

Introduction to African Art

Definitions:

- culture** - the sum of characteristics by which a given human community could be identified - race, physique, social organization, language, religion, technology, artifacts.
- convention** - signs, symbols and images that have unchanging attributes and general meaning within a culture and in the making of art.
- craft** - object making (often of practical use) that is intended for its own use and which expresses the sensibility, mentality and/or values of a people.
- anthropomorphic** - depicting the *human* form on an inanimate object, animal or natural phenomenon
- zoomorphic** - depicting *animal* forms on an inanimate object, human or natural phenomenon
- fetish** - an object believed to have magical powers (e.g. for good luck in hunting, fertility or protection from harmful spirits). Ritual is most often involved in its use or observance (to activate its power).

Considerations:

- artifact v.s. art** - "artifact" often associated with the pejorative term of "primitive", where as the term "art" is often associated with "advanced" cultures. Implicit judgement is made when **artifacts** are displayed in Natural History Museums, where as **art** is exhibited in galleries of Fine Art Museums.
- prejudice** - European civilizations have thought of the people of Africa a savage, barbarous, wild, and at best, childlike and backward, without civilization or religion.
- ceremony / ritual** - the important relationship between the art of native cultures to rituals (both societal and religious) and the interrelationship of art and performance (music and dance in native cultures).
- native** - art of indigenous peoples assumes various roles in different African cultures - art in the majority of these cultures tended to be small scale and transportable - a function of the nomadic or transient cultures that produced them.
- tradition** - native art is essentially conservative in nature and time-honor traditions are valued over innovation because of the following factors:
- 1: native art is essentially religious and religions evolve through established traditions and rituals from time immemorial.
 - 2: there is little historical development of style as we know it within a given culture's art work.
 - 3: there is diversity in working out stylistic possibilities within the limits of imposed conventions.
- abstract** - many native artists work by instinct and produce work that is "abstract" which is achieved by using one or more of the following strategies or devices:
- 1: stylization (applying an outside order on to natural forms)
 - 2: simplification (elimination of detail)
 - 3: use of iconographic symbols
 - 4: reduction of forms to linear elements and outlines
 - 5: use of patterns, textures and geometric motifs
 - 6: emphasis on flat colors and shapes
- aesthetics** - ideas of what is "beautiful" - are often connected with tribal moral codes and values in African art: in many African languages the word for "beautiful" and "good" are often interchangeable. Works of art are meant to both be aesthetically pleasing and to uphold or express moral values.
- realism** - resemblance to human likeness is desirable but African artists seldom portray specific (individual) people or animals. Instead artists attempt to portray a spiritual or conceptual reality using human or animal images (or a combination of both).
- surface** - the surface of African sculptures is significant: smooth = health = moral virtue, in contrast to rough = deformity = moral flaws.
- presentation** - self-composure, both in terms of facial expression and gesture, connotes control, pride and dignity, which is admired.
- youthfulness** - youthful appearance of the human form represents vigor, productivity, fertility and virility. Conversely, illness and deformity are signs of evil or weakness and are rarely depicted.
- craftsmanship** - African artists place a high value on fine workmanship and mastery of the medium, which include clearly established ideas and standards (set within a tribal tradition) of composition, clarity of form, balanced and symmetrical composition, and finish/surface.

History of the Human Figure in African Art:

- Nigeria:**
- Nok period** 500 to 200 C.E. - simplified representation of human forms
 - the earliest examples of African sculpture in the round (terra-cotta heads and figures)
 - Ife period** 1000 to 1200 C.E. - realistic rendering of human forms
 - sophisticated bronze sculptures cast by the lost wax process
 - Benin period** 1400 to 1800 C.E. - elaborate bronze sculptures created by professional craftsmen - idealized representation of human forms into near-geometric volumes
 - Ijo period** 1800 to 1900 C.E. - "owner of power" concept reflected in art work
 - wood sculptures using distortion to create expressionistic art pieces which express the hierarchical arrangement within society.
 - Yoruba peoples** ? to the present - object intended to display wealth & power of owner
 - art objects were also part of ritual performances
 - Chamba peoples** - statues are *mediums for communication* with spirit world.
 - statues are sometimes kept hidden (under blanket) and because it is unseen, it becomes more of an altar and a place of contact between natural and spirit world

- Zaire**
- Kongo** - sculptures carefully preserved by owners for generations: art is a visible manifestation of ancestral power which can affect present
 - Boyo** - sculptures which immortalize chiefs and ancestors (not animals or natural spirits)
 - displayed in dwellings in groups of five to seven sculptures
 - Yombe** - maternity figures of women who are nurturing forces and also guardians of spirits
 - fetish figures which have aggressive expressions with filed teeth

- West Coast:**
- Dan peoples of Liberia** - the role of the mask as a functional "real" character
 - remarkable variety of forms and styles, from whole abstract to realistic
 - deconstruction of the human form, distortion, then reassembly forms
 - Baule peoples of the Ivory Coast**
 - figures representing spirit "marriage partners"
 - Dogon** (Mali - interior of west Africa) - rendering the human body down to its simple basic forms
 - sculptures function as intermediaries between real and spirit worlds
 - used in initiation ceremonies and are interpreted differently according to receiver's age

Assignment: a one-page, point form "information page"

Due

- 1: *Thoroughly* read the previous information on both sides of this paper *before* you begin the following:
- 2: Read **Chapter 18** ("The Arts of Africa") in Art Through the Ages
- 3: Check out the **website** www.zyama.com and read and look for sculptures done by any African tribe or peoples that include the entire human figure (i.e. **not masks**, or **portrait heads**)
- 4: **Select a figure** (or in some cases, a pair of figures, for example Dogon ancestral couples) that interest you and that you can research the following **information**:
 - Name of work of art
 - Tribe and location
 - Date
 - **Function *** * **Function and Context** *very important* information especially the **Ritual / Belief system** relevant to sculpture
 - **Context ***
 - Material and technique
- 5: **Do a one-page, point form "information page"** succinctly outlining the information in #3 (above)
AND include the following **analysis**:
 - Stance / presentation
 - Anatomical detail
 - Proportion
 - Facial expression
 - GestureRegarding these points, make sure you explain **WHY** the figures are presented in distinctive ways
- 6: Describe the appearance of the human form using **descriptive language** following analysis (#4 above)
- 7: On the top of the page, include a **photograph** (xerox or down-load image from the net) of the specific piece you are analyzing (approximately Q-card size -- **no larger than 4"**)
- 8: **Note: ALL** information, including the reproduction, must fit on one side of a 8 1/2 by 11 paper. All text must be 10 point (> this text is 10 point<) or written small enough to fit on the page.