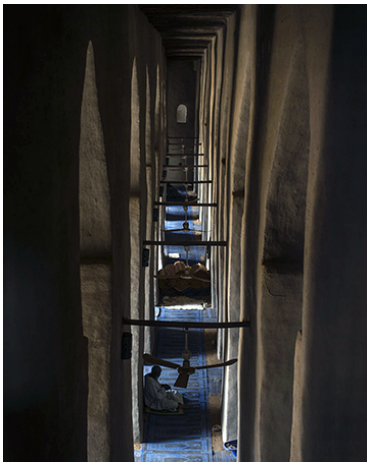


Figure 1.5.4.7: Interior view, Great Mosque of Djenné, Mali, 1907 (photo: **UN Mission in Mali**, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

During the annual festival of the *Crepissage de la Grand Mosquée*, the entire city contributes to the re-plastering of the mosque's exterior by kneading into it a mud plaster made from a mixture of butter and fine clay from the alluvial soil of the nearby Niger and

Bani Rivers. The men of the community usually take up the task of mixing the construction material. As in the past, musicians entertain them during their labors, while women provide water for the mixture. Elders also contribute through their presence on site, by sitting on terrace walls and giving advice. Mixing work and play, young boys sing, run, and dash everywhere.

Over the years Djenné's inhabitants have withstood repeated attempts to change the character of their exceptional mosque and the nature of the annual festival. For instance, some have tried to suppress the playing of music during the *Crepissage*, and foreign Muslim investors have also offered to rebuild the mosque in concrete and tile its current sand floor. Djenné's community has unrelentingly striven to maintain its cultural heritage and the unique character of the Great Mosque. In 1988, the tenacious effort led to the designation of the site and the entire town of Djenné as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO.

Backstory

The Great Mosque of Djenné is only one of many important monuments in the area known as the Djenné Circle, which also includes the archaeological sites of Djenné-Djeno, Hambarketolo, Tonomba and Kaniana. The region is known especially for its characteristic earthen architecture, which, as noted above, requires continuous upkeep by the local community.

Djenné's unique form of architecture also makes it particularly susceptible to environmental threats, especially flooding. The town is situated along a river, and in 2016, torrential rains led to massive floods that caused one historic 16th-century palace to collapse, and left the Great Mosque with significant cracks its pillars. Construction of new buildings on the archaeological sites and inadequate waste disposal infrastructure also present continual problems.

UNESCO and other agencies have supported the restoration of the riverbanks in Djenné to help prevent flooding, and the four archaeological sites have now gained official status as properties of the state, which shields them from urban development. However, the conservation situation in Djenné remains fragile. Since the civil war in Northern Mali in 2012, the government has had limited bandwidth to deal with all of the various measures necessary to successfully protect, maintain, and monitor these sites. UNESCO has also noted a lack of funding from outside partners, who, **according to the agency**, have shown greater interest in Timbuktu, where terrorists **vandalized** several historic mausoleums and a mosque in 2012.

The current state of Djenné highlights the complex network of factors that affect world heritage: armed conflict and civil unrest, environmental threats, urban development, and lack of cooperation between agencies can all undermine the fate of monuments like the Great Mosque. Such circumstances remind us of the importance and the difficulty of conservation efforts not just in Djenné, but around the globe.

Backstory by Dr. Naraelle Hohensee

Additional Resources:

The website of the Great Mosque of Djenné

Katarina Höije, "The mud mosque of Mali" from Roads and Kingdoms (May 2018)

Old Towns of Djenné (from UNESCO)

UNESCO State of Conservation report for the Old Towns of Djenné

This page titled 1.5.4: Great Mosque of Djenné (Djenné peoples) is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

1.5.5: Dogon Couple (Dogon peoples)

by STEVEN ZUCKER and DR. PERI KLEMM



Video 1.5.5.1: Dogon Couple, 18th-early 19th century (Dogon peoples), Mali, wood and metal, 73 x 23.7 (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)
Speakers: Dr. Peri Klemm and Dr. Steven Zucker

Is this a couple, or could this pair relate to a story from Dogon cosmology?

SmartHistory images for teaching and learning:



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)

This page titled 1.5.5: Dogon Couple (Dogon peoples) is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

1.5.6: Mask (Kanaga) (Dogon peoples)

by DR. CHRISTA CLARKE

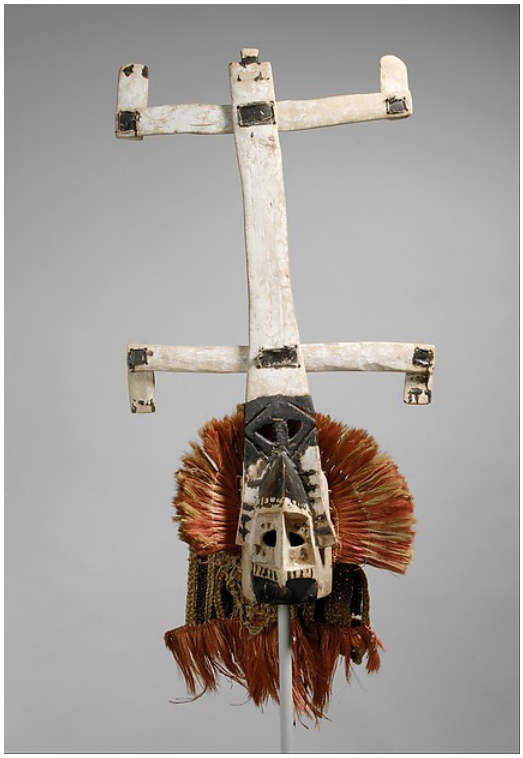


Figure **1.5.6.1**: Mask (Kanaga), Mali, Dogon peoples, 20th century, wood, fiber, hide, pigment, 53.6 x 97.2 x 15.9 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

Dogon masks, such as this one called *kanaga*, are worn primarily at *dama*, a collective funerary rite for Dogon men. The ritual's goal is to ensure the safe passage of the spirits of the deceased to the world of the ancestors. The ceremony is organized by members of Awa, a male initiation society with ritual and political roles within Dogon society. As part of the public rites related to death and remembrance, Awa society members are responsible for the creation and performance of the masks.

Like other Dogon wooden masks, *kanaga* masks depict the face as a rectangular box with deeply hollowed channels for the eyes. The superstructure above the face identifies this mask as a *kanaga*: a double-barred cross with short vertical elements projecting from the ends of the horizontal bars. This abstract form has been interpreted on two levels: literally, as a representation of a bird, and, on a more esoteric level, as a symbol of the creative force of god and the arrangement of the universe. In the latter interpretation, the upper crossbar represents the sky and the lower one, the earth.

This *kanaga* mask was collected complete with some of its costume elements. Attached to the wooden face mask is a hood composed of plaited fiber strips dyed black and yellow with a short fiber fringe that covers the dancer's head. A ruff of red and yellow fibers frames the face. The dancer also wore a black vest woven of fiber and embroidered with white cowry shells and fiber armbands at the wrists and elbows. This ensemble included a long skirt of loosely strung, curly black fibers and a short overskirt composed of straight red and yellow fibers, worn over trousers.

More than eighty different types of masks, of both wood and fiber, have been documented in *dama* performances. They represent various human characters familiar to the Dogon community, such as hunters, warriors, healers, women, and people from neighboring ethnic groups. The masks may also depict animals, birds, objects, and abstract concepts.

Because preparations are elaborate and costly, the *dama* may be held several years after the death and burial of an individual. Performances take place over a six-day period, culminating with a procession of masked dancers who escort the souls of the dead from the village, where they might cause harm, to their final resting place in the spiritual realm. The ceremony recalls the origins of the Dogon people, while also marking the end of the mourning period for the recently deceased. Today, such masks continue to be

worn at *dama* performances but are also danced on other, more secular occasions, such as national holidays and as demonstrations organized for the benefit of tourists.

© 2006 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (by permission)

Additional resources:

This work at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Dogon art at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Dogon peoples from *Art and Life in Africa* (University of Iowa)

Dogon Dama from National Geographic (video)

This page titled 1.5.6: Mask (Kanaga) (Dogon peoples) is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

1.5.7: Male and Female Antelope Headdresses (Ci wara) (Bamana peoples)

by DR. CHRISTA CLARKE



Figure 1.5.7.1: Headdress: Male Antelope (Ci Wara), 19th–20th century Mali, Bamako region, Bamana, wood, metal bands, 71.1 cm high (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

Pairs of carved wooden headdresses in the form of antelopes, like these examples, refer to the mythic culture hero Ci Wara, a divine force conceived of as half man and half antelope. Bamana oral traditions credit Ci Wara with introducing to humanity agricultural methods and an understanding of earth, animals, and plants. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Ci Wara was invoked and honored by members of a men's agricultural association, also called *ci wara*, in village-wide performances that celebrated the skills of successful farmers. These performances featured a pair of dancers wearing sculpted headdresses, one representing a male antelope and the other a female. They held sticks in their hands to paw the earth just as the mythic Ci Wara did when he first taught men to plant seeds.

In performance, the paired dancers symbolize the union between men and women, essential for the continuity of the community. The formal features of the headdress also reference elements of nature necessary to sustain life. The male serves as a metaphor for the sun, while the female is associated with the earth. The long strands of raffia fibers attached to the headdress, concealing the dancer, are likened to streams of water.



Figure **1.5.7.2**: Headdress: Female Antelope (Ci Wara), 19th–20th century Mali, Bamako region, Bamana, wood, metal bands, 71.2 cm high (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

Although *ci wara* headdresses are generally described as representing antelopes, they incorporate features of other animals, including aardvarks and pangolins. These animals are selected for their symbolic value. In this pair, the horns and long, arched neck represent the antelope, associated with grace and strength. The head with a long, pointed nose and the low-slung body are features of the aardvark, admired for its determination in digging. The sculpted headdress is attached to a basketry skullcap (now missing on these examples) and secured on top of the dancer's head with a cotton strip. The dancer's face would be covered by a semitransparent cloth, and a costume of darkened raffia fiber would cloak the dancer's body.



Figure 1.5.7.3: Ci wara kun (Male and Female Antelope Headdresses), 19th – 20th century, Bamana peoples, wood, 90.7 x 40 x 8.5 cm, Segou region, Mali (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

The silhouette-like nature of sculptural representation is noted for its elegant play of positive and negative space. The male, identified as a roan antelope, is distinguished by its long horns and elaborate openwork mane. The female, representing an oryx antelope, carries a fawn on her back, a reference to human mothers, who carry babies on their backs as they till the fields. The face and horns of both are decorated with delicate chip-carved patterning, incised linear designs, and metal appliqué and strips.

The Bamana, who live in the southern part of present-day Mali, have long considered farming to be among the most noble of all professions. Traditionally, Bamana farmers have worked arduously in the savanna fields from May to October, when it rains regularly, in order to provide enough food during the long, dry season. Today, despite the significant social changes that have impacted contemporary Bamana experience, farming remains central to their identity. Although many Bamana have adopted Islam over the course of the last century, theatrical ci wara dances continue in many Bamana villages, celebrating their agrarian lifestyle. Among the continent's most well-known forms of expression, the elegantly abstract form of the *ci wara* headdress has also been adopted as a national symbol of cultural identity, used as a logo by Mali's official airline and found on the national currency.

© 2006 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (by permission)



Video 1.5.7.1: The Artist Project: Willie Cole (from The Metropolitan Museum of Art). Willie Cole, born in 1955, is an American sculptor who lives and works in New Jersey. See **an example of his work here**.

Additional resources:

This work at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Bamana art from The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Ci Wara on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Bamana peoples on *Art and Life in Africa* (University of Iowa)

Genesis: Ideas of Origin in African Sculpture (Met publication)

This page titled 1.5.7: Male and Female Antelope Headdresses (Ci wara) (Bamana peoples) is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

1.5.8: Kòmò Helmet Mask (Kòmòkunw) (Bamana peoples)

by DR. CHRISTA CLARKE



Figure **1.5.8.1**: Kòmò Helmet Mask (*Kòmòkun*), 19th–mid-20th century, Guinea or Mali or Burkina Faso or Côte d'Ivoire, West Africa, Komo or Koma Power Association, Wood, bird skull, porcupine quills, horns, cotton, sacrificial materials, 35.2 x 22.1 x 85.6 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

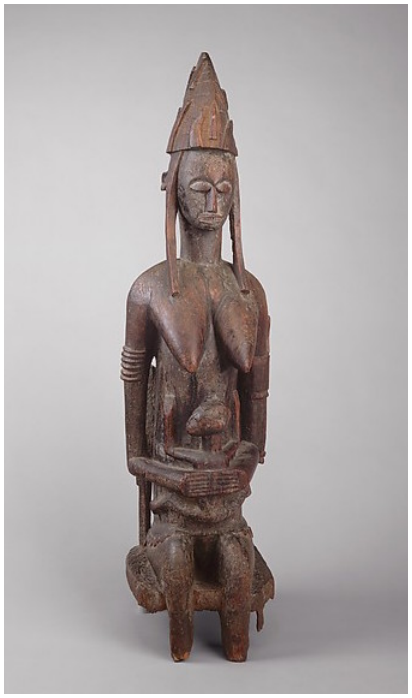


Figure **1.5.8.2**: Mother and Child, 15th-20th century, Mali, Bougouni or Dioila region, Bamana peoples, wood, 123.5 x 36.6 x 36.5 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

This headdress (above) was made and used by a member of the Komo society, an association of blacksmiths found among the Bamana and other Mande-speaking communities in the region. Komo association members enforce community laws, make judicial decisions, and offer protection from illness, misfortune, and malevolent forces. The headdress embodies the secret knowledge and awesome power of the society; its rough and unattractive form is therefore intended to be visually intimidating. While works like the Bamana maternity figure (left) depict a human ideal, this headdress is explicitly about harnessing the forces of untamed nature, a concept expressed visually in its form and material.

The wooden structure of the headdress has a domed head, gaping mouth, and long horns. Attached are antelope horns, a bird skull with a sharp beak, and porcupine quills, elements chosen for their metaphorical associations since they provide animals with power and protection. The animals themselves hold symbolic value in Bamana culture. Birds, for example, are associated with wisdom and divinatory powers, while porcupines signify the importance of preserving knowledge. The mask was further enhanced by the application of ritual substances formed from a mixture of earth, sacrificial animal blood, and medicinal plants. This material was replenished on a regular basis, endowing the mask with the critical life force, or *nyama*, that is the source of its extraordinary power.



Figure **1.5.8.3**: Alternate view, Kòmò Helmet Mask *(Kòmòkun)*, 19th–mid-20th century, Guinea or Mali or Burkina Faso or Côte d'Ivoire, West Africa, Komo or Koma Power Association, Wood, bird skull, porcupine quills, horns, cotton, sacrificial materials, 35.2 x 22.1 x 85.6 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

Komo society headdresses are **made by blacksmiths**, a specialized artisan group among the Bamana whose profession is inherited. Blacksmiths are greatly respected within their community for the special knowledge and technical skills that allow them to use fire, water, and air to transform iron ore into tools and weapons. Ironworking is considered an especially dangerous profession, one that requires courage and extraordinary abilities to manage the potentially destructive spiritual forces released during the process. Blacksmiths are therefore uniquely qualified to create Komo headdresses, which combine terrifying forms and inherently harmful materials in an object of benefit to the community.

The headdress is worn in dramatic **performances** that serve as a focal point of Komo society meetings. Held in private and restricted to initiated members, these meetings provide an opportunity to gain an understanding of the society's history, beliefs, and rituals. Accompanied by bards and musicians, a high-ranking Komo member appears wearing a headdress like this strapped on the top of his head. His face is covered with a semitransparent cloth and he wears a costume of black feathers enhanced with amulets over a hooped skirt. The dancer's performance is acrobatic and intense, featuring spectacular feats that suggest extraordinary powers. His performance responds to petitions for assistance from members of the community. Through song and dance, the Komo member gradually reveals solutions to a variety of concerns that have been presented to him, from crop failure to infertility.

Considered the most powerful of men's associations in the region, Komo has an ancient history and was well established by the time the Mali empire rose to power in the thirteenth century. Individual community branches of Komo, which are distributed widely across the region, gain authority through strong leadership, coalitions with wilderness spirits, and effective use of power objects.

© 2006 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (by permission)

Additional resources:

This work at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Komo among Tagwa-Senufo Peoples in Southwest Burkina Faso in *Art and Life in Africa* (University of Iowa)

This page titled 1.5.8: Kòmò Helmet Mask (Kòmòkunw) (Bamana peoples) is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

1.5.9: Seydou Keïta, Untitled (Seated Woman with Chevron Print Dress)

by DR. CHRISTA CLARKE



Figure **1.5.9.1**: Seydou Keïta, *Untitled [Seated Woman with Chevron Print Dress]*, 1956, printed 1997, Mali, Bamako, gelatin silver print, 60.96 x 50.8 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**) © Seydou Keïta

Commercial studio portrait photography was introduced in Mali in the 1930s and developed into a thriving industry in Bamako, the capital city, during the postwar period. Bamako's rapid economic development and accompanying population boom fueled demand for photographic portraits. Such photographs were commissioned by members of the growing middle class as mementos to be displayed on the walls of their homes or sent to faraway family members.

Among the busiest portrait studios in Bamako was that of photographer Seydou Keïta. Born in 1923, Keïta originally apprenticed as a carpenter but found his vocational calling when he was given a 6 x 9 Kodak Brownie camera by his uncle. After experimenting on his own, Keïta learned darkroom techniques from two established commercial photographers. He opened his own studio in 1948 in Bamako-Koura, an area of the city whose proximity to a train station and popular marketplace ensured a steady stream of potential clients.

Keïta soon became highly successful as a commercial photographer, producing tens of thousands of portraits over the course of his career. He developed a consistent and recognizable signature style that proved popular with local clients, who requested that their prints include a stamp with Keïta's name. A typical sitting took place during the day in his outside courtyard and could last up to an hour. Keïta gave his sitters the opportunity to individualize their portraits, helping them select a flattering pose and offering a variety of accessories as props. He posed his clients against a printed cloth, which often resulted in vibrant juxtapositions between the patterns of the sitter's clothes and that of the backdrop. Other compositional strategies included the use of a shallow depth of field and an emphasis on repetition and symmetry in framing his subject.

In this portrait, a woman reclines on her side with a relaxed and self-possessed dignity. The tight cropping places the focus entirely on the sitter, while the camera angle makes her appear on a slightly tilted slope, creating a symmetrical composition. The floral print of the woman's boubou (a traditional form of dress) contrasts with the bold black and white checkered blanket in the foreground and the swirling arabesques of the cloth backdrop, creating a syncopated clash of patterns and rhythms. Her dress and pose communicate significant aspects of her identity, revealing how traditional concepts of portraiture are maintained and modified through the medium of photography. Her head wrap is worn in a trendy style called "à la Gaulle," its jaunty angle framing the scarification marks of ethnic affiliation that she bears on her forehead. She rests her left arm casually at her waist, dangling her long slender fingers, which are considered a sign of high social standing.

When Mali won independence from France in 1962, Keïta was offered a position as official government photographer, where he remained until 1977. His governmental responsibilities required him to close his studio in 1964 and he never reopened his portrait practice, although he did continue his photography. Beginning in the 1990s, Keïta's work was included in several exhibitions in the United States and Europe, bringing him considerable fame in the international art world.

© 2006 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (by permission)

Additional resources:

This work at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

This work on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Western and Central Sudan, 1900 A.D.–present on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

The artist's website

This page titled 1.5.9: Seydou Keïta, Untitled (Seated Woman with Chevron Print Dress) is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

SECTION OVERVIEW

1.6: The art of Nigeria

From the Kingdom of Benin to the arts of the Yoruba, Nigeria is home to ancient and vibrant art traditions. **c. 15th century - present**

1.6.1: Benin Plaques

1.6.2: The Kingdom of Benin

1.6.3: Benin Art- Patrons, Artists and Current Controversies

1.6.4: The Imagery of Power on Benin Bronze Plaques

1.6.5: Benin and the Portuguese

1.6.6: Queen Mother Pendant Mask (Iyoba) (Edo peoples)

1.6.7: Benin ivory mask (Edo peoples)

1.6.8: Benin plaque- Equestrian Oba and Attendants

1.6.9: Ere Ibeji Figures (Yoruba peoples)

1.6.10: Kingdom of Ife- Sculptures from West Africa

1.6.11: Ife uncovered

1.6.12: Olowe of Ise

1.6.13: Olowe of Ise, Veranda Post of Enthroned King and Senior Wife

1.6.14: Ikenga (Igbo peoples)

1.6.15: Uche Okeke

1.6.16: Yinka Shonibare, The Swing (After Fragonard)

This page titled 1.6: The art of Nigeria is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

1.6.1: Benin Plaques

by DR. KATHRYN WYSOCKI GUNSCH and DR. BETH HARRIS



How to impress your courtiers: a lesson from the Kingdom of Benin

Additional resources

Benin plaques at the MFA, Boston

Kathryn Wysocki Gunsch, The Benin Plaques A 16th Century Imperial Monument, Oxford: Routledge, 2018

This page titled 1.6.1: Benin Plaques is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

1.6.2: The Kingdom of Benin

by THE BRITISH MUSEUM

Until the late 19th century, one of the major powers in West Africa was the kingdom of Benin, in what is now southwest Nigeria. When European merchant ships began to visit West Africa from the 15th century onwards, Benin came to control the trade between the inland peoples and the Europeans on the coast. The kingdom of Benin was also well known to European traders and merchants during the 16th and 17th centuries, when it became wealthy partly due to the slave trade.

A vivid picture



Figure **1.6.2.1**: These men took part in the expedition made by the British in 1897. In the background you can see the palace roof with a snake made of brass slithering down it. Photos like this one are the best guide we have to knowing what the palace of Benin looked like.

When the British tried to expand their own trade in the 19th century, the Benin people killed their envoys. So in 1897, the British sent an armed expedition which captured the king of Benin, destroyed his palace and took away large quantities of sculpture and regalia, including works in wood, ivory and especially brass. Some of these objects came from royal altars for the king's ancestors, but among them were a large number of cast brass plaques made to decorate the wooden pillars of the palace. These had been left in the palace storerooms while part of the palace was being rebuilt. As it later emerged, most of them were probably made between about 1550 – 1650. The people and scenes that the plaques depict are so many and varied that they give a vivid picture of the court and kingdom of that time. The plaques were most sought after and were bought by museums across Europe and America—you can see them at the British Museum, in Chicago, Vienna, Paris and a large collection can be viewed in Berlin.

A sensation

The arrival and reception of the bronze plaques caused a sensation in Europe. Scholars struggled to understand how African craftsmen could have made such works of art, proposing some wild theories to explain them. Quickly, however, research showed that the Benin bronzes were entirely West African creations without European influence, and they transformed European understanding of African history.



Figure **1.6.2.2**: Brass plaque showing the Oba of Benin with attendants, 16th century, 51 x 37 cm, Edo peoples, Benin, Nigeria © Trustees of the British Museum

When the son of the deposed king revived the Benin monarchy in 1914, now under British rule, he did his best to restore the palace and continue the ancient traditions of the Benin monarchy. Because these traditions are followed in the modern city of Benin, it is still possible to recognize many of the scenes cast in brass by Benin artists about five hundred years ago.

As decorations for the halls of the king's palace, the plaques were designed to proclaim and glorify the prestige, status, and achievements of the king, so they give an informative but very one-sided view of the kingdom of Benin. They do not show how the ordinary people lived in the villages outside the city as farmers, growing their yams and vegetables in gardens cleared from the tropical forest. Nor do they show how most of the townspeople lived, employed in crafts such as the making of the brass plaques themselves. And most striking of all, there are no women or children shown in the plaques, which means that more than half of the people of the king's court are not shown.

Many of the brass plaques from the king's palace show images of Portuguese men, whose costumes indicate that they were made during the 16th and 17th centuries. Although Benin had no gold to offer, they supplied the Portuguese with pepper, ivory, leopard skins and people, who were taken as slaves to work elsewhere in Africa and in the Portuguese colonies in Brazil. Many of these people were captives taken in the wars in which the Benin people conquered their neighbours far and wide and made them part of the kingdom, or they were sent by the conquered local chiefs as tribute to the king.

© Trustees of the British Museum

This page titled 1.6.2: The Kingdom of Benin is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

1.6.3: Benin Art- Patrons, Artists and Current Controversies

by DR. KATHRYN WYSOCKI GUNSCH

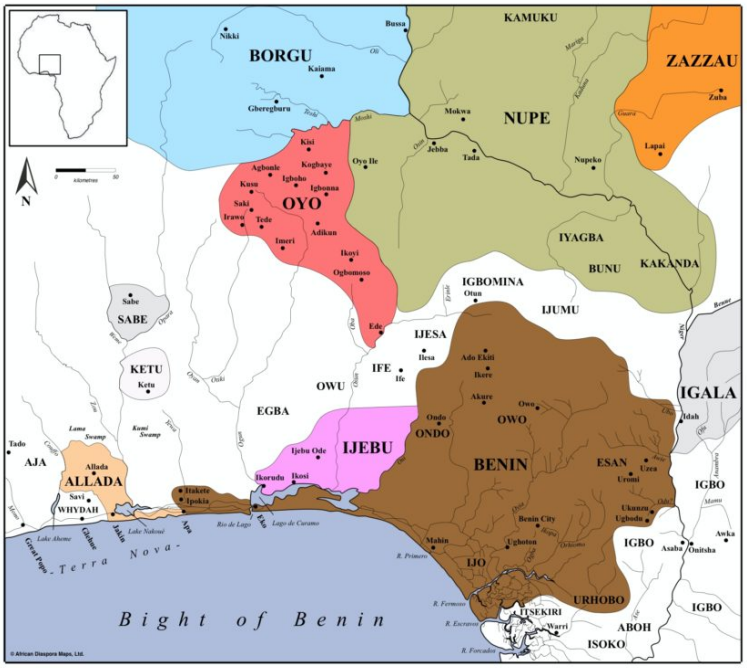


Figure 1.6.3.1: States of the Bight of Benin Interior c. 1580, courtesy of Henry B. Lovejoy, African Diaspora Maps Ltd., (CC BY 4.0)

In the age of social media, nearly everyone can present an idealized version of their real lives to the world. In the past, however, only the wealthiest and most powerful could afford to shape their image for the public. During the sixteenth century, the kings of Benin (in present-day Nigeria), reigned over nearly two million subjects and commanded a feared military force, but they also faced internal political problems that threatened the throne.

Politics, power, and art



Figure 1.6.3.2: Igue Festival: Edo govt delegation visits Oba Ewuare II

The Kingdom of Benin was founded around the year 900, but it reached the height of its power in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as a result of the conquests of new territories by two kings —Oba Ewuare and his son Oba Ozolua (Oba means “king”).

The Obas of Benin amassed great wealth by controlling trade routes reaching from the river Niger in the East to the western border with the kingdom of Dahomey. Taxes on pepper, ivory, and enslaved persons, and annual tribute payments from conquered lands in their expanding empire, also increased the wealth of the Kingdom.

Royal art from this period (and from a slightly later time of renewed wealth and power in the eighteenth century), was designed to broadcast and strengthen dynastic power. **Benin court art** celebrates the prestige of the monarchy to outsiders (like traders and ambassadors), as well as to courtiers who might try to wrest power from the king.

In the early sixteenth century, Oba Esigie successfully consolidated Benin's power over conquered territories. He took the throne after a civil war with his older brother and soon after defended Benin City from an attack from a neighboring kingdom (Idah). His commissions were designed to address the turmoil of his early reign. Esigie was a brilliant politician, and he commissioned great works of art and new festivals to assert the legitimacy of his reign.

The festival of Ugie Oro

Esigie instituted the festival of Ugie Oro, where high-ranking courtiers process around Benin City striking bronze staffs with a bird on top. The festival refers to the Idah war, when leading courtiers refused to support Esigie in his defense of the city. A bird in a tree en route to the battle prophesied that Esigie and his troops would be defeated. Esigie shot the bird and carried it as his battle standard. When he won the war against the Idah, he instituted the festival to point out that the advice of the courtiers—and the bird—had been nothing more than the empty noise produced by clanging the bronze staffs, pointing out that courtiers' should defer to the wisdom of the king.



Figure **1.6.3.3**: Artist Unidentified, Staff showing a bird of prophesy, 19th century, Copper alloy (Robert Owen Lehman Collection, Courtesy **Museum of Fine Arts, Boston**)

In the **plaques** he commissioned to ornament his audience hall, Esigie surrounded himself with images of courtiers in processions, including the festival of Ugie Oro, or engaging in other acts of service and praise—reminding them to honor and obey his authority. Today, artworks from the period of Esigie's reign are among the most celebrated in African art history, combining fascinating narratives on the majesty of the kingdom, luxurious materials, and fine workmanship.



Figure **1.6.3.4**: Throne stool of Oba Eresoyen, 1735-50, Kingdom of Benin, Nigeria, brass, 40 x 40.5 cm (**Ethnological Museum of the National Museums in Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz**)

Changes in Benin art are tightly intertwined with the changing fortunes of the kingdom, because the Oba was historically the primary patron for all artwork in bronze and **ivory**. In the beginning of the eighteenth century, Benin recovered from a series of succession struggles and wars that weakened the court and devastated its finances. Oba Akenzua I and his successor, Oba Eresoyen, strengthened the king's role and instituted new traditions and art forms to signal their regained power.

Akenzua and Eresoyen ushered in a period of renewed wealth and political power for the kingdom that continued into the 19th century. Akenzua and Eresoyen compared themselves to Ozolua and Esigie, starting the tradition of viewing Ozolua and Esigie as two of the most important kings in Benin history.

Oba Eresoyen was a major patron of the bronze-casting guild, and commissioned an elaborate copy of a bronze state stool owned by Oba Esigie—metaphorically connecting the two reigns. Eresoyen is also known as a patron of the ivory guild, and may have introduced the intricately carved tusk for memorial altars that first appear in the eighteenth century.

On memorial altars, ten to sixty tusks were displayed on top of brass commemorative heads. The **tusk** held in the Berlin Ethnographic Museum, is one of the oldest known. We see an Oba, his arms supported by attendants, placed in the center of the tusk, the most visible position. Surrounding this central triad are figures relating to the dynasty of great Obas—including two Portuguese men on horseback that refer to the reigns of Ozolua and Esigie—and motifs representing leading courtiers and priests serving the king.



Figure **1.6.3.5**: Benin ancestral altars (left), photographed in 1936 (**Etnografiska museet, Stockholm**) and an altar tusk (right) 1888 – 97, Kingdom of Benin, Nigeria, ivory, 111.8 x 31.5 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

The Artists

The Igun Eronmwon (brass-caster's guild), and the Igbesanmwan (ivory and wood carvers' guild), are responsible for all the art made for the Oba. Until the 20th century, royal artists were not allowed to make pieces for other clients without special permission. Membership in the royal artists' guilds is hereditary—even today. The head of each guild inherits his position from his father. He is

responsible for receiving commissions from the king, overseeing the design of the work, and assigning parts of the project to different artists. For this reason, nearly all historical Benin art is made in a workshop style, with individual artists contributing pieces of the whole.

While the Igun Eronmwon and Igbesanmwan guilds are separate, they often make artworks that are displayed together. Commemorative heads made for the memorial altar of a king (see ancestral altars above), for example, combine a cast-bronze head with a carved ivory tusk rising from the top, just as an ivory leopard may be finished with inlaid bronze spots.

Controversy



Figure **1.6.3.6**: Pair of leopards, 19th century, Court of Benin, Nigeria, ivory with metal inlay, 48.0 x 80.0 x 13.0 cm (**Royal Collection Trust**, © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, 2017)

Like other artworks taken from their place of origin by colonial occupiers, artworks from Benin are part of a public conversation on cultural patrimony and the ethics of collecting. The provenance (ownership history), of Benin artworks in Europe and America usually includes a moment in 1897 when Benin City was invaded by British soldiers and a part of the royal treasury was claimed by the British state as spoils of war. In the following years, other artworks were taken from Benin by individual soldiers, or pillaged from the palace and sold.

Today, the palace in Benin City and the Nigerian government both claim ownership of Benin art held in foreign collections. Museums and private owners have provided a spectrum of responses. In 2014, British citizen Mark Walker **returned** two Benin artworks he inherited from his grandfather, a soldier in the 1897 invasion, to reigning Oba Erediauwa, because he felt that the Oba was the only rightful owner. The Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) Museum is **working** to determine how to return a commemorative head to Nigeria, given the competing claims of the palace and the government.

A coalition of European museums that hold the largest collections of Benin art have been meeting with representatives of the palace and the Nigerian government since 2007, and at present plan to collaborate by **sharing** their collections through loans to a new Nigerian museum built on palace grounds. The public conversation on Benin art weighs the competing ownership claims of the palace and the government, the ethical obligation to respect communities' rights regarding their cultural patrimony, and the belief that museum collections should present world art to foster cross-cultural understanding.

Additional Resources:

Art of the Benin Kingdom at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Benin chronology on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn TImeline of Art History

Kathryn Gunsch, *The Benin Plaques: A 16th Century Imperial Monument* (Routledge Research in Art History, 2017)

Paula Ben-Amos, *Art, Innovation, and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Benin* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999)

Barbara Plankensteiner, et al, *Benin Kings and Rituals: Court Arts from Nigeria* (Vienna: Kunsthistorisches Museum mit MVK und ÖTM, 2007)

This page titled 1.6.3: Benin Art- Patrons, Artists and Current Controversies is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

1.6.4: The Imagery of Power on Benin Bronze Plaques

by DR. KATHRYN WYSOCKI GUNSCH



Figure **1.6.4.1**: Artist Unidentified, *Relief plaque showing two officials with raised swords*, c. 1530-1570, copper alloy (Robert Owen Lehman Collection, **Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston**)

Designed to impress

Think of the last time you saw an interior space that impressed you. Whether you were watching *Game of Thrones* or reality TV, walking onto a college campus or into a major museum for the first time, some spaces are designed to wow—and intimidate—visitors. The audience hall in the palace in Benin City, in present-day Nigeria, was a space made to wow. It communicated to visiting ambassadors, traders, courtiers, and subjects the power and wealth of the Oba (the king).

Privileged regalia

During the sixteenth century, the pillars of the Oba's audience hall would have been covered in bronze relief plaques like the one above. Two men stand with their feet firmly planted on an imagined plane. The men wear coral beaded regalia from head to toe—coral crowns, special high collars called *odigba* that signal their elite rank, beaded sashes across their chests, and beaded bands around their wrists and ankles.



Figure 1.6.4.2: Leopard-head hip ornament, 16th – 19th century, 19.1 x 12.1 x 5.4 cm, Edo peoples, Benin, Nigeria (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Only the Oba could grant permission to wear coral, an imported luxury related to his control of overseas trade with Portugal and, later, the Dutch, English, and French. The coral and the river-leaf pattern in the background also refers to Olokun, the god of wealth whose palace is under the sea.

The scars on the men's chests, called *iwu*, were the mark of Benin subjects until the late nineteenth century. While the men's attire signals their position within the court and their reliance on the king, their gesture announces that they are loyal and obedient subjects. Each figure holds a special fish-shaped sword, called an ***eben***, aloft. Even today, these swords are used to dance in honor of the Oba. During palace festivities, courtiers throw them spinning into the air and catch them before they touch the ground — a display to honor the king.

Decoration for a grand palace

The plaque above was originally displayed on a pillar in an audience hall located deep within the palace. Pillars held up the roof of a veranda with built-in seating that ran around a large open-air courtyard in the center.

Historical accounts from visiting traders to Benin City suggest that the audience courtyard was roughly 30 by 60 meters (98.43 x 196.85 feet) [1] and could fit 500 people.[2] Likely beginning during the reigns of Oba Esigie (who ruled from 1517 to the 1550s) and his son Orhogbua (who ruled from the 1550s–1570s), the pillars surrounding the audience court were covered with more than 850 bronze relief plaques like this one.



Figure **1.6.4.3**: Plaque depicting an audience hall, 16th -17th century, 55 x 39 cm, Edo peoples, Benin, Nigeria (photo: **British Museum**, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

A surviving plaque shows what the audience hall must have looked like at the time, with a high roof ornamented by a cast-bronze snake and depictions of courtiers and warriors on the plaques decorating the pillars below. Hanging on all sides of the columns, the plaques would have created the impression that the pillars were of solid bronze — a form of currency at the time.

The plaques were deinstalled from the audience court in Benin City before the beginning of the eighteenth century, and kept in a storeroom within the palace until the **British invasion of 1897**. They are kept today in museums in Nigeria, the **UK, Germany, Austria, and the United States**. Recent research suggests that the plaques were made in three separate periods.



Figure **1.6.4.4**: Artist Unidentified, *Relief plaque showing a crocodile with mudfish*, c. 1530-1570, copper alloy (Robert Owen Lehman Collection, **Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston**)

Casting in bronze

The plaques were all made using the **lost wax method**, where an artist creates a form in wax, covers it in layers of clay, and bakes the mold until the wax runs out. The artist then pours molten bronze into the hardened clay form, and breaks the form to release the final casting.

The early plaques are all low reliefs, meaning that they are fairly flat, without many details that rise off the surface of the plaque, like this plaque depicting a crocodile biting a mudfish.

From low to high relief

Low reliefs are easier to cast, because the artist does not need to worry about molten metal reaching each part of the form before it cools. In the later series of plaques, however, artists cast high reliefs, meaning that they have greater depth. In the plaque discussed above, the thin swords are fully free of the plaque surface, a daring compositional choice that required careful management of the hot bronze to fill the form.



Figure 1.6.4.5: Detail of relief plaque showing two officials with raised swords, showing the high relief of the bodies and fully-free swords (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

The switch to high relief suggests that the artists were becoming more confident in the medium of bronze reliefs. It may also reflect the artists' observations of how the completed reliefs looked once installed on the palace pillars. The later plaques, characterized by high-relief compositions of human figures that fill the entire surface, would have been easier to see from across the large courtyard.

Art for legitimacy

Why did the kings of Benin commission this ambitious program of court decoration? Oba Esigie fought his brother for the throne and then faced an attack from a neighboring army and the disobedience of his senior courtiers. He may have commissioned the plaques to assert his wealth and power to internal and external enemies, creating the impression of a strong monarchy despite the rocky start to his reign.



Figure **1.6.4.6**: Artist Unidentified, *Relief plaque showing a dignitary with drum and two attendants striking gongs*, c. 1530-1570, copper alloy (Robert Owen Lehman Collection, **Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston**)

The earlier plaques depict elements of regalia and metaphorical animals relating to the Oba, as well as courtiers and warriors depicted in simple, three-person compositions in hierarchical scale, where the most important person is largest. All of these motifs indirectly allude to the king and his power. The narrative presented by the later plaques more explicitly honors the might and authority of the king.

Rather than referring to the Oba through court regalia or metaphorical creatures, these compositions depict people in direct service to the crown: participating in processionals, battles or ceremonies, like the men holding the *eben* dance swords. The plaque commission was likely one element in cementing Esigie's authority. By the end of his reign and through the reign of his son Orhogbua, the court gave greater support to the monarchy.

Notes

1. Translation of Olfert Dapper's *Naukeurige Beschrijvingen der Afrikaensche gewesten*, 1676 edition, published in Adam Jones, *Olfert Dapper's Description of Benin* (1668) (Madison: University of Wisconsin Madison, 1998), p. 11.
2. A.F.C. Ryder, "The Benin Missions," *Journal of the Historical Society of Nigeria*, 2, no. 2 (1960), p. 244.

Additional resources

Read more about a chronology for Benin art

Kate Ezra, *Royal Art of Benin: The Perls Collection* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992).

Kathryn Gunsch, *The Benin Plaques: A 16th-Century Imperial Monument* (Oxford: Routledge, 2018).

Barbara Plankensteiner, et al., *Benin Kings and Rituals: Court Arts from Nigeria* (Vienna: Kunsthistorisches Museum mit MVK und ÖTM, 2007).

This page titled 1.6.4: The Imagery of Power on Benin Bronze Plaques is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

1.6.5: Benin and the Portuguese

by THE BRITISH MUSEUM

Brass

Trade with the Portuguese probably encouraged the growth of brass casting in Benin at this time. Although West Africans invented the smelting of copper and zinc ores and the casting of brass at least as long ago as the 10th century, they did not produce enough metal to supply the casting industry of Benin city, which gave such splendor to the king's palace. The Portuguese found a ready market for brass ingots, often made in the form of bracelets called "manillas."

These were made in the Low Countries (modern Holland), traded throughout West Africa as a kind of currency, and melted down by the brass workers of Benin. When the Portuguese arrived in Benin, Nigeria, in the fifteenth century, they quickly started trading brass and copper for pepper, cloth, ivory and slaves. In the 1490s a Portuguese trader wrote that at Benin copper bracelets were more highly prized than brass ones.



Figure **1.6.5.1**: Brass manilla (bracelet), 19th century C.E. © Trustees of the British Museum

The number of manillas in circulation increased dramatically from the sixteenth century when they became one of the standard trade currencies. Millions were made in Europe, along with brass and copper pots and pans, and imported into Africa for trade. Research by British Museum scientists has shown that objects like these were melted down and made into works of art such as the Benin bronze plaques.

A Portuguese soldier



Figure **1.6.5.2**: Brass figure of a Portuguese soldier holding a musket, 17th century C.E., Benin, Nigeria © Trustees of the British Museum

This is an image of a Portuguese soldier. He wears a typical 16th century European costume, with steel helmet and sword, and he carries a flintlock gun. Guns were new to the people of West Africa when the Portuguese arrived. So, Africans traded them from Europeans and learned to make them for themselves, to help them in their wars against peoples who still only had hand weapons or bows and arrows. Sometimes the king of Benin even employed Portuguese soldiers, like this man, to fight as mercenaries in his wars. Figures of Europeans such as this Portuguese soldier were kept on royal altars or on the roof of the royal palace in Benin city.

Control of trade

The rulers of Benin fought their neighbours for control to the supply of goods which could be traded to the Europeans on the coast. The king himself was in charge of trading slaves, ivory and other important goods, so that all the profit went to support his court and government.

Other merchants could only trade with the king's permission. To prevent unauthorized trading, Europeans were seldom allowed to travel inland or visit Benin city.

Suggested readings:

J. Williams (ed.), *Money: a history* (London, The British Museum Press, 1997).

K. Yoshida and J. Mack (eds.), *Images of other cultures* (Osaka, National Museum of Ethnology, 1997).

P. Girshick Ben-Amos, *The art of Benin* (London, The British Museum Press, 1995).

© Trustees of the British Museum

This page titled 1.6.5: Benin and the Portuguese is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

1.6.6: Queen Mother Pendant Mask (Iyoba) (Edo peoples)

by DR. CHRISTA CLARKE



Figure **1.6.6.1**: Queen Mother Pendant Mask (Iyoba), 16th century, Edo peoples, Court of Benin, Nigeria, ivory, iron, copper, 23.8 x 12.7 x 8.3 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

This pendant mask was created in the early sixteenth century for an Oba named Esigie, in honor of his mother Idia. The face has softly modeled, naturalistic features, with graceful curves that echo the oval shape of the head. Four carved scarification marks, a number associated with females, indicate her gender.



Figure **1.6.6.2**: Detail, *Queen Mother Pendant Mask (Iyoba)*, 16th century, Edo peoples, Court of Benin, Nigeria, ivory, iron, copper, 23.8 x 12.7 x 8.3 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

Iron inlays for the pupils and rims of the eyes intensify the Queen Mother's authoritative gaze and suggest her inner strength. The two vertical depressions on her forehead were also inlaid with iron. She is depicted wearing a choker of coral beads and her hair is arranged in an elegant configuration that resembles a tiara. The intricately carved openwork designs are stylized mudfish alternating with the faces of Portuguese traders. Both motifs are associated with the Oba and his counterpart, the sea god Olokun. The mudfish is a creature that lives both on land and in water, and a symbol of the king's dual nature as both human and divine. Similarly, the Portuguese, as voyagers from across the sea, may have been seen as denizens of Olokun's realm. Like the sea god, they brought great wealth and power to the Oba.



Figure **1.6.6.3**: Queen Mother Pendant Mask (Iyoba), 16th century, Edo peoples, Court of Benin, Nigeria, ivory, iron, copper, 23.8 x 12.7 x 8.3 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

In Benin culture, ivory holds both material and symbolic value. As a luxury good, ivory was Benin's principal commercial commodity and helped to attract Portuguese traders who, in turn, brought wealth to the kingdom in the form of copper and coral. In addition, ivory is white, a color that symbolizes ritual purity and is also associated with Olokun, who is considered to be a source of extraordinary wealth and fertility.

Queen Idia is honored as a powerful and politically astute woman who provided critical assistance to her son during the kingdom's battles to expand. Upon the successful conclusion of the war, Esigie paid tribute to Idia by bestowing upon her the title of Queen Mother, a custom that has continued with subsequent rulers until the present time. The title of Queen Mother, or *Iyoba*, is given to the woman who bears the Oba's first son, the future ruler of the kingdom. Historically, the Queen Mother would have no other children and, instead, devote her life to raising her son. Oba Esigie is said to have worn the mask as a pectoral during rites commemorating his mother. The hollow back, holes around the perimeter, and stopper composed of several tendrils of hair at the summit suggest that the mask functioned as an amulet, filled with special and powerful materials that protected the wearer. Today, such pendants are worn at annual ceremonies of spiritual renewal and purification.

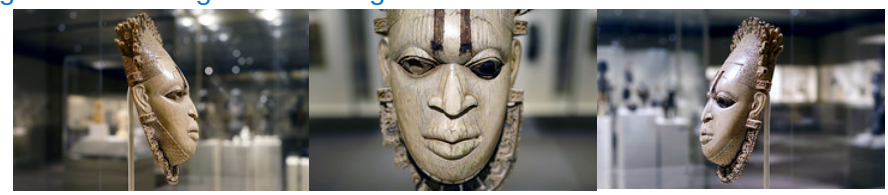
© 2006 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (by permission)

Additional resources:

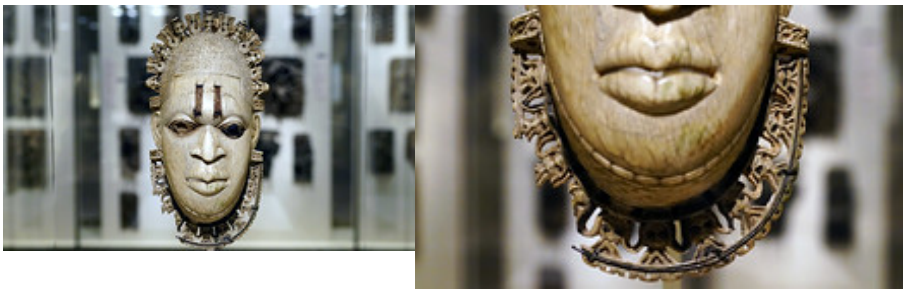
This work at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

African Ivories (Metropolitan Museum of Art publication)

Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



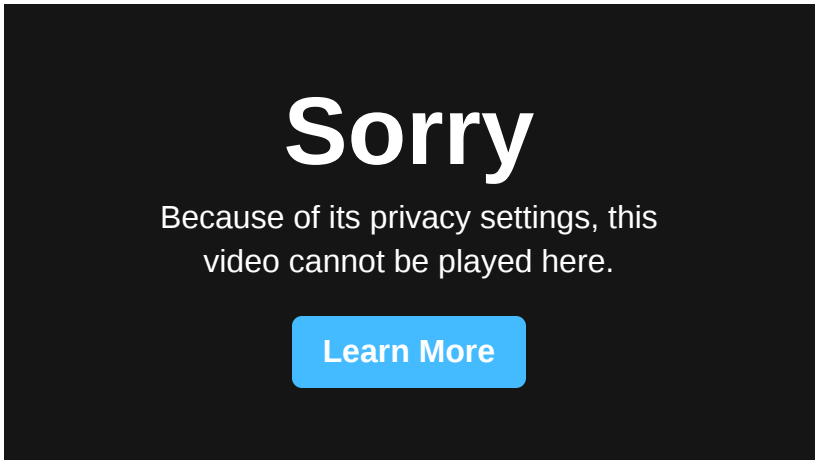
Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)

This page titled 1.6.6: Queen Mother Pendant Mask (Iyoba) (Edo peoples) is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

1.6.7: Benin ivory mask (Edo peoples)

by HENI TALKS



Gus Casely-Hayford - 'A Physical Essay in Power': The striking story of a Benin ivory mask from HENI Talks on Vimeo.

Cultural Historian Dr. Gus Casely-Hayford tells the remarkable story of a sixteenth century ivory mask from Benin, West Africa.

Contrary to its serene visage, Casely-Hayford explores how this finely carved artefact is a ‘physical essay in power’: a testament to subterfuge, savvy trading networks and bloodshed. Casely-Hayford also reflects on the mask’s changing status in the British Museum over the course of the past century, and how such objects – once regarded as ‘primitive’ – had a profound impact on the Western twentieth century avant-garde. With the rise of post-Colonial theory, such works in Western collections are now securing the status that their cultural significance merits.

This page titled 1.6.7: Benin ivory mask (Edo peoples) is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

1.6.8: Benin plaque- Equestrian Oba and Attendants

by GREG STUART

Royal history rendered in brass



Figure **1.6.8.1**: Plaque: *Equestrian Oba and Attendants*, Edo peoples (Benin Kingdom), 1550–1680, brass, 19 7/16 x 16 1/2 x 4 1/2″ / 49.5 x 41.9 x 11.4 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

This remarkable brass plaque, dated between 1550-1680, depicts an Oba (or king) and his attendants from the Benin Empire—a powerful kingdom located in present-day Nigeria. We know that the central figure is an Oba because of his distinctive coral beaded regalia. Also, attendants hold shields above his head, either to protect him from attack or possibly from the hot, tropical sun. This was a privilege only afforded to an Oba.

The figures around him range in size, not because of their actual height or distance from the Oba, but rather due to their level of importance within the court. This convention of sizing human figures based on status is known as “hierarchic scale” and is found in artwork from cultures around the world and across time. The Oba would have travelled with a large cohort of attendants, warriors, servants, diplomats, chieftains, and priests.

The plaque originally hung alongside many others on posts throughout the palace of the Oba. The order of their placement on these posts would have told the history of the royal lineage of Benin’s Obas, who traced their dynasty all the way back to Oranmiyan, whose son was the first Oba of Benin. However, the sequence of plaques is lost to us since they were long held in storage when found by westerners in the 19th century. You may notice that the Oba rides sidesaddle on horseback, which would seem to indicate a connection to Oba Esigie (who ruled c. 1504-1550), the first Oba to travel by horse. However, without knowing the original order of the plaques, we will never know for certain whether this was Esigie, or a later Oba who emulated his brash new mode of travel.

Artists working in brass were organized under Esigie. Today, artists working in brass in Benin are part of a brass workers guild, and it was likely that previous generations would have also worked collectively. These artists created plaques and other sculptures using what is known as the “lost wax casting technique,” in which, first, a more malleable wax version of the final brass work is made. It is then covered in clay and fired to harden the clay, removing the wax, which melts away in the process (hence the term, “lost wax”). Hot, molten liquid brass is then poured into the clay mold. As the brass cools, it hardens, and the clay is removed, revealing the finished plaque.



Figure 1.6.8.3: Plaque (detail): *Equestrian Oba and Attendants*, Edo peoples (Benin Kingdom), 1550–1680, brass, 19 7/16 x 16 1/2 x 4 1/2″ / 49.5 x 41.9 x 11.4 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Almost every detail in this work speaks to the Benin Kingdom's mutually beneficial trade with Portugal, which first made contact with Benin in the late 15th century. The Portuguese received items like peppers, cloth, and stone beads from Benin, while Benin received—among other items—the coral that makes up the beads worn by the Oba, and even the brass that makes up this plaque in the form of manillas, or armbands, worn by the Portuguese, which would have been melted down as the raw material for this plaque.



Figure 1.6.8.4: Manilla, Benin Kingdom, Nigeria, 17th century (?). Brass, 24 x 26 x 8 cm (Museum für Völkerkunde Wein, coll. A. Maschmann)



Figure 1.6.8.5: Rosette shape and figure (detail), plaque: *Equestrian Oba and Attendants*, Edo peoples (Benin Kingdom), 1550–1680, brass, 19 7/16 x 16 1/2 x 4 1/2″ / 49.5 x 41.9 x 11.4 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

The rosette shapes that adorn the background of the plaque were possibly derived from Christian crosses brought by these European traders. Even the horse that the Oba rides was originally introduced to West Africa from across the sea. There is nothing quite like these plaques in all of Africa or Europe from this period, and some scholars speculate that they were created as a way of reconciling traditional African brass sculptural forms with the illustrated books and prints that may have been in the possession of European travelers.

Troubled Legacy

Trade began to decline with Portugal as the Portuguese empire waned in the 18th century. By the 19th century, Britain was seeking to make inroads with Benin as a new trading partner. However, this partnership was much less mutually beneficial and was marked with frequent tension. After increased aggression from both nations, the British launched the Punitive Expedition of 1897, seizing the Oba's palace, burning down the city around it, killing many, and looting the royal court's vast stores of art and treasure.



Figure 1.6.8.6: British soldiers sit surrounded by Benin works of art during the British Punitive Expedition of 1897 (documentary photograph by Sir Harry Holdsworth Rawson)

We know that this plaque was one of the artworks looted in the siege because Norman Burrows, a known trafficker in stolen Benin objects, owned it briefly during this time. This act of looting perpetrated by the British was later condemned as a criminal and violent act of British imperialism and colonialism. As such, there are many who believe that objects such as this plaque should be returned to the people of Benin, who remain deeply connected to their history and cultural traditions. However, there are others who feel that these remarkable objects are part of the world's heritage, and thus should remain in museum collections around the world as testament to this artistically rich culture.

Backstory

A consortium of European museums called the “Benin Dialogue Group,” formed in 2007, has been meeting with representatives from Nigeria to discuss issues around repatriation. Their hope is to establish a system of rotating loans of artworks to Benin City, though the security and guaranteed return of the objects is a point of ongoing discussion, set to continue at a conference in 2018. The consortium includes representatIves from the British Museum and Berlin’s Humboldtforum, two of the institutions that hold the largest collections of objects from Benin. Other members of the group include museums in Cambridge, Vienna, Stockholm, Leiden, Leipzig and Dresden, Oxford, and Hamburg, and London. Museums in the United States and France, which also hold significant numbers of Benin artworks, have yet to become formally involved, though some, such as the Musée du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac in Paris, have been approached directly with restitution claims from Nigeria.

The ongoing dialogue between museums and nations from which important objects, like those from Benin, were forcibly removed, highlights the complexities of the current, post-colonial world. Should formerly colonized areas be repaid for the damage inflicted on them by colonial powers? Who is responsible for doing so, and how? Who has the ethical right to the ownership, display, and preservation of these important pieces of cultural heritage? The formation of consortia like the Benin Dialogue Group is a significant first step towards resolving some of these thorny and pressing questions.

Backstory by Dr. Naraelle Hohensee

Additional resources:

Alice Apley, “African Lost-Wax Casting” on the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

The Art of Africa: A Resource for Educators (publication by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, available online)

“Origins and Empire: The Benin, Owo, and Ijebu Kingdoms” on the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Benin chronology on The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Benin from the Dallas Museum of Art

Kate Ezra, *Royal Arts of Benin: The Perls Collection* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992).

Barbara Plankensteiner, (ed.). *Benin Kings and Rituals: Court Arts from Nigeria* (Ghent, Belgium: Snoeck Publishers, 2007).

“Looted Benin bronzes to be lent back to Nigeria,” *The Art Newspaper*, October 16, 2017

This page titled 1.6.8: Benin plaque- Equestrian Oba and Attendants is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

1.6.9: Ere Ibeji Figures (Yoruba peoples)

by DR. PERI KLEMM



Figure **1.6.9.1**: 19th-20th century, Nigeria, Yoruba peoples, wood, beads, cam wood powder, pigment, 9 1/4 x 3 9/16 inches (23.5 x 9 cm)

The Yoruba have one of the highest rates of twining in the world—it is estimated that out of every 1,000 births, 45-50 result in twins. Twins are revered among the Yoruba and come into this world with the protection of the *orisha* (deity) Shango who is evoked at the baby's naming ceremony when he or she is a few months old. Due to the low birth weight of twins and the high infant mortality rates in Nigeria, many twin babies do not live long. If a baby dies during childbirth, in the months leading up to the naming ceremony, the parents will seek consultation with an Ifá diviner, a Babalawo. If the Babalawo ascertains a spiritual cause, he will help the parents find a carver to create an *Ere ibeji* figure. An *Ere ibeji* is a wooden carving of a male or female figure once used by the Yoruba. The figure is thought to be a focal point for the spiritual energy of the deceased twin who, according to Yoruba traditional thought, resides in the supernatural realm where he/she is cared for by a spiritual mother.

Families, particularly grieving mothers, take comfort in the belief that a spiritual mother is caring for and guarding the departed child. The *Ere ibeji* is ritually washed, fed, clothed and carried in a cloth wrapper on the mother's back as a real baby would be carried. The *Ere ibeji* might also be decorated with camwood powder, blue paint, beads, shells, and precious textiles. But despite the fact that this carving can serve as a receptacle for the spirit of the dead child, *Ere ibeji* figures do not look like children. These figures are carved to represent an ideal type within the Yoruba criteria of beauty and in the prime of life—neither a child nor an old person.

The carving style emphasizes the conical head, an elaborate hairstyle, a roundness of the eyes and facial features, and a balanced composition between the body parts. Each of these features references a moral virtue or inner goodness all children should cultivate. *Ere ibeji* carvings reveal not only the importance of twins and a strong belief in the afterlife, but what Yoruba regard as beautiful and correct.



Figure 1.6.9.2: Ere Ibeji, Yoruba, Nigeria, carved wood with attached personal ornaments including glass bead necklaces and girdles, metal armlets and strings of cowries attached from the wrists, 25 cm (National Museum of Scotland)

In the last fifty years, the practice of commissioning a carver to create an *Ere ibeji* has waned. *Ere ibeji* figures have become Western collector's items and artists are now carving for the tourist market. However, the practice of using spiritual figures has not stopped, though since the 1970s some parents have chosen to use manufactured, imported dolls or photographs instead of carved figures as receptacles for the spiritual energy of the deceased. These materials are generally less expensive, worldly, and modern. While *Ere ibeji* carvings have a distinct style, the fact that another medium can successfully serve the same purpose suggests that for the Yoruba, art is dynamic and flexible. While Western collectors demand an *Ere ibeji* that is similar to the image above, Yoruba practitioners were not constrained by a stylistic cannon and specific materials. For indigenous users, it is the concept behind this art making practice that is most important.

Additional resources:

Yoruba peoples on Art and Life in Africa (University of Iowa)

This page titled 1.6.9: Ere Ibeji Figures (Yoruba peoples) is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

1.6.10: Kingdom of Ife- Sculptures from West Africa

by THE BRITISH MUSEUM



Figure **1.6.10.1**

Ife (pronounced ee-feh) is today regarded as the spiritual heartland of the Yoruba people living in Nigeria, the Republic of Benin and their many descendants around the world. It is rightly regarded as the birthplace of some of the highest achievements of African art and culture, combining technical accomplishment with strong aesthetic appeal.

From the 12th to the 15th centuries, Ife flourished as a powerful, cosmopolitan and wealthy city-state in West Africa, in what is now modern Nigeria. It was an influential centre of trade connected to extensive local and long-distance trade networks which enabled the region to prosper.

Sculpture



Figure **1.6.10.2**: The Ife Head, c. 14th-15th century, brass, 35 cm high, Ife, Africa © Trustees of the British Museum

The artists of Ife developed a refined and highly naturalistic sculptural tradition in stone, terracotta, brass and copper and created a style unlike anything in Africa at the time. The technical sophistication of the casting process is matched by the artworks' enduring beauty. The human figures portray a wide cross-section of Ife society and include depictions of youth and old age, health and disease, suffering and serenity.

According to Yoruba myth, Ife was the center of the creation of the world and all mankind. Ife was home to many sacred groves located in the city's forests. Two groves in particular have revealed numerous sculptures: the Ore Grove with its stone monoliths, human and animal figures and the Iwinrin Grove which is associated with terra-cotta heads and fragments from life-size figures.

The identification and function of this head, in common with the others discovered at this site, remain uncertain. Its elaborate beaded headdress, possibly representing a crown, suggest that it was associated with an Ooni, a ruler of Ife.

Other sites have revealed spectacular pieces with royal associations, including the only known complete king figure and an exquisite terra-cotta head, possibly portraying a queen both from Ita Yemoo.

Ife today

Today Ife remains a major spiritual and religious centre for the Yoruba people. Some of its shrines and groves are still in use and rituals to key gods are performed regularly. Works of art from Ife have become iconic symbols of regional and national unity, and of pan-African identity. Since Independence in 1960 enthusiasm for copies or reproductions of heritage items with nostalgic associations has increased. The “Ori Olokun” head was chosen as the logo for the All-Africa Games held in Lagos in 1973 and has been adopted as the logo of numerous commercial, educational and financial institutions. Such images have become universal symbols of African heritage.

© Trustees of the British Museum

This page titled 1.6.10: Kingdom of Ife- Sculptures from West Africa is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

1.6.11: Ife uncovered

by THE BRITISH MUSEUM



Video **1.6.11.1**: Professor John Picton and metallurgist Paul Craddock discuss the meaning and the making of the sculptures in the exhibition Kingdom of Ife sculptures from West Africa. © Trustees of the British Museum. Created by British Museum.

Little was known of the Ife civilization—that is until seventeen cast bronze heads were found by chance.

This page titled 1.6.11: Ife uncovered is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

1.6.12: Olowe of Ise

by DR. PERI KLEMM, DR. STEVEN ZUCKER and DR. CHRISTA CLARKE



Video 1.6.12.1: Olowe of Ise, Veranda post, before 1938, Nigeria, Yoruba peoples, wood, pigment, 180.3 x 28.6 x 35.6 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City). Speakers: Dr. Peri Klemm and Dr. Steven Zucker



Figure 1.6.12.1: Olowe of Ise, Veranda post, before 1938 (Yoruba people, Nigeria), wood, pigment, 180.3 x 28.6 x 35.6 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City)

In the early twentieth century, a Yoruba ruler commissioned this architectural column from one of the most renowned sculptors in the history of Yoruba art, Olowe of Ise. Born in the nineteenth century in Efon-Alaiye, a famed carving center, Olowe moved as a youth southeast to Ise. There, his artistic reputation was established when he carved a program of architectural sculptures for its king, the Arinjale. Subsequent commissions of architectural sculpture for the palaces of other regional leaders brought Olowe even greater recognition as a master sculptor. Admired by his contemporaries, Olowe's artistic talent is recalled in oriki, or praise poems, composed in his honor. His accomplishments were also recognized in the West. In 1924, a pair of his palace doors was exhibited in London and acquired for the British Museum.

Olowe created this veranda post, one of several, for the exterior courtyard of a Yoruba palace. Carved from one piece of wood, the composition combines two classic Yoruba icons of power and leadership. The most prominent of these is the equestrian warrior, who is depicted frontally sitting regally on a diminutive horse. He holds a spear and a revolver. The image of the mounted warrior symbolizes the military might needed to form kingdoms. Local leaders adopted this image to validate their rule. At the base of the post, the kneeling female figure is depicted as the dominant form. In Yoruba culture, women are honored as the source of human life and embody ideas of spiritual, political, and economic power. These allegorical representations underscore the wealth and power of the ruler who commissioned the work.

Here, as in other examples of African sculpture, proportion and scale are altered and exaggerated to symbolize ideas. The disproportionately large heads represent character, self-control, and motivation. Eyes are large to suggest awareness. Among the Yoruba, the most beautiful people have a gap between their upper front teeth. The woman's exaggerated breasts symbolize her ability to have children and to nurture them. The woman is represented slightly larger than the warrior, suggesting that she is the essential support. The warrior's horse, less important than its rider, is depicted as smaller. The subordinate role of the two youths by the woman's side is suggested by their small scale.



Figure **1.6.12.2**: Detail, Olowe of Ise, Veranda post, before 1938 (Yoruba people, Nigeria), wood, pigment, 180.3 x 28.6 x 35.6 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City)

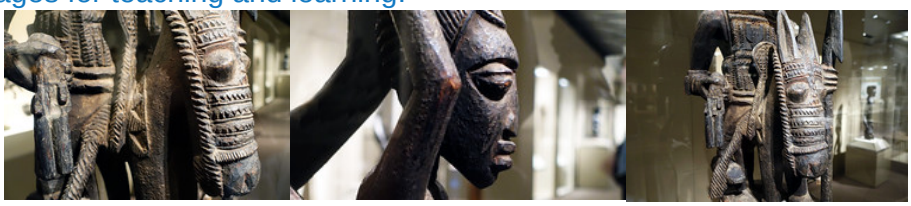
Stylistically, Olowe was very innovative in his composition. He is especially known for the manner in which figures project beyond the immediate boundaries of the sculptural space. Here, instead of the usual Yoruba practice of depicting figures in frontal poses, he sculpted the female figure turning toward the left with the two smaller attendants radiating outward at oblique angles. The compressed style of the upper portion of the column, with its weighty and self-contained equestrian figure, contrasts with the sense of kinetic energy created by the dynamic composition of multiple figures below. The sculpture's formal complexity is enhanced by its textured surface, with details originally painted in black, white, and royal blue. The deep carving style was well suited to the intense raking sunlight of its original setting just inside an exterior veranda.

The Yoruba, who live in southwestern Nigeria and southern Benin, are a diverse people with a rich cultural and artistic heritage of considerable antiquity. Although they number over 15 million people, the Yoruba embrace an overarching common identity through shared language and history. They trace the origins of both life and civilization to their founding city of Ile-Ife, which was a thriving urban center by the eleventh century. In the centuries that followed, numerous autonomous city-states developed, related through professed descent from Ile-Ife. In general, each city-state was governed by a sacred ruler, whose power was balanced by a

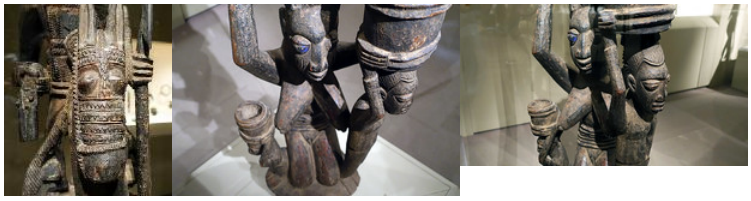
council of elders. Artists working for these regional leaders produced a wide range of art forms designed to glorify the status of the king and his court.

© 2006 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (by permission)

SmartHistory images for teaching and learning:



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)

This page titled 1.6.12: Olowe of Ise is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

1.6.13: Olowe of Ise, Veranda Post of Enthroned King and Senior Wife

by DEBORAH STOKES



Figure **1.6.13.1**: Olowe of Ise, Veranda Post of Enthroned King and Senior Wife, early 20th century, wood and pigment (photo: Dr. Delinda Collier, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0, **Art Institute of Chicago**)

Like sculpture in Medieval Europe often created to embellish architecture, this magnificent work was commissioned for a principal entryway, originally one in a suite of five veranda posts. Hand carved from one sizeable piece of high-density hardwood timber, this work by the renowned Yoruba artist Olowe of Ise originally measured more than five feet high.

He has skillfully created a complex composition comprised of five figural elements on a circular base: the crowned king, his senior wife, and three smaller attendants (one now missing) in the royal household. Portrayals of rulers and their privileged power of earthly and divine authority unite the many global art traditions across time and space.



Figure **1.6.13.2**: Olowe of Ise, Veranda Post of Enthroned King and Senior Wife, detail (photo: Dr. Delinda Collier, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0, **Art Institute of Chicago**)

Master carver

Similar to the systems of Medieval European guilds of craftsmen, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Yoruba artistic traditions were maintained by artists working in specialized carving centers throughout the southwest area of Nigeria. “Master carver” designated a person who attained the skills through training and advanced from apprentice to master within a locally established carving center or compound. A carver with exceptional talent often set up a studio on his own, accepted apprentices and assistants, and was commissioned directly.

One great master carver, **Olowe of Ise**, became a widely celebrated artist for his virtuosity of invention and design developed through the production of a range of notable and important royal commissions in the early twentieth century. Born in the town of Ise, according to published accounts, most of his life was spent working in the court center of Ise though he took commissions from other royal patrons over a wide area in the Ekiti region.



Figure **1.6.13.3**: Olowe of Ise, Veranda Post of Enthroned King and Senior Wife, detail (photo: Dr. Delinda Collier, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0, **Art Institute of Chicago**)

Signature Style

Olowe's highly original and unique style results from the variety of elements and details that he has made his own and that can be found in many of his published works. His remarkable ability to free the figures from the dense hardwood is unlike any other Yoruba carver. His virtuosity can be seen in the elegant balance of the fully three-dimensional figures in a tiered composition and placed in a variety of poses on a single base.

He treats the heads as a single ovoid form leading the eye to the crowned head of the king (*Ogoga*) and his attendant queen. The heads project at a diagonal angle that are mounted on highly elongated and slightly forward-bending necks, creating a distinct line down to their squared shoulders. The convention of elongating the figure, head, and neck can be seen in many of Olowe's carvings, creating a solid "mounting" to visually highlight the importance of the head that holds *ase*, or the inner spiritual power, dignity, strength, and sacredness of one's destiny.

Yoruba traditional thought and belief is often made manifest through hieratic proportions. The status of the king's consort is visually relayed by her physical size. However, it is balanced by the location of the seated king at the center of the post. His crowned head has been positioned so that it would be viewed at eye level in the original veranda setting. His feet are not allowed to touch the earth, a symbol of his transcendent position. His eyes are downcast, introspective, and attentive to the world beyond. He wears a conical beaded crown, signifying the legitimacy of his reign. The crown is decorated with four carved ancestral faces or 'heads' with open eyes, a reference to the divine line of descent and spiritual wisdom (*ase*) it contains.



Figure 1.6.13.4: Olowe of Ise, Veranda Post of Enthroned King and Senior Wife, detail (photo: Dr. Delinda Collier, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0, Art Institute of Chicago)

The style of the hats with serrated lines can be found in many of Olowe's works. In traditional Yoruba religious belief, the crown is the key emblem of the power of a sanctified reign, signaling the transformation of the human wearing it into a conduit to the spiritual, ancestral realm. Three small figures, scaled according to culturally-specific status, are at the base: a female who kneels in a gesture of humility and reverence; a standing court messenger identified by his half-shaved head playing a flute announcing the king's presence; and a third, now missing, standing while holding a large circular fan, emblem of royalty and Osun, the river deity.



Figure 1.6.13.5: Olowe of Ise, Veranda Post of Enthroned King and Senior Wife, detail (photo: Dr. Delinda Collier, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0, Art Institute of Chicago)



Figure **1.6.13.6**: Olowe of Ise, Veranda Post of Enthroned King and Senior Wife, detail (photo: Dr. Delinda Collier, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0, **Art Institute of Chicago**)

The king sits poised, leaning slightly forward, his weight held by his hands on his knees. A bird at the summit of his crown, a sign of transformational abilities and the protection of ancestral mothers, is rendered with an elongated beak that extends down to touch the very center of the beaded crown. Its tail points upward to the head of the standing consort who wears three vertical parallel facial marks with a line running from the left side of the bridge of the nose, identifying lineage to a principal Yoruba family, the Egbas.

She displays a once common practice in the Ekiti area of filing the front teeth as a sign of beauty and rank. Her elaborate hairstyle would reflect one worn for a festival honoring a deity (*orisha*) or during a chieftaincy installation. On her back, Olowe has replicated the queen's striking scarification patterns that are associated with her community and high status.

The formidable queen stands erect behind and towering over the king, yet they are visually connected by her hands gently resting on the back of the throne. Beaded coral adornments worn by the king and queen echo the form of their squared shoulders, and other beaded adornments are included, worn by entitlement as a member of the royal household. Traces of blue, red, and white pigments can be seen. They were once most likely prominent, but the colors have faded over time as the work was exposed to the outdoors.

A suite of five architectural posts commissioned from Olowe by the crowned king (*Ogoga*) of the town of Ikere, in Ekiti state, could be found situated in the principal entry to the local palace veranda and reception courtyard. Three of the major carvings appear to be functional supports, extending to the top of the veranda roof. Two multi-tiered figural posts flank a central geometric form, while two others facing outward represent a senior mother presenting her twins and a royal equestrian. A smaller freestanding equestrian figural group is at the center.



Figure **1.6.13.7**: Olowe of Ise, Veranda Post of Enthroned King and Senior Wife, detail (photo: Dr. Delinda Collier, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0, **Art Institute of Chicago**)

Photographed in situ more than two decades later (1958 and 1964), three of the original works had been reinstalled under a newly replaced palace veranda. The enthroned king with his senior wife is repositioned at the center and facing outward toward visiting guests, flanked by the senior mother with twins and the royal equestrian. All three appear to be structural supports. All three are now in American collections.

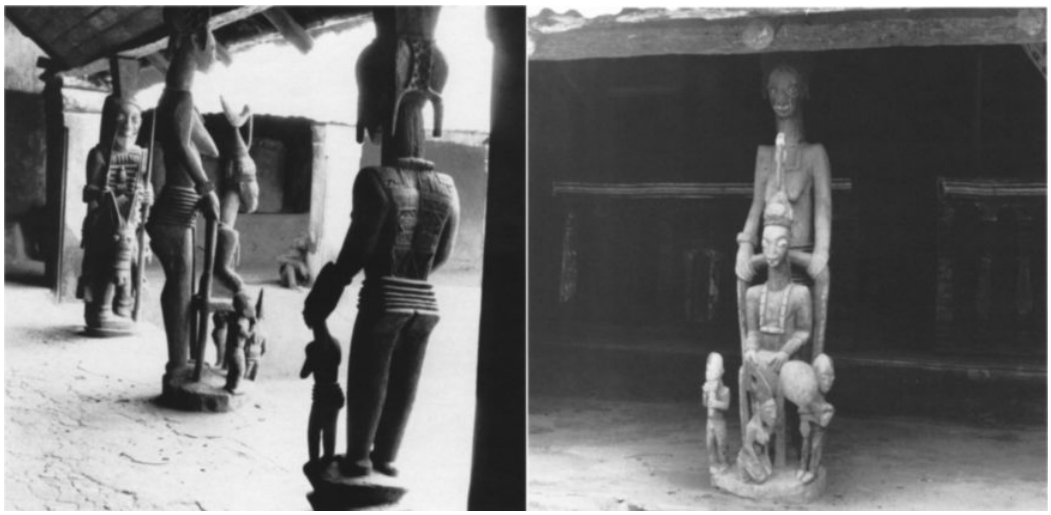


Figure **1.6.13.95**: Olowe of Ise, Veranda Posts in situ, Inner courtyard, palace of the ogoga, king of Ikere (photos by William Flagg, from Pemberton, John. "Art and Rituals for Yoruba Sacred Kings." *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 15, no. 2 (1989): 97-174

Global Connections

Olowe of Ise was flourishing in southwest Nigeria in the early twentieth century, coinciding with the time when early **Modernism** was emerging in the avant-garde circles in Paris studios. African art was **displayed** in the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro in Paris, arriving in the late nineteenth century as a result of scientific expeditions and colonial conquest.



Figure **1.6.13.8**: Constantin Brancusi, *King of Kings*, c. 1938, wood, 300.7 x 48.3 x 46 cm (photo: V, CC BY-NC 2.0)

Constantin Brancusi would have been inspired by works from francophone colonies, as *King of Kings* demonstrates. Similar to Olowe's veranda posts, this work was originally intended to stand in an architectural space, *Temple of Meditation*, a private sanctuary commissioned in 1933 by the Maharaja Yeshwant Rao Holkar of Indore.



Figure **1.6.13.9**: David Adjaye Associates, National Museum of African American History and Culture (photo: **Mondoo59**, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Architect David Adjaye was inspired by the top element of another of Olowe's veranda posts for his design of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington, D.C. Smithsonian Institution. Depicting a notable equestrian

leader, the multi-figural veranda post is on long term loan from the Museum of Five Continents, Munich, Germany and installed on the 4th floor.

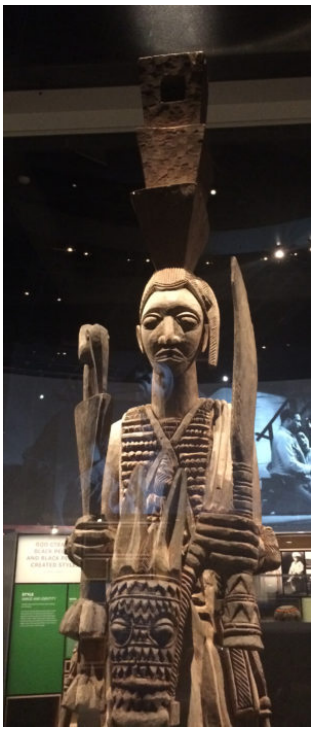


Figure **1.6.13.10**: Olowe of Ise, Equestrian veranda post, detail (photo: **C-Monster**, CC BY-NC 2.0)

Additional resources

Walker, R.A., *Olowe of Ise: A Yoruba Sculptor to Kings*, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. 1998

Olowe of Ise in the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art

Read more about Olowe of Ise

This page titled 1.6.13: Olowe of Ise, Veranda Post of Enthroned King and Senior Wife is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

1.6.14: Ikenga (Igbo peoples)

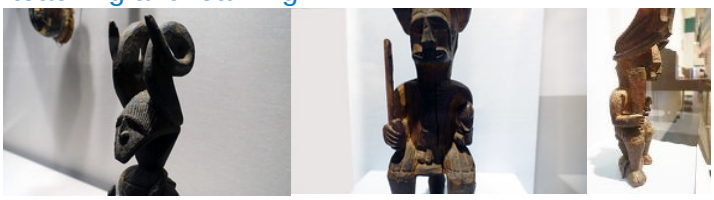
by DR. PERI KLEMM and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER



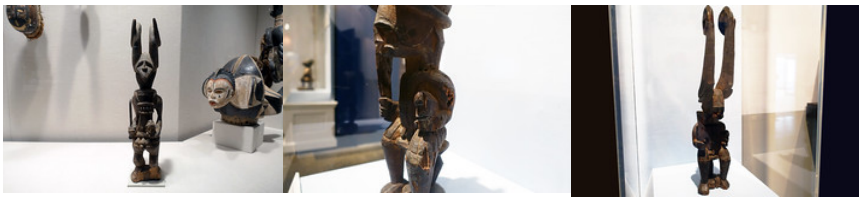
Video **1.6.14.1**: Ikenga, Igbo peoples, Nigeria, wood (University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology)

These carved wooden figures have human faces but animal attributes, and reflected the achievements of their owners.

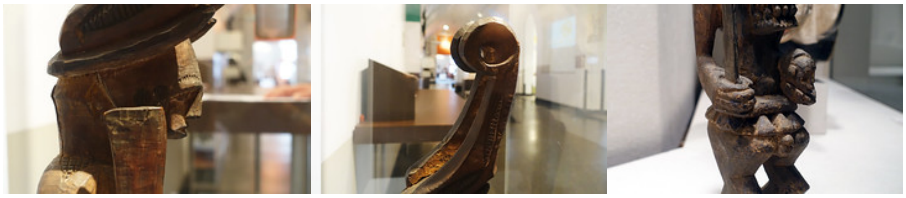
SmartHistory images for teaching and learning:



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)

This page titled 1.6.14: Ikenga (Igbo peoples) is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

1.6.15: Uche Okeke

by PERRIN LATHROP

> ***"Young artists in a new nation, that is what we are! We must grow with the new Nigeria and work to satisfy her traditional love for art or perish with our colonial past."***
>
> ***—Uche Okeke, from the "Zaria Art Society Manifesto," Natural Synthesis, 1960***

The Art Society of Zaria

During the period leading up to and following Nigerian independence in 1960, artists appropriated cultural and aesthetic traditions from around the country as a means of defining a new national identity. They drew upon narratives from Yoruba, Igbo, Urhobo and other cultures, Bible stories, local histories and artistic traditions to inform the content and style of their works, manipulating tales from the past to produce a mythology for the present.

This practice was defined as "natural synthesis" by the Art Society at Zaria, an arts group formed in the late 1950s by Uche Okeke, Demas Nwoko, Simon Okeke, Bruce Onobrakpeya and other art students at the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology (now Ahmadu Bello University) at Zaria in the northern region of Nigeria. The Art Society sought to reconsider the emphasis on Western academic artistic traditions espoused by the largely European faculty at Zaria, an art program associated with Goldsmiths (part of the University of London). Moving away from traditions steeped in colonialism, "natural synthesis" merged the best of indigenous art traditions, forms and ideas with useful ones from Western cultures to create a uniquely Nigerian aesthetic perspective.



Figure **1.6.15.1**: Uli body designs from Awka District, collected by W.B. Yeatman c. 1933 (Pitt-Rivers Museum, University of Oxford)

Later known as the Zaria Rebels, the members of the Art Society devised an academic program outside of the official university curriculum. The members thoroughly researched indigenous cultural and artistic traditions, produced works based on their findings and met regularly to discuss the outcomes. Though they took a similar conceptual approach to art making, the vast diversity inherent in the practices they analyzed led to great variation in their formal and stylistic synthesis.

The *Uli* aesthetic

Uche Okeke, the Art Society's second president, drew inspiration for a new visual language from *uli*, an Igbo female body and wall painting tradition from southeastern Nigeria that is based on sinuous abstract forms derived from nature (above). In *uli*, Okeke saw "limitless expression," internalizing the drawing technique he learned from his mother, a renowned uli draughtswoman, to serve a modernist sensibility.



Figure 1.6.15.2: Uche Okeke, *Owls*, From the *Oja Suite*, 1962, ink on paper © The Estate of Uche Okeke (Newark Museum)

While waiting in Abule Oje, Lagos in 1962 for traveling papers to Munich, Germany, where he was to train in stained glass and mosaic at the Franz Meyer Studio, Okeke created a series of pen and ink drawings that make up his remarkable *Oja Suite*. In one drawing, *Owls* (left), vertical lines, zigzags, spirals (*agwolagwo* or snake motif) and v-shapes (*okala isinwaoji* or three-lobed kola nut motif) come together to form two owls perched amidst dense foliage under a full moon. With his spare manipulation of line and spontaneous employment of *uli* symbols, Okeke distills cosmic and animal forms to their essential components. Okeke does not simply mimic *uli* forms but internalizes the flowing, poetic process of the drawing tradition itself, analyzing and exploiting its formal potential.

In drawings like *Owls*, the meanings of particular *uli* symbols become untied from their referents and depend entirely upon the other lines, motifs and spaces within the composition for interpretation. In Okeke's hands, the flowing lines and naturalistic patterns of *uli* converge to form vegetal, human and animal compositions that give form the artist's conception of a new Nigeria.

Civil war

After his return from Germany in 1963, Okeke settled in Enugu, then capital of Nigeria's Eastern Region. With the help of other former Art Society artists, Okeke established a cultural center, which he directed from 1964 to 1967. Modeled on prominent scholar Ulli Beier's Mbari Artists and Writers Club in Ibadan, Okeke's Mbari Enugu brought together artists, writers, dramatists and intellectuals to exchange ideas, collaborate, exhibit and discuss new work.

From 1967 to 1970, Nigeria's brutal civil war, known as the Nigerian-Biafran War, tore apart the newly independent nation with economic, ethnic, cultural and religious conflict. Though the southeastern provinces attempted secession to establish the short-lived Republic of Biafra, Nigeria remained largely united despite endemic corruption, poverty, inequality and injustice.



Figure 1.6.15.3: Uche Okeke, *Refugee Family*, 1966, linotype

In the lead up to and during the war, Okeke mobilized participants at the Mbari to produce art, literature and performances that reflected their experiences of the conflict. With a heightened awareness of the failure, hope and tragedy of humanity, Okeke produced works like *Refugee Family* (1966) that meditated on the pogroms (organized massacres of particular ethnic groups) inflicted upon Igbo in Northern Nigeria at the start of the war. Alienated figures in earth tones are sparely outlined with thick *uli*-influenced strokes. The work's modest medium (linocut on paper) and technique represent the artist's need to process the conflict through visual production, despite the dearth of art materials available at the time.

Nsukka

After the war, Okeke joined the faculty of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, where he ran the Department of Fine and Applied Arts from 1971 to 1983. Under his direction, Nsukka rose to prominence as a center of Nigeria's artistic creativity, drawing artists like the renowned El Anatsui to its ranks. At Nsukka, Okeke further developed his synthesis theory, encouraging students to research Nigerian art traditions to solve formal problems in their work. The artist's own experiments with *uli* became increasingly abstract in prints like ***Isi Nwoji* (1972)** where *uli* motifs, like the diamond-shaped kola nut (*isioji*), are clearly defined but with a bolder graphic approach.

The oil boom of the mid-1970s expanded Nigeria's income capacity, but also brought massive official corruption and the institution of a series of military regimes from 1983 to 1998. Under Okeke's supervision, Nsukka students like Obiora Udechukwu manipulated *uli*, and later *nsibidi*, another indigenous graphic system, and even Chinese *li* calligraphy to give form to the social and political struggles preoccupying everyday life in Nigeria.

Through Udechukwu, who later became a prominent professor at Nsukka, Okeke's rigorous intellectual inquiry into *uli* influenced another generation of artists, including Tayo Adenaike, Olu Oguibe, Chika Okeke-Agulu and Marcia Kure, among others. Like Okeke, these artists continue to think deeply about place and history in their very contemporary manipulations of design traditions from the past.

Additional Resources:

"The Poetics of Line: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group," National Museum of African Art

Ulli Beier, *Contemporary Art in Africa* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1968).

Clementine Deliss, *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa* (New York: Flammarion, 1995).

C. Krydz Ikwuemesi, ed. *The Triumph of a Vision: An Anthology on Uche Okeke and Modern Art in Nigeria* (Lagos: Pendulum Art Gallery, 2003).

Chika Okeke-Agulu, "Nationalism and Rhetoric of Modernism in Nigeria: The Art of Uche Okeke and Demas Nwoko, 1960-1968," *African Arts*, vol. 39, no. 1 (Spring 2006): pp. 26-37, 92-3.

Simon Ottenberg, *New Traditions from Nigeria: Seven Artists of the Nsukka Group* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997).

Simon Ottenberg, ed. *The Nsukka Artists and Nigerian Contemporary Art* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian National Museum of African Art and University of Washington Press, 2002).

This page titled 1.6.15: Uche Okeke is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

1.6.16: Yinka Shonibare, The Swing (After Fragonard)

by DR. ALLISON YOUNG



Figure **1.6.16.1**: Yinka Shonibare MBE, *The Swing (After Fragonard)*, 2001 (Tate, London) © Yinka Shonibare

With her fingers delicately grasping the thickly coiled rope of a swing suspended mid-flight, a life-sized female mannequin flirtatiously kicks up her left foot, projecting her slipper into the air where it hovers above a tangle of branches. Our gaze is directed from the arch of her foot towards the vibrant trim of her petticoat, gown and coat.

A recreation of a Rococo painting

The Swing (After Fragonard) is a three-dimensional recreation of the Rococo painting after which it was titled, which itself offers testimony to the opulence and frivolity of pre-Revolutionary France. Painted in 1767, Jean-Honoré Fragonard's *The Swing* depicts a coquettish young girl swinging in a lush and fertile forest and, of course, playfully kicking up her shoe. A sculpture of a bashful cherub looks on, but he is not alone; the female figure is flanked by two male figures lurking in the shadows, one seems to push her swing from behind, as the other mischievously glances up the layers of her dress to catch a glimpse of what is beneath.

Living with History

> ***Living in England, with my colonial relationship to this country, one cannot escape all these Victorian things, because they are everywhere: in architecture, culture, attitude…***



Figure **1.6.16.2**: Jean-Honoré Fragonard, *The Swing*, oil on canvas, 1767 (Wallace Collection, London

Shonibare's quotations of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century style and sensibility are visually captivating; at the same time, tableaux such as *The Swing* contain some dark undertones. To begin with, the beautiful young protagonist of Fragonard's painting has somehow become headless. This is likely a reference to the use of the guillotine during the Reign of Terror in the 1790s, when members of the French aristocracy were publicly beheaded. Drawing our attention to questions of excess, class and morality that were raised by revolutionaries two centuries ago, Shonibare invites us to also consider the increasing disparity between economic classes today, especially alongside the growing culture of paranoia, terror and xenophobia in global politics since 9/11.

As a British-born Nigerian, raised between Lagos and London, Shonibare is especially perceptive to the ways in which issues of access, nationalism and belonging have their roots in modern European history, particularly with regards to the United Kingdom

and its relationship to its former colonies. Here is where the specific fabrics that Shonibare utilizes become more relevant, as their symbolism is steeped in histories of cultural appropriation, imperialism and power.

Indonesian motifs, made by Europeans, sold in West Africa

Though tailored in the fashion of eighteenth-century French aristocratic style, the costume that is modeled by Shonibare's protagonist has been sewn from colorful and abstractly patterned fabrics with quite different origins: the bright golds, reds and blues arranged in geometric motifs across her ruffled skirt are typical of the "African" Dutch wax fabrics that Shonibare has famously used to adorn his figural tableaux throughout his career.



Figure **1.6.16.3**: Dutch wax print fabrics (photo: **ipercher**, CC BY-NC 2.0)

While these fabrics have come to signify African identity today, the patterns on Dutch wax fabrics were originally based on motifs found in Indonesian batiks, and were manufactured in England and Holland in the nineteenth-century. Predictably, the European imitations did not prove lucrative when sold in South Asian markets, so Dutch manufacturers then marketed the textiles to their West African colonies, where they have since been appropriated and integrated into local visual culture.

As such, Dutch wax fabrics as we know them today are the product of the complex economic and cultural entanglements that resulted from European imperialism. As curator Okwui Enwezor has explained, Shonibare uses the fabrics "as a tool to investigate the place of ethnicity and the stereotype in modernist representation. (…) The textile is neither Dutch nor African, therefore, the itinerary of ideas it circulates are never quite stable in their authority or meaning."

Aesthetics and Authenticity

As fictional as their "African-ness" may appear to be, however, the fabrics have now been completely assimilated in places like Nigeria, where Shonibare grew up. As Enwezor points out, the material is "both fake and authentic, both readymade and original," not to mention indisputably cosmopolitan.

The question of what is "authentically" African has personal resonance for Shonibare, who, as an art student in London, was shocked when one of his instructors suggested that he make work that expressed his African identity. This conversation prompted him to think about stereotypes and the areas that exist between categories of identity and culture. The artist began using the material in 1992.

In Pursuit of Leisure

What might Shonibare wish to communicate by bringing together these "African" textiles with Fragonard's Rococo images, or any of the other European masterpieces that the artist has appropriated in his sculptural installations?

In imaging this particular moment in European history, Shonibare wishes to forge connections between imperialism, the aristocracy, and the "colonized wealthy class." In *The Swing (After Fragonard)*, which is loaded with references to the French Revolution, the Age of Enlightenment and colonial expansion into Africa, Shonibare asks us to consider how a simple act of leisure can be so controversial.

> ***While the leisure pursuit might look frivolous (…) my depiction of it is a way of engaging in that power. It is actually an expression of something much more profoundly serious insofar as the accumulation of wealth and power that is personified in leisure was no doubt a product of exploiting people.***

In this and other works, Shonibare chooses stories—including biographies, world events, and works of art—which are already effective allegories concerning race, class, corruption and greed, calling our attention to some of the darker moments in Western history. However, his use of the Dutch Wax fabric, with its spurious origins and its misleading aesthetic identity, serve as a reminder that history and truth are also themselves constructions.

This page titled 1.6.16: Yinka Shonibare, The Swing (After Fragonard) is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

1.7: Republic of Benin

Buffalo (*Bocio*) (Fon peoples)

by DR. CHRISTA CLARKE



Figure **1.7.1**: Buffalo (Bocio), 19th century, Republic of Benin, Fon peoples, silver, iron, and wood, 30.5 cm high (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

Royal works of art, like this silver buffalo, were made by members of the Huntondji family, who served Fon kings as jewelers and smiths since the eighteenth century. Though small in size, this shimmering silver creature radiates strength and determination. Bulging eyes, bared teeth, black curved horns, cocked ears, and swishing tail create this effect. Its eyes, horns, and tail are made from iron, a material associated with the Fon war god, Gu. The forest buffalo was an emblem of the Fon king Guezo, who ruled Dahomey (modern Republic of Benin) from 1818 until 1858. The qualities associated with a ruler's emblem—in the case of the buffalo, strength, enduring memory, and royal legacy—were seen as defining a king's reign. Although he came to power by usurping the throne of his older brother, Guezo is recalled as an important leader who unified the diverse constituencies of the kingdom.

Symbols of Fon kings were determined in a divination ceremony known as *fa*, which predicted the nature and character of each king's reign. The buffalo emblem is one of 256 different *fa* divination signs, which were represented in a variety of artistic media created to support and enhance the king's authority. Sculptural forms, like this example, in addition to functioning as royal symbols, also served as bocio, empowered objects that provided protection to the king. Placed in palace shrines where they served as the focus of prayer, these works were given potency through the presence of powerful substances in their interiors. Royal bocio were also displayed during ceremonial processions and transported to battlefields during times of war.



Figure 1.7.2: Detail, *Buffalo (Bocio)*, 19th century, Republic of Benin, Fon people, silver, iron, and wood, 30.5 cm high (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

To create this buffalo figure, the sculptor sheathed a solid wooden core with very thin pieces of silver. He tacked these pieces to the surface in individual sheets, creating a patchwork effect. Then he finished the surface with hatching marks to simulate hide and incised vertical lines for the large, bared teeth. The sculptor's technique was a clever one, because silver was a luxury material derived primarily from European coins. The artist's technique of encasing wood in sheet metal maximized the visual effects of a costly material without using the large quantities of metal required for lost-wax casting.

The Fon kingdom of Dahomey, founded in the early seventeenth century, was an important regional power renowned for its strong monarchy, military prowess, and impressive court arts. Dahomey's influence expanded in the eighteenth century with the capture of the port city of Ouidah. From this coastal center, the kingdom participated in lucrative trade with Europeans, growing prosperous first by serving as a middleman in the Atlantic slave trade and, later, by selling palm oil. French colonization and the subsequent abolishment of the institution of kingship led to the fall of Dahomey in the late nineteenth century.
© 2006 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (by permission)

Additional resources:

This work at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Portraits of African Leadership: Living Rulers

This page titled 1.7: Republic of Benin is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

SECTION OVERVIEW

1.8: The art of Sierra Leone

15th - 20th century

1.8.1: Lidded Saltcellar

1.8.2: Stone Head (mahe yafei), Kisi peoples

1.8.3: Bundu / Sowei Helmet Mask (Mende peoples)

1.8.4: Helmet Mask

1.8.5: Cotton hammock (Vai peoples)

1.8.6: Ceremonial Ladle (Dan peoples)

1.8.7: Found accidentally

This page titled 1.8: The art of Sierra Leone is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

1.8.1: Lidded Saltcellar

by DR. CHRISTA CLARKE



Figure **1.8.1.1**: Lidded Saltcellar, Sierra Leone, Sapi-Portugese, 15th-16th century, ivory, 29.8 cm high (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

This magnificent lidded ivory saltcellar was carved by a Sapi sculptor working in what is now Sierra Leone. This work is part of a group of ivory artifacts created during the earliest period of exchange between Africans living south of the Sahara and Europeans.



Figure **1.8.1.4**

During the second half of the fifteenth century, journeys of exploration brought Portuguese navigators into direct contact with cultures of coastal western Africa. At a number of coastal centers in present-day Sierra Leone and Guinea Bissau, as well as Nigeria and Democratic Republic of Congo, the travelers encountered African carvers of considerable talent and professional skill. They commissioned African works in ivory for export as souvenirs of their travels or as gifts for the European nobility who financed their voyages. Many of the artifacts entered European princely collections, formed as cabinets of curiosities. These works, whose African origins had been forgotten until recent art historical research unearthed them, have come to be known as Afro-Portuguese ivories.



Figure 1.8.1.2: Rosettes (detail), *Lidded Saltcellar*, Sierra Leone, Sapi-Portugese, 15th-16th century, ivory, 29.8 cm high (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

At the time, salt was rare and therefore very expensive in Europe. To be able to display this precious commodity in such a finely carved and elaborately detailed vessel was a symbol of wealth and prestige at the table of a wealthy Portuguese. Local artists are believed to have been shown European prototypes on which to base their creations.

This vessel's form and some elements of its decoration recall European saltcellars. For example, an acorn nestled inside the stylized petals of a rose crowns the top of the container, while four rosettes carved in relief surround the upper part of the lid (above).



Figure 1.8.1.3: Snakes (detail), *Lidded Saltcellar*, Sierra Leone, Sapi-Portugese, 15th-16th century, ivory, 29.8 cm high (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Most of the designs, however, are distinctly African, reflecting Sapi artistic sensibilities. Four figures wearing local dress are sculpted around the base (below). Two are warriors bearing swords and shields, and two are women. Above them, curving around the disk of ivory, are four delicately carved snakes that drop down toward four dogs represented in a state of alarm with bared fangs, drawn-back ears, and bristling fur.



Figure 1.8.1.4: Detail, *Lidded Saltcellar*, Sierra Leone, Sapi-Portugese, 15th-16th century, ivory, 29.8 cm high (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

Although the Sapi peoples have dispersed to other locales since the sixteenth century, traditions associated with contemporary peoples related to the Sapi, notably the Baga, provide insights into the meaning of such imagery. In Baga belief, snakes are identified with local water spirits, called Niniganné. The Niniganné are described as powerful beings with long, smooth hair and brilliant scales. They are believed to be capable of spanning two realms—the earthly and the spiritual—and are associated with waterways, wealth (in the form of clothing and metal), and danger. These attributes coincide with Sapi perceptions of the Portuguese seafarers, whose flowing hair and unusual attire may be compared to descriptions of Niniganné. Like the water spirits, the Portuguese visitors were regarded as powerful individuals with mystical abilities who traveled across the water bringing great riches, in the form of trade. They also brought danger, since, beginning as early as 1512, the Portuguese king required that ships returning from Africa be laden with slaves.

© 2006 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (by permission)

Additional resources:

This work at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Afro-Portugese Ivories on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Ivory and Boxwood Carvings, 1450–1800 on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

This page titled 1.8.1: Lidded Saltcellar is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

1.8.2: Stone Head (mahe yafei), Kisi peoples

by THE BRITISH MUSEUM



Figure **1.8.2.1**: Stone head (mahe yafei), 16th – 18th century, Sierra Leone, Kisi peoples, steatite or soapstone, 24 x 10 x 17.5 cm © Trustees of the British Museum

Found accidentally

Numerous enigmatic sculptures carved in stone have been found over a wide area of Sierra Leone and western Liberia. Most of these sculptures are in human form. The Mende people who occupy the largest area where they have been discovered call them nomoli meaning “found spirit”; they are characterised by their bulging eyes and flaring nostrils.

The Mende regard them as “rice gods” and make offerings to them to increase their harvest yields. Other sculptures associated with the Kisi people, known as pomdo, are more varied in form. They are viewed as ancestor figures and are placed in shrines. Little is known about the age, use or origins of these sculptures. They have been found accidentally by local farmers buried in the earth or in waterways, and by diamond miners.

Larger, pedestal heads such as this one, appear to form a sub-group of the figures described above. This magnificent steatite head is rendered in a naturalistic style. It stands on a solid pedestal base with its head tilted majestically backwards. The elaborate hairstyle with top knot and the representation of earrings is beautifully captured. Other heads of this type are carved with beards or moustaches and some are depicted wearing nose-rings. Such attributes suggest that these heads represent people of status, possibly chiefs or community leaders.

Portuguese accounts from the early seventeenth century describe chiefs with elaborate hairstyles and wearing gold rings in their nose and ears but there is no mention of an active stone carving tradition at this time. The sculptures bear stylistic similarities to ivory salt cellars produced by Sapi artists for European clients between the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

Scholars currently believe that some of these stone sculptures may have been made prior to the arrival of Europeans on the coast in 1463.

© Trustees of the British Museum

This page titled 1.8.2: Stone Head (mahe yafei), Kisi peoples is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

1.8.3: Bundu / Sowei Helmet Mask (Mende peoples)

by DR. PERI KLEMM and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER

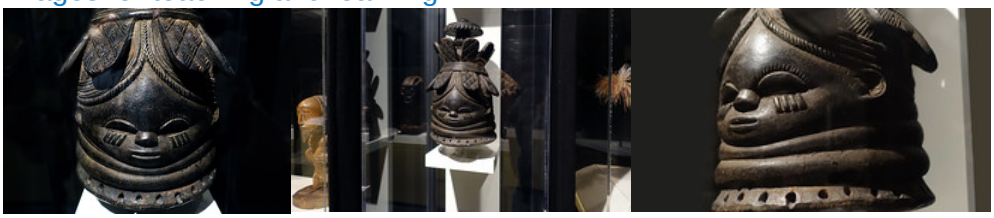


Video 1.8.3.1: Helmet Mask for Sande Society (*Ndoli Jowei*), Mende peoples, Nguabu Master (Moyamba district, Sierra Leone), late 19th-early 20th century, wood and pigment, 39.4 x 23.5 x 26 cm (Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, New York)

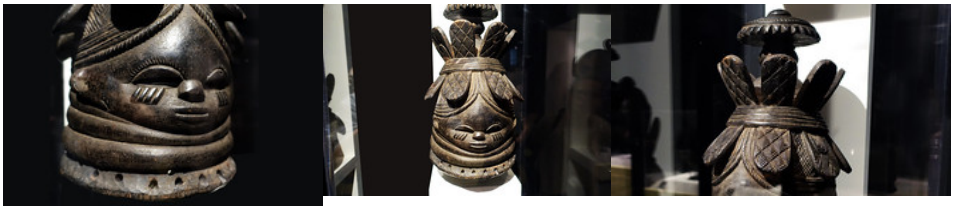
The Mende initiation rite for young women is the only known masquerade tradition where the mask-wearers are female.

Sowei refers most specifically to medicine—the kind of medicine that female healers/herbalists utilize. Embodied in this idea of medicine is a spiritual force. The mask, when danced, is a visual expression of this spirit. The term also refers to the custodian of the medicine — a Sande official.

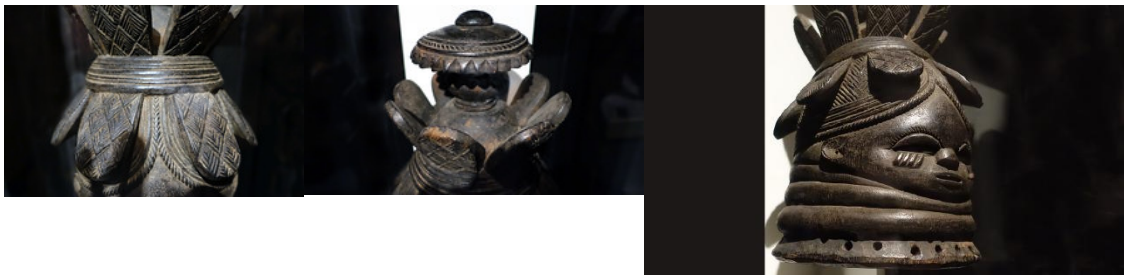
SmartHistory images for teaching and learning:



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)

This page titled 1.8.3: Bundu / Sowei Helmet Mask (Mende peoples) is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

1.8.4: Helmet Mask

by DR. CHRISTA CLARKE



Figure 1.8.4.1: Helmet Mask, 19th-20th century, Sierra Leone, Moyamba region, Mende or Sherbro peoples, wood, metal, 47.9 x 22.2 x 23.5cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

This helmet mask reveals the hand of a master through its refined carving, harmonious design, and innovative elements. Within Mende and Sherbro culture, helmet masks are carved with symbolic features intended to endow the wearer with spiritual power. Senior members of two distinct initiation societies, Sande and Humui, may have worn this work in performances.

Sande is a powerful pan-ethnic women's association responsible for the education and moral development of young girls. Helmet masks of this kind represent its guardian spirit and allude to an idealized female beauty. Historically, the Sande initiation process took months to complete, yet today sessions are coordinated with the calendars of secondary schools and may be completed during vacations and holidays. Such masks are worn by initiated Sande women at performances that celebrate the completion of the young initiates' training period.



Figure **1.8.4.2**: Detail, *Helmet Mask*, 19th-20th century, Sierra Leone, Moyamba region, Mende or Sherbro peoples, wood, metal, 47.9 x 22.2 x 23.5cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

The masks are finely carved to convey admired feminine features: an elaborate coiffure, a smooth, broad forehead, narrowly slit eyes, a small, composed mouth, and a sensuously ringed neck. This composition of forms and symmetry creates a serene facial expression that implies self-control. The presence of a beard, a symbol synonymous with the wisdom men achieve with age and experience, may suggest that, through Sande, women attain knowledge equal to men. Directly below the curve of the beard are two slots through which the performer can see.

The mask's glossy black patina evokes the beauty of clean, healthy, oiled skin. It may also refer to the blackness of the river bottom, where the Sande spirit is believed to reside. In this interpretation, the ringed neck may refer to the circular ripples of water that are formed as the Sande spirit emerges from her watery realm.

In Humui, a medicine society for men and women, this type of helmet mask has been used to address curative needs, especially mental illness. The four projecting animal-horn amulets that rise from the perimeter may be a reference to the animal horns filled with protective medicinal ingredients worn by Humui members.

© 2006 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (by permission)

Additional resources:

This mask at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

This page titled 1.8.4: Helmet Mask is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

1.8.5: Cotton hammock (Vai peoples)

by THE BRITISH MUSEUM



Figure **1.8.5.1**: Cotton hammock, early 20th century, Vai peoples, cotton, 213 x 125 cm, Sierra Leone © Trustees of the British Museum

Made for a chief

This is an elaborate hammock probably made for a male or female chief in Sierra Leone in the early twentieth century. Prior to the advent of motorised vehicles and an extended road network after the Second World War men and women of status in Sierra Leone used elaborate hammocks as a key means of transport in inland areas. During the colonial period British officials would also commission hammocks for their personal use.

These hammocks had a heavy wooden frame with a cloth canopy to protect them from the sun and the hammock was supported on the heads of four bearers. The slung part of the hammock was made from between three to five strips of woven cotton sewn together edge to edge to form a wide cloth. The ends were doubled over to form a loop through which the carrying poles were inserted.

Wealth and prestige

The cloth used for the slung part of the hammocks was inspired by the *kpokpo*("country cloth") tradition. Such cloth was woven in varying width narrow strips by men using a double-heddle loom. *Kpokpo* cloths use predominantly locally grown cotton often combined with imported machine spun yarn to provide greater strength and a wider range of colours. These specialist weavers demonstrated their creative ingenuity and technical knowledge in the design and patterning of some of these cloths which displayed the prestige and wealth of their owners.

This hammock is woven in three weft-faced strips in various shades of indigo, brown, red, and natural colours. Supplementary weft float motifs in black and white cotton thread are scattered – seemingly randomly – along the weft bands.

The centre of each band has a block of densely-worked tapestry weave geometric motifs. Along each side of the hammock are three separately woven flaps with bold weft stripes and natural-coloured pompoms. These would have been highly visible as the hammock travelled along and may have been specially designed for such public display.

The British Museum

© Trustees of the British Museum

This page titled 1.8.5: Cotton hammock (Vai peoples) is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

1.8.6: Ceremonial Ladle (Dan peoples)

by DR. CHRISTA CLARKE



Figure **1.8.6.1**: Zlan of Belewale, Ceremonial Ladle *(Wakemia* or *Wunkirmian)*, Libera, Dan peoples, before 1960, wood, fiber, metal, and pigment, 13.3 × 58.4 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

Among the We and neighboring Dan peoples, large, sculpted ladles like this one are created to honor women known as *wunkirle*, a title earned through their exceptional generosity and hospitality. This title is bestowed upon one woman from each village quarter who has demonstrated outstanding abilities as an industrious farmer, a bountiful provider of food, and a gracious host. The chosen woman is expected to offer hospitality to all who come to her door at the great celebrations that occur before the planting season begins. As *wunkirle*, she leads a procession of women carrying pots of cooked rice and soup and directs the distribution of the food to all the guests in attendance. Her duties also include hosting itinerant bands of musicians and entertainers as well as later providing food for men who toil in the fields during the planting season.

Such ladles are carved as an emblem of honor for a particular *wunkirle* and are typically passed on to the successor she selects to replace her. According to We belief, these ceremonial ladles embody a spiritual force, called *dü*, which sustains the wunkirle's exceptional abilities to organize feasts, bringing her great fame and social status. Women who have been honored as *wunkirle* often accompany male dancers wearing masks in performances. Bearing their ladles in hand, the women dance with the masker, offering gifts and blessings.



Figure **1.8.6.2**: Detail, Zlan of Belewale, Ceremonial Ladle *(Wakemia* or *Wunkirmian)*, Libera, Dan peoples, before 1960, wood, fiber, metal, and pigment, 13.3 × 58.4 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

This ladle takes the form of a long, scooplike bowl surmounted by a handle in the shape of a female head. It is attributed to the artist Zlan, a master carver active during the first half of the twentieth century. The face, sculpted in a style characteristic of Zlan's work, features slit eyes, a generous mouth with four metal- tab teeth, and a line of delicately incised scarification from forehead to nose. White kaolin clay around the eyes and extending to the sides represents the band of white kaolin clay that Dan women often apply cosmetically to symbolize the heightened powers of sight one must possess to be aware of the spiritual realm. A carved coiffure of two large crescents extending front to back is embellished with plaited fiber along the central ridges. On such ladles, the sculpted head is believed to be a portrait of the original owner of the ladle, whose individuality is conveyed through details of specific scarification and coiffure design features, rather than physical likeness.



Figure **1.8.6.3**: Source

Zlan's work was much sought after by wealthy patrons in Dan, Mano, and We villages in Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire. The son of a carver, Zlan was born around the turn of the twentieth century in a We town on the River Cess, which forms a border between Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia. Zlan's early demonstration of artistic talent was recognized and encouraged by his mother, who gave him his first adze. He secured his first commission for a sculpture around the age of thirteen and eventually gained widespread recognition for his masterful carvings, many of which now grace museum collections in the United States and Europe.

Until his death sometime before 1960, Zlan served as a mentor to many students during their apprenticeship, establishing his village of Belewale as a major center of carving. According to the recollections of locals, Zlan was often assisted in carving by his wife Sonzlanwon, who blocked out forms in the wood for Zlan to finish. The tradition of carving has continued in Zlan's family, at least through the late 1980s, carried on by his nephews Wrudugweh and Blekwa as well as a niece, Ziate.

© 2006 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (by permission)

Additional resources:

This work at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

This page titled 1.8.6: Ceremonial Ladle (Dan peoples) is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.3: West Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

1.8.7: Found accidentally

This page titled 1.8.7: Found accidentally is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

2: Central Africa

Central Africa includes Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Republic of the Congo, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and Rwanda.

2.1: Cameroon

2.1.1: Ceremonial Palm Wine Vessel (Cameroon Grasslands peoples)

2.1.2: Elephant Mask (Bamileke Peoples)

2.2: Democratic Republic of the Congo

2.2.1: Crucifix (Kongo peoples)

2.2.2: Female (pwo) Mask

2.2.3: Power Figure (Nkisi Nkondi), Kongo peoples

2.2.4: Ndop Portrait of King Mishe miShyaang maMbul (Kuba peoples)

2.2.5: Lukasa (Memory Board) (Luba peoples)

2.2.6: Buli Master, possibly Ngongo ya Chintu, Prestige Stool- Female Caryatid (Luba or Hemba peoples)

2.2.7: Double Prestige Panel (Kuba peoples)

2.2.8: Figurative Harp (Domu) (Mangbetu peoples)

2.3: Gabon

2.3.1: Kota reliquary (mbulu ngulu)

2.3.2: Female Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble (Fang peoples)

2.3.3: Female Reliquary Guardian Figure (Fang peoples)—video

This page titled 2: Central Africa is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

SECTION OVERVIEW

2.1: Cameroon

In the Grasslands region of northwestern Cameroon, bead embroidery is one of the most lavish arts. **19th-20th century**

2.1.1: Ceremonial Palm Wine Vessel (Cameroon Grasslands peoples)

2.1.2: Elephant Mask (Bamileke Peoples)

This page titled 2.1: Cameroon is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

2.1.1: Ceremonial Palm Wine Vessel (Cameroon Grasslands peoples)

by DR. CHRISTA CLARKE



Figure **2.1.1.1**: Ceremonial Palm Wine Vessel, 19th–20th century, Grassfields region, Cameroon, gourd, glass beads, cloth, cane, wood, 76.2 x 30.8 x 19.7 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

Of the many ritual items in a Grassfields kingdom's royal treasury, bead-embroidered calabashes are among the most important. These containers were used exclusively by the Fon (chief) to store palm wine served on ceremonial occasions. The ritual consumption of palm wine was considered a sacred activity and reinforced the Fon's spiritual and political power. Palm wine was also an essential component of sacrificial libations to the ancestors.



Figure **2.1.1.2**: Animal heads (detail), Ceremonial Palm Wine Vessel, 19th–20th century, Grassfields region, Cameroon, gourd, glass beads, cloth, cane, wood, 76.2 x 30.8 x 19.7 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

This example features a long-necked calabash attached to a tall cylindrical basketry base. The carved wood stopper has two horned animal heads facing opposing directions and a third animal head pointing upward, symbols of all-seeing powers (above). The entire assemblage is covered with cloth embroidered with strands of translucent and opaque glass beads that form intricate and colorful circular, diamond-shaped, and zigzag patterns.

These abstract geometric motifs symbolize attributes of royal power. The circular medallions surrounding the spherical body refer to the earth spider, a symbol of supernatural wisdom and communication. Because this type of spider burrows in the earth, it is believed to have the ability to unite humans, who live above the ground, with the ancestors who are buried below. Diamond-shaped motifs on the stopper and on the sides and bottom rim of the stand represent the frog, a symbol of fertility and increase. Their presence on the container conveys the idea that, with the support of many people, a peaceful and prosperous kingdom is possible.



Figure **2.1.1.3**: Bottom (detail), Ceremonial Palm Wine Vessel, 19th–20th century, Grassfields region, Cameroon, gourd, glass beads, cloth, cane, wood, 76.2 x 30.8 x 19.7 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

Rulers throughout the many kingdoms in the Grassfields region of western Cameroon employed a range of art objects to assert their political, economic, and religious power. Presented publicly in lavish displays of wealth and power, many court objects were distinguished by their elaborate bead embroidery. Imported from Europe, beads were considered a luxury material whose use and distribution were controlled by the Fon. The decoration of wooden sculpture with vast quantities of brilliantly colored beads transformed utilitarian objects, such as stools, vessels, and pipes, into symbols of royal status and prestige.



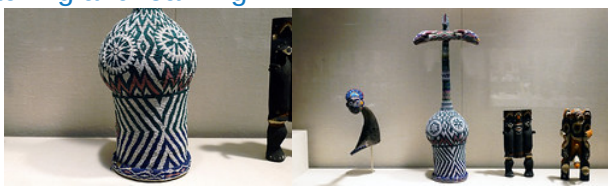
Figure **2.1.1.4**: Animal head (detail), Ceremonial Palm Wine Vessel, 19th–20th century, Grassfields region, Cameroon, gourd, glass beads, cloth, cane, wood, 76.2 x 30.8 x 19.7 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

Additional resources:

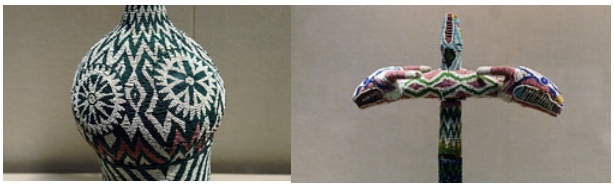
This work at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Trade Relations among European and African Nations

SmartHistory images for teaching and learning:



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)

This page titled 2.1.1: Ceremonial Palm Wine Vessel (Cameroon Grasslands peoples) is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.4: Central Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

2.1.2: Elephant Mask (Bamileke Peoples)

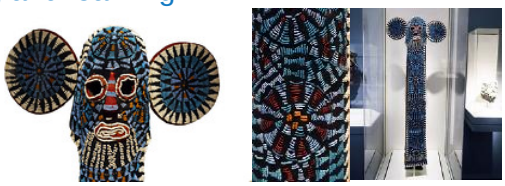
by DR. PERI KLEMM and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER



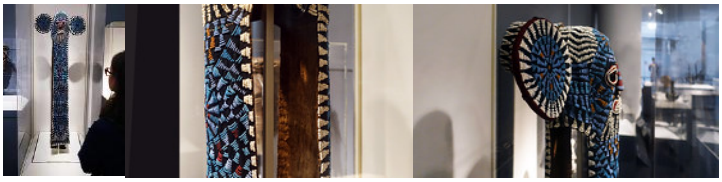
Video **2.1.2.1**: Elephant (Aka) Mask, Kuosi Society, Bamileke Peoples, Grassfields region of Cameroon, 20th century, cloth, beads, raffia, fiber, 146.7 x 52.1 x 29.2 cm (Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, New York)

The austere display of this powerful object masks the complexity of its original context.

SmartHistory images for teaching and learning:



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)

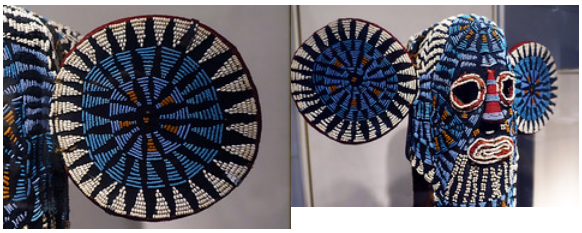


Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)





Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)...

This page titled 2.1.2: Elephant Mask (Bamileke Peoples) is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.4: Central Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

SECTION OVERVIEW

2.2: Democratic Republic of the Congo

This region is home to numerous cultures and their art. **16th-20th century**

2.2.1: Crucifix (Kongo peoples)

2.2.2: Female (pwo) Mask

2.2.3: Power Figure (Nkisi Nkondi), Kongo peoples

2.2.4: Ndop Portrait of King Mishe miShyaang maMbul (Kuba peoples)

2.2.5: Lukasa (Memory Board) (Luba peoples)

2.2.6: Buli Master, possibly Ngongo ya Chintu, Prestige Stool- Female Caryatid (Luba or Hemba peoples)

2.2.7: Double Prestige Panel (Kuba peoples)

2.2.8: Figurative Harp (Domu) (Mangbetu peoples)

This page titled 2.2: Democratic Republic of the Congo is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

2.2.1: Crucifix (Kongo peoples)

by DR. CHRISTA CLARKE



Figure **2.2.1.1**: Crucifix, 16th-17th century, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kongo peoples, solid cast brass, 27.3 cm high (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

When Portuguese explorers first arrived at the mouth of the Zaire River in 1483, the Kongo kingdom was thriving and prosperous, with extensive commercial networks between the coast, interior, and equatorial forests to the north. Portugal and Kongo soon established a strong trading partnership. In addition to material goods, the Portuguese also brought Christianity, which was rapidly adopted by Kongo rulers and established as the state religion in the early sixteenth century by King Afonso Mvemba a Nzinga. The adoption of Christianity allowed Kongo kings to foster international alliances not only with Portuguese leaders but also with the Vatican. In response to their new faith, Kongo craftsmen began to introduce Christian iconography into their artistic repertoire.

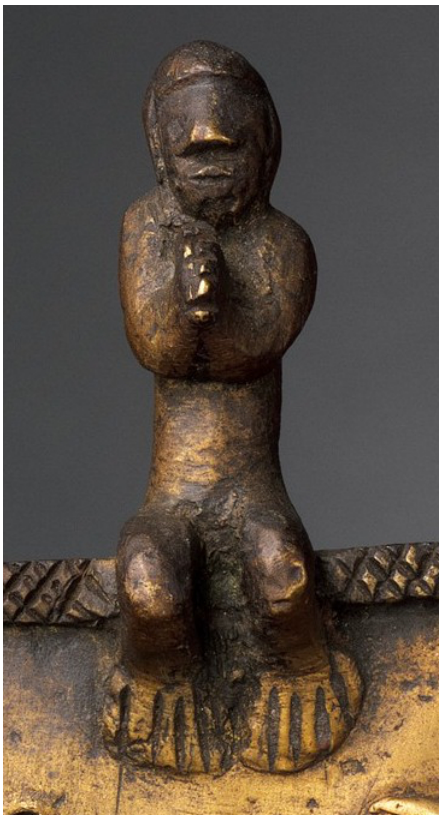


Figure **2.2.1.2**: Detail, Crucifix, 16th-17th century, Democratic Republic of the Congo; Angola; Republic of the Congo, solid cast brass, 27.3 cm high (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

This crucifix demonstrates how Kongo artists adapted and transformed Western Christian prototypes.

Although the general depiction of the central Christ figure with arms extended follows Western conventions, the features of the face are African. The presence of four smaller figures with clasped hands—two seated on the top edges of the cross, one at the apex, and one at the base—is a departure from standard iconography (left). These figures are more abstract and remote, in contrast to the expressionistic treatment of Christ.

Western forms like the crucifix resonated profoundly with preexisting Kongo religious practices. In Kongo belief, the cross was already regarded as a powerful emblem of spirituality and a metaphor for the cosmos. An icon of a cross within a circle, referred to as the Four Moments of the Sun, represents the four parts of the day (dawn, noon, dusk, and night) that symbolize more broadly the cyclical journey of life.

Kongo kings, having adopted Christianity as the state religion, commissioned locally made crucifixes for use as emblems of leadership and power. These crucifixes were cast with copper alloys. The use of copper, a valued import from Europe, reinforced the association with wealth and power. Although Christianity was eventually rejected by the Kongo in the seventeenth century, such works continued to be made as symbols of indigenous cosmological concepts.

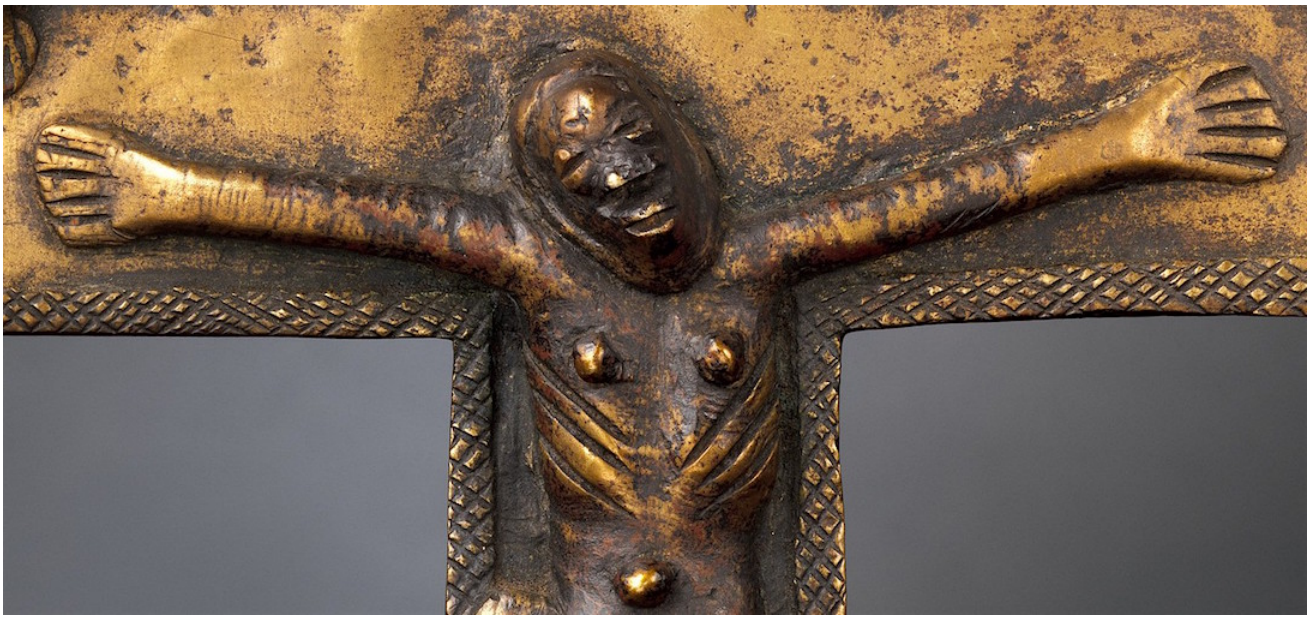


Figure **2.2.1.3**: Detail, Crucifix, 16th-17th century, Democratic Republic of the Congo; Angola; Republic of the Congo, solid cast brass, 27.3 cm high (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

© 2006 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (by permission)

Additional resources:

This sculpture at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Central Africa, c. 1600-1800 on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

---

This page titled 2.2.1: Crucifix (Kongo peoples) is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.4: Central Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

2.2.2: Female (pwo) Mask

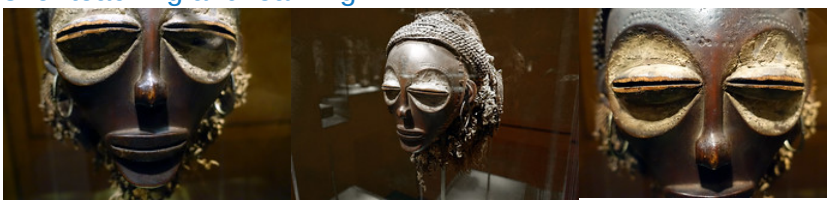
by DR. PERI KLEMM and DR. BETH HARRIS



Video **2.2.2.1**: Female (*pwo*) mask, Chokwe peoples, Democratic Republic of Congo, early 20th century, wood, plant fiber, pigment, copper alloy, 39.1 cm high (Smithsonian National Museum of African Art, Washington D.C.)

This mask was made and worn by men, but its purpose is to honor women who have bravely survived childbirth.

SmartHistory images for teaching and learning:



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)

This page titled 2.2.2: Female (pwo) Mask is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.4: Central Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

2.2.3: Power Figure (Nkisi Nkondi), Kongo peoples

by DR. SHAWNYA L. HARRIS and DR. PERI KLEMM



Video **2.2.3.1**:

Power Figure: Male (Nkisi), 19th-mid 20th century, Kongo peoples, wood, pigment, nails, cloth, beads, shells, arrows, leather, nuts and twine, 58.8 x 26 x 25.4 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art). Speakers: Dr. Peri Klemm and Dr. Beth Harris



Figure **2.2.3.1**: Power figure (Nkisi nkondi), Kongo peoples (Democratic Republic of the Congo). c. late 19th century, wood and metal, 36 x 18 1/2 x 14 1/4″ / 16/8 x 47 x 36.2 cm (Detroit Institute of Arts)

Divine protection

Sacred medicines and divine protection are central to the belief of the Kongo peoples (Democratic Republic of Congo). The Kongo believe that the great god, Ne Kongo, brought the first sacred medicine (or *nkisi*) down from heaven in an earthenware vessel set upon three stones or termite mounds.

A *nkisi* (plural: *minkisi*) is loosely translated as a “spirit” yet it is represented as a container of sacred substances which are activated by supernatural forces that can be summoned into the physical world. Visually, these *minkisi* can be as simple as pottery or vessels containing medicinal herbs and other elements determined to be beneficial in curing physical illness or alleviating social ills. In other instances *minkisi* can be represented as small bundles, shells, and carved wooden figures. *Minkisi* represent the ability to both ‘contain’ and ‘release’ spiritual forces which can have both positive and negative consequences on the community.

Nkisi nkondi

A fascinating example of a *nkisi* can be found in a power figure called *nkisi nkondi* (a power figure is a magical charm seemingly carved in the likeness of human being, meant to highlight its function in human affairs.). A *nkisi nkondi* can act as an oath taking image which is used to resolve verbal disputes or lawsuits *(mambu)* as well as an avenger (the term *nkondi* means 'hunter') or guardian if sorcery or any form of evil has been committed. These *minkisi* are wooden figures representing a human or animal such as a dog (*nkisi kozo*) carved under the divine authority and in consultation with an *nganga* or spiritual specialist who activates these figures through chants, prayers and the preparation of sacred substances which are aimed at 'curing' physical, social or spiritual ailments.

Insertions



Figure **2.2.3.2**: (Nkisi N'Kondi: Mangaaka), mid to late nineteenth century, wood, paint, metal, resin, ceramic, 46 7/16″ / 118 cm high, Democratic Republic of Congo (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Nkisi nkondi figures are highly recognizable through an accumulation of pegs, blades, nails or other sharp objects inserted into its surface. Medicinal combinations called *bilongo* are sometimes stored in the head of the figure but frequently in the belly of the figure which is shielded by a piece of glass, mirror or other reflective surface. The glass represents the 'other world' inhabited by the spirits of the dead who can peer through and see potential enemies. Elements with a variety of purposes are contained within the *bilongo*. Seeds may be inserted to tell a spirit to replicate itself; *mpemba* or white soil deposits found near cemeteries represent and enlist support from the spiritual realm. Claws may incite the spirits to grasp something while stones may activate the spirits to pelt enemies or protect one from being pelted.

The insertions are driven into the figure by the *nganga* and represent the *mambu* and the type or degree of severity of an issue can be suggested through the material itself. A peg may refer to a matter being 'settled' whereas a nail, deeply inserted may represent a more serious offense such as murder. Prior to insertion, opposing parties or clients often lick the blades or nails, to seal the function or purpose of the *nkisi* through their saliva. If an oath is broken by one of the parties or evil befalls one of them, the *nkisi nkondi* will become activated to carry out its mission of destruction or divine protection.

Migrations

Europeans may have encountered these objects during expeditions to the Congo as early as the 15th century. However, several of these "fetish" objects, as they were often termed, were confiscated by missionaries in the late 19th century and were destroyed as evidence of sorcery or heathenism. Nevertheless, several were collected as objects of fascination and even as an object of study of Kongo culture. Kongo traditions such as those of the *nkisi nkondi* have survived over the centuries and migrated to the Americas and the Caribbean via Afro-Atlantic religious practices such as vodun, Palo Monte, and macumba. In Hollywood these figures have morphed into objects of superstition such as New Orleans voodoo dolls covered with stick pins. Nonetheless, *minkisi* have left an indelible imprint as visually provocative figures of spiritual importance and protection.



Figure **2.2.3.3**: (Nkisi N'Kondi: Mangaaka), mid to late nineteenth century, wood, paint, metal, resin, ceramic, 46 7/16″ / 118 cm high, Democratic Republic of Congo (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Essay by Dr. Shawnya Harris

Additional resources:

This figure at the Detroit Institute of Arts

The sculpture at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Nkisi Nkondi on Art Through Time

Nkisi Nkondi on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

David C. Driskell, Michael D. Harris, Wyatt Macgaffey, and Sylvia H. Williams, *Astonishment and power* (Washington: Published for the National Museum of African Art by the Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993).

Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the spirit: African and Afro-American art and philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983).

This page titled 2.2.3: Power Figure (Nkisi Nkondi), Kongo peoples is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.4: Central Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

2.2.4: Ndop Portrait of King Mishe miShyaang maMbul (Kuba peoples)

by ROGER D. ARNOLD



Figure **2.2.4.1**: Detail, *Ndop Portrait of King Mishe miShyaang maMbul*, c. 1760-80, wood and camwood powder, 19-1/2 x 7-5/8 x 8-5/8″ (Brooklyn Museum)

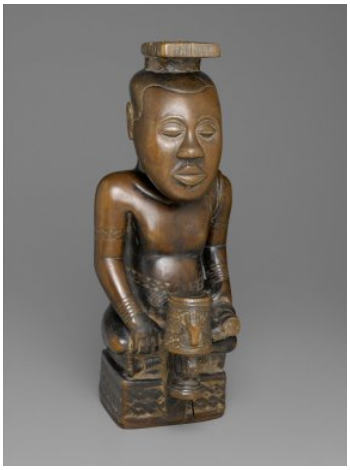


Figure **2.2.4.2**: Ndop Portrait of King Mishe miShyaang maMbul, c. 1760-80, wood and camwood powder, 19-1/2 x 7-5/8 x 8-5/8″ (Brooklyn Museum)

In all world cultures, artists honor remarkable leaders by creating lasting works of art in their honor. Historical leaders in the West, like Charlemagne and Alexander the Great were celebrated for their accomplishments during their lifetime and remembered through many works of art created to preserve their legacy. During the first half of the eighteenth century, the Kuba King Mishe miShyaang maMbul was celebrated throughout his kingdom for his generosity and for the great number of his loyal subjects. He was even the recipient of his own praise song. At the height of his reign in 1710, he commissioned an idealized portrait-statue called an *ndop*. With the commission of his *ndop*, Mishe miShyaang maMbul recorded his reign for posterity and solidified his accomplishments amongst the pantheon of his predecessors. The *ndop* that portrayed his likeness was eventually purchased by the Brooklyn Museum in 1961 and has been on view at the museum since that time. It was first collected in 1909 by a colonial minister in what was then the Belgian Congo, the European country's colony.



Figure **2.2.4.3**: Frontal view, *Ndop Portrait of King Mishe miShyaang maMbul*, c. 1760-80, wood and camwood powder, 19-1/2 x 7-5/8 x 8-5/8″ (Brooklyn Museum)

Why are Mishe miShyaang maMbul and others commemorated in the arts of Africa largely unknown to us? Unlike in Euro-American contexts, history in Sub-Saharan Africa was not written down by members of cultural communities until colonialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Instead of written records, oral narrative was the primary method for collective and personal histories to be passed down from one generation to the next. As these spoken histories were passed down, they were changed and adapted to reflect their times. The changing nature of oral narrative is like a highly complex game of telephone, where the words can be changed and often only the spirit of the original meaning is preserved.

Before being purchased by Western collectors and museums, African sculptures served as important historical markers within their communities. The *ndop* sculptural record helps freeze a moment in time that would otherwise be transformed during its transmission from generation to generation. When we look at these sculptures in museums, it is important to remember that they were created about, and for, individuals. Since information and history was transferred orally in Africa, sculptural traditions like the *ndop* can help us gain insight into information about historical individuals and their cultural ideals.

The Kuba Artist

The Kuba live in the Democratic Republic of the Congo on the southern fringes of the equatorial forest in an area bounded by two rivers called the Kasai and Sankuru. Over a period of three centuries of movement and exchange beginning in the 17th century, this loose confederacy of people formed into a durable kingdom. Since that time, the name “Kuba” largely refers to nineteen unique but related ethnic groups, all of which acknowledge the leadership of the same leader (*nyim*).

The Kuba are renowned for a dynamic artistic legacy across media. Historically, Kuba artists were professional woodcarvers, blacksmiths, and weavers who worked exclusively for the *nyim*. Kuba artists learned their art by becoming apprentices to others who were well-known and accomplished in their community. Similar to art traditions in other world cultures, the apprentices imitated or copied early pieces from their teachers until they were skilled enough to develop their own designs. Although the names of individual artists were not written down—and are not known to us today—artists were sought after by name and were important to the Kuba royal court and beyond.

Ndop Sculpture

The *ndop* statues might be the the most revered of all Kuba art forms. The *ndop* (literally meaning “statue”) are a genre of figurative wood sculpture that portrays important Kuba leaders throughout the eighteenth to twentieth centuries. Art historians believe that there are seven *ndop* statues of historical significance in Western museums. These seven are significant because the lives of the *nyim* they portray were celebrated in oral histories that were recorded and written down by early European visitors, so we know the most about them.



Figure **2.2.4.4**: Ndop, wooden carving of King Shyaam aMbul aNgoong, from the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire), late 18th century, wood, 55 cm high (British Museum)

You can travel to the British Museum in England or the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Belgium to see *ndop*. *Ndop* sculptures that are on view at the British Museum were brought to Europe from Africa by Hungarian ethnographer Emil Torday. Torday and other early visitors to the Kuba court documented oral traditions related to artwork. Art historians have since tried to reconstruct and sort out these early accounts; they use the sculptures themselves to interpret precolonial Kuba history.

Ndop sculpture have rounded contours creating forms that define the head, shoulders and stomach, and also feature a defined collarbone. While the relative naturalism may appear to have been informed by an artist's one-to-one observation of the *nyim*, *ndop* sculptures aren't exact likenesses; they are not actually created from direct observation. Instead, cultural conventions and visual precedents guide the artists in making the sculpture. The expression on the face, the position of the body, and the regalia were meant to faithfully represent the ideal of a king—but not an individual King. For example, the facial features of each statue follow sculpting conventions and do not represent features of a specific individual. All figures are sculpted using a one-to-three proportion —the head of the statue was sculpted to be one third the size of the total statue. Kuba artists emphasized the head because it was considered to be the seat of intelligence, a valued ideal.



Figure **2.2.4.5**: Detail, *Ndop Portrait of King Mishe miShyaang maMbul*, c. 1760-80, wood and camwood powder, 19-1/2 x 7-5/8 x 8-5/8″ (Brooklyn Museum)

How are we able to identify each *ndop*, then? There are specific attributes that link each *ndop* to named individuals. All ndop sculpture would feature a geometric motif and an emblem (*ibol*), chosen by the *nyim* when he was installed as a leader and commissioned his *ndop*. The geometric motif pattern and the ibol served as identifying symbols of his reign and was sculpted in prominent relief on the front of each base. The *ibol* is a signifier that gives the *ndop* its particular identity, making it clear who the

sculpture portrays and what reign it represents. A drum with a severed hand is the *ibol* for Mishe miShyaang maMbul's reign, and that helps us identify the sculpture as his likeness.

Other styles or conventions that were followed by sculptors of *Ndop* can be found in royal regalia such as belts, armbands, bracelets, shoulder ornaments, and a unique projecting headdress, called a shody. The arms of each *ndop* extend vertically at either side of the torso, with the left hand grasping the handle of a ceremonial knife (*ikul*) and the right hand resting on the knee. Artists decorated the surface of the sculpture by carving representations of what was conventionally worn; the finely chiseled details correspond to objects that represent the prerogative and prestige of the *nyim*.

The *ndop* of Mishe miShyaang maMbul is part of a larger genre of figurative wood sculpture in Kuba art. These sculptures were commissioned by Kuba leaders or *nyim* to preserve their accomplishments for posterity. Because transmission of knowledge in this part of Africa is through oral narrative, names and histories of the past are often lost. The *ndop* sculptures serve as important markers of cultural ideals. They also reveal a chronological lineage through their visual signifiers.

Additional Reading

Binkley, David A. and Patricia Darish. *Kuba*. Milan: 5 Continents Press, 2010.

LaGamma, Alisa. *Heroic Africans: Legendary Leaders, Iconic Sculptures*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2011.

Siegmann, William and Joseph Adande. *African Art: A Century At The Brooklyn Museum*. New York: Prestel, 2009.

Vansina, Jan. "Recording the Oral History of the Bakuba." *Journal of African History* 1:1, 1960, 43 – 61.

This page titled 2.2.4: Ndop Portrait of King Mishe miShyaang maMbul (Kuba peoples) is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.4: Central Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

2.2.5: Lukasa (Memory Board) (Luba peoples)

by JULIET MOSS

Performing history

While Europeans may open a history book to learn about their past, in the Luba Kingdom of the Democratic Republic of Congo, history was traditionally performed—not read. In fact, Luba royal history is not chronological and static as Westerners learn it. Rather, it is a dynamic oral narrative which reinforces the foundations upon which Luba kingship is established and supports the current leadership. This history is also used to interpret and judge contemporary situations.



Figure **2.2.5.1**: Lukasa (memory board), Mbudye Society, Luba peoples, Democratic Republic of Congo, c. 19th to 20th century, wood, beads and metal

Special objects known as *lukasa* (memory boards) are used by experts in the oral retelling of history in Luba culture. The recounting of the past is performative and includes dance and song. The master who has the skill and knowledge to read the *lukasa* will utilize it as a mnemonic device, touching and feeling the beads, shells, and pegs to recount history and solve current problems.

Luba Kingdom

The Luba Kingdom of the Democratic Republic of Congo was a very powerful and influential presence from the sixteenth to the early twentieth centuries in central Africa. Their art highlights the roles that objects played in granting the holders the authority of kingship and royal power.

The Luba people are one of the Bantu peoples of Central Africa and the largest ethnic group in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The Kingdom of the Luba arose in the Upemba Depression (a large marshy area comprising some fifty lakes) in what is now the southern Democratic Republic of Congo. The Luba had access to a wealth of natural resources including gold, ivory, and copper, but they also produced and traded a variety of goods such as pottery and wooden sculpture.

Lukasa

For the Luba people, kingship is sacred, and the elite Mbudye Society (whose members are considered “men of memory,” and who have extensive religious training) use the *lukasa* to recount history in the context of spiritual rituals. Diviners (who have the power to predict the future) can also read the *lukasa*.

Each *lukasa* is different but small enough to hold in the left hand. The board is "read" by touching its surface with the right forefinger. The tactile qualities are apparent. The *lukasa* illustrated here is one of the oldest known examples, with carved geometric designs on the back and sides, and complex clusters of beads of various sizes whose colors have faded over time. The board is narrower at the center making it easy to hold.

The *lukasa* is typically arranged with large beads surrounded by smaller beads or a line of beads, the configuration of which dictates certain kinds of information. This information can be interpreted in a variety of ways and the expert might change his manner of delivery and his reading based upon his audience and assignment. The most important function of the *lukasa* was to serve as a memory aid that describes the myths surrounding the origins of the Luba empire, including recitation of the names of the royal Luba line.

Additional resources:

Ways of Recording African History on the The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Luba People from Art and Life in Africa (University of Iowa)

Lukasa from learner.org

Mary Nooter Roberts, "The King is a Woman: Shaping Power in Luba Royal Arts," African Arts, Autumn 2013, pp. 68-81

Art and Oracle: African Art and Rituals of Divination

Lukasa in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Lukasa (memory board) in the Collection of the Brooklyn Museum

---

This page titled 2.2.5: Lukasa (Memory Board) (Luba peoples) is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.4: Central Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

2.2.6: Buli Master, possibly Ngongo ya Chintu, Prestige Stool- Female Caryatid (Luba or Hemba peoples)

by DR. CHRISTA CLARKE



Figure **2.2.6.1**: Buli Master, possibly Ngongo ya Chintu, *Prestige Stool: Female Caryatid*, 19th century, Luba or Hemba peoples, Buli village, Democratic Republic of the Congo, wood, metal studs, 61 cm high (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)



Figure **2.2.6.2**: Buli Master, possibly Ngongo ya Chintu, Prestige Stool: Female Caryatid, 19th century, Luba or Hemba peoples, Buli village, Democratic Republic of the Congo, wood, metal studs, 61 cm high (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

Sculpted seats are among the most important insignia of office used exclusively by Luba rulers, including kings, chiefs, and the heads of clans or lineages. A royal stool is believed to serve as a receptacle for a ruler's spirit. It therefore holds great symbolic value as the repository and wellspring of sacred kingship. Such seats, part of the ensemble of regalia that constitutes a Luba treasury, are an integral part of the investiture ceremony establishing a ruler's political authority. Except for these rare ceremonial occasions, the royal stool was wrapped in cloth and safeguarded by a specially designated official.

This figurative example is supported by a standing female figure whose high status is indicated by her elaborate four-lobed coiffure and intricate raised scarification patterns on her torso, both front and back. The depiction of women on royal stools acknowledges their important political and symbolic roles in Luba society. Historically, female royals were often married to chiefs in outlying areas, helping to expand and unify the kingdom. Because the Luba trace succession and inheritance through the female line, such marriages established important bonds of kinship and allegiance. The imagery of the female supporting the stool symbolizes the fact that the chief or king inherits the right to rule through his female ancestors. Luba leaders owned a series of items of regalia depicting female figures which referred to the female body as a receptacle for the spiritual power of divine kingships.



Figure **2.2.6.3**: Detail, Buli Master, possibly Ngongo ya Chintu, *Prestige Stool: Female Caryatid*, 19th century, Luba or Hemba peoples, Buli village, Democratic Republic of the Congo, wood, metal studs, 61 cm high (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

This royal ceremonial stool was created by an artist known as the Buli Master, celebrated for the distinctive formal structure and emotional appeal of his sculptures. His extraordinary artistic legacy is a corpus of about twenty stylistically related works, all demonstrating a unique expressionism. Lacking the youthful idealism more commonly seen in African sculpture, this figure has an elongated face with prominent cheekbones, arching brows, half-closed eyes set in sunken sockets, a high rounded forehead, and pursed lips. Her body is small and stooped, suggesting that the seat weighs heavily upon her. These features create a sense of sadness or suffering not typically seen in African sculpture, which tends to be fairly emotionless.

The Buli Master, named after a village in the eastern part of Democratic Republic of Congo where some of his works were acquired, is believed to have been active in the mid- to late nineteenth century. The sculptor has created a dynamic formal composition, building in volume and complexity from the base to the top. Her large feet, barely raised from the base of the stool, provide the foundation for the stool's vertical support formed by her short sturdy legs, torso, and large oval head. The seat rests upon her coiffure and the tips of her fingers. The sense that she bears a heavy burden is reinforced by exaggerated flattened hands.

All royal stools are conceived of as replicas of an original seat of office given to the Luba king Kalala Ilunga. The Luba kingdom was said to have been founded by Kalala Ilunga, a heroic prince who overthrew his despotic uncle to establish a new dynasty of divine rulers. Leaders of the various Luba chiefdoms in the area have historically traced their descent from this founding ruler. Their exalted position within this sacred line of succession is expressed materially by the possession of royal insignia designed to bolster chiefly authority.

© 2006 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (by permission)

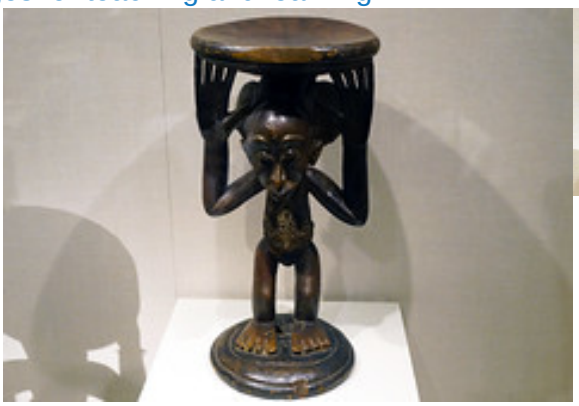
Additional resources:

This work at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

This work on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Mary Nooter Roberts, Luba Art and Divination on Art and Life in Africa (University of Iowa)

SmartHistory images for teaching and learning:




Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)

This page titled 2.2.6: Buli Master, possibly Ngongo ya Chintu, Prestige Stool- Female Caryatid (Luba or Hemba peoples) is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.4: Central Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

2.2.7: Double Prestige Panel (Kuba peoples)

by DR. CHRISTA CLARKE



Figure **2.2.7.1**: Double Prestige Panel, 19th-20th century, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sankuru River region, Kuba peoples, raffia palm fiber, 51.4 x 116.2 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

This double panel of raffia cloth with cut-pile embroidery was created to serve as a prestige item in Kuba society. The Kuba kingdom has a complex political structure composed of independent chiefdoms under the central authority of a king. It was founded in the early seventeenth century by Shyaam a-Mbul a Ngoong, a ruler who brought together some seventeen different ethnic groups into a unified polity. Shyaam is recalled as a dynamic and innovative leader who introduced a number of important Kuba artistic traditions, including lavish woven and embroidered textiles made of raffia. In fact, the Kuba founding ruler is said to have identified so closely with the patronage of these textiles that he adopted the term for raffia palm, shyaam, as his name.

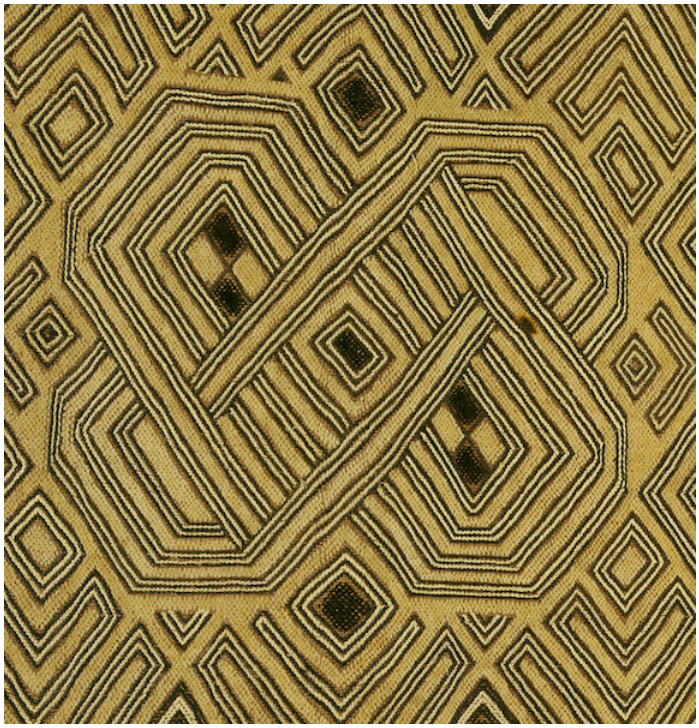


Figure **2.2.7.2**: Double Prestige Panel, 19th-20th century, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sankuru River region, Kuba peoples, raffia palm fiber, 51.4 x 116.2 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

In this complex composition, each panel features a large central interlacing motif against a diamond-patterned background. The dense patterns have been embroidered with strands of dyed raffia fiber that are cut close to the surface, creating a soft, velvety

texture. Varying in both tone and texture, the patterns project dramatically from the gold field.

The preparation, production, and design of Kuba raffia textiles require the collaborative efforts of both men and women. Men are responsible for cultivating raffia palm trees and collecting the outer layers of the fronds, which yield fiber strands. They weave these strands on a vertical heddle loom into panels of cloth. Individual woven units, known as mbala, are softened and refined to a linen-like texture by pounding. These flat-woven panels may then be decorated and stitched together to form garments. Women assemble and decorate their own skirts, which can be up to nine yards in length. Men fashion their skirts, which can be of greater length and have a border of raffia tufts. Both genders employ a range of decorative processes, including dying, appliqué, embroidery, and patchwork, although some distinctive techniques, such as openwork and cut- pile, are practiced only by women. The completed garments are worn differently: women wrap the skirt around their bodies, while men gather the cloth around their hips, secured by a belt with the top folded over.



Figure **2.2.7.3**: Double Prestige Panel, 19th-20th century, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sankuru River region, Kuba peoples, raffia palm fiber, 51.4 x 116.2 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Some raffia cloth, like this panel, was not fashioned into garments, but was displayed instead as prestige items. In the past, individual panels of raffia textiles were used as objects of exchange in financial, legal, and even marital transactions. They were also displayed and offered as memorial gifts during funerals, as an indication of the deceased's importance as well as the generosity of the surviving family members. Today, despite the availability of machine- made cotton cloth, raffia textiles are still regarded as the only kind of garment appropriate to adorn the body of the deceased. An important individual may be buried dressed in multiple layers of raffia skirts, often family treasures passed down through generations.

© 2006 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (by permission)

Additional resources:

This work at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

The work on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Kingdoms of the Savanna: The Kuba Kingdom

Kuba Peoples on Art and Life in Africa (University of Iowa)

This page titled 2.2.7: Double Prestige Panel (Kuba peoples) is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.4: Central Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

2.2.8: Figurative Harp (Domu) (Mangbetu peoples)

by DR. CHRISTA CLARKE



Figure **2.2.8.1**: Figurative Harp (Domu), 19th–20th century, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mangbetu peoples, wood and hide, 52.1 x 48.3 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

In northern Democratic Republic of Congo, the Mangbetu peoples established an influential centralized kingdom that reached its apex of power during the second half of the nineteenth century. Mangbetu aristocrats surrounded themselves with a variety of finely crafted utilitarian objects, including boxes, stools, weapons, and musical instruments. The opulence of the kingdom captured the attention of European visitors to the region, who described Mangbetu court life and its artistic traditions in glowing terms.

This musical instrument, with freestanding strings that rise in a horizontal plane from its belly to neck, is a harp. The curved neck ends in a finely carved head with partially open mouth, as if in song. The wooden sound box is covered with carefully stitched animal hide. When playing the harp, a musician sat with the sound box on his lap and the neck pointing away from him. He held the neck with his left hand and plucked the strings with both. The harp player adjusted the tone of each string by turning the tuning pegs set in the harp's neck. Harp players performed for the entertainment of community groups and, as they played, sang about events in their travels and heroic deeds of the past.



Figure **2.2.8.2**: Detail, Figurative Harp (Domu), 19th–20th century, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mangbetu peoples, wood and hide, 52.1 x 48.3 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

The presence of a carved head on this harp may reflect an African response to Western aesthetic taste and patronage. In the colonial period, Europeans began to commission sculpture from local Mangbetu artists, expanding the demand for such works. Fascinated by the bound and elongated heads once common among the Mangbetu (fig. 9), European patrons encouraged artists to include human forms on objects that were previously nonfigurative. Although popular as gifts to visiting foreign dignitaries, these figurative objects were rarely commissioned for local use and their production eventually ceased.

© 2006 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (by permission)

Additional resources:

This work at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

This work on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Enid Schildkrout, "Mangbutu Royal Art and Herbert Lang, 1902-1906," in Art and Life in Africa (University of Iowa)

This page titled 2.2.8: Figurative Harp (Domu) (Mangbetu peoples) is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.4: Central Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

SECTION OVERVIEW

2.3: Gabon

The art by people in this region is of immense spiritual significance. **19th-20th century**

2.3.1: Kota reliquary (mbulu ngulu)

2.3.2: Female Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble (Fang peoples)

2.3.3: Female Reliquary Guardian Figure (Fang peoples)—video

This page titled 2.3: Gabon is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

2.3.1: Kota reliquary (mbulu ngulu)

by DR. KATHRYN WYSOCKI GUNSCH and DR. STEVEN ZUCKER



Video **2.3.1.1**: Kota reliquary figure (mbulu ngulu), late 19th to early 20th century, Gabon, wood, copper, brass, and bone, 59.69 cm high (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

These reliquary figures helped a nomadic society to honor their loved ones after death.

Additional resources

This sculpture at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

This page titled 2.3.1: Kota reliquary (mbulu ngulu) is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.4: Central Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

2.3.2: Female Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble (Fang peoples)

by DR. CHRISTA CLARKE



2.3.2.1: from a Reliquary Ensemble: Seated Female, 19th–early 20th century, Fang peoples, Okak group, Gabon or Equatorial Guinea, wood, metal, 64 x 20 x 16.5 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)



2.3.2.2: from a Reliquary Ensemble: Seated Female, 19th–early 20th century, Fang peoples, Okak group, Gabon or Equatorial Guinea, wood, metal, 64 x 20 x 16.5 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

The Fang peoples of Gabon believed that ancestral relics held great spiritual power. Byeri was a Fang association devoted to the veneration of lineage ancestors and founders, leaders, and fertile women who made significant contributions to society during their lifetime. After death, their relics, particularly the skull, were conserved in cylindrical bark containers and guarded by carved wooden heads or figures mounted atop the receptacles.

The lustrous black surface of this carved female figure still glistens from repeated applications of palm oil used for ritual purification. The sculptor shaped this figure to illustrate the ability to hold opposites in balance, a quality admired by the Fang. He juxtaposed the large head of an infant with the developed body of an adult. The static pose and expressionless face contrast with the palpable tension of the bulging muscles and the projecting forms of the arms, legs, and breasts. These reliquary sculptures may be male or female and are not considered portraits of the deceased. They were often decorated with gifts of jewelry or feathers and received ritual offerings of libations, such as palm oil.

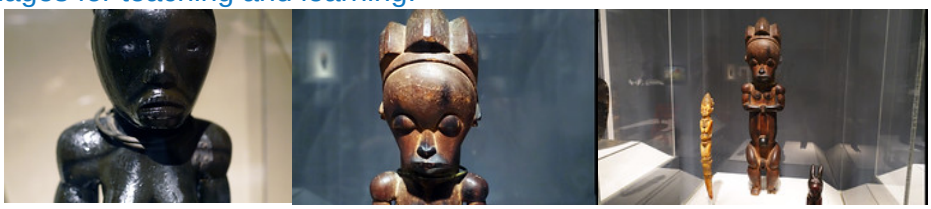
On the occasion of initiation into Byeri, the figures were removed from their containers and manipulated like puppets in performances that dramatized the raising of the dead for didactic purposes. During the early twentieth century, Fang reliquary sculpture began to be acquired by Western collectors, who admired the inspired interpretation of the human form. This particular work was formerly in the collections of two well- known modernist artists, the painter André Derain and the sculptor Jacob Epstein.

Additional resources:

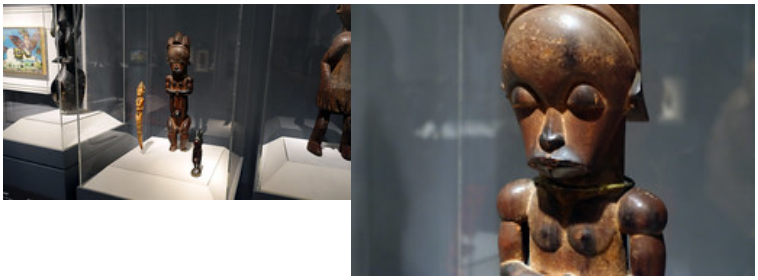
This work at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Fang people in Art and Life in Africa (University of Iowa)

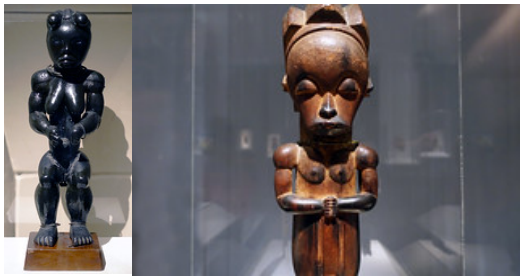
SmartHistory images for teaching and learning:



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)

Figure **2.3.2.32**: More Smarthistory images…

This page titled 2.3.2: Female Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble (Fang peoples) is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.4: Central Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

2.3.3: Female Reliquary Guardian Figure (Fang peoples)—video

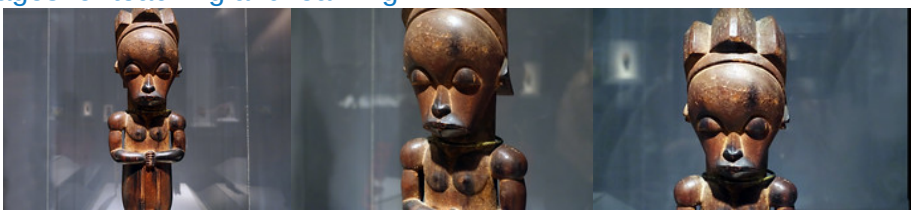
by DR. BETH HARRIS and DR. PERI KLEMM



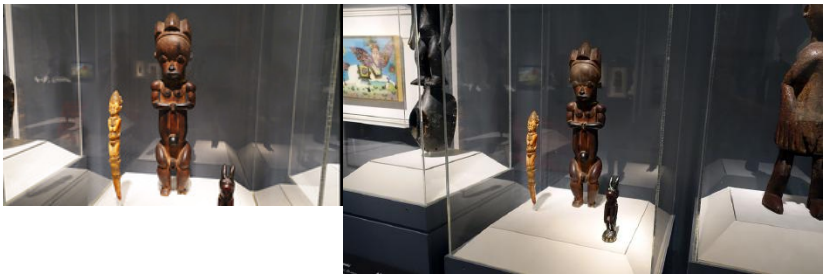
Video **2.3.3.1**: Reliquary Guardian Figure (Eyema-o-Byeri), Gabon, Fang peoples, mid 18th to mid 19th century, wood and iron, 58.4 cm high (Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, New York)

These figures look calm and contemplative, but also display real strength and vitality in their muscular forms.

SmartHistory images for teaching and learning:



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)

This page titled 2.3.3: Female Reliquary Guardian Figure (Fang peoples)—video is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.4: Central Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

3: North Africa

Prehistoric rock art, ancient Egypt, and the art of Islam. **12,000 B.C.E. - 900 C.E.**

North Africa includes Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia, and the Canary and Madeira Islands.

3.1: Algeria and Libya

3.1.1: Rock Art in North Africa

3.1.2: Rock Art in the Green Sahara (Africa)

3.1.3: Running Horned Woman, Tassili n'Ajjer, Algeria

3.1.4: Rock-Art Sites of Tadrart Acacus

3.1.5: Rock-Art Sites of Tadrart Acacus

3.2: Egypt

3.3: The art of Tunisia

3.3.1: The Great Mosque of Kairouan

3.3.2: Kairouan (from UNESCO)

This page titled 3: North Africa is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

SECTION OVERVIEW

3.1: Algeria and Libya

Algeria is home to some of the world's most significant ancient rock art. **12,000 - 2,000 B.C.E.**

3.1.1: Rock Art in North Africa

3.1.2: Rock Art in the Green Sahara (Africa)

3.1.3: Running Horned Woman, Tassili n'Ajjer, Algeria

3.1.4: Rock-Art Sites of Tadrart Acacus

3.1.5: Rock-Art Sites of Tadrart Acacus

This page titled 3.1: Algeria and Libya is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

3.1.1: Rock Art in North Africa

by ***THE BRITISH MUSEUM***



Figure **3.1.1.1**: Tuareg looking over the Tassili n'Ajjer massif. 2013,2034.4551 © TARA/David Coulson



Figure **3.1.1.2**: View of section of rock shelter wall containing painting of 'La Dame Noire de Sefar'("the Black Lady of Sefar"). Row of small stones placed in front of paintings to mark closest approach for tourists. Sefar, Ajjer Plateau, Djanet, Tassili, Algeria. Reproduced by permission of the artist. Copyright TARA/ David Coulson

Forests of Stone

Algeria is Africa's largest country and most of it falls within the Sahara Desert. It also hosts a rich rock art concentration. Most of the sites are found in the south east of the country near its borders with Libya and Niger but there are also important concentrations in the Algerian Maghreb and in the Hoggar Mountains in the central south.

The most renowned of all these areas is the Tassili n'Ajjer (meaning "plateau of chasms") in the south east. Water and sand erosion have carved out a landscape of thin passageways, large arches, and high-pillared rocks, described as "forests of stone" by French archaeologist and ethnographer Henri Lhote. The resulting undercuts at cliff bases have created rock shelters with smooth walls ideal for painting and engraving (left).

The Ajjer plateau rises to approximately 500-600 meters above the plain of Djanet, an oasis city, and capital of Djanet District, in Illizi Province, southeast Algeria. The region has been inhabited since Neolithic times, when the environment was much wetter and sustained a wider extent of flora and fauna as witnessed in the numerous rock paintings of Tassili n'Ajjer. Classified as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1982 and Biosphere Reserve in 1986, Tassili n'Ajjer covers a vast area of desert landscape in southern Algeria, stretching from the Niger and Libyan border area, north and east of Djanet, as far as Illizi and Amguid, covering an area of 72,000 sq. km.



Figure **3.1.1.3**: Map showing location in north Africa of Tassili N'Ajjer National Park, Imagery @2015 Data SIO, NOAA, U.S. Navy, NGA, GEBCO, Landsat, IBCAO, U.S. Geological Survey, Map data @2015 Google

The rock art of the Tassili region was introduced to Western eyes as a result of visits and sketches made by French legionnaires, in particular a Lt. Brenans during the 1930s. On several of his expeditions, Lt. Brenans took French archaeologist Henri Lhote who went on to revisit sites in Algeria between 1956-1970 documenting and recording the images he found. Regrettably, some previous methods of recording and/or documenting have caused damage to the vibrancy and integrity of the images.

Subject matter

More than 15,000 rock paintings and engravings, dating back as far as 12,000 years are located in this region and have made Tassili world famous for this reason. The art depicts herds of cattle and large wild animals such as giraffe and elephant, as well as human activities such as hunting and dancing. The area is especially famous for its Round Head paintings which were first described and published by Henri Lhote in the 1950s. Thought to date from around 9,000 years old, some of these paintings are the largest found on the African continent, measuring up to 13 feet in height.



Figure **3.1.1.4**: Painted rock art depicting five red figures, from Jabbaren, Ajjer Plateau, Djanet, Tassili, Algeria. 2013,2034.4248 © TARA/David Coulson

Although the styles and subjects of north African rock art vary, there are commonalities: images are most often figurative and frequently depict animals, both wild and domestic. There are also many images of human figures, sometimes with accessories such as recognisable weaponry or clothing. These may be painted or engraved, with frequent occurrences of both, at times in the same context. Engravings are generally more common, although this may simply be a preservation bias due to their greater durability.

The physical context of rock art sites varies depending on geographical and topographical factors—for example, Moroccan rock engravings are often found on open rocky outcrops, while Tunisia's Djebibina rock art sites have all been found in rock shelters. Rock art in the vast and harsh environments of the Sahara is often inaccessible and hard to find, and there is probably a great deal of rock art that is yet to be seen by archaeologists; what is known has mostly been documented within the last century.

The British Museum

© Trustees of the British Museum

This page titled 3.1.1: Rock Art in North Africa is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.5: North Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

3.1.2: Rock Art in the Green Sahara (Africa)

Rock art is one of the best records of the life of past peoples who lived across the Sahara.



Video **3.1.2.1**: Video from The British Museum

The Sahara is the world's largest hot desert, spanning the entire northern part of Africa. Yet it hasn't always been dry — archaeological and geological research shows that it has undergone major climatic changes over thousands of years. Rock art often depicts extraordinary images of life, landscape and animals that show a time when the Sahara was much greener and wetter than it is now.

This film is in collaborative partnership with the Leverhulme Trust-funded project: "Peopling the Green Sahara. A multi-proxy approach to reconstructing the ecological and demographic history of the Saharan Holocene", Paul Breeze, Nick Drake and Katie Manning, Department of Geography, King's College London Modelling and mapping of the Green Sahara ©Kings College London Images ©Trust for African Rock Art (TARA)/David Coulson & ©Kings College London

---

This page titled 3.1.2: Rock Art in the Green Sahara (Africa) is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.5: North Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

3.1.3: Running Horned Woman, Tassili n'Ajjer, Algeria

by NATHALIE HAGER



Figure **3.1.3.1**: Running Horned Woman, 6,000-4,000 B.C.E., pigment on rock, Tassili n'Ajjer, Algeria

"Discovery"

Between 1933 and 1940, camel corps officer Lieutenant Brenans of the French Foreign Legion completed a series of small sketches and hand written notes detailing his discovery of dozens of rock art sites deep within the canyons of the Tassili n'Ajjer. Tassili n'Ajjer is a difficult to access plateau in the Algerian section of the Sahara Desert near the borders of Libya and Niger in northern Africa (see map below). Brenans donated hundreds of his sketches to the Bardo Museum in Algiers, alerting the scientific community to one of the richest rock art concentrations on Earth and prompting site visits that included fellow Frenchman and archaeologist Henri Lhote.

Lhote recognized the importance of the region and returned again and again, most notably in 1956 with a team of copyists for a 16-month expedition to map and study the rock art of the Tassili. Two years later Lhote published *A la découverte des fresques du Tassili*. The book became an instant best-seller, and today is one of the most popular texts on archaeological discovery.



Figure **3.1.3.2**: Sand and rocks, Tassili n'Ajjer, Algeria (photo: **Akli Salah**, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Lhote made African rock art famous by bringing some of the estimated 15,000 human figure and animal paintings and engravings found on the rock walls of the Tassili's many gorges and shelters it to the wider public. Yet contrary to the impression left by the title of his book, neither Lhote nor his team could lay claim to having discovered Central Saharan rock art: long before Lhote, and even before Brenans, in the late nineteenth century a number of travelers from Germany, Switzerland, and France had noted the existence of "strange" and "important" rock sculptures in Ghat, Tadrart Acacus, and Upper Tassili. But it was the Tuareg—the

indigenous peoples of the region, many of whom served as guides to these early European explorers—who long knew of the paintings and engravings covering the rock faces of the Tassili.



Figure **3.1.3.3**: Tassili n'Ajjer is a Tamahaq name meaning "plateau" of the Ajjer people (the Kel Ajjer is group of tribes whose traditional territory was here). Much of the 1,500-2,100 meter high plateau is protected by an 80,000 square kilometer National Park.

The "Horned Goddess"

Lhote published not only reproductions of the paintings and engravings he found on the rock walls of the Tassili, but also his observations. In one excerpt he reported that with a can of water and a sponge in hand he set out to investigate a "curious figure" spotted by a member of his team in an isolated rock shelter located within a compact group of mountains known as the Aouanrhet massif, the highest of all the "rock cities" on the Tassili. Lhote swabbed the wall with water to reveal a figure he called the "Horned Goddess":

> ***On the damp rock surface stood out the gracious silhouette of a woman running. One of her legs, slightly flexed, just touched the ground, while the other was raised in the air as high as it would normally go. From the knees, the belt and the widely outstretched arms fell fine fringes. From either side of the head and above two horns that spread out horizontally was an extensive dotted area resembling a cloud of grain falling from a wheat field. Although the whole assemblage was skillfully and carefully composed there was something free and easy about it…***



Figure **3.1.3.4**: Visible in this reproduction of the original rock painting are two groupings in red ochre of small human figures superimposed onto the horned goddess

The *Running Horned Woman*, the title by which the painting is commonly known today, was found in a massif so secluded and so difficult to access that Lhote's team concluded that the collection of shelters was likely a sanctuary and the female figure—"the most beautiful, the most finished and the most original"—a goddess:

> ***Perhaps we have here the figure of a priestess of some agricultural religion or the picture of a goddess of such a cult who foreshadow—or is derived from—the goddess Isis, to whom, in Egypt, was attributed the discovery of agriculture.***

Lhote's suggestion that the painting's source was Egyptian was influenced by a recently published hypothesis by his mentor, the French anthropologist Henri Breuil, the then undisputed authority on prehistoric rock art who was renowned for his work on Paleolithic cave art in Europe. In an essay titled, "The White Lady of Brandberg, South-West Africa, Her Companions and Her Guards," Breuil famously claimed that a painting discovered in a small rock shelter in Namibia showed influences of Classical antiquity and was not African in origin, but possibly the work of Phoenician travellers from the Mediterranean. Lhote, equally convinced of outside influence, linked the Tassili painting's provenance with Breuil's ideas and revised the title to the 'White Lady' of Aouanrhet:

> ***In other paintings found a few days later in the same massif we were able to discern, from some characteristic features, an indication of Egyptian influence. Some features are, no doubt, not very marked in our 'White Lady'; still, all the same, some details as the curve of the breasts, led us to think that the picture may have been executed at a time when Egyptian traditions were beginning to be felt in the Tassili.***

Foreign influence?

Time and scholarship would reveal that the assignment of Egyptian influence on the *Running Horned Woman* was erroneous, and Lhote the victim of a hoax: French members of his team made "copies" of Egyptionized figures, passing them off as faithful reproductions of authentic Tassili rock wall paintings. These fakes were accepted by Lhote (if indeed he knew nothing of the forgeries), and falsely sustained his belief in the possibility of foreign influence on Central Saharan rock art. Breuil's theories were likewise discredited: the myth of the "White Lady" was rejected by every archaeologist of repute, and his promotion of foreign influence viewed as racist.

Marina & Enriqu



Figure **3.1.3.5**: The Tassili plateau, hailed as “the greatest center of prehistoric art in the world”: undercuts at cliff bases have created rock shelters with smooth walls ideal for painting and engraving. The Tassili’s unique geological formations of eroded sandstone rock pillars and arches—“forests of stone”—resemble a lunar landscape. (photo: **Marina & Enrique**, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Yet Breuil and Lhote were not alone in finding it hard to believe that ancient Africans discovered how to make art on their own, or to have developed artistic sensibilities. Until quite recently many Europeans maintained that art “spread” or was “taken” into Africa, and, aiming to prove this thesis, anointed many works with Classical sounding names and sought out similarities with early rock art in Europe. Although such vestiges of colonial thinking are today facing a reckoning, cases such as the “White Lady” (both of Namibia and of Tassili) remind us of the perils of imposing cultural values from the outside.

Chronology

While we have yet to learn how, and in what places, the practice of rock art began, no firm evidence has been found to show that African rock art—some ten million images across the continent—was anything other than a spontaneous initiative by early Africans. Scholars have estimated the earliest art to date to 12,000 or more years ago, yet despite the use of both direct and indirect dating techniques very few firm dates exist (“direct dating” uses measurable physical and chemical analysis, such as radiocarbon dating, while “indirect dating” primarily uses associations from the archaeological context). In the north, where rock art tends to be quite diverse, research has focused on providing detailed descriptions of the art and placing works in chronological sequence based on style and content. This ordering approach results in useful classification and dating systems, dividing the Tassili paintings and engravings into periods of concurrent and overlapping traditions (the *Running Horned Woman* is estimated to date to approximately 6,000 to 4,000 B.C.E.—placing it within the “Round Head Period”), but offers little in the way of interpretation of the painting itself.



Figure **3.1.3.6**: Running Horned Woman (detail) (photo: **FJ Expeditions**)

Advancing an interpretation of the *Running Horned Woman*

Who was the *Running Horned Woman*? Was she indeed a goddess, and her rock shelter some sort of sanctuary? What does the image mean? And why did the artist make it? For so long the search for meaning in rock art was considered inappropriate and unachievable—only recently have scholars endeavored to move beyond the mere description of images and styles, and, using a variety of interdisciplinary methods, make serious attempts to interpret the rock art of the Central Sahara.

Lhote recounted that the *Running Horned Woman* was found on an isolated rock whose base was hollowed out into a number of small shelters that could not have been used as dwellings. This remote location, coupled with an image of marked pictorial quality —depicting a female with two horns on her head, dots on her body probably representing scarification, and wearing such attributes of the dance as armlets and garters—suggested to him that the site, and the subject of the painting, fell outside of the everyday. More recent scholarship has supported Lhote's belief in the painting's symbolic, rather than literal, representation. As Jitka Soukopova has noted, "Hunter- gatherers were unlikely to wear horns (or other accessories on the head) and to make paintings on their whole bodies in their ordinary life."[1] . Rather, this female horned figure, her body adorned and decorated, found in one of the highest massifs in the Tassili—a region is believed to hold special status due to its elevation and unique topology—suggests ritual, rite, or ceremony.



Figure **3.1.3.7**: Archers, Tassili n'Ajjer (photo: **Patrick Gruban**, CC BY-SA 2.0)

But there is further work to be done to advance an interpretation of the *Running Horned Woman*. Increasingly scholars have studied rock shelter sites as a whole, rather than isolating individual depictions, and the shelter's location relative to the overall landscape and nearby water courses, in order to learn the significance of various "rock cities" in both image making and image viewing.

Archaeological data from decorated pottery, which is a dated artistic tradition, is key in suggesting that the concept of art was firmly established in the Central Sahara at the time of Tassili rock art production. Comparative studies with other rock art complexes, specifically the search for similarities in fundamental concepts in African religious beliefs, might yield the most fruitful approaches to interpretation. In other words, just as southern African rock studies have **benefitted from tracing the beliefs and practices of the San people**, so too may a study of Tuareg ethnography shed light on the ancient rock art sites of the Tassili.

Afterword: the threatened rock art of the Central Sahara

Tassili's rock walls were commonly sponged with water in order to enhance the reproduction of its images, either in trace, sketch, or photograph. This washing of the rock face has had a devastating effect on the art, upsetting the physical, chemical, and biological balance of the images and their rock supports. Many of the region's subsequent visitors—tourists, collectors, photographers, and the next generation of researchers—all captivated by Lhote's "discovery"—have continued the practice of moistening the paintings in order to reveal them. Today scholars report paintings that are severely faded while some have simply disappeared. In addition, others have suffered from irreversible damage caused by outright vandalism: art looted or stolen as souvenirs. In order to protect this valuable center of African rock art heritage, Tassili N'Ajjer was declared a National Park in 1972. It was classified as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1982 and a Biosphere Reserve in 1986.

[1] Jitka Soukopova, "The Earliest Rock Paintings of the Central Sahara: Approaching Interpretation," *Time and Mind: The Journal of Archaeology, Consciousness and Culture* 4, no. 2 (2011), p. 199.

Additional resources

African Rock Art: TassilinAjjer – Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Tassili n'Ajjer – African World Heritage Sites

Tassili n'Ajjer, UNESCO

TARA – Trust for African Rock Art: Algeria and TARA Interactive Rock Art Map

David Coulson and Alec Campbell, *African Rock Art: Paintings and Engravings on Stone* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2001).

David Coulson and Alec Campbell, "Rock Art of the Tassili n Ajjer, Algeria." *Adoranten*, no. 1 (2010), p. 115.

Jeremy H. Keenan, "The Lesser Gods of the Sahara." *Public Archaeology* 2, no. 3 (2002), pp. 131-50.

Jean Dominque Lajoux, *The Rock Paintings of Tassili*, translated by G. D. Liversage (London: Thames and Hudson, 1963).

Henri Lhote, *The Search for the Tassili Frescoes*, translated by Alan H. Brodrick (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1959).

Jitka Soukopova, "The Earliest Rock Paintings of the Central Sahara: Approaching Interpretation," *Time and Mind: The Journal of Archaeology, Consciousness and Culture* 4, no. 2 (2011), pp. 193-216.

This page titled 3.1.3: Running Horned Woman, Tassili n'Ajjer, Algeria is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.5: North Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

3.1.4: Rock-Art Sites of Tadrart Acacus

This page titled 3.1.4: Rock-Art Sites of Tadrart Acacus is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

3.1.5: Rock-Art Sites of Tadrart Acacus

by UNESCO



Video **3.1.5.1**: Source: UNESCO TV / © NHK Nippon Hoso Kyokai URL: http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/287/.

On the borders of Tassili N'Ajjer in Algeria, also a World Heritage site, this rocky massif has thousands of cave paintings in very different styles, dating from 12,000 B.C.E. to 100 C.E.. They reflect marked changes in the fauna and flora, and also the different ways of life of the populations that succeeded one another in this region of the Sahara.

This page titled 3.1.5: Rock-Art Sites of Tadrart Acacus is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.5: North Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

3.2: Egypt

Ancient Egypt

by DR. PERI KLEMM



Figure **3.2.1**: Detail, *Hunefer's Judgement in the presence of Osiris*, Book of the Dead of Hunefer, 19th Dynasty, New Kingdom, c. 1275 B.C.E., papyrus, Thebes, Egypt (British Museum)

Since the arts of ancient Egypt have conceptual, thematic, and stylistic connections to the traditional arts of Africa, Mediterranean cultures, and the Islamic world, it is difficult to place them in one geographic category. In general, Egyptologists study ancient Egypt as it connects to the ancient world beyond Africa so Smarthistory and most art history textbooks have chosen to place the bulk of Egyptian artworks within the Ancient Mediterranean section. Many scholars agree that an explicitly Western approach to the study of Egyptian art is problematic and a new, rich field of study that addresses ancient art within the framework of African art history is underway. By including links to ancient Egypt art here, we hope to remind readers of Egypt's firm placement within North Africa and the need to examine this work from various disciplinary perspectives.

Ancient Egypt

Predynastic and Old Kingdom

Middle and New Kingdom

Ptolemaic

This page titled 3.2: Egypt is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.5: North Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

SECTION OVERVIEW

3.3: The art of Tunisia

One of the earliest mosques in Africa is found here. **670 - 900 C.E.**

3.3.1: The Great Mosque of Kairouan

3.3.2: Kairouan (from UNESCO)

This page titled 3.3: The art of Tunisia is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

3.3.1: The Great Mosque of Kairouan

by DR. COLETTE APELIAN



Figure **3.3.1.1**: Sahn (courtyard) and minaret, Great Mosque of Kairouan, Tunisia c. 836-75 (photo: **Andrew Watson**, CC BY-SA 2.0)

A new city

Seventh-century North Africa was not the easiest place to establish a new city. It required battling Byzantines; convincing Berbers, the indigenous people of North Africa, to accept centralized Muslim rule; and persuading Middle Eastern merchants to move to North Africa. So, in 670 CE, conquering general Sidi Okba constructed a Friday Mosque (*masjid-i jami`* or *jami`*) in what was becoming Kairouan in modern day Tunisia. A Friday Mosque is used for communal prayers on the Muslim holy day, Friday. The mosque was a critical addition, communicating that Kairouan would become a cosmopolitan metropolis under strong Muslim control, an important distinction at this time and place.

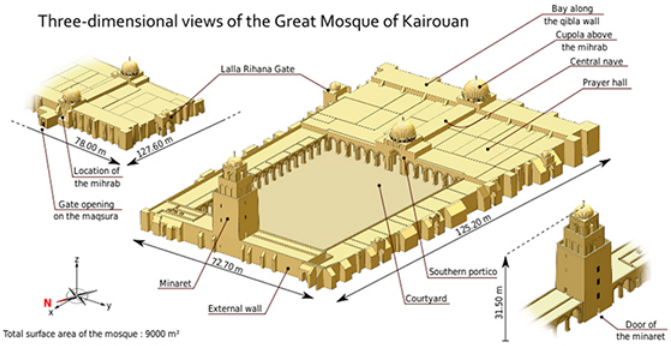


Figure **3.3.1.2**: Rendering of the Great Mosque of Kairouan, Tunisia. From left to right: zoom on the south wall (seen from the outside), global view of the mosque, zoom on the minaret seen from the court (graphic: **Tachymètre**)

Known as the Great Mosque of Kairouan, it is an early example of a hypostyle mosque that also reflects how pre-Islamic and eastern Islamic art and motifs were incorporated into the religious architecture of Islamic North Africa. The aesthetics signified the Great Mosque and Kairouan, and, thus, its patrons, were just as important as the religious structures, cities, and rulers of other empires in this region, and that Kairouan was part of the burgeoning Islamic empire.

The Aghlabids

During the eighth century, Sidi Okba's mosque was rebuilt at least twice as Kairouan prospered. However, the mosque we see today is essentially ninth century. The Aghlabids (800-909 C.E.) were the semi-independent rulers of much of North Africa. In 836, Prince Ziyadat Allah I tore down most of the earlier mudbrick structure and rebuilt it in more permanent stone, brick, and wood. The prayer hall or sanctuary is supported by rows of columns and there is an open courtyard, that are characteristic of a hypostyle plan.



Figure **3.3.1.3**: Great Mosque of Kairouan prayer hall facade (photo: **Damian Entwistle**, CC BY-SA 2.0)

In the late ninth century, another Aghlabid ruler embellished the courtyard entrance to the prayer space and added a dome over the central arches and portal. The dome emphasizes the placement of the mihrab, or prayer niche (below), which is on the same central axis and also under a cupola to signify its importance.

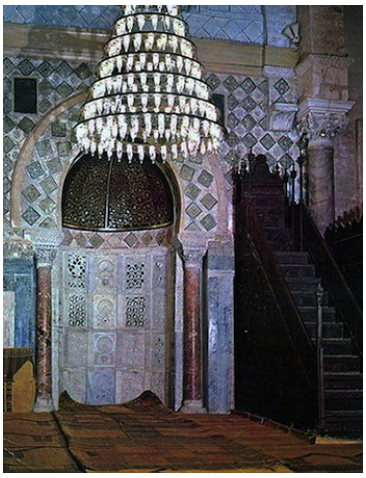


Figure **3.3.1.4**: Mihrab (left) and minbar (right), Interior view of the dome, Great Mosque of Kairouan

The dome is an architectural element borrowed from Roman and Byzantine architecture. The small windows in the drum of the dome above the mihrab space let natural light into what was an otherwise dim interior. Rays fall around the most significant area of the mosque, the mihrab. The drum rests on squinches, small arches decorated with shell over rosette designs similar to examples in Roman, Byzantine, and Umayyad Islamic art. The stone dome is constructed of twenty four ribs that each have a small corbel at their base, so the dome looks like a cut cantaloupe, according to the architectural historian K. A. C. Creswell.



Figure **3.3.1.5**: Interior view of the dome above the mihrab, Great Mosque of Kairouan (photo: **Richard Mortel**, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



Figure **3.3.1.6**: Exterior view of the mihrab dome in the Great Mosque of Kairouan, Tunisia (photo: **Chuck Moravec**, CC BY 2.0)

Other architectural elements link the Great Mosque of Kairouan with earlier and contemporary Islamic religious structures and pre-Islamic buildings. They also show the joint religious and secular importance of the Great Mosque of Kairouan. Like other hypostyle mosques, such as the Prophet's Mosque in Medina, the mosque of Kairouan is roughly rectangular. Wider aisles leading to the mihrab and along the qibla wall give it a T-plan. The sanctuary roof and courtyard porticos are supported by repurposed Roman and Byzantine columns and capitals.



Figure **3.3.1.7**: View of lustre tiles that surround the mihrab (photo: **Richard Mortel**, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

The lower portion of the mihrab is decorated with openwork marble panels in floral and geometric vine designs. Though the excessively decorated mihrab is unique, the panels are from the Syrian area. Around the mihrab are lustre tiles from Iraq. They also feature stylized floral patterns like Byzantine and eastern Islamic examples.



Figure 3.3.1.8: Prayer Hall, Great Mosque of Kairouan (photo: Citizen59, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Since it was used for Friday prayer, the mosque has a ninth-century minbar, a narrow wooden pulpit where the weekly sermon was delivered. It is said to be the oldest surviving wooden minbar. Like Christian pulpits, the minbar made the prayer leader more visible and audible. Because a ruler's legitimacy could rest upon the mention of his name during the sermon, the minbar served both religious and secular purposes. The minbar is made from teak imported from Asia, an expensive material exemplifying Kairouan's commercial reach. The side of the minbar closest to the mihrab is composed of elaborately carved latticework with vegetal, floral, and geometric designs evocative of those used in Byzantine and Umayyad architecture.



Figure 3.3.1.9: Minaret, Great Mosque of Kairouan (photo: Tab59, CC BY-SA 2.0)

The minaret dates from the early ninth century, or at least its lower portion does. Perhaps inspired by Roman lighthouses, the massive square Kairouan minaret is about thirty two meters tall, over one hundred feet, making it one of the highest structures around. So in addition to functioning as a place to call for prayer, the minaret identifies the mosque's presence and location in the city while helping to define the city's religious identity. As it was placed just off the mihrab axis, it also affirmed the mihrab's importance.

The mosque continued to be modified after the Aghlabids, showing that it remained religiously and socially significant even as Kairouan fell into decline. A Zirid, al-Mu'izz ibn Badis (ruled 1016-62 CE), commissioned a wooden maqsura, an enclosed space within a mosque that was reserved for the ruler and his associates. The maqsura is assembled from cutwork wooden screens topped with bands of carved abstracted vegetal motifs set into geometric frames, kufic-style script inscriptions, and merlons, which look like the crenellations a top a fortress wall. Maqsuras are said to indicate political instability in a society. They remove a ruler from the rest of the worshippers. So, the enclosure, along with its inscription, protected the lives and affirmed the status of persons allowed inside.

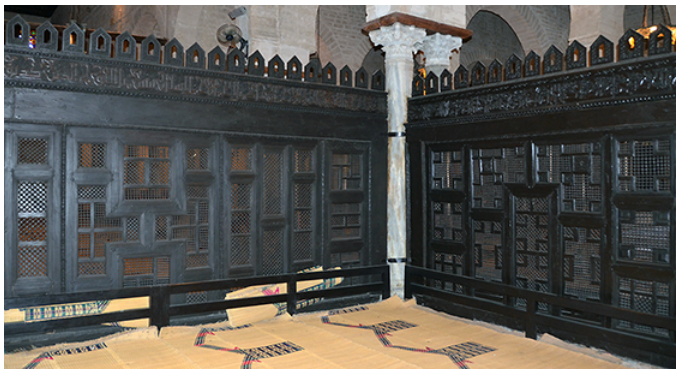


Figure **3.3.1.10**: Maqsura, Great Mosque of Kairouan, Tunisia (photo: **Richard Mortel**, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

In the thirteenth century, the Hafsids gave the mosque a more fortified look when they added buttresses to support falling exterior walls, a practice continued in later centuries. In 1294, Caliph al-Mustansir restored the courtyard and added monumental portals, such as Bab al-Ma on the east and the domed Bab Lalla Rejana on the west. Additional gates were constructed in later centuries. Carved stone panels inside the mosque and on the exterior acted like billboards advertising which patron was responsible for construction and restoration.

An intellectual center

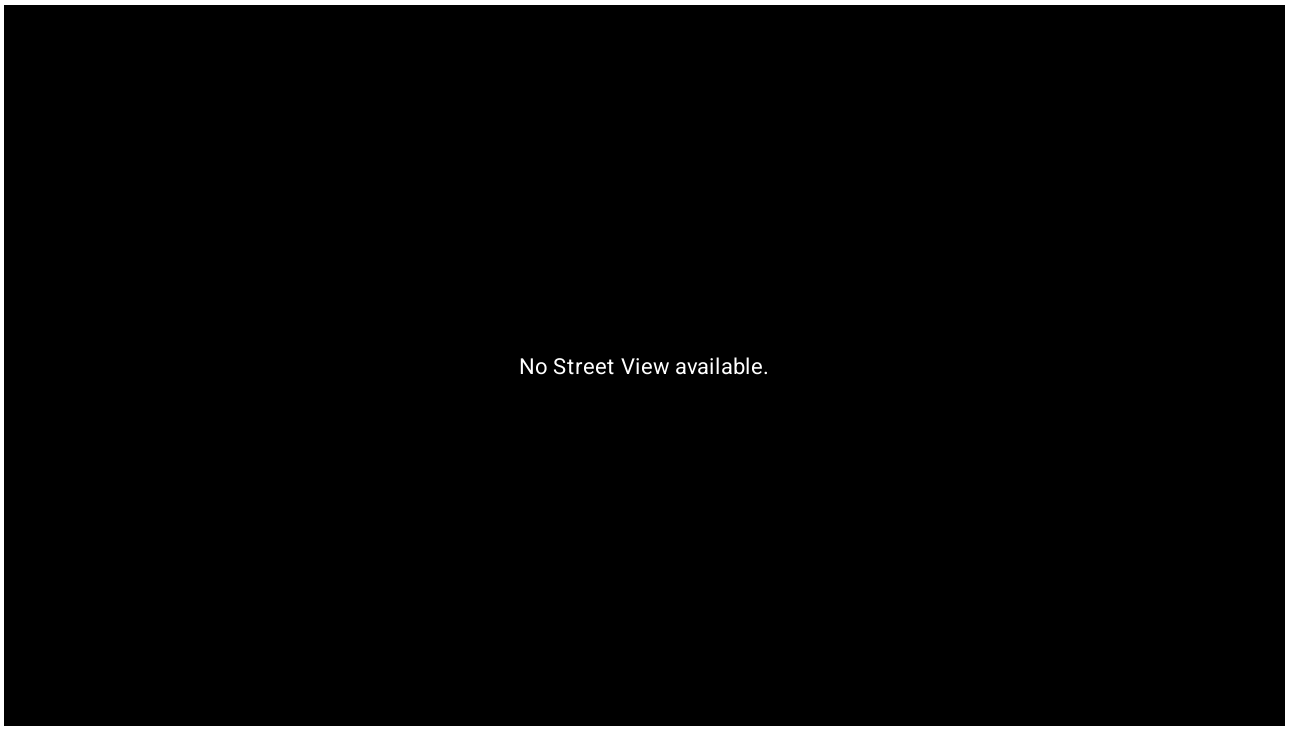
The Great Mosque was literally and figuratively at the center of Kairouan activity, growth, and prestige. Though the mosque is now near the northwest city ramparts established in the eleventh century, when Sidi Okba founded Kairouan, it was probably closer to the center of town, near what was the governor's residence and the main thoroughfare, a symbolically prominent and physical visible part of the city. By the mid-tenth century, Kairouan became a thriving settlement with marketplaces, agriculture imported from surrounding towns, cisterns supplying water, and textile and ceramic manufacturing areas. It was a political capital, a pilgrimage city, and intellectual center, particularly for the Maliki school of Sunni Islam and the sciences. The Great Mosque had fifteen thoroughfares leading from it into a city that may have had a circular layout like Baghdad, the capital of the Islamic empire during Kairouan's heyday. As a Friday Mosque, it was one of if not the largest buildings in town.



Figure **3.3.1.11**: Exterior of the Qibla Wall, Great Mosque of Kairouan (photo: **Gavinother**, CC BY 2.0)

The Great Mosque of Kairouan was a public structure, set along roads that served a city with a vibrant commercial, educational, and religious life. As such, it assumed the important function of representing a cosmopolitan and urbane Kairouan, one of the first cities organized under Muslim rule in North Africa. Even today, the Great Mosque of Kairouan reflects the time and place in which it was built.





Additional resources:

Images of the mosque from Manar Al-Athar (University of Oxford)

Sheila S. Blair and Jonathan M. Bloom, *The Art and Architecture of Islam 1250-1800* (New York: Yale University Press, 1995).

K. A. C. Creswell and James W. Allan, *A Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture* (Cairo: The American University of Cairo Press, 1989).

Richard Ettinghausen, Oleg Grabar, Marilyn Jenkins-Madina, *Islamic Art and Architecture, 650-1250* (New York: Yale University Press, 2001).

Peter Harrison, *Castles of God: Fortified Religious Buildings of the World* (Rochester: Boydell Press, 2004).

Robert Hillenbrand, *Islamic Architecture: form, function, and meaning* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

John D. Hoag, *Islamic Architecture*, New York: Electa/Rizzoli, 1975.

Ira Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 2nd edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

Mourad Rammah, "Kairouan," *Museum with no Frontiers, Islamic Art in the Mediterranean, Ifriqiya. Thirteen Centuries of Art and Architecture in Tunisia (*Vienna: Electa, 2002).

Andrew Petersen, Dictionary of Islamic Architecture (New York: Routledge, 1999).

This page titled 3.3.1: The Great Mosque of Kairouan is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.5: North Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

3.3.2: Kairouan (from UNESCO)

by UNESCO



Video **3.3.2.1**: Video from UNESCO TV / © NHK Nippon Hoso Kyokai

Founded in 670, Kairouan flourished under the Aghlabid dynasty in the 9th century. Despite the transfer of the political capital to Tunis in the 12th century, Kairouan remained the Maghreb's principal holy city. Its rich architectural heritage includes the Great Mosque, with its marble and porphyry columns, and the 9th-century Mosque of the Three Gates.

This page titled 3.3.2: Kairouan (from UNESCO) is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.5: North Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

4: Southern Africa

4.1: The art of Namibia

4.1.1: Origins of rock art in Africa

4.1.2: Apollo 11 Cave Stones

4.2: The art of South Africa

4.2.1: Married Woman’s Apron (Ndebele peoples)

4.2.2: William Kentridge, drawing from Tide Table (Soho in Deck Chair)

4.2.2.1: On the beach, but in a suit

4.3: Zimbabwe

4.3.1: Great Zimbabwe

This page titled 4: Southern Africa is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

4.1: The art of Namibia

This page titled 4.1: The art of Namibia is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

4.1.1: Origins of rock art in Africa

This page titled 4.1.1: Origins of rock art in Africa is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

4.1.2: Apollo 11 Cave Stones

This page titled 4.1.2: Apollo 11 Cave Stones is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

4.2: The art of South Africa

This page titled 4.2: The art of South Africa is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

4.2.1: Married Woman’s Apron (Ndebele peoples)

This page titled 4.2.1: Married Woman’s Apron (Ndebele peoples) is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

4.2.2: William Kentridge, drawing from Tide Table (Soho in Deck Chair)

This page titled 4.2.2: William Kentridge, drawing from Tide Table (Soho in Deck Chair) is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

4.2.2.1: On the beach, but in a suit

This page titled 4.2.2.1: On the beach, but in a suit is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

4.3: Zimbabwe

This page titled 4.3: Zimbabwe is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

4.3.1: Great Zimbabwe

This page titled 4.3.1: Great Zimbabwe is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

5: A beginner's guide

Africans have contributed to the world’s cultural heritage with works of astonishing innovation. This chapter covers the period from 7000 B.C.E. to the present

5.1: Peoples and cultures
5.2: Historical overview- to 1600
5.3: Historical overview- from the 1600s to the present
5.4: Aesthetics
5.5: The human figure, animals and symbols
5.6: Form and meaning
5.7: Religion and the Spiritual Realm
5.8: Art and politics
5.9: Rites of passage
5.10: Art and the individual
5.11: African art and the effects of European contact and colonization
5.12: The Reception of African Art in the West
5.13: Western appreciation of African art

This page titled 5: A beginner's guide is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

5.1: Peoples and cultures

by DR. CHRISTA CLARKE



Figure **5.1.1**: Google earth view of Africa, © Google

Today, Africa is considered to be the cradle of human ancestry, from which we may all trace our descent. Based on the evidence to date, most scientists concur that humankind evolved and modern humans emerged on the African continent. Recent discoveries of cultural artifacts dating back 70,000 years also suggest that the earliest forms of visual expression may be found in Africa. For many thousands of years, Africans have contributed to the cultural heritage of the world, creating masterful works of astonishing innovation and creativity.

Urban centers

Today, over 680 million people live in Africa. Although some regions remain sparsely inhabited, others are densely populated. The West African nation of Nigeria, for example, has one-fifth of the entire continent's population. About a third of all Africans live in large cities such as Lagos (Nigeria), the continent's most populous city with 13.5 million people. Other major urban centers in contemporary Africa include Cairo (Egypt), Kinshasa (Democratic Republic of Congo), Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire), Dakar (Senegal), and Johannesburg, Cape Town, and Pretoria (South Africa). The majority of Africans, however, live in more rural areas where their lifestyle centers on agricultural activities.



Figure **5.1.2**: Africa north of the equator, © Google

Climate

In those parts of the continent that are not heavily urbanized, Africa's geography and climate have especially impacted the development of different artistic traditions. In agricultural communities, seasonal patterns of rainfall and drought affect cultivation and, by extension, their cultural practices. An alternation between rainy and dry seasons is seen throughout much of Africa, in varying degrees. Dry seasons allow opportunities for part-time artisans to create artifacts and for people to organize festivals and other large-scale social events that employ such art forms. Certain areas, such as southwestern Africa and parts of eastern Africa's interior, also had (and continue to have) frequent droughts. This has forced populations to migrate often or adopt a nomadic lifestyle. As a result, their artistic expression has focused on relatively ephemeral and personal traditions such as body ornamentation, rather than larger scale wooden sculpture.



Figure **5.1.3**: Africa south of the equator, © Google

Diversity

Throughout the continent, there is found a diversity of societies, languages, and cultures. It is estimated that there are well over 1,000 distinct languages in Africa, making it the most linguistically varied of all the continents. In Nigeria alone, more than 250 different languages are spoken. Important regional languages, spoken over broad geographic areas by people of varied ethnicity, include Arabic in northern Africa, Swahili in eastern Africa, and Hausa and Mandinka in parts of western Africa. English, French, and Portuguese were introduced during the colonial period and remain in wide usage today.

A note on language

Culturally, Africans define themselves in many different ways: by occupational caste, village, kinship group, regional origin, and nationality. "Peoples" or "cultures" are the preferred terms when referring to ethnic identities; "tribe"—a word sometimes applied to African peoples or societies—is an inappropriate, even inaccurate term, and should be avoided. Based on a concept developed by nineteenth-century Western social theorists, "tribe" was used to describe a group of people sharing a common language, history, geographic region, and sociopolitical organization. In reality, ethnicity and social identity are much more complex, as Africans may identify themselves in multiple ways. For example, an individual may be simultaneously Nigerian, a resident of the Delta State, Ijo (a broad ethnic designation), and Kalabari (an eastern subgroup of the Ijo). Furthermore, the term "tribe" reflects misleading historical and cultural assumptions, as it often implies a kind of cultural backwardness with derogatory associations.

© 2006 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (by permission)

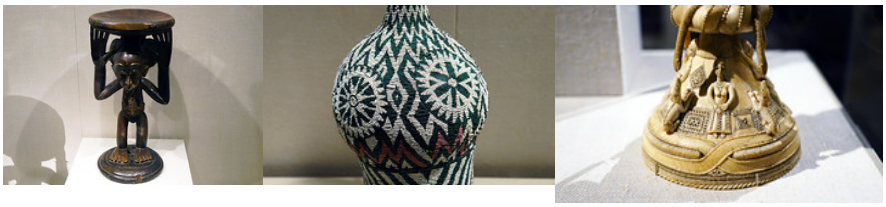
Additional resources:

For instructors: related lesson plan on Art History Teaching Resources

Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)

This page titled 5.1: Peoples and cultures is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.1: A beginner's guide** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

5.2: Historical overview- to 1600

by DR. CHRISTA CLARKE

Humankind's origins and the beginnings of cultural expression may be traced to Africa. Recent discoveries in the southern tip of Africa provide remarkable evidence of the earliest stirrings of human creativity. Ocher plaques with engraved designs, made some 70,000 years ago, represent some of humankind's earliest attempts at visual expression. Although much remains to be learned about Africa's ancient civilizations through further archaeological research, such discoveries suggest tantalizing possibilities for rich insights into human as well as artistic evolution.

Rock paintings depicting domesticated animals provide artistic evidence of the existence of agricultural communities that developed in both the Sahara region and southern Africa by around 7000 B.C.E. As the Sahara began to dry up, sometime before 3000 B.C.E., these farming communities moved away. In the north, this led to the emergence of art-producing civilizations based along the Nile, the world's longest river. **Egypt**, one of the world's earliest nation-states, was unified as a kingdom by 3100 B.C.E. Further south along the Nile, one of the earliest of the Nubian kingdoms was centered at Kerma in present-day Sudan and dominated trade networks linking central Africa to Egypt for almost one thousand years beginning around 2500 B.C.E.

A corpus of sophisticated terracotta sculptures found over a broad geographic area in present-day Nigeria provides the earliest evidence of a settled community with ironworking technology south of the Sahara. The artistic creations of this culture are referred to as Nok, after the village where the first terracotta was discovered, and date to 500 B.C.E. to 200 C.E., a period of time coinciding with ancient Greek civilization. Although Nok terracottas continue to be unearthed, no organized excavations have been undertaken and little is known about the culture that produced these sculptures.



Figure **5.2.1**: terracotta, 13th century, Mali, Inland Niger Delta region, Djenné peoples, 25/4 x 29.9 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

Terracotta heads, buried around 500 C.E., have also been found in north eastern South Africa. These important ancient artistic traditions are underrepresented in Western museums today, including the Metropolitan, due to restrictions regarding the export of archaeological materials.



Figure **5.2.2**: Detail, *Linguist Staff* (*Okyeame*), 19th-early 20th century, Ghana, Akan peoples, Asante, gold foil, wood, nails, 156.5 x 14.6 x 5.7 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

The first millennium C.E. witnessed the urbanization of a number of societies just south of the Sahara, in the broad stretch of savanna referred to as the **western Sudan**.

The strategic location of the **Inland Niger Delta**, lying in a fertile region between the Bani and Niger rivers, contributed to its emergence as an economic and cultural force in the area. Excavations there at the site of Jenne- jeno ("Old Jenne," also known as **Djenne-jeno**) suggest the presence of an urban center populated as early as 2,000 years ago. The city continued to thrive for many centuries, becoming an important crossroads of a trans-Saharan trading network. Terracotta figures and fragments unearthed in the region reveal the rich sculptural heritage of a sophisticated urban culture (see the *Seated Figure*, above).

By the ninth century, trade across the Sahara had intensified, contributing to the rise of large state societies with diverse cultural traditions along trade routes in the western Sudan as well as introducing Islam into the region. Initially traversed by camel caravans beginning around the fifth century, established trans-Saharan trade routes ensured the lucrative exchange of gold mined in southern West Africa and salt from the Sahara, as well as other goods. **Ghana**, one of the earliest known kingdoms in this region, grew powerful by the eighth century through its monopoly over gold mines until its eventual demise in the twelfth century (see the Linguist Staff, left).

The present-day nation of Ghana takes its name from this ancient empire, although there is no historical or geographic connection.



Figure 5.2.3: A view of the Great Mosque of Djenné, designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1988 along with the old town of Djenné, in the central region of Mali. (UN Photo/Marco Dormino, taken on March 25, 2015, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

In the early thirteenth century, the **kingdom of Mali** ascended under the leadership of Sundiata Keita, who is still revered as a culture hero in the Mande-speaking world. At its height, this Islamic empire, which flourished until the seventeenth century, encompassed an area larger than western Europe and established Africa's first university in Timbuktu. Under the Songhai empire of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, one of the largest in Africa, the cities of Timbuktu and Jenne (also known as Djenne) prospered as major centers of Islamic learning (image above).

Beyond the kingdoms of the western Sudan, other centers of cultural and artistic activity emerged elsewhere in western Africa. The art of metalworking flourished as early as the ninth century at a site called Igbo-Ukwu, in what is now southern Nigeria. Hundreds of intricate **copper alloy castings discovered there** provide artistic evidence of a sophisticated and technically accomplished culture.



Figure 5.2.4: Shrine head, Yoruba, Nigeria, 12th-14th century, terracotta, 31.1 x 14.6 x 18.4 cm (Minneapolis Institute of Art)

Nearby to the west, the ancient site of Ife, considered the cradle of Yoruba civilization, emerged as a major metropolis by the eleventh century. Artists working for the royal court in Ife produced a large and diverse corpus of masterful work, including magnificent bronze and terracotta sculptures renowned for their portrait-like naturalism (image left). The rich artistic traditions of the Yoruba continue to thrive **in the present day**.

The neighboring kingdom of Benin, which traces its origins to Ife, established its present dynasty in the fourteenth century. Over the next 500 years, specialist artisans working for the Benin king created several thousand works, mostly made of luxury materials such as ivory and brass, that offer insights into life at the royal court (image below). Other state societies emerged in the eastern and southern parts of the continent.



Figure 5.2.5: Head of an Oba, Nigeria, Court of Benin, 16th century, brass, 23.5 x 21.9 c 22.9 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)



Figure 5.2.6: Bet Giyorgis Church, Lalibela, Ethiopia, c. 1220 (photo: Henrik Berger Jørgensen, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

The Aksum empire (also known as Axum), one of the earliest Christian states in Africa, flourished from the first century C.E. into the eleventh century, producing remarkable stone palaces and **enormous granite funerary monoliths**.

Christian faith inspired the artistic creations of later dynasties, including the extraordinary churches of Lalibela hewn from solid rock in the thirteenth century, and the illuminated manuscripts and other liturgical arts of the later Solomonic era.

Notable among the kingdoms that emerged in southern Africa is **Mapungubwe** in present-day Zimbabwe, a stratified society that arose in the eleventh century and grew wealthy through trade with Muslim merchants along the eastern African coast.

Just to the north are the remains of an ancient city known as Great Zimbabwe, considered one of the oldest and largest architectural structures in sub-Saharan Africa. This massive complex of stone buildings, spread over 1,800 acres, was constructed over 300 years beginning in the eleventh century.



Figure **5.2.7**: Wall and tower, Great Enclosure, Great Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe, 14th century (photo: **Ross Huggett**, CC BY 2.0)



Figure **5.2.8**: Lidded Saltcellar, 15th-16th century, Sierra Leone, Sapi-Portugese, ivory, 29.8 x 10.8 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

In the fifteenth century, the age of exploration ushered in a period of sustained engagement between Europe and Africa. The Portuguese, and later the Dutch and English, began trade with cities along the western coast of Africa around 1450. They returned from Africa with favorable accounts of powerful kingdoms as well as examples of African artistry commissioned from local sculptors. These exquisitely carved ivory artifacts, now known as the "Afro-Portuguese" ivories, were brought back from early visits to the continent and became part of the curiosity cabinets of the Renaissance nobles who sponsored exploration and trade.

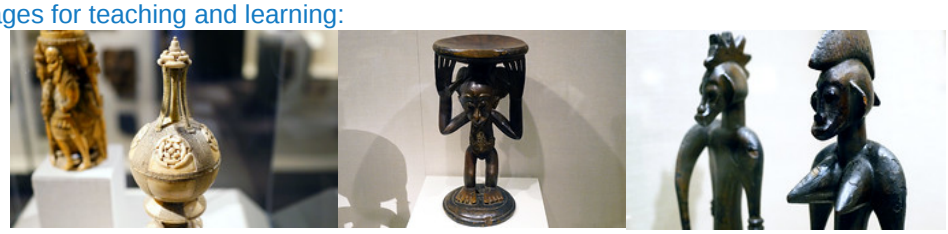
Through trade, African artists were also introduced to new materials, forms, and ideas. Although historically glass and shell beads were made indigenously, trade with Europe in the sixteenth century introduced large quantities of manufactured glass beads that became widely used throughout Africa (see a later example here). European imports of copper and coral made these luxury materials more plentiful, and artists used them in greater quantities (as in the *Head of an Oba*, above). Artifacts of European manufacture, such as canes and chairs, served as prototypes for the development of new prestige items for regional leaders (as in the Linguist's Staff, above). Along with goods imported from Europe, the travelers also brought with them their systems of belief, including Christianity. In some cases, such as in the central African kingdom of Kongo, Christianity was embraced and its iconography integrated into the artistic repertoire. In other parts of Africa, the foreign traders themselves were sometimes represented in artworks.



Figure **5.2.9**: Crucifix, 16th-17th century, Democratic Republic of the Congo; Angola; Republic of the Congo, Kong Peoples, Kongo Kingdom, solid cast brass, 27.3 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

© 2006 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (by permission)

SmartHistory images for teaching and learning:



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)

Additional resources:

Nok Terracottas (500 B.C.–200 A.D.) on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

African Rock Art on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

African Rock Art of the Southern Zone on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

African Rock Art of the Central Zone on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Inland Niger Delta on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Trade and the Spread of Islam in Africa on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

The Empires of the Western Sudan: Ghana Empire on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

The Trans-Saharan Gold Trade (Seventh–Fourteenth Centuries) on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Igbo-Ukwu on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Ife (from ca. Sixth Century)

Ife Terracottas (1000–1400 A.D.)

Origins and Empire: The Benin, Owo, and Ijebu Kingdoms

The Monumental Stelae of Aksum (Third–Fourth Centuries) on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Ethiopia's Enduring Cultural Heritage on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Mapungubwe (ca. 1050–1270) on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Great Zimbabwe (Eleventh–Fifteenth Centuries) on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

---

This page titled 5.2: Historical overview- to 1600 is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.1: A beginner's guide** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

5.3: Historical overview- from the 1600s to the present

by DR. CHRISTA CLARKE



Figure **5.3.1**: : Seated Portuguese Male, 18th century, Nigeria, Court of Benin, Edo peoples, brass, 12.7 x 5.1 x 6 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

Western trade with Africa was not limited to material goods such as copper, cloth, and beads. By the sixteenth century, the transatlantic slave trade had already begun, forcibly bringing Africans to the newly discovered Americas. Slavery had existed in Africa (as it did elsewhere in the world) for centuries prior to the sixteenth, and many socially stratified African societies kept slaves for domestic work. The sheer number of slaves traded across the Atlantic, however, was unprecedented, as over 11 million Africans were brought to the Americas and the Caribbean over a period of four centuries. Driven by commercial interests, the slave trade peaked in the eighteenth century with the expansion of American plantation production, and continued until the mid-nineteenth century. While Europeans primarily profited from the slave trade, certain West African kingdoms, like Dahomey, also grew wealthy and powerful by selling captives of war. By the late eighteenth century, the slave trade began to wane as the abolitionist movement grew. Those who survived the forced migration and the notorious Middle Passage brought their beliefs and cultural practices to the New World.

Within this far-flung diaspora, certain cultures—such as the Yoruba and Igbo of today's Nigeria, and the Kongo from present-day Democratic Republic of Congo—were especially well represented. African slaves brought few, if any, personal items with them, although recent archaeological investigations have yielded early African artifacts, like the beads and shells found at the African burial grounds in New York's lower Manhattan, which date to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The influence of Africans in the Americas is perhaps best seen in diverse forms of cultural expression that have enriched our society tremendously. Architectural elements such as open-front porches and sloped hip-roofs reflect African influence in the Americas. The religious practices of Haitian Vodou have roots in the spiritual beliefs of Dahomean, Yoruba, and Kongo peoples. Some elements of cuisine in the American South, such as gumbo and jambalaya, derive from African food traditions. Certain musical forms, such as jazz and the blues, reflect the convergence of African musical practices and European-based traditions.



Figure 5.3.2: Figurative Harp (Domu), 19th-20th century, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mangbetu, wood, hide, twine, brass ring, 67.3 x 21.6 x 30.5 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Although the slave trade was banned entirely by the late nineteenth century, European involvement in Africa did not end. Instead, the desire for greater control over Africa's resources resulted in the colonization of the majority of the continent by seven European countries. The Berlin Conference of 1884–85, attended by representatives of fourteen different European powers, resulted in the regulation of European colonization and trade in Africa. Over the next twenty years, the continent was occupied by France, Belgium, Germany, Britain, Spain, Italy, and Portugal. By 1914, the entire continent, with the exception of Ethiopia and Liberia, was colonized by European nations.

The colonial period in Africa brought radical changes, disrupting local political institutions, patterns of trade, and religious and social beliefs. The colonial era also impacted cultural practices in Africa, as artists responded to new forms of patronage and the introduction of new technologies as well as to their changing social and political situations. In some cases, European patronage of local artists resulted in stylistic change (for example the harp, left) or new forms of expression. At the same time, many artistic traditions were characterized as "primitive" by Westerners and discouraged or even banned.

Although African artifacts were brought to Europe as early as the sixteenth century, it was during the colonial period that such works entered Western collections in significant quantities, forming the basis of many museum collections today. African artifacts were collected as personal souvenirs or ethnographic specimens by military officers, colonial administrators, missionaries, scientists, merchants, and other visitors to the continent. In many of these instances of collecting, objects were gathered through voluntary trade.

In one extreme instance, an act of war initiated by Britain against one of its colonies, thousands of royal art objects were removed from the kingdom of Benin following its defeat by a British military expedition in 1897 (image below). European nations with colonies in Africa established ethnographic museums with extensive collections, such as the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium, the Völkerkunde museums in Germany, the British Museum in London, and the Musée de l'Homme in Paris (now housed at the Musée du Quai Branly). In the United States, which had no colonial ties to Africa, the nascent study of ethnography motivated the formation of collections at the American Museum of Natural History in New York and the Field Museum in Chicago. In 1923, the Brooklyn Museum became the first American museum to present African works as art.



Figure 5.3.3: Plaque: Equestrian Oba and Attendants, 1550-1680, Nigeria, Court of Benin, Edo peoples, brass, 49.5 x 41.9 x 11.4 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Independence movements in Africa began with the liberation of Ghana in 1957 and ended with the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa during the 1990s. The postcolonial period has been challenging, as many countries struggle to regain stability in the aftermath of colonialism. Yet while the media often focuses on political instability, civil unrest, and economic and health crises, these represent only part of the story of Africa today. From its many urban centers to more tradition-based rural villages, Africa is increasingly entering the global marketplace. The proliferation of systems of communication, such as computers and cell phones, throughout Africa has facilitated increased interaction with other parts of the world. As Africa moves into the twenty-first century, hope lies in its natural and human resources and the commitment of many Africans to work toward a stable and prosperous future.



Figure 5.3.4: Martin Rakotoarimanana, *Mantle (Lamba Mpanjakas)*, 1998, Madagascar, Antananarivo or Arivonimamo, Imerina village, silk, 274 x 178.1 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

In spite of Africa's political, economic, and environmental challenges, the postcolonial period has been a time of tremendous vigor in the realm of artistic production. Many tradition-based artistic practices continue to thrive or have been revitalized. In Guinea, the revival of D'mba performances in the 1990s, after decades of censorship by the Marxist government, is one example of cultural reinvention. Similarly, in recent years, Merina weavers in the highlands of Madagascar have begun to create brilliantly hued silk cloth known as *akotofahana*, a textile tradition abandoned a century ago.

Photography, introduced on the continent in the late nineteenth century, has become a popular medium, particularly in urban areas. Artists like **Seydou Keïta**, who operated a portrait studio in Bamako, Mali, in the colonial period, set the stage for later generations of photographers who captured the faces of newly independent African countries. It is also important to mention developments in modern and contemporary African art. During the colonial period, art schools were established that provided training, often based on Western models, to local artists. Many schools were initiated by Europeans, such as the Congolese Académie des Arts, established by Pierre Romain-Desfossé in 1944 in Elisabethville, whose program was based on those of art schools in Europe. Less frequently, the teaching of modern art was initiated by indigenous Africans, such as Chief Aina Onabolu, who is credited with introducing modern art in Nigeria beginning in the 1920s. Since the mid-twentieth century, increasing numbers of African artists have engaged local traditions in new ways or embraced a national identity through their visual expression.

Artists in today's Africa are the products of diverse forms of artistic training, work in a variety of mediums, and engage local as well as global audiences with their work. In recent decades, contemporary artists from Africa, both self-taught and academically trained, have begun to receive international recognition. Many artists from Africa study, work, and/or live in Europe and the United States. Kenyan-born Magdalene Odundo, for example, was trained as an artist in schools in Kenya and in England, where she now lives. The **burnished ceramic vessels** she creates, which are purely artistic and not functional, embody her diverse sources, including traditional Nigerian and Kenyan vessels as well as Native American pottery traditions of New Mexico. The work of contemporary African artists like Odundo reveals the complex realities of artistic practice in today's increasingly global society.

© 2006 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (by permission)

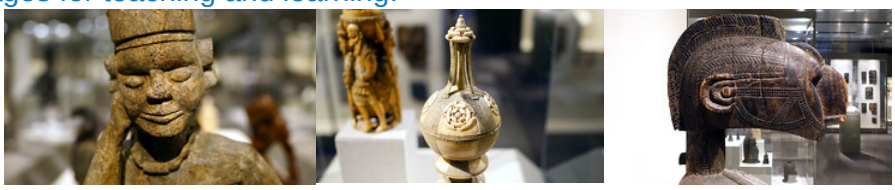
Additional resources:

The Transatlantic Slave Trade on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Trade Relations among European and African Nations on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Frederick Lamp, Frederick. "Art of the Baga: A Drama of Cultural Reinvention." *African Arts* 29.4 (1996), pp. 20-33.

SmartHistory images for teaching and learning:



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)

This page titled 5.3: Historical overview- from the 1600s to the present is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.1: A beginner's guide** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

5.4: Aesthetics

by DR. CHRISTA CLARKE



Figures **5.4.1**: Côte d'Ivoire, central Côte d'Ivoire, Baule peoples, wood, pigment, beads and iron, 55.4 x 10.2 x 10.5 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

The Role of Visual Expression in Africa

Because many tradition-based African artifacts serve a specific function, Westerners sometimes have not regarded them as art. We need to recognize, however, that the concept of "art for art's sake" is a relatively recent invention of the Western world. Prior to the Renaissance, most art traditions around the world were considered functional as well as aesthetic. The objects African artists create, while useful, also embody aesthetic preferences and may be admired for their form and composition.

Aesthetics



Figures **5.4.2**: Côte d'Ivoire, central Côte d'Ivoire, Baule peoples, wood, pigment, beads and iron, 55.4 x 10.2 x 10.5 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

Artists and patrons in many African societies express well-defined aesthetic preferences and value skillful work. Studies of aesthetics in some African societies have led to the identification of certain artistic criteria for evaluating visual arts. Among the Baule in Côte d'Ivoire, for example, a sculpture of the human figure should emphasize a strong muscular body, refined facial features, and elaborate hairstyle and scarification patterns, all of which reflect cultural ideals of civilized beauty (above and detail left). Scholars of aesthetics in Yoruba (Nigeria) visual expression have identified criteria based on both formal elements, such as a smooth surface, symmetrical composition, and a moderate resemblance to the subject, as well as abstract cultural concepts, such as

ase (inner power or life force) and *iwa* (character or essential nature). Many African societies associate such smooth, finished surfaces with cultivated refinement.

African aesthetics generally have an ethical or religious basis. An artwork considered “beautiful” is often also believed to be “good,” in the sense that it exemplifies and upholds moral values. The fact that, in many societies, the words for beautiful and good are the same suggests a strong correspondence between these two ideas. The ability of an artifact to work effectively, whether that means connecting with the spiritual realm or imparting a lesson to initiates, may also be a standard for determining the “beauty” of an artifact.



Figure **5.4.3**: Kòmò Helmet Mask (Kòmòkun), 19th–mid-20th century, Guinea or Mali or Burkina Faso or Côte d’Ivoire, West Africa, Komo or Koma Power Association, Wood, bird skull, porcupine quills, horns, cotton, sacrificial materials, 35.2 x 22.1 x 85.6 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

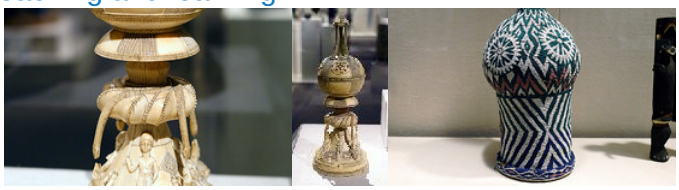
Although in the Western world, aesthetics is often equated with beauty, artists in some African cultures create works that are not intended to be beautiful. Such works are deliberately horrific in order to convey their fearsome powers and thereby elicit a strong reaction in the viewer (above).

© 2006 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (by permission)

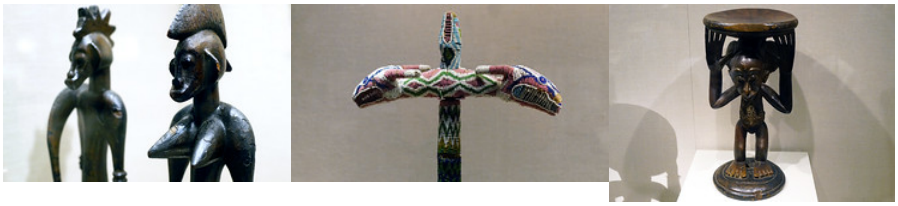
Additional resources:

Ways of recording African History on the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:



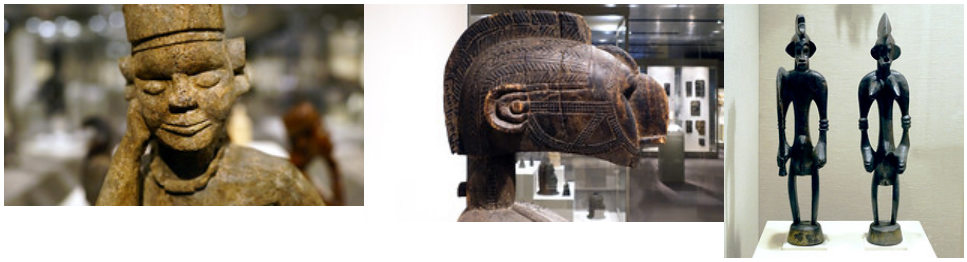
Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)

This page titled 5.4: Aesthetics is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.1: A beginner's guide** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

5.5: The human figure, animals and symbols

by DR. CHRISTA CLARKE



Figure 5.5.1: Plaque: Equestrian Oba and Attendants, 1550-1680, Nigeria, Court of Benin, Edo peoples, brass, 49.5 x 41.9 x 11.4 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

The human figure

The human figure is the main subject that traditionally has engaged African artists. African figurative sculpture usually departs from natural proportions. There is often a conceptual basis behind artistic conventions such as the simplification and exaggeration of the human features. For example, in many African artworks, the head appears proportionately larger than the body. This formal emphasis has symbolic meaning, as the head is believed to have a special role in guiding one's destiny and success in many African societies. African artists also employ scale for symbolic effect in multifigure compositions, a practice known as hierarchical representation. In these cases, the most important individual is depicted as the largest figure, while those of lesser importance decrease in size exponentially (above).



Figure 5.5.2: Buffalo (*Bocio*), 19th century, Republic of Benin, Fon people, silver, iron, and wood, 30.5 cm high (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Animals with special attributes—such as antelopes, snakes, leopards, and crocodiles—are represented in art for symbolic purposes. For example, the nineteenth-century Fon king Guezo is represented by a buffalo, an animal signifying strength and determination, selected as his emblem through *fa* divination (above). Representations of animals consuming other animals (below) may serve as a metaphor for competing spiritual or social forces. Their depiction is meant to encourage other, less destructive means to resolve a difficult social encounter.



Figure 5.5.3: Helmet Mask (*Gelede*), 20th century, Nigeria or Republic of Benin, Yoruba people, Ketu group, wood, 57.2 x 38.7 x 45.7 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Features of different types of animals may also be combined into new forms that synthesize complex ideas. Among the Bamana, for example, ci wara headdresses are based on the features of various antelope species and may also incorporate those of aardvarks, anteaters, and pangolins, all highly symbolic animals. The resulting synthesis of animal forms evokes the mythic Ci Wara, the divine force conceptualized as half man and half antelope who introduced agricultural methods to the Bamana.

Animal symbols may also take more abstract form. In the Cameroon Grassfields, circular medallions represent spiders, a symbol of supernatural wisdom, and diamond- shaped motifs refer to frogs, which stand for fertility and increase (image 26). Some forms of symbolism in African art use plants as points of reference. On cast plaques from Benin, a background pattern of river leaves is a symbol for Olokun, god of the sea (below).

Other Forms of Symbolism



Figure 5.5.4: Headdress: Janus, 19th–20th century, Nigeria, Lower Cross River region, Ejagham or Bale people, Wood, hide, pigment, cane, horn, and nails, 53.3 x 43 x 25 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

Symbols may be nonrepresentational. Geometric patterns on Bwa plank masks have multiple levels of meaning that refer to ideals of social and moral behavior taught to initiates (**example here**). Materials also hold symbolic value. Gold foil used in Asante regalia alludes to the sun and to life's vital force (**example here**). Indigenous forms of writing, such as nsibidi used among various cultures in Nigeria's Cross River region, embody multiple levels of symbolic meaning that can be accessed only by the initiated. Gestures, too, are a form of symbolism (see the example above where painted designs on the forehead and cheeks of the faces represent nsibidi, an indigenous writing). In Kongo art, a seated pose illustrates a dictum about balance, composure, and reflection (example, below), while a protruding tongue refers indirectly to the activation of medicines.



Figure 5.5.5: (Tumba), 19th–20th century, Kongo peoples, Bamboma village, Angola or Democratic Republic of the Congo, Steatite, 41.3 x 21.9 x 13 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

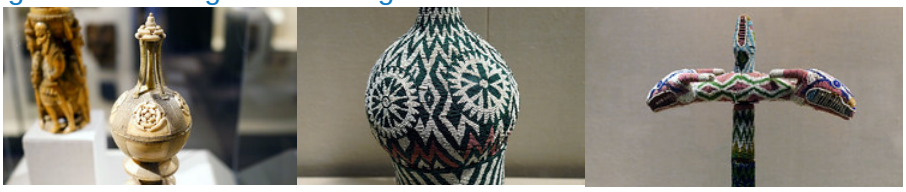
© 2006 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (by permission)

Additional resources:

Essays on African Art on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Art & Life in Africa (University of Iowa)

SmartHistory images for teaching and learning:



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



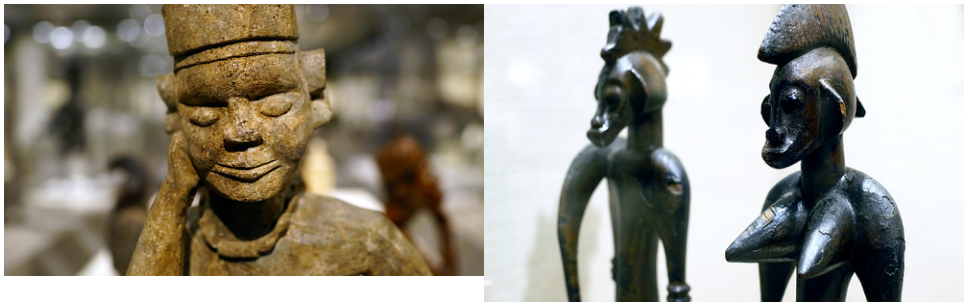
Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)

This page titled 5.5: The human figure, animals and symbols is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.1: A beginner's guide** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

5.6: Form and meaning

by DR. CHRISTA CLARKE



Figure **5.6.1**: Helmet Mask, 19th-20th century, Sierra Leone, Moyamba region, Mende or Sherbro people, wood, metal, 47.9 x 22.2 x 23.5cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

Abstraction and Idealization

Realism or physical resemblance is generally not the goal of the African artist. Many forms of African art are characterized by their visual abstraction, or departure from representational accuracy. Artists interpret human or animal forms creatively through innovative form and composition. The degree of abstraction can range from idealized naturalism, as in the cast brass heads of Benin kings (below, left), to more simplified, geometrically conceived forms, as in the Baga headdress (below).



Figure **5.6.2**: Head of an Oba, Nigeria, Court of Benin, 16th century, brass, 23.5 x 21.9 c 22.9 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

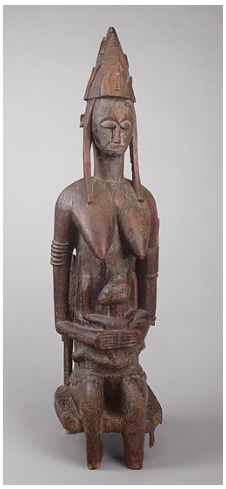


Figure **5.6.3**: Mother and Child, 15th–20th century, Mali, Bamana peoples, wood, 123.5 x 36.6 x 36.5 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

The decision to create abstract representations is a conscious one, evidenced by the technical ability of African artists to create naturalistic art, as seen, for example, in the art of Ife, in present-day Nigeria. Idealization is frequently seen in representations of human beings. Individuals are almost always depicted in the prime of life, never in old age or poor health. Culturally accepted standards of moral character and physical beauty are expressed through formal emphasis.

Masks used by the women's Sande society, for example, present Mende cultural ideals of female beauty (top of page). Instead of a physical likeness, the artist highlights admired features, such as narrow eyes, a small mouth, carefully braided hair, and a ringed neck. Idealized images often relate to expected social roles and emphasize distinctions between male and female.

In Bamana statuary, full breasts and a swelling belly highlight a woman's role as nurturer (left). At the same time, **complementary male and female pairs** of figures express the concept of an ideal social unit through matched gestures, stances, and expressions.



Figure **5.6.4**: Headdress: Female Bust (D'mba), 19th–20th century, Baga people, wood, 118.1 x 35.3 x 67.5cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

Surface

Once an artifact leaves its creator's hands, its visual appearance may be altered through use in ritual or performance contexts. Repeated handling of an artifact during ceremonies can create a smoothly worn surface, while ritual applications of palm oil may result in a lustrous sheen (**example here**). During ceremonies, decorative elements, such as beads, metal jewelry, and fabric, can be added to a work. Applications of sacrificial substances and organic materials create an encrusted surface that literally and figuratively empowers an object (**example here**). Masks and figurative sculptures may also be repainted from one season to the next. Bwa masks, for example, are soaked after the harvest and repainted red, white, and black, generally with natural vegetal or mineral pigments but now also with European enamel paints (**example here**).

Form and Meaning



Figure **5.6.5**: Headdress: Janus, 19th–20th century, Nigeria, Lower Cross River region, Ejagham or Bale people, Wood, hide, pigment, cane, horn, and nails, 53.3 x 43 x 25 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)



Figure **5.6.6**: Headdress: Janus, 19th–20th century, Nigeria, Lower Cross River region, Ejagham or Bale people, Wood, hide, pigment, cane, horn, and nails, 53.3 x 43 x 25 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

While creations by African artists have been admired by Western viewers for their formal power and beauty, it is important to understand these artifacts on their own terms. Many African artworks were (and continue to be) created to serve a social, religious, or political function. In its original setting, an artifact may have different uses and embody a variety of meanings. These uses may change over time. A mask originally created for a particular performance may be used in a different context at a later time. **Nwantantay masks**, used by the southern Bwa in Burkina Faso, may be performed during burial ceremonies and also for annual

renewal rites. Artworks can also have different meanings for different individuals or groups. A sculpture owned by an elite association holds deeper levels of meaning for its members than for the general public, who may understand only its basic meaning. The painted designs on an Ejagham headdress, for example, represent an indigenous form of writing, the meanings of which are restricted to individuals of the highest status and rank (left and above). Understanding the cultural contexts and symbolic meanings of African art therefore enhances our appreciation of its form.

© 2006 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (by permission)

Additional resources:

Headdress: Female Bust (D'mba) at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Head of an Oba at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Helmet Mask at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Janus Headdress at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

SmartHistory images for teaching and learning:



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)





Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)

This page titled 5.6: Form and meaning is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.1: A beginner's guide** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

5.7: Religion and the Spiritual Realm

by DR. CHRISTA CLARKE



Figure **5.7.1**: Seated (Dogon) Couple, 18th-early 19th century (Dogon peoples), Mali, wood and metal, 73 x 23.7 (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

Traditional religions in Africa

Most traditional religions in Africa have developed at the local level and are unique to a particular society. Common elements include a belief in a creator god, who is rarely if ever represented in art and directly approached by worshipers. Instead, the supreme deity is petitioned through intermediaries, or lesser spirits. These spirits may be related to the natural world and have control over powerful natural phenomena. For instance, **Nwantantay masks** used by the Bwa of Burkina Faso represent various flying spirits that inhabit the natural world and can offer protection. These flying spirits are believed to take physical form as insects or water fowl. In Guinea, Baga beliefs describe local water spirits, called *Niniganné*, associated with both wealth and danger that take symbolic form as snakes. Nature spirits, appealed to by Baule diviners in Côte d'Ivoire for spiritual insights, are conceived of as grotesque beings associated with untamed wilderness (**example here**).



Figure 5.7.2: Ci wara kun (Male and Female Antelope Headdresses), 19th – 20th century, Bamana peoples, wood, 90.7 x 40 x 8.5 cm, Segou region, Mali (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)



Figure 5.7.3: (Ndeo), 19th–mid-20th century, Senufo peoples, Korhogo region, Bandama River region, Côte d'Ivoire, wood, pigment, 60.2 x 14 x 11.8cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, female figure and male figure)

Other spirits represent founding ancestors, whose activities are described in stories about the creation of the world and the beginnings of human life and agriculture. The Dogon of Mali recount their genesis story with reference to Nommo, a primordial being who guided an ark with the eight original ancestors from heaven to populate the earth (top of page). Also in Mali, Bamana agricultural ceremonies invoke Ci Wara, the half man and half antelope credited with introducing agriculture to humanity (above). The original ancestors in Senufo (Côte d'Ivoire) belief are represented by a monumental pair of male and female figures exemplifying an ideal social unit (example left).

The category of spirits believed to be most accessible to humans is that of recently deceased ancestors, who can intercede on behalf of the living community. Among the Akan in Ghana, ancestors are commemorated by terracotta sculptures that, when placed in a

sacred grove near the cemetery, serve as a focal point for funeral rites and a point of contact with the deceased (example here). Fang societies preserved the bones of important deceased individuals in bark containers in the belief that their relics held great spiritual power (example here). In many large states, a living king and leader may be regarded as divine as well. In the kingdom of Benin, in today's Nigeria, the Oba historically was considered semi-divine and therefore constituted the political and spiritual focus of the kingdom (example here).

Christianity in Africa

In addition to indigenous religions at a local level, other religions are also practiced throughout Africa. Christianity has existed in Egypt and northern Africa since the second century. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church was established in the fourth century by King Ezana, who adopted Christianity as the state religion (example here). In the late fifteenth century, Christianity was introduced into sub- Saharan Africa by Portuguese explorers and traders. Although most African cultures did not adopt the religion, the Kongo king Afonso Mvemba a Nzinga established Christianity as the state religion in the early sixteenth century (example here). During the colonial period, Christianity gained converts throughout the continent.



Figure 5.7.4: Crucifix, 16th-17th century, Democratic Republic of the Congo; Angola; Republic of the Congo, solid cast brass, 27.3 cm high (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Islam came to Egypt after 640, then spread below the Sahara in the eighth and ninth centuries through traders and scholars. On the east coast, Arab and Persian colonizers introduced Islam beginning in the eighth century. Although the acceptance of Islam or Christianity sometimes precluded the practice of traditional religions, in many cases they coexisted or were incorporated into preexisting beliefs. The adoption of Islam and Christianity also led to the abandonment of many earlier forms of artistic expression.



Figure 5.7.5: Head of an Oba, Nigeria, Court of Benin, 16th century, brass, 23.5 x 21.9 c 22.9 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Religious practice in Africa centers on a desire to engage the spiritual world in the interests of social stability and well-being. Annual rites of renewal among the Bwa, for example, are designed to seek the continued goodwill of nature spirits (example here). Political leaders also seek religious guidance to ensure the success of their reign. Fon kings, for example, referenced a divination process known as fa, which predicted the nature and character of their reign (example here). Personal misfortune, such as illness, death, or barrenness, or community crises, including war or drought, are also cause to petition the spirits for guidance and assistance. Art objects are employed as vehicles for spiritual communication in diverse ways. Some are created for use in an altar or shrine and may receive sacrificial offerings. The Dogon of Mali, for example, show gratitude to the ancestors by offering pieces of meat in a monumental container presented to the family altar (below). In the kingdom of Benin (Nigeria), cast brass heads commemorating deceased kings are placed on royal ancestral altars, where they serve as a point of contact with the king's royal ancestors (above).



Figure 5.7.6: Ritual Vessel (Aduno Koro): Horse, 19th–20th century, Mali, Dogon peoples, wood, 18.4 x 56.9 x 10.8 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Other objects are used by diviners to attract and tap into spiritual forces. The dazzling beauty of an expertly carved Baule figure sculpture lures a nature spirit into inhabiting the sculpture, thereby aiding a diviner's work (example here). Such objects themselves are often not inherently powerful but must be activated through ritual offerings or by a knowledgeable religious specialist.

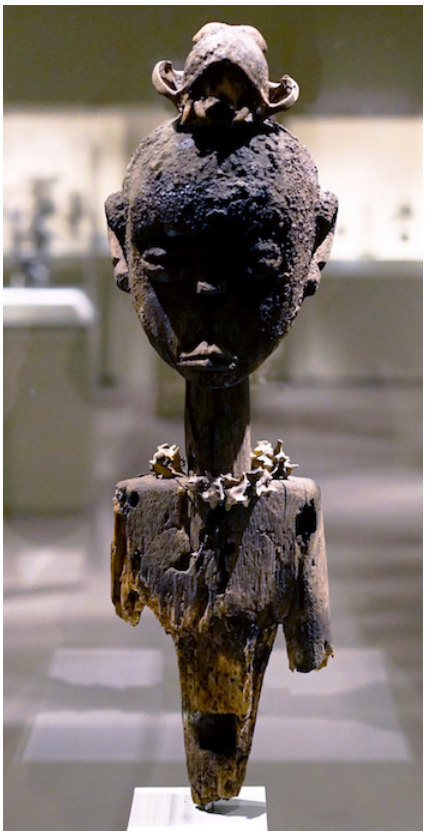


Figure **5.7.7**: Bocio, 19th–early 20th century, Fon peoples, Republic of Benin, wood, bone, metal wire, sacrificial materials (including dog skull), 49.5 x 14.6 x 14.3 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

Fon diviners empower figurative sculptures called *bocio* with organic substances that ensure their client's health and well-being (left). Similarly, Kongo ritual objects known as *nkisi* derive their potency from various substances, both organic and man-made, added to a carved figure by a ritual specialist (**example here**). The unseen forces of nature or the spiritual world are called upon to serve a variety of purposes, including communicating with the spirits, honoring ancestors, healing sickness, or reinforcing societal standards, through masked performances. Masquerades involve the active participation of dancers, musicians, and even the audience, in addition to the masked dancer, who serves as the vehicle through which these invisible powers become manifest. By donning a mask and its associated costume, the dancer transcends his own identity and is transformed into a powerful spiritual being. Among the Dogon, masks are worn at dama, a collective funerary rite for men whose goal is to ensure safe passage of the deceased's spirit to the world of the ancestors (**example here**). Masked performances by members of the Bamana Komo association convey knowledge of their history, beliefs, and rituals to initiated members (**example here**)**.** The massive sculpted headdress known as D'mba among the Baga is seen as a symbol of cultural reinvention and appears on various occasions marking personal and communal growth (**example here**). Among the Mende and their neighbors, masquerades of the Sande society encourage and celebrate young female initiates and offer a model of feminine beauty and spiritual power (**example here**).

© 2006 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (by permission)

Additional resources:

African Art on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Art and Life in Africa (University of Iowa)

Seated (Dogon) Couple at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Headdress: Male Antelope (Ci Wara) at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

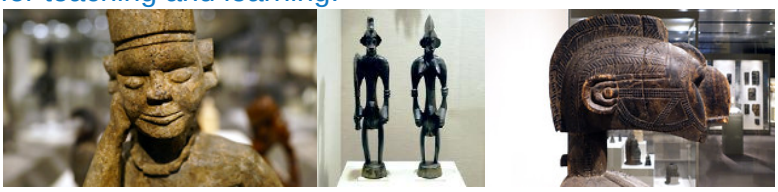
Male and Female Poro Altar Figures (*Ndeo*) at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Ritual Vessel (Aduno Koro): Horse at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Crucifix from the Democratic Republic of Congo at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Art and Oracle: African Art and Rituals of Divination (ebook from The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

SmartHistory images for teaching and learning:



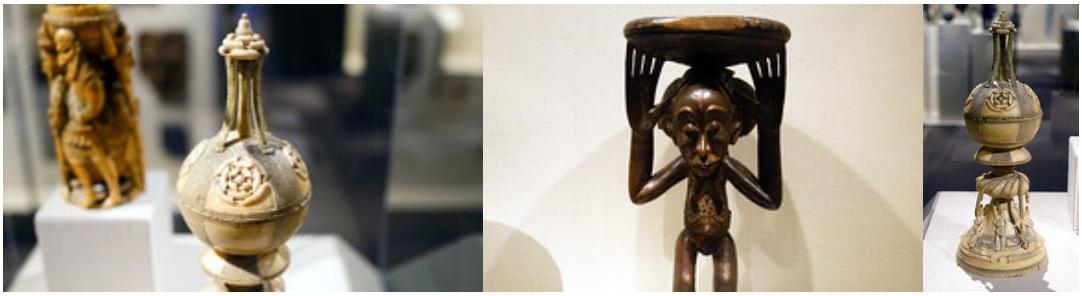
Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



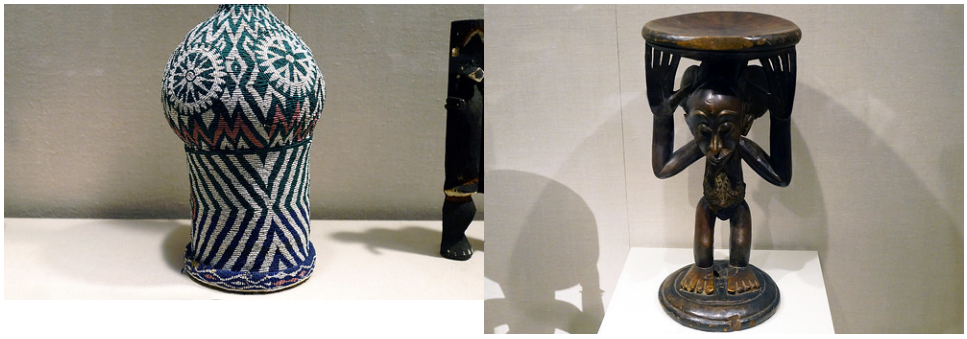
Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)

This page titled 5.7: Religion and the Spiritual Realm is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.1: A beginner's guide** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

5.8: Art and politics

by DR. CHRISTA CLARKE

Political institutions in Africa that predate European colonization have ranged from large, centralized kingdoms led by a single ruler to smaller, village-based societies. Centralized states may vary in size and complexity but are generally ruled by a chief or king, supported by a hierarchical bureaucracy. In many different societies, leaders are considered to be semi-divine. In less centralized societies, power is not vested in a single individual. Instead, authority may be exercised by family heads, a council of elders, or local social or political institutions. African political institutions were dramatically impacted by colonial rule. The role of traditional rulers continues to change in post-independence Africa, where modern states are governed by national leaders.



Figure **5.8.1**: Head of an Oba, Nigeria, Court of Benin, 16th century, brass, 23.5 x 21.9 c 22.9 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

In centralized states, leaders have historically played an important role as patrons of the arts. Often, leaders held monopolies over the materials used and controlled artistic production as well (see image above). They commissioned a wide range of prestige objects, distinguished by the lavish use of luxury materials (see below), as well as complex architectural programs (**example here**). Works made of metal, ivory, or beads were not only visually spectacular, but also reminded the public of the king's wealth and power. Such art forms underscored the king's fundamental difference from—and superiority to—his subjects. Royal arts are often used in ceremonial contexts that mark and legitimize political authority. Handheld objects, such as flywhisks, staffs (like the one below), and pipes, are used as personal regalia to indicate rank and position within the court.



Figure \(\PageIndex{2\): Detail, Linguist Staff (*Okyeame*), 19th-early 20th century, Ghana, Akan peoples, Asante, gold foil, wood, nails, 156.5 x 14.6 x 5.7 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

Special seats of office and clothes and regalia made of expensive materials (**example here**) distinguish the leader's exalted position and set him apart, both literally and figuratively, from his subjects. Larger works legitimize political power to a broad public. Portraits of past leaders document dynastic lines of leadership and serve as a visual reminder of the present king's legacy like the portrait of an Oba above). Such portraits generally present an idealized depiction of a youthful and vigorous king and emphasize the various trappings of royalty.



Figure **5.8.3**: Kòmò Helmet Mask (*Kòmòkun*), 19th–mid-20th century, Guinea or Mali or Burkina Faso or Côte d'Ivoire, West Africa, Komo or Koma Power Association, Wood, bird skull, porcupine quills, horns, cotton, sacrificial materials, 35.2 x 22.1 x 85.6 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

Among smaller, village-based societies, in which governance is distributed among local associations, artworks do not glorify a particular leader. Instead of lavish displays of royal regalia, masks and figures are used as agents of social control or education. Such works are generally commissioned by a group of individuals, such as a council of elders or members of a religious association. They give visual form to spiritual forces whose power is enlisted to maintain order and well-being in a community. Sometimes, artworks are deliberately fearsome, employing elements of the natural world considered inherently powerful, such as sacrificial blood or medicinal plants (example above). In other contexts, the sculpture's imagery presents cultural ideals held collectively by the society (**example here**).

Additional resources:

African art on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Barbara W. Blackmun, Art and Rule in the Benin Kingdom, on Art & Life in Africa (University of Iowa)

Michelle Gilbert, Akan Leadership and Ceremony, on Art & Life in Africa (University of Iowa)

Kathy Curnow, Benin Kingdom Leadership Regalia on Art & Life in Africa (University of Iowa)

Joseph Aurélien Cornet, Kuba Art and Rule on Art & Life in Africa (University of Iowa)

SmartHistory images for teaching and learning:



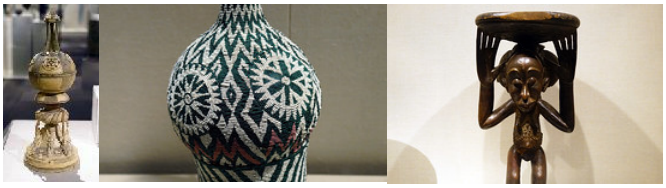
Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)

This page titled 5.8: Art and politics is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.1: A beginner's guide** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

https://human.libretexts.org/@go/page/161149

5.9: Rites of passage

by DR. CHRISTA CLARKE



Figure **5.9.1**: (*Ndeo*), 19th–mid-20th century, Senufo peoples, Korhogo region, Bandama River region, Côte d'Ivoire, wood, pigment, 60.2 x 14 x 11.8cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

In many African societies, art plays an important role in various rites of passage throughout the cycle of life. These rituals mark an individual's transition from one stage of life to another. The birth of a child, a youth's coming of age, and the funeral of a respected elder are all events in which an individual undergoes a change of status. During these transitional periods, individuals are considered to be especially vulnerable to spiritual forces. Art objects are therefore created and employed to assist in the rite of passage and to reinforce community values.

The birth of a child is an important event, not only for a family but for society as well. Children ensure the continuity of a community, and therefore a woman's ability to bear children inspires awe. Ideals of motherhood and nurturance are often expressed visually through figurative sculpture. Among the Senufo, for example, female figures pay homage to the important roles women play as founders of lineages and guardians of male initiates (example above). The importance of motherhood is symbolized by a gently swelling belly and lines of scarification radiating from the navel, considered the source of life. In other societies, such as the Bamana, figural sculptures are employed in ceremonies designed to assist women having difficulty conceiving (example below). They serve simultaneously as a point of contact for spiritual intercession and as a visual reminder of physical and moral ideals.

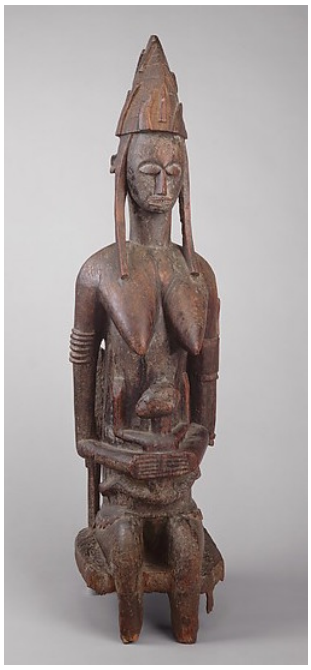


Figure 5.9.2: Mother and Child, 15th–20th century, Mali, Bougouni or Dioila region, Bamana peoples, wood, 123.5 x 36.6 x 36.5 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Initiation, or the coming of age of a boy or girl, is a transition frequently marked by ceremony and celebration. The education of youths in preparation for the responsibilities of adulthood is often a long and arduous process. Initiation rites usually begin at the onset of puberty.

Boys, and to a lesser extent girls, are separated from their families and taken to a secluded area on the outskirts of the community where they undergo a sustained period of instruction and, more typically in the past than now, circumcision. At the conclusion of this mentally and physically rigorous period, they are reintroduced to society as fully initiated adults and given the responsibilities and privileges that accompany their new status.During initiation, artworks protect and impart moral lessons to the youths. The spiritual forces associated with this period of transformation are often given visual expression in the form of masked performances.

During the initiation of boys, male dancers wearing wooden masks may make several appearances. Their performances can serve diverse purposes—to educate boys about their future social role, to bolster morale, to impress upon them respect for authority, or simply to entertain and relieve stress. The initiation of girls rarely includes the use of wooden masks, focusing more on transforming the body through the application of pigment.



Figure 5.9.3: Headdress, 19th–20th century, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Yaka peoples, wood, cane, raffia, pigment, 45.1 x 61 x 54.6 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

The women's Sande society, found among the Mende and their neighbors, is one of the few organizations in which women wear wooden masks as part of initiation ceremonies (example here). Many initiation organizations continue in today's Africa, often adapting to contemporary lifestyles. For example, in the past, the Sande society's initiation process could take months to complete;

now, Sande sessions have adapted to the calendars of secondary schools and initiation may be completed during vacation and holiday periods.

In many African societies, death is not considered an end but rather another transition. The passing of a respected elder is a time of grief and lamentation but also celebration. In this final rite of passage, the deceased joins the realm of the honored ancestors. While the dead are buried soon after death, a formal funeral often takes place at a later time. Funeral ceremonies with masked performances serve to celebrate the life of an individual and to assist the soul of the deceased in his or her passage from the human realm to that of the spirits (example here). Such ceremonies generally mark the end of a period of mourning and may be collective, honoring the lives of the deceased over a number of years.



Figure 5.9.4: From a Reliquary Ensemble: Seated Female, 19th–early 20th century, Fang peoples, Okak group, Gabon or Equatorial Guinea, wood, metal, 64 x 20 x 16.5 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

Figurative sculpture is also employed to commemorate important ancestors. Representations of the deceased, individualized through details of hairstyle, dress, and scarification, serve not only as memorials but also as a focal point for rituals communicating with ancestors (**example here**). In some central African societies, certain bones of the deceased are believed to contain great power and are preserved in a reliquary. In such cases, figurative sculpture attached to the reliquary does not represent the ancestor but honors and amplifies the power of the sacred relics (example above).

Additional resources:

Senufo Arts and Poro Initiation in Northern Côte d'Ivoire on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

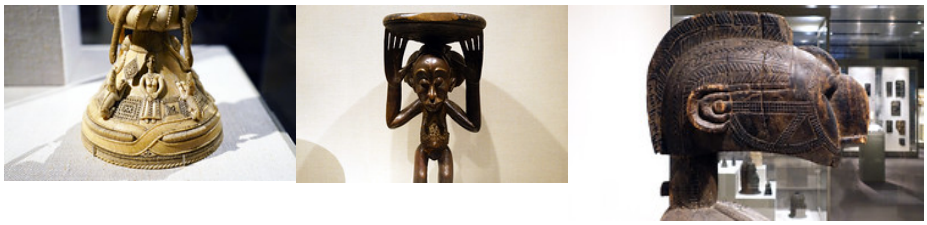
Manuel Jordan, Art and Initiation in Western Zambia on Art & Life in Africa (University of Iowa)

Ruth Phillips, Henrietta Cosentino and Rebecca Bussell, Women's Art and Initiation in Mendeland in Art & Life in Africa (University of Iowa)

SmartHistory images for teaching and learning:



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)

This page titled 5.9: Rites of passage is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.1: A beginner's guide** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

5.10: Art and the individual

by DR. CHRISTA CLARKE



Figure **5.10.1**: Zlan of Belewale, Ceremonial Ladle (Wakemia or Wunkirmian), before 1960, Dan peoples, wood, fiber, metal, pigment, 13.3 × 58.4 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

While many kinds of African art are employed in communal contexts, others serve the needs of individuals. Domestic furnishings and objects of personal use, while practical in purpose, also have an aesthetic dimension. The artistic enhancement of objects of utilitarian function reflect and reinforce an individual's standing and status in society. Details of form and decoration personalize an object, marking it as the property of a specific individual and, occasionally, providing information about ethnic affiliation, social status, or rank. At the same time, the artistic inventiveness and careful execution of such works clearly indicate a desire to integrate aesthetics into daily life.



Figure 5.10.2: Côte d'Ivoire, central Côte d'Ivoire, Baule peoples, wood, pigment, beads and iron, 55.4 x 10.2 x 10.5 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Personal adornment and dress are important forms of aesthetic expression. Scarification and hairstyle, in particular, are regarded by Africans as means by which the body is refined and civilized. Specifics of bodily ornamentation are often depicted in fine detail on masks and figurative sculpture, indicating their importance as symbols of cultural, personal, and/or professional identity (example above). Dress is also a means of self-expression and definition. Certain forms of textiles identify the wearer by age or status and may also convey personal identity as well (example below). Textiles have also historically been conceived as a form of wealth and their extensive use comments upon the wearer's access to riches.



Figure **5.10.3**: Married Woman's Apron (Ijogolo), 19th-20th century, South Africa, Ndebele peoples, leather, beads and thread, 75.6 x 67.3cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art)**

Additional resources:

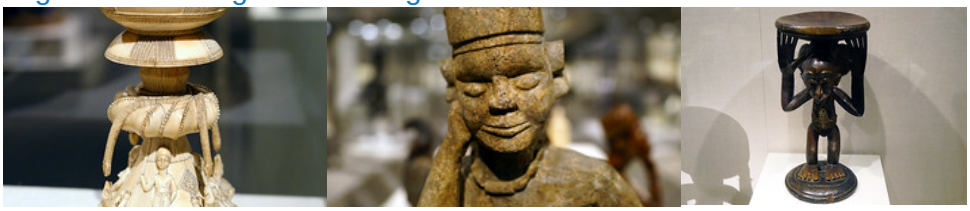
Kingdoms of Madagascar: Malagasy Textile Arts on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Tutsi Basketry on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Rachel Hoffman, Textiles in Mali on Art & Life in Africa (University of Iowa)

Fred T. Smith, Frafra Leatherwork and Brass Bangles on Art & Life in Africa (University of Iowa)

Smarthistory images for teaching and learning:



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)

This page titled 5.10: Art and the individual is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.1: A beginner's guide** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

5.11: African art and the effects of European contact and colonization

This page titled 5.11: African art and the effects of European contact and colonization is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

5.12: The Reception of African Art in the West

by DR. PERI KLEMM



Figure **5.12.1**: View of archaeological and ethnographic collections (Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford) (photo: **Jorge Royan**, CC: BY-SA 3.0)

When early European explorers brought back souvenirs from their trips to the African continent they were regarded as curiosities and they didn't find a home in art museums for centuries. Instead, these objects became part of natural history museums—along with fossilized remains, flora and fauna, and purely utilitarian objects. They were considered the man-made material remains of a culture. Clouded by the framework of Social Darwinism in the 19th century and other beliefs that justified racial hierarchies, peoples of African, Pacific, and Native American descent were regarded as less civilized, even less human. Attitudes about their art were also determined by pre-conceived ideas about race and therefore, their creations were not categorized as "Art" in Euro-American sense.



Figure **5.12.2**: Plank Mask (Nwantantay), 19th-20th century, Bwa peoples, wood, pigment, fiber, 182.9 x 28.2 x 26 cm, Burkina Faso (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

By the early 1900s however, these same objects that were initially regarded as artifacts of material culture, began to be exhibited in Western art museums and galleries as “art.” The objects themselves had not changed, but there was a shift in the attitudes and assumptions about what constituted a work of art.

To historicize this issue more, we can divide the history of the display and reception of African art into four periods. In the eighteenth century, objects like the ones illustrated here would likely be housed in a “curiosity cabinet”—in a private family parlor where trinkets and novelties acquired over generations, often while traveling, were displayed. The artist, culture, and function of these objects was not usually recorded or regarded as significant. By the nineteenth century, many of these curiosity cabinet collections were donated first to natural history museums where they were categorized and classified in the name of science along with flora, fauna, and skeletal remains. By the twentieth century, some of these same works were exhibited in fine art galleries and museums. Over time, African art has become widely collected and ever more popular.



Figure 5.12.3: terracotta, 13th century, Mali, Inland Niger Delta region, Djenné peoples, 25/4 x 29.9 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

Some of the assumptions about what constitutes art is still very much a part of the Western aesthetic system. For example, “high art” is still thought of as painting and sculpture. Because many African artworks served a specific function, Westerners have sometimes not regarded these as art. It is worth remembering, however, that the concept of “art” divorced from ritual and political function, is a relatively recent development in the West. Prior to the 18th century, most artistic traditions around the world were functional as well as aesthetic, and arguments can be made that all art serves social and economic functions. The objects that African artists create—while useful—embody aesthetic preferences and may be admired for their form, composition and invention.



Figure 5.12.4: Detail, Man's Prestige Cloth, early 20th century, Akan peoples, Asante group, silk and cotton, 289.6 x 172.7 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Eighteenth-century theories

In Eighteenth-century Europe, philosophers and critics constructed a definition of "art" in which the object was unique, complex, irreplaceable, inspired by the natural world, and with the exception of architecture, non-functional. In contrast, non-Western art was viewed as not unique, simply produced, replaceable, abstract, and utilitarian. Therefore, Non-Western art was *not* considered to be art.

Nineteenth-century theories

Nineteenth century notions of art were redefined by theories of cultural evolution. Social Darwinism was used to support the claim that all cultures progress along an evolutionary ladder. Western culture was seen as the most advanced and inherently superior. Societies in Africa were viewed as more primitive, a state of being from which modern Western society evolved. Franz Boas in 1927 in his book *Primitive Art* shows that cultural evolutionism is seriously flawed. He argued that contemporary societies cannot be arranged on a ladder of "least evolved" or "most advanced." Nor can their art.

Twentieth-century-cultural relativism and Pablo Picasso



Figure 5.12.5: Pablo Picasso, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, 1907, oil on canvas, 243.9 x 233.7 cm (The Museum of Modern Art)

Anthropologists and art historians came to realize that non-Western cultures should not be judged according to the values of the West, leading to a reevaluation of the nature of "art." However, it was modern Western artists who brought non-Western objects into the popular imagination as works of art worthy of aesthetic consideration. Looking for a new way to represent modernity,

artists such as Andre Derain, Amedeo Modigliani, and Pablo Picasso turned to non-Western art for stylistic inspiration. We see this in Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (above). The women's faces on the right of the canvas have been painted as masks inspired by African artworks Picasso observed on his trip to the Trocadero Museum in Paris in 1907:

> ***All alone in that awful museum with masks, dolls made by the redskins, dusty manikins. Les Demoiselles d'Avignon must have come to me that very day, but not at all because of the forms; because it was my first exorcism painting — yes absolutely!… The masks weren't just like any other pieces of sculpture. Not at all. They were magic things. But why weren't the Egyptian pieces or the Chaldean? We hadn't realized it. 'Those were primitive, not magic things. The Negro pieces were mediators. They were against everything — against unknown, threatening spirits. I always looked at fetishes. I understood; I too am against everything. I understood what the Negroes used their sculpture for. Why sculpt like that and not some other way? After all, they weren't Cubists! Since Cubism didn't exist.***

In the quote above, Picasso recognized that the African and Amerindian artists whose work he saw at the museum in Paris were deliberately using abstraction. He doesn't focus on why they chose this style but he adopts it, none-the-less, to pursue his own expressive interests. For contemporary avant-garde artists, African art offered abstraction as a strategy for the representation of modernity. The quote also tells us that Picasso, like many Western collectors, didn't know much about the function, culture, or history of African objects and he seems to have focused on their purely formal properties. **Picasso**, **Piet Mondrian**, **Constantin Brancusi**, **Georges Braque** and other modernists helped Western viewers to see these objects as "art" but the cultural meanings of these works remained opaque. However, over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, scholars began to question social Darwinism and seek out indigenous interpretations of the form and function of objects.

Today, many contemporary African artists are influenced by tradition-based African art (see for example, **El Anatsui**). African arts played a central role in their communities, whether to communicate royalty, sacrality, inner virtues, aesthetic interests, genealogy, or other concerns. As the art historian Robert Farris Thompson has argued for the Yoruba, African art is used to make things happen, it is efficacious and necessary for events like rituals, masquerades, and life cycle transitions to successfully occur.

Additional resources:

African influences in Modern Art on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Collecting for the Kunstkammer on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

---

This page titled 5.12: The Reception of African Art in the West is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.1: A beginner's guide** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

5.13: Western appreciation of African art

Western appreciation of African art

by DR. CHRISTA CLARKE



Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble: Seated Female, 19th–early 20th century, Fang peoples, Okak group, Gabon or Equatorial Guinea, wood, metal, 64 x 20 x 16.5 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

The appreciation of African art in the Western world has had an enormous impact not only on the development of modern art in Europe and the United States, but also on the way African art is presented in a Western museum setting. Although objects from Africa were brought to Europe as early as the fifteenth century, it was during the colonial period that a greater awareness of African art developed. The cultural and aesthetic milieu of late-nineteenth-century Europe fostered an atmosphere in which African artifacts, once regarded as mere curios, became admired for their artistic qualities.

African sculpture, in particular, served as a catalyst for the innovations of modernist artists. Seeking alternatives to realistic representation, Western artists admired African sculpture for its abstract conceptual approach to the human form. For example, the powerfully carved Fang reliquary figure (right), with its bulbous and fluid forms, attracted the attention of the painter André Derain and the sculptor Jacob Epstein, both of whom once owned the sculpture.

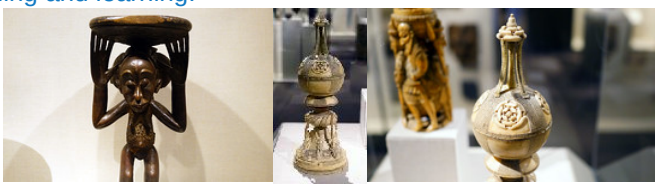
Increasing interest among artists and their patrons gradually brought African art to prominence in the Western art world. Along with this growing admiration for African art, the aesthetic preferences of collectors and dealers resulted in the development of distinctions between art and artifact. Masks and figurative statuary in wood and metal—genres and media most readily assimilated into established categories of fine art in the West—were preferred over more overtly utilitarian objects, such as vessels or staffs. Masks and figurative statuary are more commonly found in western and central Africa. The legacy of early Western taste, with its emphasis on sculptural forms such as masks and figures, continues to inform most museum collections of African art.

As African art became more widely appreciated in the West, scholars began to study both its stylistic diversity and the meanings that African artifacts hold for their makers. Our understanding of African art has been shaped by the work of anthropologists and art historians, many of whom have spent considerable time doing research in Africa on specific cultural traditions. African scholars are also undertaking research into their own heritage. Their sustained commentaries have led to new information and insights, providing a better understanding of the complex cultural meanings embodied in art. At the same time, scholars today recognize that interpreting the creation, form, and use of African art is an inexact science, as meanings and functions shift over time and across regions.

Additional resources:

African Influences in Modern Art on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

SmartHistory images for teaching and learning:



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



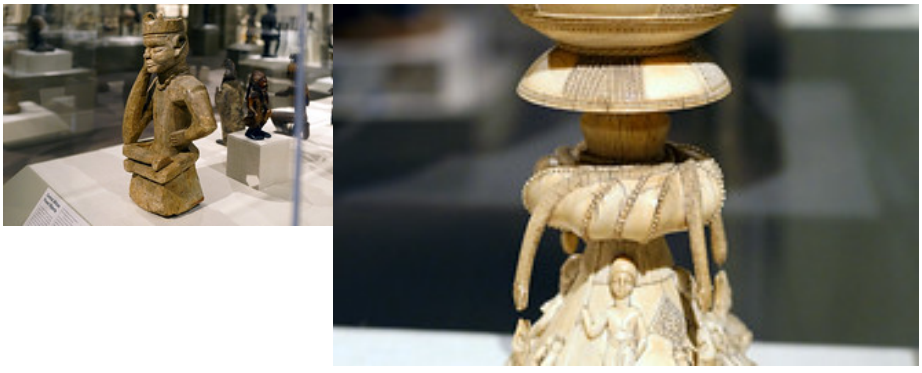
Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)



Click on image for larger picture (External link to flickr)

This page titled 5.13: Western appreciation of African art is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.1: A beginner's guide** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

6: East Africa and the Horn of Africa

For two millennia, East Africa has been home to powerful empires and prosperous trading cities. **c. 1 C.E. - present**

East Africa is made up Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Djibouti (Horn of Africa), Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi (the African Great Lakes region) and the island nations of Comoros, Mauritius, Seychelles, Réunion and Mayotte in the Indian Ocean.

6.1: Tanzania

6.2: The art of Ethiopia

6.2.1: Aksumite Coins

6.2.2: Illuminated Gospel

6.2.3: Julie Mehretu, Stadia II

6.2.4: Christian Ethiopian art

6.2.5: An Ethiopian icon

6.2.6: The kingdom of Aksum

This page titled 6: East Africa and the Horn of Africa is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

6.1: Tanzania

Kilwa Kisiwani, Tanzania

by STEVEN ZUCKER, WORLD MONUMENTS FUND and STEPHEN BATTLE



Video **6.1.1**: A conversation with Stephen Battle, World Monuments Fund and Steven Zucker, Smarthistory about the history and architecture of Kilwa Kisiwani, Tanzania

This page titled 6.1: Tanzania is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.2: East Africa and the Horn of Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

SECTION OVERVIEW

6.2: The art of Ethiopia

Ethiopia is known for its magnificent churches, illuminated manuscripts, and world-famous contemporary art.

6.2.1: Aksumite Coins

6.2.2: Illuminated Gospel

6.2.3: Julie Mehretu, Stadia II

6.2.4: Christian Ethiopian art

6.2.5: An Ethiopian icon

6.2.6: The kingdom of Aksum

This page titled 6.2: The art of Ethiopia is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

6.2.1: Aksumite Coins

by THE BRITISH MUSEUM

Coins have a unique significance in the history of Aksum. They are particularly important because they provide evidence of Aksum and its rulers. The inscriptions on the coins highlight the fact that Aksumites were a literate people with knowledge of both Ethiopic and Greek languages.

Conversion to Christianity

It is generally thought that the first Aksumite coins were intended for international trade. These coins, bearing the name of King Endybis (c. 270/290 C.E.), were mainly struck in gold and silver and followed the weight standard which existed in the Roman Empire. Initially, the symbols of the crescent and disc, which were common to the religions in South Arabia to which Aksum adhered, were used on early Aksumite coins. But after the conversion of King Ezana around 340–356 C.E., the king made a powerful statement by replacing the existing symbols with a cross which clearly denoted the importance that Christianity now had in the kingdom. The coins also had a portrait of the ruler on the obverse and reverse of the coin along with teff, a local type of wheat. Inscriptions were another form of information included on the coins.



Figure **6.2.1.1**: Gold coin, c. 270-300 C.E., gold, Aksumite, modern Ethiopia © Trustees of the British Museum. Obverse showing head and shoulders bust of King Endubis facing right, wearing headcloth with rays at forehead and triangular ribbon behind, framed by two wheat-stalks. Disc and crescent at top.

For the most part, gold coins were inscribed in Greek and often intended for exports, while silver and copper coins were insribed in Ge'ez (Aksumite script). From the 4th century C.E., an increasing number of copper coins were issued which had evidently Christian inscriptions such as "Joy and Peace to the People" and "He conquers through Christ." With the replacement of gold coins with copper ones, the craftsmen of Aksum started using specialized techniques of gilding, which was unique to the kingdom and involved gold leaf being added to crowns and other symbols to enhance the appearance, and most probably the value, of coins.



Figure **6.2.1.2**: Coin of King Joel, 6th century C.E., Aksum, modern Ethiopia © Trustees of the British Museum

This coin was minted during the reign of King Joel in sixth-century Aksum. Between the second and the ninth centuries, the kingdom of Aksum prospered in Ethiopia. The trade routes along the Nile Valley that led to the Red Sea and on into the Indian Ocean made Aksum a destination for many merchants and travelers.

The large cross on the reverse of the coin symbolizes the country's shift to Christianity. This took place during the fourth century when a traveller named Frumentius converted Aksum's ruler, King Ezana. The old religious symbols of the sun and the moon no longer appeared on coins and were replaced with a cross, which was enlarged over the years.

The religious symbolism on these coins had strong political implications, as it aligned Aksum's religious identity with its main trading partners, Rome, and later Byzantium.

Suggested readings:

J. Williams (ed.), *Money: a history* (London, The British Museum Press, 1997).

© Trustees of the British Museum

This page titled 6.2.1: Aksumite Coins is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.2: East Africa and the Horn of Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

6.2.2: Illuminated Gospel

by DR. CHRISTA CLARKE



Figure **6.2.2.1**: Illuminated Gospel, Amhara peoples, Ethiopia, late 14th–early 15th century, parchment (vellum), wood (acacia), tempera and ink, 41.9 x 28.6 x 10.2 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

This full-page illumination is one of twenty-four from a manuscript of the Gospel that reflects Ethiopia's longstanding Christian heritage. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church was established in the fourth century by King Ezana (who ruled 320–350). He adopted Christianity as the official state religion of Aksum, a kingdom located in the highlands of present-day Ethiopia. As the Christian state expanded over the centuries, monasteries were founded throughout the region. These became important centers of learning and artistic production, as well as influential outposts of state power.

The manuscript was created at a monastic center near Lake Tana in the early fifteenth century. It is composed of 178 leaves of vellum bound between acacia wood covers. The illuminations depict scenes from the life of Christ and portraits of the Evangelists. This text and its pictorial format are based upon manuscripts produced by the Coptic Church. Here, however, these prototypes are transformed into local forms of expression. For example, the imagery is two-dimensional and linear, which is characteristic of Ethiopian painting. Additionally, the text is inscribed not in its original Greek, but in Ge'ez, the ancient liturgical language of Ethiopia. Ge'ez is one of the world's oldest writing systems and is the foundation of today's Amharic, Ethiopia's national language.



Figure 6.2.2.2: Christ (detail), Illuminated Gospel, Amhara peoples, Ethiopia, late 14th–early 15th century, parchment (vellum), wood (acacia), tempera and ink, 41.9 x 28.6 x 10.2 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

In this depiction of the Ascension of Christ into heaven, he appears framed in a red circle at the summit, surrounded by the four beasts of the Evangelists. Below, Mary and the Apostles gesture upward. The stylistic conventions seen here, such as the abbreviated definition of facial features and boldly articulated figures, are consistent throughout the manuscript, suggesting the hand of a single artist. The artist depicts the figures' heads frontally and their bodies frequently in profile. The use of red, yellow, green, and blue as the predominant color scheme is typical of Ethiopian manuscripts from this period. The images were intended to be viewed during liturgical processions.



Figure 6.2.2.3: Mary and the apostles (detail), Illuminated Gospel, Amhara peoples, Ethiopia, late 14th–early 15th century, parchment (vellum), wood (acacia), tempera and ink, 41.9 x 28.6 x 10.2 cm (**The Metropolitan Museum of Art**)

The Gospels were considered among the most holy of Christian texts by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Such manuscripts were often commissioned by wealthy patrons for presentation as gifts to churches. While the text demonstrated the erudition of its monastic creator, the elaborate ornamentation reflected the prestige of the benefactors. Many works of Ethiopian art were destroyed by Islamic incursions during the sixteenth century, making this manuscript a rare survivor.

© 2006 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (by permission)

Additional resources:

This work at The Metropolitan Museum of Art

The Art of the Book in the Middle Ages on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Eastern and Southern Africa on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

African Christianity in Ethiopia on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Prayer Book: Arganonä Maryam (The Organ of Mary) in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art

---

This page titled 6.2.2: Illuminated Gospel is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.2: East Africa and the Horn of Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

6.2.3: Julie Mehretu, Stadia II

by DR. ALLISON YOUNG



Figure **6.2.3.1**: Julie Mehretu, *Stadia II*, 2004, ink and acrylic on canvas, 108 x 144″ (Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh) (© Julie Mehretu)

Opening / Ceremonies

When looking at *Stadia II*, first try to isolate the black lines from the rest of the composition. Does this centrifugal structure remind you of a sports arena, an amphitheater or opera house? Perhaps a political chamber? It could denote all of these, broadly invoking our experiences as individuals and collective bodies in such spaces. The built environment, for Mehretu, provides a setting in which people can gather, protest, pray, and riot in mass numbers.

Now, try to imagine yourself in a large stadium, at an important athletic championship such as the FIFA World Cup or the Olympics. How do the crowds behave? What types of phrases or slogans are they shouting, and at what volume? Think about the matching clothing and the painted faces of spectators wearing team colors, or the flags and banners that they wave over their heads.

In her monumental paintings, murals, and works on paper, Julie Mehretu overlays architectural plans, diagrams, and maps of the urban environment with abstract forms and personal notations. The resulting compositions convey the energy and chaos of today's globalized world. *Stadia II* is part of a triptych of works created in 2004, and explores themes such as nationalism and revolution as they occur in the worlds of art, sports, and contemporary politics.

Gaze back into the painting and observe the various shards of color floating over the work's architectural skeleton. The scene, however abstract, could easily represent our visualization of the sports arena. Small circles, dots, and hash marks float through the open space at the center of the composition, resembling the eruption of confetti that announces a winning team's victory (or, alternately, that of a lucky political candidate on Election Day).



Figure **6.2.3.2**: Julie Mehretu, detail, *Stadia II*, 2004, ink and acrylic on canvas, 108 x 144″ (Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh) (© Julie Mehretu)

Notice the larger circles, triangles, blocks and parallelograms that float across the upper register. Far from arbitrary, these basic pictorial elements could comprise the designs of nearly any country's national flag. The cluster of red and blue stripes, for instance, located along the top-right edge of the canvas, resemble the American flag, without necessarily resolving into a perfect match. We

may also find corporate logos and religious symbols interspersed throughout; Mehretu is intentional in drawing analogies between these forms and the propagandistic ways in which they are often used.

Lastly, observe the painterly grey marks that seem to rise from the lower and central registers like plumes of smoke. Stadiums and capital buildings can represent triumph, pride and celebration, but they are also common targets for bombings and acts of terror, which are often motivated by a comparable degree of zealousness and ideological fervor.

Process

Mehretu's working process begins with the projection of maps and diagrams onto the work's blank surface. From these, the artist makes traces and hash marks that eventually grow into characters and communities. The first layer is coated with an acrylic-and-silica mixture that seals the drawing under a transparent ground. After drying, this ground is itself overlaid with more figures and photographs that are again assimilated into the composition.

The artist describes her final product as containing a "stratified, tectonic geology (…) with the characters themselves buried—as if they were fossils."[1] This distinct sense of temporality serves as a metaphor for history, memory, and the legacies of past cultural epochs that still influence contemporary life.

Utopian Abstraction

While nationalism, sports and global politics are key points of entry into the work, Mehretu also considers art historical precedents for these themes.

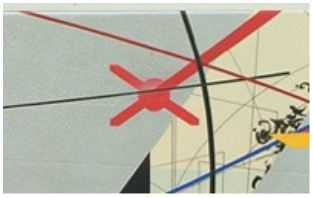


Figure **6.2.3.3**: Julie Mehretu, detail, *Stadia II*, 2004, ink and acrylic on canvas, 108 x 144″ (Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh) (© Julie Mehretu)

Take a look at the orange diamonds at the side edges, the black quadrilaterals interspersed above, or the dynamic red "X" found at the top edge. These lines and shapes are unmistakable references to the Russian constructivist and Bauhaus movements of the early twentieth century, and to artists such as Alexandr Rodchenko, Kasmir Malevich, El Lissitzky, and Wassily Kandinsky. These artists conceived of pure abstraction as a way to wipe clean the slate of history and to promote universalism and collectivity in art, politics and culture.

Mehretu has long explored the use of abstraction in service of revolution and utopian politics throughout the history of Modernist art, "I am (…) interested in what Kandinsky referred to in 'The Great Utopia' when he talked about the inevitable implosion and/or explosion of our constructed spaces out of the sheer necessity of agency. So, for me, the coliseum, the amphitheater, and the stadium are perfect metaphoric constructed spaces."[2] These can represent both the organized sterility of institutions and the "chaos, violence, and disorder" of revolution and mass gathering.

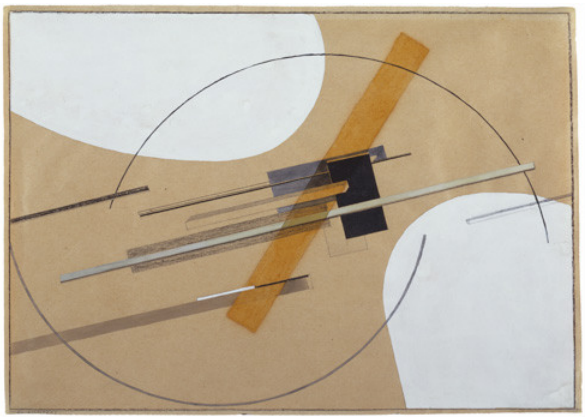


Figure 6.2.3.4: El Lissitzky, *Proun (Entwurf zu Proun, S.K.)*, 1922-23, watercolor, gouache, india ink,graphite, conté crayon, and varnish on buff paper, 8 7/16 × 11 3/4″ / 21.4 × 29.7 cm (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York)

Global Networks

Because Mehretu builds her piece from multiple layers of figure and ground alike, the colors, shapes, and planar forms in *Stadia II* seem to be suspended between surfaces, and are often caught in a swirling motion around the axis of her compositions. The dynamism of the work makes reference to traffic patterns, wind and water currents, migrations, border crossings and travel.

Depicting patterns of movement, Mehretu emphasizes, on one hand, the militarization of bodies moving within and between national (or digital) spaces, and acknowledges the increasing speeds at which the world seems to be moving. Yet, while her compositions might be vertiginous and disorienting at times, we are given a chance to reflect on the potential and importance of such interconnectedness.

Born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, Mehretu has lived in Michigan, Rhode Island, and Dakar Senegal, and now resides in New York City.

1. Julie Mehretu, quoted in Thelma Golden, “Julie Mehretu’s Eruptive Lines of Flight as Ethos of Revolution,” in *Julie Mehretu: The Drawings*, ed. Catherine de Zegher and Thelma Golden, New York, NY: Rizzoli, 2007.

2. Julie Mehretu, “Looking Back: Email Interview between Julie Mehretu and Olukemi Ilesanmi, April 2003” in *Drawing into Painting*, Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 2003: 13-14.

This page titled 6.2.3: Julie Mehretu, Stadia II is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.2: East Africa and the Horn of Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

6.2.4: Christian Ethiopian art

by DR. JACOPO GNISCI



Figure **6.2.4.1**: Church of St. George, c. 12th/13th century, Lalibela, Amhara Region (photo: **Rod Waddington**, CC BY-SA 2.0)

Ethiopia is a country in Africa with ancient Christian roots. It possesses a vigorous artistic tradition and is home to hundreds of old churches and monasteries perched at the top of hard-to-access mountains, hidden by lush vegetation, or surrounded by the tranquil waters of one of its lakes.

What is Christian Ethiopian art?

The introduction of Christian elements in art and the construction of churches in Ethiopia must have started shortly after the introduction of Christianity and continues to this day, since about half of the population are practicing Christians. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church claims that Christianity reached the country in the 1st century C.E. (thanks to the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch described in the Acts of the Apostles 8:26-38), while archaeological evidence suggests that Christianity spread after the conversion of the Ethiopian king Ezana during the first half of the 4th century C.E.

The term “Christian Ethiopian art” therefore refers to a body of material evidence produced over a long period of time. It is a broad definition of spaces and artworks with an Orthodox Christian character that encompasses churches and their decorations as well as illuminated manuscripts and a range of objects (crosses, chalices, patens, icons, etc.) which were used for the liturgy (public worship), for learning, or which simply expressed the religious beliefs of their owners. We can infer that from the thirteenth century onwards works of art were for the most part produced by members of the Ethiopian clergy.

Periodization

Artworks from Ethiopia can and should be contextualized within the country’s historical development. Scholars still disagree on how to divide and classify the development of Christian Ethiopian art into chronological phases. In this essay, the development of Christian Ethiopian art is broadly divided into the eight periods listed below, but it must be kept in mind that the dates for the earlier periods are still debated and we have very limited evidence prior to the early Solomonic period (1270-1527).



Figure **6.2.4.2**: View from Debre Damo, the monastery is accessible only by rope up a sheer cliff (photo: **Fabian Lambeck**, CC BY-SA 4.0)



Figure **6.2.4.3**

This period takes its name from the city of **Aksum** which had been the capital of Ethiopia for several centuries before the conversion to Christianity of King Ezana (who ruled from c. 320–360) and served as capital for several centuries after. While we cannot rule out the possibility that Christianity had been present in the country prior to **the conversion of this ruler**, it is only starting from this period that expressions of distinctly Christian beliefs appear in the material record.

A small number of Ethiopian churches, such as Debre Damo (above) and Degum, can be tentatively ascribed to the Aksumite period. These two structures probably date to the 6th century or later. Still standing pre-6th century Aksumite churches have not been confidently identified. However, archaeologists believe that a small number of now-ruined structures dating to the 4th or 5th century functioned as churches—a conclusion based on features such as their orientation. A large stepped podium in the compound of the church of Mary of Zion in Aksum (considered by the Ethiopians as the dwelling place of the Ark of the Covenant), probably once gave access to a large church built during this period.



Figure **6.2.4.4**: Gold coin, c. 270-300 C.E., gold, Aksumite, modern Ethiopia © Trustees of the British Museum. Obverse showing head and shoulders bust of King Endubis facing right, wearing headcloth with rays at forehead and triangular ribbon behind, framed by two wheat-stalks. Disc and crescent at top.

Aksumite churches adopted the basilica plan. These churches were constructed using well-established local building techniques and their style reflects local traditions. Although very little art survives from the Aksumite period, recent radiocarbon analyses of two illuminated Ethiopic manuscripts known as the **Garima Gospels** suggest that these were produced respectively between the 4th-6th and 5th-7th centuries. Aksumite coins (left) can also be looked at to gain insight into artistic conventions of the period.

The Post-Askumite period (c. 8th/9th-12th centuries C.E.)

A number of factors contributed to the gradual impoverishment and decline of the Aksumite kingdom. The Arab expansion into Northern Africa cut off the kingdom's access to the Red-Sea waterway (and to the markets which could be reached through it and on which a large part of the kingdom's prosperity had been based). There is also evidence to suggest that some of the kingdom's natural resources, such as gold and ivory, had been depleted. Very little is known about this phase of Ethiopian history and scholars even disagree on the dates of its beginning and end.

The political center of Ethiopia seems to have gradually shifted to the southern and eastern parts of the Tigray region in the Post-Aksumite period. A few churches in these areas have been tentatively attributed to this period, but subsequent adaptations combined with the inability to obtain permissions to conduct archaeological surveys make dating difficult. It seems likely that churches continued to be built as well as hewn (cut) out of rock. A group of funerary hypogea (underground chambers) in the Hawzien plain (in northern Ethiopia) may have been transformed into churches during the post-Aksumite period. This could be the case for churches such as Abreha-we-Atsbeha (below) and Tcherqos Wukro (the paintings in these churches probably date from a later period). According to local oral traditions, a small number of iron crosses date to the Aksumite or Post-Aksumite periods, but the absence of reliable dating methods and the fact that such crosses were produced at least until the sixteenth century, makes it extremely difficult to verify these claims.



Figure 6.2.4.5: Interior of the church of Abreha-we-Atsbeha, post-Aksumite Period(?), Tigray Region (photo: Jay Ramji, by permission)

The Zagwe period (c. 1140-1270 C.E.)

By the first half of the twelfth century, the center of power of the Christian Kingdom had shifted even further south, to the Lasta region (a historic district in north-central Ethiopia). From their capital Adeffa, members of the Zagwe dynasty (from whom this period takes its name), ruled over a realm which stretched from much of modern Eritrea to northern and central Ethiopia. While limited evidence about their capital exists, the churches of Lalibela—a town which takes its name from the Zagwe ruler credited with its founding—stand as a testament to the artistic achievements of this period.



Figure 6.2.4.6: Bete Maryam, Lalibela, Ethiopia, 12th-13th century (photo: A. Davey, CC BY 2.0)

Lalibela includes twelve buildings destined for worship which, together with a network of linking corridors and chambers, are entirely carved or "hewn" out of living rock. The tradition of hewing churches out of rock, already attested in the previous periods, is here taken to a whole new level. The churches, several of which are free-standing, such as Bete Gyorgis (Church of St. George, image at top of page), have more elaborate and well-defined façades. They include architectural elements inspired by buildings from the Aksumite Period. Furthermore, some, such as Bete Maryam, feature exquisite internal decorations (above), which are also carved out of the rock, as well as wall paintings. The interiors of the churches blend Aksumite elements with more recent elements of Copto-Arabic derivation. In Bete Maryam, for example, the architectural elements—such as the hewn capitals and window frames—imitate Aksumite models (see below), whereas the paintings can be compared with those in the medieval Monastery of St. Antony at the Red Sea.



Figure 6.2.4.7: Left: exterior, Bete Maryam, Lalibela, Ethiopia, 12th-13th century (photo: Bernard Gagnon, CC BY-SA 3.0); right: interior, Bete Maryam, Lalibela, Ethiopia, 13th century (photo: A. Davey, CC BY 2.0)

Several wooden altars survive from this period, some decorated with figures, together with numerous crosses, some of which are engraved. No illuminated manuscripts or icons from this period have been discovered thus far.

The Early Solomonic period (1270-1527)

By 1270, the last Zagwe ruler was overthrown by Yekunno Amlak, who claimed to descend from the kings of the Aksumite period and traced his lineage all the way back to the biblical union of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. His descendants—the Solomonics—ruled Ethiopia until the third quarter of the twentieth century. For much of this period, the Solomonics did not have a fixed capital, but moved across the country according to the seasons and their needs.

The Solomonics were as active as patrons of the arts as their predecessors, and endowed churches with hundreds of precious gifts. Works of art were also donated to ecclesiastic centers by nobles and clergymen, as well as by individuals known from dedicatory inscriptions on the work they commissioned. The rock-cut church of **Gannata Maryam**, a few kilometers south-east of Lalibela, features an almost complete set of murals depicting saints, angels, and motifs inspired by the New Testament. The church also features a portrait of Yekunno Amlak. Numerous illuminated manuscripts, particularly **Gospel books**, were created between the late thirteenth and early fifteenth centuries. A few dozen feature not just Canon Tables and portraits of the four Evangelists (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), as in the earlier Garima Gospels**,** but also scenes from the Old and New Testaments.



Figure **6.2.4.8**: Annunciation, Ethiopien d'Abbadie *105*, fol. 5, (photo: **Bibliothèque nationale de France**).

By the turn of the fifteenth century other manuscripts, especially Psalters**,** are frequently illustrated and crosses are often embellished with depictions of saints and of the Virgin and Child (above). The earliest surviving **Ethiopian icons** also date from this century (above and below). Written sources suggest that the Ethiopian Emperor Zar'a Ya'eqob encouraged the use of panel paintings in church rituals. While other artistic mediums used during the fifteenth century are largely indebted to the art of the fourteenth century, the icons feature new iconographic motifs and the lines are more elegant and sinuous and the figures have less rigid poses.



Figure 6.2.4.9: Diptych with Mary and Her Son Flanked by Archangels, Apostles and a Saint, Ethiopia, 15th century, tempera on wood, left panel: 8 7/8 x 7 13/16 x 5/8 inches (**The Walters Art Museum**)

The mid-Solomonic period (1527-1632)

After a period of relative stability in the fifteenth century, a sequence of events shook the Ethiopian kingdom to its foundations, bringing it to the brink of collapse. First, came an invasion from the neighboring Muslim Sultanate of Adal led by a general called Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi whose army pillaged and destroyed numerous churches and Christian works of art across the country between 1529 and 1543. Incursions by the Oromo people from the south throughout the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries further strained the country's fragile structures. To make matters worse, the conversion to Catholicism of Emperor Susenyos in 1622 soon plunged the country into a civil war, for many of his subjects refused to adhere to the religious beliefs and liturgical practices that the Jesuit missionaries present in Ethiopia wanted to enforce. The conflict lasted until his abdication in favor of his son Fasilides in 1632.

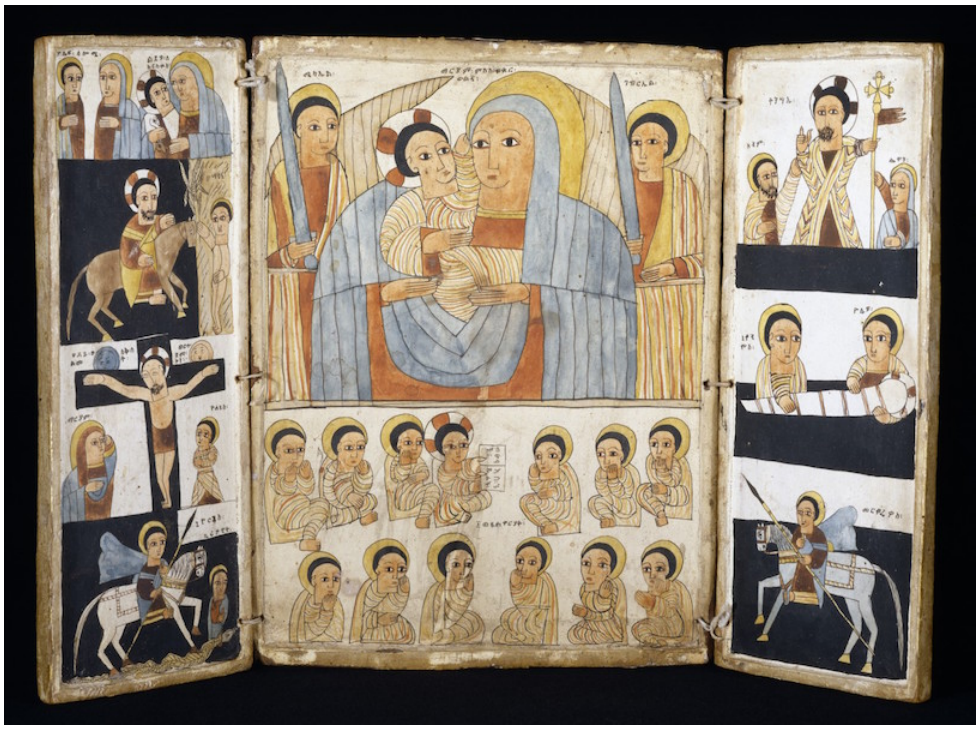


Figure 6.2.4.9: Triptych with Mary and Her Son, Archangels, Scenes from Life of Christ and Saints, Ethiopia, early 16th century, tempera on wood, 10-1/2 x 7-7/8 x 1-1/16 inches (**The Walters Art Museum**)

This phase of Ethiopian art has been sometimes described as period of “transition” because artworks produced during the sixteenth century still include stylistic and iconographic elements that are typical of the fifteenth century, while foreshadowing developments which will take place in the second half of the seventeenth century. However, as such, this description of transition is applicable to most historical periods, and is therefore not particularly helpful. The art produced during the mid-Solomonic period reflects the difficult situation the country was in. The practice of decorating manuscripts with pictures and geometric motifs declined considerably, and few crosses and churches have been confidently attributed to the sixteenth century. Moreover, although numerous icons from this period have survived, these seldom achieve the linear elegance of painted panels from the fifteenth-century.



Figure **6.2.4.10**: Zämänfäs Qeddus (Scribe), *Archangels Michael and Gabriel*, late 17th century (Early Gondarine), tempera and ink on parchment, 10 x 9 1/16 inches (**The Walters Art Museum**)



Figure **6.2.4.11**

The ascent to the throne of Fasilides in 1632 marks the beginning of a period of renewed stability for Ethiopia and the Solomonic dynasty. Fasilides ordered a new a capital, Gondar, about 50 kilometers north of Lake Tana (the largest lake in Ethiopia). He and his successors funded the construction of palaces and banquet halls within the royal compound that still exist today and they promoted the building of churches near by and in the Lake Tana region. The adoption of a circular plan for the construction of churches becomes standard (as opposed to the longitudinal format of the basilica).

Scholars usually divide the Gondarine period into two stylistic phases. The first Gondarine style (above), is characterized by the use of bright colors and the absence of shading. The clothing, often embellished with decorative elements, is usually painted in red, blue or yellow and the folds are indicating with simple parallel lines. The contour lines are well-defined and the modeling of the face is executed using a plain coral red resulting in an unnatural effect.

Works painted in the second Gondarine style (below), which was developed roughly during the reign of Iyasu II (1730-1755), have darker shades of color; the contour lines become lighter and a more delicate use of shading confers volume to the bodies and faces of the figures. A number of new themes, many of which were inspired from books printed in Europe, appear during the eighteenth century and it becomes increasingly common to find depictions of donors and patrons. Numerous crosses (like **this processional cross** from The British Museum), decorated with depictions of the Virgin Mary, Jesus, and saints were produced during the second part of the Gondarine period.



Figure **6.2.4.12**: Adoration of the Magi, from an illuminated manuscript, folio 27r, Vellum, tempera, and leather binding, 12 5/8 x 8 11/16 x 2 3/8 inches (Princeton University Art Museum)

Zemene Mesafint period (1769-1855)

The period known as Zemene Mesafint, or the Era of Judges, begins with the deposition of Emperor Iyosas. This period, which lasted almost a century, saw a decline in the prestige, influence, and authority of the Solomonics, and witnessed the rise of a number of regional warlords who fought against each other for supremacy. This period has received less attention from historians, but seems to have been characterized by a decline in the production of art. Paintings from this period are strongly indebted to works executed during the second Gondarine style in terms of themes and forms, but the palette used by artists moves once again toward bright, plain colors.

The Late Solomonic period (1855-1974)



Figure **6.2.4.13**: Emperor Menelik II, the Archangel Raguel, and a court writer, c. 1889, Entoto Raguel Church, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (photo: author)

The final historical period begins with the ascent to the throne of Tewodros II, who claimed Solomonic descent and ends with the deposition of Haile Selassie, the event that marks the end of Solomonic rule in Ethiopia.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, church painting continues to show indebtedness to the second Gondarine style, but contemporary figures and events are depicted next to religious subjects with an increasing frequency. Moreover, while patrons had occasionally been depicted from the Zagwe period onwards in an idealized manner, by the turn of the twentieth century they are portrayed more realistically, as can be seen by the painting of Emperor Menelik II (above) in the church of Entoto Raguel. After the Second World War, traditionally trained Ethiopian painters, such as Qes Adamu Tesfaw, continued to work alongside artists influenced by **modernism**. The use of imported synthetic colors became increasingly common and by the 1960s icons and manuscripts were created, to a large extent, for the tourist **market**.

Additional resources

Foundations of Aksumite Civilization and Its Christian Legacy (First–Seventh Centuries) on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Monumental Architecture and Stelae of the Aksumite Empire on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

African Christianity in Ethiopia on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Ethiopia's Enduring Cultural Heritage on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

Biblical narrative of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon (I Kings 10)

Review of a recent biography of the life of Haile Selassie

This page titled 6.2.4: Christian Ethiopian art is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.2: East Africa and the Horn of Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

6.2.5: An Ethiopian icon

by DR. JACOPO GNISCI



Figure **6.2.5.1**: Diptych with Mary and Her Son Flanked by Archangels, Apostles and a Saint, Ethiopia, 15th century, tempera on wood, left panel: 8 7/8 x 7 13/16 x 5/8 inches (**The Walters Art Museum**)

The term icon is used to refer to a devotional image. It is typically painted on a flat wooden panel, although in Ethiopia, as in other traditions, materials such as metal or stone could also be used to produce this type of image. The earliest known Ethiopian icons have been dated to the fifteenth century and are generally painted with tempera on gesso-primed wooden panels. Ethiopian icons from this period typically portray the Virgin and Child, the Apostles, and Saint George.

The piece shown here, which can be dated tentatively to the second half of the fifteenth century, features precisely such a combination of subjects. On the left panel, the Child touches his Mother's chin, a gesture of tenderness which appears more frequently in works from this period onwards. The central pair is flanked by two angels with unsheathed swords who act as their royal guard.

The right panel is decorated with portraits of the Apostles who turn their gaze in adoration towards the Virgin and Child. In the bottom right corner is a representation of Saint George on horseback. The names of several of the figures on the right panel have been written on the borders which divide the scene into registers. It is likely that inscriptions identifying the upper row of Apostles and the Virgin and Child were originally present on the upper frame of the two panels. Icons such as this were most likely created to encourage devotion towards the Virgin Mary in accordance with the wishes of the Ethiopian emperor Zarʾa Yaʿ əqob (who ruled from 1434–68) and would have been used in churches and in religious processions.

Additional resources:

Jacopo Gnisci, "A Fifteenth-Century Ethiopian Icon of the Virgin and Child by the Master of the Amber-Spotted Tunic," *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*, vol. 65 (2019), pp. 183–93.

Marilyn E. Heldman, *The Marian Icons of the Painter Frē Ṣeyon: A Study in Fifteenth-Century Ethiopian Art, Patronage, and Spirituality* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1994).

This page titled 6.2.5: An Ethiopian icon is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.2: East Africa and the Horn of Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

6.2.6: The kingdom of Aksum

by THE BRITISH MUSEUM

One of the four greatest powers in the world



Figure **6.2.6.1**

Aksum was the name of a city and a kingdom which is essentially modern-day northern Ethiopia (Tigray province) and Eritrea. Research shows that Aksum was a major naval and trading power from the 1st to the 7th centuries C.E. As a civilization it had a profound impact upon the people of Egypt, southern Arabia, Europe and Asia, all of whom were visitors to its shores, and in some cases were residents.

Aksum developed a civilization and empire whose influence, at its height in the 4th and 5th centuries C.E., extended throughout the regions lying south of the Roman Empire, from the fringes of the Sahara in the west, across the Red Sea to the inner Arabian desert in the east. The Aksumites developed Africa's only indigenous written script, Ge'ez. They traded with Egypt, the eastern Mediterranean, and Arabia.

Despite its power and reputation—it was described by a Persian writer as one of the four greatest powers in the world at the time—very little is known about Aksum. Written scripts existed, but no histories or descriptions have been found to make this African civilization come alive.



Figure **6.2.6.2**: Pyxis, 5th century, ivory with the base restored in wood, 11.3 cm in diameter, Alexandria, Egypt © Trustees of the British Museum

A counterpoint to the Greek and Roman worlds

Aksum provides a counterpoint to the Greek and Roman worlds, and is an interesting example of a sub-Saharan civilization flourishing towards the end of the period of the great Mediterranean empires. It provides a link between the trading systems of the Mediterranean and the Asiatic world, and shows the extent of international commerce at that time. It holds the fascination of being a “lost” civilization, yet one that was African, Christian, with its own script, coinage, and international reputation. It was arguably as advanced as the Western European societies of the time.

The society was hierarchical with a king at the top, then nobles, and the general population below. This hierarchy can be discerned by the buildings that have been found, and the wealth of the goods found in them. Although Aksum had writing, very little has been found out about society from inscriptions. It can be assumed that priests were important, and probably traders, too, because of the money they would have made. Most of the poor were probably craftsmen or farmers. In some descriptions, the ruler is described as “King of Kings” which might suggest that there were other, junior kings in outlying parts of the empire which the Aksumites gradually took over.There is evidence of at least 10–12 small towns in the kingdom, which suggests it was an urban society, but for descriptions of these there is only archaeological evidence. Little or nothing is known about such things as the role of women and family life.

Christianity

Aksum embraced the Orthodox tradition of Christianity in the 4th century (c. 340–356 C.E.) under the rule of King Ezana. The king had been converted by Frumentius, a former Syrian captive who was made Bishop of Aksum. On his return, Frumentius had promptly baptized King Ezana, who then declared Aksum a Christian state, followed by the king’s active converting of the Aksumites. By the 6th century, King Kaleb was recognized as a Christian by the emperor Justin I of Byzantium (ruled 518–527) when he sought Kaleb’s support in avenging atrocities suffered by fellow Christians in South Arabia. This invasion saw the inclusion of the region into the Aksumite kingdom for the next seven decades.

Judaism

Although Christianity had a profound effect upon Aksum, Judaism also had a substantial impact on the kingdom. A group of people from the region called the Beta Israel have been described as “Black Jews.” Although their scriptures and prayers are in Ge’ez, rather than in Hebrew, they adhere to religious beliefs and practices set out in the Pentateuch (Torah), the religious texts of the Jewish religion. Although often regarded by scholars/academics as not technically ‘”Jewish” but instead a pre-Christian, Semitic people, their religion shares a common ancestry with modern Judaism. Between 1985 and 1991 almost the whole Beta Israel population of Ethiopia was moved to Israel.

Solomon and Sheba

The Queen of Sheba and King Solomon are important figures in Ethiopian heritage. Traditional accounts describe their meeting when Sheba, Queen of Aksum, went to Jerusalem, and their son Menelik I formed the Solomonic dynasty from which the rulers of Ethiopia (up to the 1970s) are said to be descended. It has also been claimed that Aksum is the home of the Biblical Ark of the Covenant, in which lies the “Tablets of Law” upon which the Ten Commandments are inscribed. Menelik is believed to have taken it on a visit to Jerusalem to see his father. It is supposed to reside still in the Church of St Mary in Aksum, though no-one is allowed to set eyes on it. Replicas of the Ark, called Tabots, are housed in all of Ethiopia’s churches, and are carried in procession on special days.

© Trustees of the British Museum

This page titled 6.2.6: The kingdom of Aksum is shared under a CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by Smarthistory.

- **4.2: East Africa and the Horn of Africa** by Smarthistory is licensed CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

Index

D

dire

Glossary

Sample Word 1 | Sample Definition 1

Detailed Licensing

Overview

Title: SmartHistory of Art IV - Africa

Webpages: 122

Applicable Restrictions: Noncommercial

All licenses found:

- CC BY-NC-SA 4.0: 99.2% (121 pages)
- Undeclared: 0.8% (1 page)

By Page

- SmartHistory of Art IV - Africa - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
  - Front Matter - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - TitlePage - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - InfoPage - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - Table of Contents - *Undeclared*
    - Licensing - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
  - 1: West Africa - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - 1.1: Burkina Faso - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - 1.2: The art of Ghana - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
      - 1.2.1: Golden Stool (Sika dwa kofi), Asante peoples - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
      - 1.2.2: Linguist Staff (Okyeamepoma) (Asante peoples) - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
      - 1.2.4: Memorial Head (Akan peoples) - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
      - 1.2.5: Akua'ba Female Figure (Akan peoples) - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
      - 1.2.6: Asafo Flags- Stitches Through Time - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
      - 1.2.7: El Anatsui - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
      - 1.2.8: El Anatsui, Old Man's Cloth - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
      - 4.1.2.3: Kente cloth - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - 1.3: Guinea - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - 1.4: The art of the Ivory Coast - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
      - 1.4.1: Owie Kimou, Portrait Mask (Mblo) of Moya Yanso (Baule peoples) - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
      - 1.4.2: Pair of Diviner's Figures (Baule peoples) - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - 1.5: The art of Mali - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
      - 1.5.1: Saving Timbuktu's manuscripts - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
      - 1.5.2: Seated Figure (Djenné peoples) - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
      - 1.5.3: Lost History- the terracotta sculpture of Djenne Djenno - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
      - 1.5.4: Great Mosque of Djenné (Djenné peoples) - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
      - 1.5.5: Dogon Couple (Dogon peoples) - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
      - 1.5.6: Mask (Kanaga) (Dogon peoples) - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
      - 1.5.7: Male and Female Antelope Headdresses (Ci wara) (Bamana peoples) - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
      - 1.5.8: Kòmò Helmet Mask (Kòmòkunw) (Bamana peoples) - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
      - 1.5.9: Seydou Keïta, Untitled (Seated Woman with Chevron Print Dress) - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - 1.6: The art of Nigeria - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
      - 1.6.1: Benin Plaques - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
      - 1.6.2: The Kingdom of Benin - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
      - 1.6.3: Benin Art- Patrons, Artists and Current Controversies - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
      - 1.6.4: The Imagery of Power on Benin Bronze Plaques - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
      - 1.6.5: Benin and the Portuguese - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
      - 1.6.6: Queen Mother Pendant Mask (Iyoba) (Edo peoples) - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
      - 1.6.7: Benin ivory mask (Edo peoples) - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
      - 1.6.8: Benin plaque- Equestrian Oba and Attendants - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
      - 1.6.9: Ere Ibeji Figures (Yoruba peoples) - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
      - 1.6.10: Kingdom of Ife- Sculptures from West Africa - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
      - 1.6.11: Ife uncovered - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
      - 1.6.12: Olowe of Ise - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*

- 1.6.13: Olowe of Ise, Veranda Post of Enthroned King and Senior Wife - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
- 1.6.14: Ikenga (Igbo peoples) - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
- 1.6.15: Uche Okeke - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
- 1.6.16: Yinka Shonibare, The Swing (After Fragonard) - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
- 1.7: Republic of Benin - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
- 1.8: The art of Sierra Leone - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
  - 1.8.1: Lidded Saltcellar - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
  - 1.8.2: Stone Head (mahe yafei), Kisi peoples - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
  - 1.8.3: Bundu / Sowei Helmet Mask (Mende peoples) - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
  - 1.8.4: Helmet Mask - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
  - 1.8.5: Cotton hammock (Vai peoples) - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
  - 1.8.6: Ceremonial Ladle (Dan peoples) - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
  - 1.8.7: Found accidentally - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
- 2: Central Africa - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
  - 2.1: Cameroon - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - 2.1.1: Ceremonial Palm Wine Vessel (Cameroon Grasslands peoples) - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - 2.1.2: Elephant Mask (Bamileke Peoples) - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
  - 2.2: Democratic Republic of the Congo - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - 2.2.1: Crucifix (Kongo peoples) - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - 2.2.2: Female (pwo) Mask - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - 2.2.3: Power Figure (Nkisi Nkondi), Kongo peoples - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - 2.2.4: Ndop Portrait of King Mishe miShyaang maMbul (Kuba peoples) - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - 2.2.5: Lukasa (Memory Board) (Luba peoples) - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - 2.2.6: Buli Master, possibly Ngongo ya Chintu, Prestige Stool- Female Caryatid (Luba or Hemba peoples) - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - 2.2.7: Double Prestige Panel (Kuba peoples) - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - 2.2.8: Figurative Harp (Domu) (Mangbetu peoples) - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
  - 2.3: Gabon - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - 2.3.1: Kota reliquary (mbulu ngulu) - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - 2.3.2: Female Figure from a Reliquary Ensemble (Fang peoples) - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - 2.3.3: Female Reliquary Guardian Figure (Fang peoples)—video - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
- 3: North Africa - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
  - 3.1: Algeria and Libya - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - 3.1.1: Rock Art in North Africa - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - 3.1.2: Rock Art in the Green Sahara (Africa) - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - 3.1.3: Running Horned Woman, Tassili n'Ajjer, Algeria - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - 3.1.4: Rock-Art Sites of Tadrart Acacus - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - 3.1.5: Rock-Art Sites of Tadrart Acacus - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
  - 3.2: Egypt - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
  - 3.3: The art of Tunisia - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - 3.3.1: The Great Mosque of Kairouan - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - 3.3.2: Kairouan (from UNESCO) - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
- 4: Southern Africa - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
  - 4.1: The art of Namibia - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - 4.1.1: Origins of rock art in Africa - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - 4.1.2: Apollo 11 Cave Stones - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
  - 4.2: The art of South Africa - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - 4.2.1: Married Woman's Apron (Ndebele peoples) - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - 4.2.2: William Kentridge, drawing from Tide Table (Soho in Deck Chair) - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
      - 4.2.2.1: On the beach, but in a suit - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
  - 4.3: Zimbabwe - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
    - 4.3.1: Great Zimbabwe - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
- 5: A beginner's guide - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
  - 5.1: Peoples and cultures - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
  - 5.2: Historical overview- to 1600 - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
  - 5.3: Historical overview- from the 1600s to the present - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
  - 5.4: Aesthetics - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
  - 5.5: The human figure, animals and symbols - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
  - 5.6: Form and meaning - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
  - 5.7: Religion and the Spiritual Realm - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
  - 5.8: Art and politics - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
  - 5.9: Rites of passage - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*

- 5.10: Art and the individual - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
- 5.11: African art and the effects of European contact and colonization - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
- 5.12: The Reception of African Art in the West - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
- 5.13: Western appreciation of African art - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*

6: East Africa and the Horn of Africa - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*

- 6.1: Tanzania - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
- 6.2: The art of Ethiopia - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
- 6.2.1: Aksumite Coins - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
- 6.2.2: Illuminated Gospel - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
- 6.2.3: Julie Mehretu, Stadia II - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
- 6.2.4: Christian Ethiopian art - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
- 6.2.5: An Ethiopian icon - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
- 6.2.6: The kingdom of Aksum - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*

Back Matter - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*

- Index - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
- Glossary - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*
- Detailed Licensing - *CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*