

# UNDERSTANDING AFRICAN ART

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## **Overview**

African art has been on exhibition throughout the world with many different perceptions. The true value of the enriched presentation of this art form has a great impact on the world culture and life style. The values of African art come in a diversified display of art forms that represent the cultural rituals, religious beliefs, symbols, and the diversity of Africa.

There has unfortunately been a broad difference between the true content of what African art actually symbolizes and the interpretation of westerners based on their private interpretations. Western culture for many years has given a generic explanation of African art. They do not value nor take into account the impact of African religious beliefs, cultural customs, nor the significance of making a particular art form and its functions. It is vitally important to consider these factors to correctly interpret African art. The lack of understanding has led to the lack of pursuing the truth about the distinctive forms of African art. It has also led to misconceptions about their style. Some have even suggested that African art forms are childlike. Actually their expression was often a sophisticated and deliberate exaggeration of features of certain forms that represented their gods. These misconceptions could also lead to the misinterpretation of African culture as well as its art.

This unit has been specifically formulated to increase the awareness level and expand the knowledge of art viewers about African art. It will also help to dispel misconceptions and therefore develop an understanding of the true cultural importance as well as the meaning of African art.

This six-week curriculum is designed for ninth through twelfth graders in a Visual Arts I class. It will introduce the students to some of the key elements of understanding the high emphasis on the conceptual art form in Africa. The students will view videotapes of

African art and its history. They will be instructed to read information that will reveal why various types of art are made in Africa. From this curriculum, the students will be informed of the religious content and the major role it played in the artist's creative expression. Finally, they will be required to utilize the acquired information along with developing a tool (skill) in making African masks, seats and dolls. This will be implemented through a series of art assignments that will be retained in a portfolio along with written reflections of their perceptions of African art before and after their experience in the classroom.

## **Rationale**

The teacher will present a short informal African art history to present the true facts about the culture, the art and the people. The study of African art which includes African masks, seats and African dolls will be a key element in communicating to the students the true beauty of African art, its culture and its meaning. Just like the continent of Africa with all of its various countries, art is a large area to cover. It also has great diversity in its relationship to religion, rituals, dance, music and language. Students will be introduced to the differences between the distinctive concepts and techniques that craftsmen display in their art form.

Most African art is made out of wood, fiber, or various metals. Some types of African art have been created over a long period of time, but because of the use of perishable materials many artworks last no longer than 200 years. Therefore each generation has been taught to copy the same style and technique in order to keep the enrichment and magic of the art form alive. The student will not only learn about these techniques, but also how African music, dance, religion and customs are related to their particular art forms.

The oldest art form found in Africa are wall paintings of animals and rituals. In the northern region around Egypt, textile and wall paintings record the history of farming and maintenance of animals along the northern banks of the Nile during the first century B.C.E. In the Kush southern region, we find terra cotta that dates back to 56 B.C.E. Nigeria had the first signs of bronze casting dating to the 9<sup>th</sup> century C.E. There is also evidence that most bronze and other casting material date to the 12<sup>th</sup> century C. E. There were some artists in the southeastern part of Zimbabwe who constructed round towers and walls to implement power and rule for that region. These types of architectural achievements were rendered with a tremendous amount of great passion and technical know how. Their aesthetics relate to their cultural significance.

A primary African art form is the mask. Masks are usually detailed in design, crafted for its specific purpose, and varied in function. Most of the African masks, for example have features like the eyes, nose, ears and mouth that are over emphasized. They are also quite distorted in the shape of the head and the neck. The deliberate facial distortions are based on the African religious beliefs and rituals.

There are three masks that will be discussed; two are from Nigeria and one Pende mask is from the Democratic Republic of Congo. The Ogoni culture dance mask of Nigeria is a wooded antelope mask used in a fertility ceremony. The Ogoni mask has two antelope horns, large ears, large oval eyes, large long nose and a small mouth. The Ekoi mask is another dance mask from Nigeria that used antelope skin. Both the Ogoni and the Ekoi masks are distorted in the shape of the face and neck. According to the western cultural and the world, they view African art as very primitive and too simplistic. They may even go as far as labeling it as childlike. It is true that the anatomy of the face of the mask is quite distorted compared to that which is normally represented in Roman or Greek sculpture. But when one looks at African art, one must understand that it has more of a conceptual point of view in which the mask reflects the spiritual and religious character of the culture in which it is made. Even the colors used on the mask have a significant part to play that reflects religious expression.

Included in the appendices are three drawings of dance masks; The Pende Pumbu from the Democratic Republic of Congo and two from Nigeria; the Ogoni culture mask and the Ekoi culture mask. The Pumbu mask is a half cylinder shape with bands of black and white diamonds and triangles in alternate patterns. The eyes are large, round and project as tubes from the red upper third of the face. The eyes are painted white to show great anger. The mask itself represents the power of the chief. The mask face from the Ogoni culture is golden brown with a black trim which represents the empowerment of the mask. The mask from the Ekoi culture has red skin, black hair and the base is brown. Both men and women are represented in Ekoi masks. Mask painted white represent women and the black painted mask represent the men. Colors have special meaning in African art and can vary by culture, but all is not known to the western world.

The mask reflects the spiritual and religious character of the culture in which it is made. First one must re-examine the true function of the mask and ritual as well as examining its decorative headdress. For example, the mask from the Ogoni culture has enlarged eyes, the ears are horns and the nose is enlarged to indicate the glory and power of the spirits used to complete the tasks from the ceremonies. The small mouth partially is to indicate less talking and therefore denotes that any words given are words of wisdom. The designer of the mask was not concerned in making it perfect in human anatomy, because this was a superhuman being that had powers beyond human. Therefore the details had to represent empowerment, not limitations.

The mask is only one part of the total uniform that is worn from head to toe. The dancer is covered with straw, fabric or material that disguises the identity of the dancer. One inaccurate representation of African art is just to show the mask and not the whole uniform of the dancer. In western culture, most see this as acceptable; collectors do not see the problem in hanging a single mask on the wall or placing it in a plastic box. To the average African it is not satisfactory, but an insult. In comparison, it is as if a person took a utility knife and cut a small section of the Mona Lisa's face from the painting and disposed of the rest of the painting. The face of the mask is just as important as the role of making it. And the music that is performed during the ceremony is also important. All of

the various elements have a religious measure and total community support that brings about true love for its function. This is only a small segment of viewing the aesthetics and true beauty of African art.

The students in visual art will be informed that African art does not only focus on art design that African art provides more than aesthetics. It is also an important part of their lives. The Baule Yoruba dance mask from the Ivory Coast has animal features which again portray significant values and power for boys performing the rites of passage to manhood. It is a family tradition that encourages artists to create these beautiful headdresses in a style which is passed down from father to son from one generation to another generation. The Yoruba dance mask was originally carved by a farmer to please his wife. This indicates that not all masks were made for a religious purpose.

The key element of this lesson is also to recognize the importance of keeping the tradition. Thus, there are special craftsmen that duplicate what has already been made to keep the spirit alive. Westerners wish to have their own personal signature and personal style promoting their work as unique compared to others. They wished to be recognized for their art achievements by having their name carved or placed somewhere on their finished product to confirm that they did the work and get the credit. In African culture, the craftsmen feel honored to render the art form without taking credit in placing their name somewhere on the finished piece. The artifacts and artwork of African art is made to serve as a function whereas much Western art emphasizes the aesthetic, decorative, and beautiful design that works with the décor of someone's gallery, museum or home. One last example is to reflect the personal needs and principle of an African doll as it is used in Africa. The Asante Doll/Aku'ada is a wooden figure that is made mainly for a woman to encourage fertility and the birth of a beautiful child. In Ghana, the women carry this doll with them. Some would wear it as a necklace or carry it close on their body to bless them to conceive children. The students should be able to distinguish the broad difference and significance that African art represents compared to Western art.

## **Objectives**

The main objective of this unit is to have the students first clearly understand the values of African art and its purpose. A second objective is to learn the various beliefs and rituals behind some African art in various cultures. Third is to promote enjoyment of making an African mask, African doll, and African seat within this curriculum. And last to reflect on what they learned about African rituals and beliefs and how it effects the people who live in that culture. If possible, the students would have the opportunity to combine music with the African mask in order to do a performance in the classroom. This curriculum should provide more of an appreciation for African art. For each lesson, the curriculum will provide information on a work of art created, the location and culture where it was made, how it was made, and how the students can create their own art form. The content of the lesson on how to make African seats will have the same frame of information. A few contour drawings of some masks, African dolls, and African seats are provided within the

curriculum. The seats are more than just a place to rest your body, but it also has various symbols and cultural rituals. Some of the components connected with the mask are the full costume of the dancer, precision of the dance and its performance of music.

### **Strategies**

To meet these objectives students will view on video how Africans live in certain parts of the continent. Another strategy will involve written material for the students to read narrative stories and historical information about African art. The visual arts component will include instruction on how to draw an African mask, to make an African mask out of cardboard, to make an African mask out of paper mache and to make an African mask out of various materials such as straw, feathers, clay rope and metal.

Students will also be introduced to making a wooden seat carved with a pattern or design that could represent their personality and character. Last, but not least the students will have the opportunity to make a three dimensional doll that will represent and reflect their personality. The lesson will allow the students to see the diversity of art forms in the classroom that is reflective of individual personality and character. The students can understand the influence and important inclusion of cultural, ritual, and religious beliefs in making art. This will also enable them to broaden their awareness and understanding of African art. The students will learn the elements of design: line, shape, form, value, color, space and texture by making three dimensional sculptures; dolls, masks and seats. The students will also advance their understanding of balance, unity, contrast, pattern, movement and rhythm. Following each lesson, a questionnaire will be given to further evaluate the student's understanding.

There is a broad contrast of influences that came from European culture which invaded different parts of Africa. The European culture overlapped African customs, causing the Africans to adapt to their beliefs. Students will see how their art slowly changed to complement these new religious invasions. For example, there are some African cultures that use the crucifix, but with African figures. Students would be introduced to the various sounds and music that is in Africa from videos and tapes. The music will be incorporated in the room while working on their projects. The student would have a lesson on each subject matter of mask, dolls, seats and focus on the origin, culture and who made it. The purpose and the reason for making each three dimensional form will be addressed in each lesson. Students should be able to see the contrast between the common life style of Africa and Western culture. The student will specifically understand the way the art is made and its main function. Also, the students will investigate the spiritual elements of each African art form.

### **Class Activities**

This unit emphasizes learning more about African art, along with developing a stronger understanding of the art by making three dimensional art forms. The application of classroom activities are vitally important to give absolute true facts about African art.

Each lesson on African art should promote high expectations for the students by preparing the classroom setting with the following:

The teacher should communicate all the contributions Africa art made and its positive effect on the art world and also on mankind.

Things to promote productivity from the students while working on the African curriculum:

- Display artifacts on the tables.
- Display of African masks, dolls in the room.
- African Music played during period.
- Presentations from interns.

## Fact Sheet Example

The teacher should have a fact sheet example for African masks, dolls and seats. Each fact sheet should follow the format below.

Map on upper left hand side of form. Map should indicate the location of where the artifacts are from.

A diagram of the mask, seat, or doll should be displayed on the top right hand side of the form.

Text should be typed at the left hand of form. Included information:

### **ORIGINAL CRAFTSPERSON**

### **ORIGIN**

### **HISTORICAL PERIOD**

### **CULTURAL CLIMATE**

### **PURPOSE OR CLASSIFICATION OF THE OBJECT**

(Fill in appropriate information accordingly under each topic heading)

#### A. Introduction To Art

Lesson will state full definition of what African Art is based on.

Ayo, Yvonne. *Africa*. Dorling Kinderslye, 2000. Eye-witness books collection-good for specific information about masks, dolls, and seats.

Onyefulu, Ifeoma. *A is for Africa*. New York: Puffin, July 1997. An alphabet book focusing on West African traditions.

Willett, Frank. *African Art*. New York: Thames & Hudson Inc., 2002. A classic study of African art.

Cameron, Elisabeth L. *Isn't She a Doll? Play and Ritual in African Sculpture*, Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1996. Examines significance of small doll-like sculptures across cultures.

LaGamma, Alisa, *Art and Oracle: African Art and Rituals of Divination*, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000. Essay on divination in Africa and individual catalogue entries on divination objects, many of which parallel works in the Olkes Collection

#### B. Behavioral Expectations

The students will be expected to follow the instructions on the activities from the introduction to the various art projects.

#### C. Drawing (three weeks)

- Create a design of patterns that form into free flow African mask.
- Create drawings which explore a process of shapes that give balance, rhythm, repetition, line, unity, and scale which identify the cultural events.
- Materials to be used:
  - Construction Paper
  - Tissue Paper
  - Water Colors
- Assessment of construction paper: glue on flat surface to form a mask.

#### D. Three-Dimensional Art

##### Phase One: African mask

- Student form elements of an African mask of the Bakuba culture.
- Student form a mask with horns from the Bakuba culture.
- Compare and contrast the characteristics of 2-D and 3-D art.
- Explore three dimensional materials; wood, clay & paper mache.

Willett, Frank. *African Art*. New York: Thames & Hudson Inc., 2002. A classic study of African art.

Frederic John Lamp. See the Music, Hear the Dance: Rethinking African Art at the Baltimore Musuem of Art, Prestel, Munich, 2004.

Expectations: Students will have a fulfilled experience in the study and making of African mask and awareness of African culture and its people.

#### Phase Two: Wooden Stool

- Students will create a step by step process based on:
  - History of various seats.
  - Explore seats for male and female.
  - Contrast of seats for queen, chief & others.
  - Create a wooden stool:
    - Paper Mache
    - Clay Form

Price, Sally. *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, Chicago, 1989. A provocative text on the way third-world art has been treated in western museums.

Willett, Frank. *African Art*. New York: Thames & Hudson Inc., 2002. A classic study of African art.

Expectations: Students will have a fulfilled experience in the study of and making of African seats and awareness of African culture and its people.

#### Phase Three: African Dolls

- Students will form African doll figures from clay or cardboard.
- Students will study history of African dolls.
- Students will use references
- Students related 3-D design of dolls.
- Students will work on the project which demonstrates from the rubrics research that was reflected from the mask and seat projects.

Cameron, Elisabeth L. *Isn't S;He a Doll? Play and Ritual in African Sculpture*, Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1996. Examines significance of small doll-like sculptures across cultures.

LaGamma, Alisa, *Art and Oracle: African Art and Rituals of Divination*, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000. Essay on divination in Africa and individual catalogue entries on divination objects, many of which parallel works in the Olkes Collection

Expectations: Students will have a fulfilled experience in the study of and making of African dolls and awareness of African culture and its people.

### **African Art Curriculum Recommendation**

- Standards for materials, supplies-instructional aids & tools.
- Materials and equipments are sufficient to implement the African art.
- Visual resources that support the art curriculum objectives such as slides, films, 2-D, 3-D reproductions.
  - Original works
  - Art Books
  - Art Special exhibition
- Quality computers-visual equipment
- Library of books on various art cultures
- Provides an annual budget
- Resident artist of culture art-speakers
- Maximum student capacity 28.

## Bibliography

Ayo, Yvonne. *Africa*. Dorling Kinderslye, 2000. Eye-witness books collection-good for specific information about masks, dolls, and seats.

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Willett, Frank. *African Art*. New York: Thames & Hudson Inc., 2002. A classic study of African art.

Cameron, Elisabeth L. *Isn't She a Doll? Play and Ritual in African Sculpture*, Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1996. Examines significance of small doll-like sculptures across cultures.

LaGamma, Alisa, *Art and Oracle: African Art and Rituals of Divination*, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000. Essay on divination in Africa and individual catalogue entries on divination objects, many of which parallel works in the Olkes Collection

Finley, Carol. *The Art of African Masks: Exploring Cultural Traditions (Art Around the World)*. Lerner Publishing Group, March 1999. Describes how different types of mask are made and used in Africa and how they reflect the culture of their ethnic groups.

Price, Sally. *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, Chicago, 1989. A provocative text on the way third-world art has been treated in western museums.

Frederic John Lamp. See the Music, Hear the Dance: Rethinking African Art at the Baltimore Museum of Art, Prestel, Munich, 2004.

## **MAPS OF AFRICA**

Frederick John Lamp. See the Music, Hear the Dance: Rethinking African Art at the Baltimore Museum of Art, Prestel, Munich, 2004.

## **OGONI CULTURAL DANCING MASK**

## **EKOI CULTURAL DANCING MASK**

## **PENDE PUMBU CULTURAL MASK**

## **Content Standards**

### **Arts and Humanities**

- 1) All students describe the meanings they find in various works from the visual and performing arts and literature on the basis of aesthetic understanding of the art form.
- 2) All students evaluate and respond critically to works from the visual and performing arts and literature of various individuals and cultures, showing that they understand important features of the works.
- 3) All students relate various work from the visual and performing arts and literature to the historical and cultural context within which they were created.
- 4) All students produce, perform or exhibit their work in the visual arts, music, dance or theater, and describe the meanings that their work has for them.

## Appendices