
CONTENT AREA 6

Africa

1100–1980 C.E.

ENDURING UNDERSTANDING 6-1. *Human life, which is understood to have begun in Africa, developed over millions of years and radiated beyond the continent of Africa. The earliest African art dates to 77,000 years ago. While interpretation of this art is conjectural at best, the clarity and strength of design and expression in the work is obvious.*

- ▶ **Essential Knowledge 6-1a.** Early artistic expression on the African continent is found in the rock art of the Sahara and in southern Africa. Those works depict the animals that lived in each region, human pursuits (e.g., herding, combat, and perhaps dance or some sort of regularized behavior), contact among different groups of people, and the use of technologies (e.g., horses and chariots).
- ▶ **Essential Knowledge 6-1b.** The now-deserts of the Sahara were once grasslands and an original source of agriculture and animal husbandry. As the desert grew, it stretched toward the still well-watered valley of the Nile and the culture of Pharaonic Egypt. Resulting human migrations carried populations southward into central Africa and eventually across the Congo River Basin. The arts, major world religions, and international trade routes followed those paths and flourished in patterns of distribution seen in Africa today.

ENDURING UNDERSTANDING 6-2. *Human beliefs and interactions in Africa are instigated by the arts. African arts are active; they motivate behavior, contain and express belief, and validate social organization and human relations.*

- ▶ **Essential Knowledge 6-2a.** Art in Africa is a combination of objects, acts, and events, created in a wide variety of media (vocal, aural, and visual) and materials (wood, ivory, metals, ceramic, fiber, and elements of nature) that are carved, cast, forged, modeled, woven, and combined by recognized specialists for knowledgeable patrons.
- ▶ **Essential Knowledge 6-2b.** Art reveals belief systems; it presents a world that is known but not necessarily seen, predictable, or even available to everyone. These arts are expressive rather than representational and often require specialized or supernaturally ordained capabilities for their creation, use, and interpretation. African art is concerned with ideas (beliefs and relationships that exist in the social and intellectual world) rather than the with objects of the natural or physical world. Art is created for both daily use and ritual purposes (such as leadership, religious beliefs, diagnosis and divination, education, and personal adornment).

- ▶ **Essential Knowledge 6-2c.** Art forms may be prescribed by a diviner, commissioned by a supplicant, and produced by a specific artist. The art object comes under the custodianship of the person who commissioned it or a member of his or her family. Performances of objects are accompanied by costumes and music. None of these practices is simple or random. Cultural protocols acknowledge and ensure the efficacy and appropriateness of artistic experience in Africa. African art is sung, danced, and presented in holistic experiences for designated audiences; it is created for specific reasons and to produce expected results.

ENDURING UNDERSTANDING 6-3. *Use and efficacy are central to the art of Africa. African arts, though often characterized, collected, and exhibited as figural sculptures and masks, are by nature meant to be performed rather than simply viewed. African arts are often described in terms of the contexts and functions with which they appear to be associated.*

- ▶ **Essential Knowledge 6-3a.** As in all arts, aspects of human experience (such as origins, destinies, beliefs, physicality, power, and gender) are expressed through objects and performances. Artistic expression in Africa is an integral part of social life, connecting daily practices to beliefs, systems of power and authority, and social networks that link people to their families, communities, and shared ancestors. African arts mark status, identity, and cycles of human experience (e.g., maturational, seasonal, astronomical, and liturgical).
- ▶ **Essential Knowledge 6-3b.** Education, incorporation into adulthood, and civic responsibility are processes marked by the creation, manipulation, and interpretation of art objects. The arts of authority (both achieved and inherited status and roles) legitimate traditional leadership. Leaders' histories and accomplishments are often entrusted to and lauded by historians, bards, and elders. Personal identity, social status, and relationships are delineated by aesthetic choices and artistic expression. Common ancestors link leaders, sanction social behavior and choices, and define the order of social life.
- ▶ **Essential Knowledge 6-3c.** Urbanization and its monumental trappings (both bureaucratic and architectural) often associated with "civilization" take many forms in Africa. Administrative and liturgical centers exist apart from settlement that is often determined by the spaces required for agriculture or herding. Seasonal climatic shifts and demands of political relations affect the scale and distribution of built environments and arts that mark them. The sites of Meroë, Timbuktu, Zimbabwe, Igbo Ukwu, and Kilwa Kisiwani demonstrate that range of monumentalities.

ENDURING UNDERSTANDING 6-4. *Outsiders have often characterized, collected, and exhibited African arts as primitive, ethnographic, anonymous, and static, when in reality Africa’s interaction with the rest of the world led to dynamic intellectual and artistic traditions that sustain hundreds of cultures and almost as many languages, contributing dramatically to the corpus of human expression. African life and arts have been deeply affected by ongoing, cosmopolitan patterns of interaction with populations around the world and through time.*

- ▶ **Essential Knowledge 6-4a.** African histories, often sung or recited, are traditionally the responsibility of specialists. Outsiders often see those histories as timeless and unchanging. The Africa we know often comes from ideas promulgated by foreigners since the ninth century — as though history were brought to, rather than originating from, Africa.
- ▶ **Essential Knowledge 6-4b.** As they have been traditionally collected by outsiders, African art objects that are similar in form are often grouped with works that come from the same place and are produced by a designated ethnic group. The name of the artist and the date of creation are rarely acknowledged by the outsiders who collected them. These gaps in the record do not reflect a lack of interest on the part of those who commission, use, and protect art objects; rather they are the result of ignorance and predisposition by those collecting, describing, and explaining African art.
- ▶ **Essential Knowledge 6-4c.** Creative contributions of African life and arts are found in populations around the world. Artistic practices were conveyed by and continue to be serviced by African people and beliefs, from Macao to Manaus to Mauritania. These creative contributions are reflected in diverse art forms, from the practices of Santeria to Japanese screens and the paintings of Renaissance Venice. The literatures of Negritude and the Harlem Renaissance expanded the notions of place and race to new levels that are again changing in the contemporary diaspora. Although traditional African art forms are usually described and exhibited, contemporary African arts have increased awareness and understanding of the arts of the continent across the globe.

Image Set

167. Conical tower and circular wall of Great Zimbabwe. Southeastern Zimbabwe. Shona peoples. c. 1000–1400 C.E. Coursed granite blocks. (2 images)



Conical tower

© Werner Forman Archive/The Bridgeman Art Library



Circular wall

© Werner Forman Archive/The Bridgeman Art Library

168. Great Mosque of Djenné. Mali. Founded c. 1200 C.E.; rebuilt 1906–1907. Adobe. (2 images)



Great Mosque of Djenné

© George Steinmetz/Corbis



Monday market at the Great Mosque of Djenné

© Remi Benali/Corbis

169. Wall plaque, from Oba's palace. Edo peoples, Benin (Nigeria). 16th century C.E. Cast brass. (2 images)



Wall plaque, from Oba's palace

Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Image source © Art Resource, NY



Contextual photograph: Oba of Benin

© Werner Forman/Art Resource, NY

170. *Sika dwa kofi* (Golden Stool). Ashanti peoples (south central Ghana). c. 1700 C.E. Gold over wood and cast-gold attachments. (2 images)



Sika dwa kofi

© Marc Deville/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images



Contextual photograph: *Sika dwa kofi*

© Marc Deville/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images

171. *Ndop* (portrait figure) of King Mishe miShyaang maMbul. Kuba peoples (Democratic Republic of the Congo). c. 1760–1780 C.E. Wood. (2 images)



Ndop

© Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York, USA/The Bridgeman Art Library



Contextual photograph: *Ndop*

Kuba Nyim (ruler) Kot a Mbweky III in state dress with royal drum in Mushenge, Democratic Republic of the Congo. Photograph by Eliot Elisofon, 1971. EEPA EECL 2139/Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives/National Museum of African Art/Smithsonian Institution

172. Power figure (*Nkisi n'kondi*). Kongo peoples (Democratic Republic of the Congo). c. late 19th century C.E. Wood and metal.



Nkisi n'kondi

© Detroit Institute of Arts, USA/Founders Society Purchase/Eleanor Clay Ford Fund for African Art/The Bridgeman Art Library

173. Female (*Pwo*) mask. Chokwe peoples (Democratic Republic of the Congo). Late 19th to early 20th century C.E. Wood, fiber, pigment, and metal.



Female (*Pwo*) mask

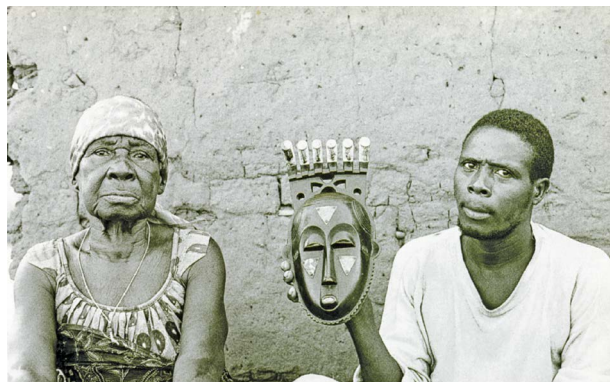
Photograph © by Franko Khoury/National Museum of African Art/Smithsonian Institution

174. Portrait mask (*Mblo*). Baule peoples (Côte d'Ivoire). Early 20th century C.E. Wood and pigment. (2 images)



Mblo

© Jerry L. Thompson



Contextual photograph: *Mblo*

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175. *Bundu* mask. Sande Society, Mende peoples (West African forests of Sierra Leone and Liberia). 19th to 20th century C.E. Wood, cloth, and fiber. (2 images)



Bundu mask

© Schomburg Center, NYPL/Art Resource, NY



Contextual photograph: *Bundu* mask

© William Siegmann Estate, Edward DeCarbo, Executor

176. *Ikenga* (shrine figure). Igbo peoples (Nigeria). c. 19th to 20th century C.E. Wood.



Ikenga

© Werner Forman/Art Resource, NY

177. Lukasa (memory board). Mbudye Society, Luba peoples (Democratic Republic of the Congo). c. 19th to 20th century C.E. Wood, beads, and metal. (2 images)



Lukasa

Photo © Heini Schneebeli/The Bridgeman Art Library



Contextual photograph: *Lukasa*

Courtesy of Mary Nooter Roberts

178. Aka elephant mask. Bamileke (Cameroon, western grassfields region). c. 19th to 20th century C.E. Wood, woven raffia, cloth, and beads. (2 images)



Aka elephant mask

Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Image Source
© Art Resource, NY



Contextual photograph: *Aka elephant mask*

© George Holton/Photo Researchers/Getty Images

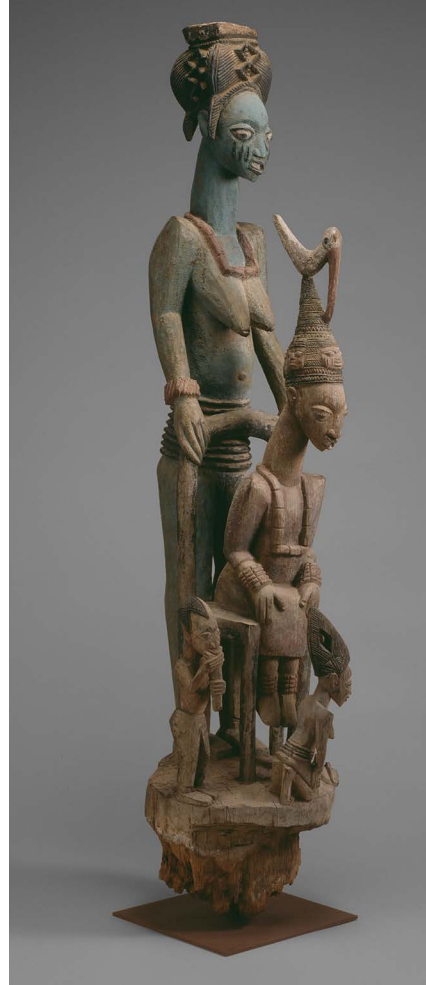
179. Reliquary figure (*byeri*). Fang peoples (southern Cameroon). c. 19th to 20th century C.E. Wood.



Reliquary figure (*byeri*)

© Brooklyn Museum/Corbis

180. Veranda post of enthroned king and senior wife (Opo Ogoga). Olowe of Ise (Yoruba peoples). c. 1910–1914 C.E. Wood and pigment.



Veranda post of enthroned king and senior wife (Opo Ogoga)

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