

Vocabulary

griots

The Art of Africa

Throughout Africa, in both the past and the present—even within the context of modern nation-states—the visual arts are well integrated with other art forms, including music, dance, and drama. The art of Africa was an integral part of the daily lives and religious rituals of the people.

The Role of Art in African Cultures

The huge continent of Africa has a population of millions that is sub-divided into about 1,000 cultural groups. The peoples of Africa have long-established, highly developed cultures that have been producing sophisticated art forms for centuries. The arts are as varied as the peoples.

Everything is made with great care, whether for rituals or everyday use. Art addresses not only the concerns of the living, their ancestors, and those yet to be born, but also those of the spirits of nature. A great deal of African art emphasizes important events of life and forces of nature that influence the lives of individuals and communities.

Dominant themes in African art include birth and death; the roles of men, women, and children; coming of age; sickness and healing; the importance of food and water; and the human relationship with nature. Artworks are often linked to celebrations and rituals, both nonreligious and sacred. Westerners are fascinated with objects from these cultures and have put them in museums. It is important to understand the original context in which these objects were made and used.



► **FIGURE 12.17** The vertical lines on the face of this figure probably represent ornamental scars made to indicate ancestry and to enhance physical beauty. How did the artist use the principles of art in creating this portrait of a king?

Portrait of a King. Ife, Nigeria. Copper alloy. Eleventh–fifteenth century. H: 36.2 cm (14¹/₄"). Museum of Mankind, London, England.

Ancient Ife

For the Yoruba (**yaw**-ruh-buh) people of Nigeria, the city of Ife (**ee**-feh) is the place where life and civilization began. Yoruba cities developed between the years A.D. 800 and 1000. By A.D. 1100, artists of Ife had developed a highly refined, lifelike sculptural style to create portraits of the first Yoruba kings and queens. The display of royal portraits, with their composed, balanced facial features, added a sense of stability in periods of political transition between rulers, or following the death of a ruler (**Figure 12.17**).

According to Yoruba beliefs, the world consists of two realms: the real world that can be seen and touched; and the supernatural world of ancestors, gods and goddesses, and spirits. Works of art created for the real, or visible, world tend to be realistic, whereas works of art created for the supernatural, or invisible, world tend to be more abstract.

As memorial portraits of Yoruba royalty, these sculptures celebrate the lives and accomplishments of individuals. Like Yoruba poems, which record family history and personal deeds, these refined works of art encourage living generations to strive for perfection. They encourage the living to match or surpass the cultural accomplishments of previous generations.

The Empire of Mali

Works of art made centuries ago in Ife and elsewhere in West Africa document the rise of city-states throughout the region. The terra-cotta sculptures of cavalymen and foot soldiers from the Inland Niger Delta, near the ancient city of Jenne, date back to the early thirteenth century, when the empire of Mali was founded by a powerful military leader and king named Sundiata.

These figures reveal proud profiles, with jutting chins and heads held high atop sturdy necks. Their bodies appear straight and tall whether shown standing or seated upright on stallions (**Figure 12.18**). The figures represent members of the well-outfitted and well-organized army described in an epic that recounts Sundiata's life history.



▲ **FIGURE 12.18** Because wet clay is soft, artists can easily add texture to the overall forms of clay sculptures. How many different kinds of texture can you identify in this work?

Inland Delta Region, Mali. Equestrian figure. c. thirteenth century. Ceramic. 70.5 cm (27 7/8"). National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Museum purchase, 86-12-2.

► **FIGURE 12.19** This solid iron figure shows the strong vertical lines that characterize Mali sculpture.

Bamana peoples, Mali. Bamana iron figure. Iron, string, cowrie shells. Indiana University Art Museum, Bloomington, Indiana. Gift of Ernst Anspach.



► **FIGURE 12.20** Notice that the proportions of these figures are expressive rather than realistic.

Seated Man and Woman. Dogon people, Mali. Wood. 76.2 cm (30"). Photograph © 1993 by the Barnes Foundation, Merion Station, Pennsylvania.



The strength of Sundiata's great cavalry and army of foot soldiers enabled him to gain political power. Under his leadership, the empire of Mali became one of the largest and wealthiest kingdoms the world has ever known. The epic story of the rise of Sundiata is passed on by **griots** (**gree-oh**), *oral historians who are also musicians and performers*, throughout West Africa to this day.

The city of Jenne is the oldest city in sub-Saharan Africa. In the art and architecture from this city there is an emphasis on vertical elements (**Figure 12.19**). This can be seen in the corner pinnacles of house facades, which are made tall and straight.

The sculpture shown in **Figure 12.20**, made by the Dogon (**doh-gahn**) people of Mali, conveys a sense of harmony and balance. As images of the first man and woman described in Dogon myths of creation, this sculpture serves as an inspiration to living generations. These figures are seated on a stool with a circular support that symbolizes the link between the earth below and the spirit world above. Carved from a single piece of wood, the interlocking forms effectively convey Dogon ideas regarding the interdependence of men and women and their complementary social roles.

The Kingdom of Benin

The Benin (**buh**-neen) kingdom, situated in what is now southern Nigeria, was a society of many class levels, with an oral tradition that goes back seven or eight centuries. The kingdom reached the peak of its power in the sixteenth century. Like earlier artists in nearby Ife, Benin artists excelled in creating metal sculptures using a copper alloy possessing many of the same qualities as bronze.

Among the most ambitious of the Benin castings are the high-relief sculptures that once covered the walls and pillars of the royal palace. One of these contains the figure of the *oba* (**oh**-bah), or king, flanked by two chiefs bearing shields, sword bearers, and palace attendants (**Figure 12.21**).

Here four social ranks are depicted. The king, or *oba* is placed in the center and is the largest figure. The two chiefs are almost as large as the king. Two sword bearers, one a child, are even smaller. Three tiny figures, one supporting the king's foot and two in the top corners, represent the least powerful members of the court.

The *oba* wears a patterned wrapper, or waist cloth, a six-ringed necklace, and sits side-saddle on a horse. In Benin culture, horses are symbols of political power.

The Asante Kingdom

The Akan people lived in central and coastal Ghana. In the first half of the eighteenth century, these people joined together to form a powerful



◀ **FIGURE 12.21** In Benin art the most politically powerful person is represented as the largest figure. This representation reflects the central organization of the kingdom. Less powerful individuals are smaller.

Kingdom of Benin, Edo people, Nigeria. *Mounted King with Attendants*. c. sixteenth–seventeenth century. Brass. 49.5 × 41.9 × 11.3 cm (19½ × 16½ × 4½"). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York. The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection. Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1965. (1978.412.309)



▲ **FIGURE 12.22** Works of art made using the lost-wax casting technique often show finely textured details. What elements of art are especially important in this work?

Akan people, Asante Kingdom, Ghana. *Necklace*. Nineteenth century. Gold. 2.5 × 40 cm (1 × 15³/₄"). Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Virginia. The Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund.

confederation of states that included many cultural groups. The largest of these groups was the Asante (ah-sahn-tee).

Gold was the measure of wealth for the Asante and their kings, who tightly controlled its use. Items fashioned from the precious metal were made to be worn by these kings as a sign of their divine authority and absolute power.

Asante necklaces, bracelets, and anklets were crafted by stringing cast-gold beads with gold nuggets, glass and stone beads, and other items. In **Figure 12.22**, a pendant in the form of a land crab is used. This necklace was probably designed for a queen mother, because the land crab was widely recognized by the Asante as a symbol for a person of this rank.

The work of goldsmiths in Kumase, the Asante capital, was regulated by the king. He allowed people to commission works of art from these highly skilled craftsmen. Items obtained through the king's court included gold ornaments, staffs, and swords.



► **FIGURE 12.23** Weavers of Kente cloth have invented many different patterns. These patterns often have names that are immediately recognized by members of Akan societies. What elements of art have been used to create the patterns on this cloth?

Asante people, Ghana. Man's cloth (Kente cloth). Rayon. L: 314 cm (123⁷/₈"), W: 217 cm (85⁵/₈"). UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, Los Angeles, California. Anonymous gift.

The Asante king also controlled the use of special cloth. During the 1600s, weavers created the first *Kente* (**ken-tee**) *cloth*, a brilliantly colored and patterned fabric that became the royal cloth. Kente cloth is woven in narrow strips that are then stitched together to form large pieces with complex patterns (**Figure 12.23**). By the 1720s, Asante weavers were unraveling imported silk fabrics and reweaving them into cloths featuring their own unique designs. Silk cloths woven with special symbolic patterns were reserved exclusively for kings.

The Bwa People

Although wood is the most common material used to carve face masks and headdresses, African masks were constructed in different ways using a wide variety of materials. For example, the Bwa people of Burkina Faso made masks of leaves, plant fibers, porcupine quills, and feathers. Leaf masks were made at the end of the dry season, before the rains that marked the beginning of the next agricultural cycle. The Bwa people considered leaf masks the most ancient mask form and closely associated them with nature (**Figure 12.24**).

The Bwa people also produced wooden masks that were used during village ceremonies or harvest festivals. The music of flutes, drums, and gongs accompanied the dancers wearing these masks, which took different forms—animal, human, and abstract. All were painted with black, white, and red geometric patterns. Plank masks were among the most abstract of all mask forms made by the Bwa people (**Figure 12.25**, page 338).



▲ **FIGURE 12.24** African masks are generally more than just a face covering. Imagine wearing a leaf mask like this one. How would you feel?

Bwa people, Burkina Faso, village of Boni. Detail of a leaf mask. 1985.



▲ **FIGURE 12.25** Though large and cumbersome, plank masks are made of lightweight wood. To help steady the mask, the performer holds a stick between his teeth. This stick projects through rim holes at the back of the mask. What elements of art are emphasized in these masks?

Bwa people, Burkina Faso, village of Pa. Plank masks entering performance area, harvest celebration.

Activity

Constructing a Mask

Demonstrating Effective Use of Media and Tools in Design.

What happens when you cover your face with a mask? Can you hide your identity from others? Design your own mask using thin cardboard, construction paper, paint, or other media and tools. In choosing your design and materials, think about what you want your mask to represent.



Check Your Understanding

1. What beliefs are reflected in the terra-cotta and bronze sculptures of the Yoruba people?
2. What are griots?
3. How do artists of the Benin kingdom signify the importance of figures in their artworks?
4. What is Kente cloth, and what is it used for?
5. Describe general characteristics of sculptures from the Ife, Dogon, and Edo cultures of Africa.