27: Africa in the Modern Period
27.1: Religious Art in Africa

27.1.1: African Art and the Spirit World

Beliefs about the spirit world are deeply embedded in traditional African culture, but were heavily influenced by Christianity and Islam.

Learning Objective

Discuss the role of African masks, statues, and sculptures in relation to the spirit world

Key Points

- Most traditional African cultures include beliefs about the spirit world, which is widely represented through both traditional and modern art such as masks, statues, and sculptures.
- Wooden masks are often used to depict deities or ancestors; in many traditions, they are believed to channel spirits when worn by ceremonial dancers.
- Statues and sculptures are also used to represent, connect to, or communicate with spiritual forces.
- Today, Africans profess a wide variety of religious beliefs, the most common of which are Christianity and Islam; perhaps less than 15% still follow traditional African religions.
- Despite the drastic decrease in native African religions, some modern art in Africa has worked to reincorporate traditional spiritual beliefs, such as in modern Makonde Art depicting spirits.

Key Terms

receptacle

A container.

sanctuaries

Consecrated (or sacred) areas of a church or temple.

Background

Like all human cultures, African folklore and religion is diverse and varied. Culture and spirituality share space and are deeply intertwined in most African cultures, which have been heavily influenced by the introduction of Christianity and Islam during the era of European colonization. Most traditional African cultures include beliefs about the spirit world, which is widely represented through both traditional and modern art such as masks, statues, and sculptures. In some societies, artistic talents were themselves seen as ways to please higher spirits.
Traditional Influences on Contemporary Religious Art

Masks and Rituals

Wooden masks, which often take the form of animals, humans, or mythical creatures, are one of the most commonly found forms of traditional art in western Africa. These masks are often used to depict deities or represent the souls of the departed. They may be worn by a dancer in ceremonies for celebrations, deaths, initiations, or crop harvesting. In many traditional mask ceremonies, the dancer goes into deep trance, and during this state of mind he or she is believed to communicate with ancestors in the spirit world. The masks themselves often represent an ancestral spirit, which is believed to possess the wearer of the mask. Most African masks are made with wood and can also be decorated with ivory, animal hair, plant fibers, pigments, stones, and semi-precious gems.

Mask from Gabon
A traditional mask from Gabon.

Statues and sculptures are also used to represent or connect to spiritual forces. For example, Bambara statuettes, such as the Chiwara, are used as spiritually charged objects during ritual. During the annual ceremonies of the Guan society, a group of up to seven figures, some dating back to the 14th century, are removed from their sanctuaries by the elder members of the society. The wooden sculptures, which represent a highly stylized animal or human figure, are washed, re-oiled and offered sacrifices. The Kono and Komo societies use similar statues to serve as receptacles for spiritual forces. The Igbo would traditionally make clay altars and shrines of their deities, usually featuring various figures. In the Kingdom of Kongo, nkisi were objects believed to be inhabited by spirits. Often carved in the shape of animals or humans, these "power objects" were believed to help aid in the communication with the spirit world.

**Modern Religion**

Today, the countries of Africa contain a wide variety of religious beliefs, and statistics on religious affiliation are difficult to come by. Christianity and Islam make up the largest religions in contemporary Africa, and some sources say that less than 15% still follow traditional African religions. Despite the drastic decrease in native African religions, some modern art in Africa has worked to reincorporate traditional spiritual beliefs. For example, modern Makonde Art has turned to abstract figures in which spirits, or Shetani, play an important role.

![Modern Makonde carving in ebony](image)

Modern Makonde sculptures often depict spirits, or Shetani.

**27.1.2: Masks in the Kalabari Kingdom**

Culture and artistic festivities of the Kalabari Kingdom involve the wearing of elaborate outfits and carved masks to celebrate the spirits.

**Learning Objective**

Discuss the role of the spiritual in the masks of the Kalabari Kingdom

**Key Points**
• The Kalabari Kingdom was an independent trading state of the Kalabari people, an Ijaw ethnic group, in the Niger River Delta. Today it is recognized as a traditional state in what is now Rivers State, Nigeria.
• Although the Ijaw are now primarily Christians, they also maintain elaborate traditional religious practices.
• Veneration of ancestors plays a central role in Ijaw traditional religion, while water spirits figure prominently in the Ijaw pantheon. In addition, the Ijaw practice a form of divination in which recently deceased individuals are interrogated on the causes of their death.
• The role of prayer in the traditional Ijaw system of belief is to maintain the living in the good graces of the water spirits among whom they dwelt before being born into this world.
• Each year, the Ijaw hold celebrations involving masquerades that last for several days in honor of the spirits.
• Ijaw men wearing elaborate outfits and carved masks dance to the beat of drums and manifest the influence of the water spirits through the quality and intensity of their dancing.

Key Terms

kin
Race; family; breed; kind.

enculturation
The process by which an individual adopts the behavior patterns of the culture in which he or she is immersed.

Introduction: The Kalabari

The Kalabari Kingdom, also called Eleme Kalabari (New Shipping Port), or New Calabar by the Europeans, was an independent trading state of the Kalabari people, an Ijaw ethnic group, in the Niger River Delta. Today it is recognized as a traditional state in what is now Rivers State, Nigeria. As well as participating in trade, the Ijaw have traditionally been a fishing and farming culture.

Culture and Art

Although the Ijaw are now primarily Christians (95% profess to be), with Roman Catholicism and Anglicanism being the varieties of Christianity most prevalent among them, they also maintain elaborate traditional religious practices. Veneration of ancestors plays a central role in Ijaw traditional religion, while water spirits, known as Owuamapu, figure prominently in the Ijaw pantheon. In addition, the Ijaw practice a form of divination called Igbadai, in which recently deceased individuals are interrogated on the causes of their death. The Ijaw are also known to practice ritual acculturation, whereby an individual from a different and unrelated group undergoes rites to become Ijaw.

The Role of Ijaw Masks
Ijaw religious beliefs hold that water spirits are like humans, having personal strengths and shortcomings, and that humans dwell among the water spirits before being born. Each year, the Ijaw hold celebrations lasting for several days in honor of the spirits. Central to the festivities is the role of masquerades, in which men wearing elaborate outfits and carved masks dance to the beat of drums and manifest the influence of the water spirits through the quality and intensity of their dancing. Particularly spectacular masqueraders are believed to be possessed by the particular spirits on whose behalf they are dancing.

Ijaw mask


27.1.3: Dogon Sculpture

Dogon sculpture primarily revolves around the themes of religious values, ideals, and freedoms.
Learning Objective

Describe the characteristics of Dogon art, sculpture, and rituals, as well as the background and location of the Dogon culture

Key Points

- The Dogon are an ethnic group living in the central plateau region of the country of Mali, in the West of the African continent, and are well known for their unique sculptures. Dogon sculptures are not made to be seen publicly and are commonly hidden from the public eye within the houses of families, sanctuaries, or the hogon (spiritual leader).
- Dogon sculptures are typically characterized by an elongation of form and a mix of geometric and figurative images.
- The Dogon style has evolved into a kind of cubism: ovoid head, squared shoulders, tapered extremities, pointed breasts, forearms and thighs on a parallel plane, and hair stylized by three or four incised lines.

Key Terms

Tellem

The people who inhabited the Bandiagara Escarpment in Mali from the 11th through 16th centuries CE.

vessel

A general term for all kinds of craft designed for transportation on water, such as ships or boats.

Introduction: The Dogon People

The Dogon are an ethnic group living in the central plateau region of the country of Mali, in the West of the African continent. They migrated to the region around the 14th century CE. They are best known for their religious traditions, wooden sculpture, architecture, and funeral masquerades. The past century has seen significant changes in the social organization, material culture, and beliefs of the Dogon, partly because Dogon country is one of Mali’s major tourist attractions.

Dogon Sculpture

Dogon art is primarily sculptural and revolves around religious values, ideals, and freedoms. Dogon sculptures are not made to be seen publicly and are commonly hidden from the public eye within the houses of families, sanctuaries, or the hogon (a spiritual leader of the Dogon people). The importance of secrecy is due to the symbolic meaning behind the pieces and the process by which they are made. Dogon sculptures are typically characterized by an elongation of form and a mix of geometric and figurative images.
Dogon Sculpture

Dogon sculptures are typically characterized by an elongation of form and a combination of geometric and figurative images.

Themes

Themes found throughout Dogon sculpture consist of figures with raised arms, superimposed bearded figures, horsemen, stools with caryatids, women with children, figures covering their faces, women grinding pearl millet, women bearing vessels on their heads, donkeys bearing cups, musicians, dogs, quadruped-shaped troughs or benches, figures bending from the waist, mirror-images, apron-wearing figures, and standing figures. Signs of other contacts and origins are evident in Dogon art; the Dogon people
were not the first inhabitants of the area, and influence from the Tellem, or the people who inhabited the region in Mali between the 11th and 16th centuries CE, is evident in the use of rectilinear designs.

Dogon art is extremely versatile, although common stylistic characteristics—such as a tendency towards stylization—are apparent on the statues. Their art deals with Dogon myths, whose complex ensembles regulate the life of the individual. The sculptures are preserved in innumerable sites of worship and personal or family altars, and often render the human body in a simplified way, reducing it to its essentials. Many sculptures recreate the silhouettes of the Tellem culture, featuring raised arms and a thick patina, or surface layer, made of blood and millet beer. The Dogon style has evolved into a kind of cubism: ovoid head, squared shoulders, tapered extremities, pointed breasts, forearms and thighs on a parallel plane, and hair stylized by three or four incised lines.

**Uses**

Dogon sculptures serve as a physical medium in initiations and as an explanation of the world. They serve to transmit an understanding to the initiated, who will decipher the statue according to the level of their knowledge. Carved animal figures, such as dogs and ostriches, are placed on village foundation altars to commemorate sacrificed animals, while granary doors, stools, and house posts are also adorned with figures and symbols. Kneeling statues of protective spirits are placed at the head of the dead to absorb their spiritual strength and to be their intermediaries with the world of the dead, into which they accompany the deceased before once again being placed on the shrines of the ancestors.

**27.1.4: Mendé Masks**

Mendé masks are commonly used in initiation ceremonies into secret Poro and Sande societies.

**Learning Objective**

Discuss how Mendé masks are created and used by the Mendé people

**Key Points**

- The Mendé people are one of the two largest ethnic groups in Sierra Leone; they belong to a larger group of Mandé peoples who live throughout West Africa.
- The masks associated with the secret societies of the Mendé are probably the best known and most finely crafted in the region.
- Masks represent the collective mind of Mendé community; viewed as one body, they are seen as the Spirit of the Mendé people.
- The most important masks personify and embody the powerful spirits belonging to the medicine societies: the goboi and gbini of the Poro society (the secret society for men) and the soweï of the Sande society (the secret society for women). The features of a Soweï mask convey Mendé ideals of female morality and physical beauty; they are somewhat unusual because women wear the masks.

**Key Term**

hale
Secret societies of the Mendé people.

**Background and Art of the Mendé People**

The Mendé people are one of the two largest ethnic groups in Sierra Leone, having roughly the same population as their neighbours the Temne people. Together, the Mendé and Temne both account for slightly more than 30% of the country's total population. The Mendé belong to a larger group of Mande peoples who live throughout West Africa. Mostly farmers and hunters, the Mendé are divided into two groups: the halemo (or members of the hale or secret societies) and the kpowa (people who have never been initiated into the hale). The Mendé believe that all humanistic and scientific power is passed down through the secret societies.

Mendé art is primarily found in the form of jewelry and carvings. The masks associated with the secret societies of the Mendé are probably the best known and are finely crafted in the region. The Mendé also produce beautifully woven fabrics, which are popular throughout western Africa, and gold and silver necklaces, bracelets, armlets, and earrings. The bells on the necklaces are of the type believed capable of being heard by spirits, ringing in both worlds, that of the ancestors and the living.

**Mendé Masks**

Masks represent the collective mind of the Mendé community; viewed as one body, they are seen as the Spirit of the Mendé people. The Mendé masked figures are a reminder that human beings have a dual existence; they live in the concrete world of flesh and material things as well as in the spirit world of dreams, faith, aspirations, and imagination.

The standard set of Mendé maskers includes about a dozen personalities embodying spirits of varying degrees of power and importance. The most important of these personify and embody the powerful spirits belonging to the medicine societies: the goboi and gbini of the Poro society (the secret society for men), the sowei of the Sande society (the secret society for women), and the njaye and humoi maskers belonging to the eponymous medicine societies. The maskers of the Sande and Poro societies are responsible for enforcing laws and are important symbolic presences in the rituals of initiation and in public ceremonies that mark the coronations and funerals of chiefs and society officials.

**Sowei Masks**

The features of a Sowei mask convey Mendé ideals of female morality and physical beauty. They are somewhat unusual in that women traditionally wear the masks. The bird on top of the head represents a woman's intuition that lets her see and know things that others can't. The high or broad forehead represents good luck or the sharp, contemplative mind of the ideal Mendé woman. Downcast eyes symbolize a spiritual nature, and it is through these small slits that a woman wearing the mask would look out of. The small mouth signifies the ideal woman's quiet and humble character. The markings on the cheeks are representative of the decorative scars girls receive as they step into womanhood. The neck rolls are an indication of the health of ideal women; they have also been called symbols of the pattern of concentric,
circular ripples the Mendé spirit makes when emerging from the water. The intricate hairstyles reveal the close ties within a community of women. The holes at the base of the mask are where the rest of the costume is attached; a woman who wears these masks must not expose any part of her body, or it is believed a vengeful spirit may take possession of her.

When a girl becomes initiated into the Sande society (the Mendé secret society for women), the village's master woodcarver creates a special mask just for her. Helmet masks are made from a section of tree trunk, often of the kpole (cotton) tree, and then carved and hollowed to fit over the wearer's head and face. The woodcarver must wait until he has a dream that guides him to make the mask a certain way for the recipient. A mask must be kept hidden in a secret place when no one is wearing it. These masks appear not only in initiation rituals but also at important events such as funerals, arbitrations, and the installation of chiefs.

Helmet Mendé Mask

Helmet masks of the Mendé, Vai, Gola, Bassa and other peoples of the sub-region are the best documented instance of women's masking in Africa. These masks are used by the Sande association, a powerful organization with social, political and religious significance. Although worn only by women, these masks, as is the case elsewhere in Africa, are carved by men.

Gbini Masks

Gbini is considered to be the most powerful of all Mendé maskers; it appears both at the final ceremony of
the Poro initiation process for a son of the paramount chief and also at the coronation of funeral of a paramount chief. Because of its power, women are made to stand far back from gbini and if a woman accidentally touches it, she must be anointed with medicine immediately.

The Gbini wears a large leopard skin, which indicates its association with the paramount chief. The flat, round headpiece resembles the chief's crown. The headpiece is constructed of animal hide stretched over a bamboo framework, and the hide is decorated with cowrie shells and black, white, and red strips of cloth that are worked into a geometric pattern. At the center is a round mirror. Several flaps that are similarly decorated hang down from the base of the headpiece and overlap the cape, which covers much of the wearer's torso.

Gbini mask

Gbini mask, Mendé (wood, leopard skin, sheepskin, antelope skin, raffia fiber, cotton cloth, cotton string, cowry shells), from the collection of the Brooklyn Museum.

Attributions

- African Art and the Spirit World
  - "Boundless." [http://www.boundless.com/](http://www.boundless.com/). Boundless Learning [CC BY-SA 3.0](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/).

Masks in the Kalabari Kingdom

Dogon Sculpture

Mendé Masks
- "Mende people." [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mende_people%23Arts](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mende_people%23Arts). Wikipedia [CC BY-SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/).
27.2: African Clothmaking

27.2.1: Bògòlanfini: Traditional Malian Cloth

Bògòlanfini is a traditional Malian fabric that is exported worldwide for use in fashion, fine art, and decoration.

**Learning Objective**

Describe the bògòlanfini fabric of the San culture

**Key Points**

- Bògòlanfini, or "mud cloth," is a handmade Malian cotton fabric traditionally dyed with fermented mud. It has an important place in traditional Malian culture and has, more recently, become a symbol of Malian cultural identity.
- The cloth is being exported worldwide for use in fashion, fine art, and decoration.
- In traditional bògòlanfini production, the cloth is soaked in a bath of dye from the leaves of the n'gallama tree and then painted in intricate motifs with a special fermented mud collected from riverbeds.
- Modern, simplified production techniques using simpler designed and faster methods that allow large quantities of bògòlanfini to be mass-produced six to seven times faster for the tourist and export markets.
- In Mali, the cloth is worn by people of all ethnicities, including prominently in Malian cinema and by Malian musicians, either as an expression of national or ethnic identity or as a fashion style.

**Key Term**

motif

A recurring or dominant element in a work of art.

**Bògòlanfini**

Bògòlanfini, or bogolan ("mud cloth"), is a handmade Malian cotton fabric traditionally dyed with fermented mud. It has an important place in traditional Malian culture, and, more recently, it has become a symbol of Malian cultural identity. The cloth is being exported worldwide for use in fashion, fine art, and decoration. Its center of production is in San, a city located in the Ségou Region of Mali.

**Traditional Production**
In traditional bògòlanfini production, men weave the cloth and women dye it. On narrow looms, strips of cotton fabric about 15 centimeters (5.9 inches) wide are woven and stitched into cloths about 1 meter (3 feet) wide and 1.5 meters (5 feet) long.

The dyeing process begins with the cloth being soaked in a dye bath made from mashed and boiled, or soaked, leaves of the n’gallama tree (Anogeissus leiocarpa). Once it has taken on a yellow hue, the cloth is sun-dried and then painted with designs using a piece of metal or wood. The paint, carefully and repeatedly applied to outline the intricate motifs, is made of a special mud, collected from riverbeds and fermented for up to a year in a clay jar. Due to a chemical reaction between the mud and the dyed cloth, the brown color remains after the mud is washed off. Finally, the yellow n’gallama dye is removed from the unpainted parts of the cloth by applying soap or bleach, rendering them white. After prolonged use, the very dark brown color turns a variety of rich tones of brown, while the unpainted underside of the fabric retains a pale russet color.

Bògòlanfini fabric

The paint on traditional mud cloths, carefully and repeatedly applied to outline the intricate motifs, is made of a special mud collected from riverbeds and fermented for up to a year in a clay jar.

Simplified Production

Around Mopti and Djenné, a simpler method is used to produce bògòlanfini. The cloth is dyed yellow in wolo solution made from the leaves of Terminalia avicennoides and is then painted over with black designs. The yellow is either removed, producing a stark black and white design, or painted a deep orange with a solution from the bark of M’Peku (Lannea velutina).

Based on these simplified techniques, large quantities of bògòlanfini are now being mass-produced for the tourist and export markets. These fabrics use simpler designs, often applied by stencil and painted in black on a yellow or orange background. With this method, the cloth can be produced about six to seven times faster. The democratic reforms in Mali after the overthrow of Moussa Traoré in 1991 caused many young men to lose their previously guaranteed government jobs and scholarships, leading many to take up bògòlanfini production. Consequently, most cloth is now produced by men rather than women, and the traditional year-long apprenticeships have been replaced by short, informal training sessions.
Cultural Significance

Traditional Uses

In traditional Malian culture, bògòlanfini is worn by hunters, serving as camouflage, as ritual protection, and as a badge of status. Women are wrapped in bògòlanfini after their initiation into adulthood (which includes genital cutting) and immediately after childbirth, as the cloth is believed to have the power to absorb the dangerous forces released under such circumstances. Bògòlanfini patterns are rich in cultural significance, referring to historical events (such as a famous battle between a Malian warrior and the French), crocodiles (significant in Bambara mythology) or other objects, mythological concepts, and proverbs. Since about 1980, bògòlanfini has become a symbol of Malian cultural identity and is being promoted as such by the Malian government.

Modern Uses

In Mali, the cloth is now worn by people of all ethnicities, including prominently in Malian cinema and by Malian musicians, either as an expression of national or ethnic identity or as a fashion style. Particularly popular among young people, Bògòlanfini is made into a wide range of clothes, Western miniskirts, and jackets, as well as traditional flowing robes (boubous). The Malian fashion designer Chris Seydou has been credited with popularizing bògòlanfini in international fashion. Bògòlanfini has become a popular Malian export, notably to the United States. There, it is marketed as mud cloth, either as a symbol of Malian culture or as a generically ethnic decorative cloth.

Bògòlanfini

Bògòlanfini hanging in the market of Enndé.

In Art
Bògòlanfini is also produced as fine art by several Malian artists, notably by the *Groupe Bogolan Kasobané*, six artists who have been collaborating since 1978. These paintings are produced with vegetable dyes and mud but often feature designs unrelated to those of traditional fabrics; their newer motifs are also often found on clothing. Traditional bògòlanfini designs are also used on a wide range of commercial products, such as coffee mugs, curtains, towels, sheets, book covers, and wrapping paper.

### 27.2.2: Cloth Production in Bamum

The Bamum people are known for their extensive dyeing practice and their production of royal cloth, known as Ntieya.

**Learning Objective**

Describe the history, dyes, and beaded sculptures of the Kingdom of Bamum

**Key Points**

- The Bamum people are a Bantu ethnic group of Cameroon with around 215,000 members; the pre-colonial kingdom of Bamum existed in what is now northwest Cameroon from 1394–1884.
- The economy of the Bamum Kingdom was largely agricultural, and slave owning was practiced on a small scale. The Bamum kingdom also traded with neighboring populations, importing salt, iron, beads, cotton goods, and copper objects.
- The Bamum people have an indigenous writing system, known as Bamum script or Shu Mom. The script was developed by Sultan Ibrahim Njoya in 1896, and is taught in Cameroon by the Bamum Scripts and Archives Project.
- The Bamun developed an extensive artistic culture at their capital of Fumban at the beginning of the 20th century. During Njoya's reign six dye pits containing various colors were maintained.
- The Bamum imported indigo-dyed raffia-sewn cloth from the Hausa to be used as royal cloth, known as Ntieya; Hausa craftsmen were kept at palace workshops to supply nobles and teach the art of dyeing.
- During the 19th and early 20th century, Bamum artists also created splendid beaded sculptures for the royal court.

**Key Terms**

Hausa

One of the largest ethnic groups in Africa; a diverse but culturally homogeneous people based primarily in the Sahelian and Sudanian Daura area of northern Nigeria and southeastern Niger, with significant numbers also living in parts of Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Chad, Togo, Ghana, Sudan, Gabon, and Senegal.

indigo

A purplish-blue color.

**Background: Bamum**
The Bamum people are a Bantu ethnic group of Cameroon with around 215,000 members. The pre-colonial kingdom of Bamum (1394–1884) was a West African state in what is now northwest Cameroon. The Mbam, a part-Bantu ethnic group from northeast Cameroon, founded the kingdom at the end of the 14th century; its capital was the ancient walled city of Fumban.

The German Empire claimed the territory as the colony of Kamerun in 1884 and began a steady push inland. They initiated projects to improve the colony’s infrastructure, relying on a harsh system of forced labor. With the defeat of Germany in World War I, Kamerun became a League of Nations mandate territory and was split into French Cameroon and British Cameroons in 1919. France integrated the economy of Cameroon with that of France and improved the infrastructure with capital investments, skilled workers, and continued forced labor.

**Bamum Culture and Art**

The Bamum people have an indigenous writing system known as Bamum script or Shu Mom. The script was developed by Sultan Ibrahim Njoya in 1896 and is taught in Cameroon by the Bamum Scripts and Archives Project. Little is known about the Bamum Kingdom’s material and social culture during its existence. Originally, the language of state in the Bamum kingdom was that of the Tikar. This apparently did not last long, and the language of the conquered, Mben, was adopted.

**Royal Cloth**

The Bamum developed an extensive artistic culture at their capital of Fumban at the beginning of the 20th century. During the reign of Njoya, six dye pits containing various colors were maintained. The Bamum also imported indigo-dyed raffia-sewn cloth from the Hausa to be used as royal cloth. This royal cloth was called Ntieya, and Hausa craftsmen were kept at palace workshops to supply nobles and teach the art of dyeing. At the same time, during the 19th and early 20th century, Bamum artists created splendid beaded sculptures for the royal court. Colorful beadwork attached to a fabric base covers most of the carved wooden figures.
Bamum sculpture

This life-size male figure from the kingdom of Bamum in Cameroon is a visually compelling example of the splendid beaded sculptures Bamum artists created for the royal court in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

27.2.3: Kente Cloth

The Asante are a clan of the Akan people and are known for their production of vibrantly colored Kente cloth.

Learning Objective

Discuss Kente cloth and its cultural role

Key Points
The Asante, or Ashanti, are a nation and ethnic group who live predominantly in and are native to Ashanti, Asanteman, and Ghana and the Ivory Coast.

Kente cloth (known as Nwenton in the Asante language), is an Asante type of silk and cotton fabric made of interwoven cloth strips that is native to the Asante people.

The cloth was traditionally a royal and sacred cloth worn only at times of high importance, most often by Asante kings. Over time, the use of the Kente cloth have became more widespread, and it is one of the most well-known textiles in Africa.

A variety of Kente patterns have been invented, each of which has a certain concept or concepts traditionally associated with it.

The icon of African cultural heritage around the world, Kente cloth is identified by its dazzling, multicolored patterns of bright colors, geometric shapes, and bold designs.

Key Terms

crescent

The figure of the moon as it appears in its first or last quarter, with concave and convex edges terminating in points.

replica

An exact copy.

Background: The Asante People and Akan Art

The Asante, or Ashanti, are a nation and ethnic group who live predominantly in and are native to Ashanti, Asanteman, and in Ghana and the Ivory Coast. They speak Asante and are of Akan origin. Prior to European colonization, the Ashanti people developed a large and influential empire in West Africa. The Ashanti later developed the powerful Ashanti Confederacy, or Asanteman, and became the dominant presence in the region. The Asantehene is the political and spiritual head of the Asantes.

Art from the Akan people of West Africa is known primarily for Akan goldweights and cultural jewelry. The Akan people are also known for their strong connection between visual and verbal expressions. Akan culture values gold above all other metals, so the artwork and jewelry made of gold is of great worth to them, whether it be made for appearance, artistic expression, or more practical trading purposes.

Kente Cloth

Kente cloth (known as Nwenton in the Asante language), is an Asante type of silk and cotton fabric made of interwoven cloth strips that is native to the Asante people. The cloth was traditionally a royal and sacred cloth worn only at times of high importance, most often by Asante kings. Over time, the use of the Kente became more widespread; however, its importance has remained and it is held in high esteem among the Asante people.

Kente cloth is made in Kumasi, the capital of Asante, and in the Asanteland Peninsula (specifically in
Bonwire, Adanwomase, Sakora Wonoo, and Ntonso in the Kwabre areas of the Asante). The cloth is also worn by many other groups who have been influenced by Asante people, making it one of the best known of all African textiles.

**Traditions and Development**

A variety of Kente patterns have been invented, each of which has a certain concept or concepts traditionally associated with it. For example, the *Obaakofoo Mmu Man* pattern symbolizes democratic rule; *Emaa Da* symbolizes novel creativity and knowledge from experience; and *Sika Fre Mogya* represents responsibility to share monetary success with one's relations. According to legend, Kente was first made by two Asante friends who went hunting in a forest and found a spider making its web. The friends stood and watched the spider for two days before returning home to implement what they had seen. West Africa has had a cloth weaving culture for centuries via the stripweave method, but Asante history tells of the cloth being created independent of outsider influence.

**Uses**

The icon of African cultural heritage around the world, Kente cloth is identified by its dazzling, multicolored patterns of bright colors, geometric shapes, and bold designs. A Kenite cloth is typically sewn together from many narrow (about 3.9 inches wide) Kente stripes. Cloth that is characterized by weft designs woven into every available block of plain weave is called *adweneasa*. The Asante people choose Kente cloths as much for their names as for their colors and patterns; although the cloths are identified primarily by the patterns found in the lengthwise (warp) threads, there is often little correlation between appearance and name. Names are derived from several sources, including proverbs, historical events, important chiefs, queen mothers, and plants.
Kente weaving is a traditional craft among the Asante people of Ghana. A kente cloth is typically sewn together from many narrow (about 3.9 inches wide) kente stripes. This image shows different colorful patterns of typical Asante Kente stripes.

Attributions

- Bògólanfini: Traditional Malian Cloth
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27.3: Other African Art

27.3.1: The Benin Bronzes

The Benin Bronzes are a collection of more than 3,000 brass plaques from the royal palace of the Kingdom of Benin, located in present-day Nigeria.

Learning Objective

Explain the distinguishing characteristics of the Benin Bronzes

Key Points

- The Benin Bronzes are a collection of more than 3,000 brass plaques from the royal palace of the Kingdom of Benin, located in present-day Nigeria.
- The bronzes were seized by a British force in the Punitive Expedition of 1897 and given to the British Foreign Office.
- Bronzes are believed to have been cast in Benin since the 13th century, with many from the collection dating from the 15th and 16th centuries.
- The metal pieces were made using lost-wax casting and are considered among the best sculptures made using this technique. The Bronzes depict a variety of images, including animals, fish, humans, and scenes of court life. They were cast in matching pairs, although each was individually made.
- Bronze and ivory objects had a variety of functions in the ritual and courtly life of the Kingdom of Benin; they were used principally to decorate the royal palace and glorify the Oba, or King.

Key Terms

Punitive Expedition of 1897

A military journey undertaken by the United Kingdom (with a force of 1,200) to retaliate against Benin City after a previous defeat of a British-led invasion; British troops captured, burned, and looted Benin City, bringing to an end the west African Kingdom of Benin and relocating most of the country's art, including the Benin Bronzes, to Britain.

lost-wax casting

The process by which a duplicate metal sculpture (often silver, gold, brass, or bronze) is created from an original sculpture; dependent on the sculptor's skills, intricate works can be achieved by this method.

manillas

Penannular armlets, mostly in bronze, copper, or gold, which served as a form of money or barter coinage among certain West African peoples.

Oba
Overview: The Benin Bronzes

The Benin Bronzes are a collection of more than 3,000 brass plaques and sculptures from the royal palace of the Kingdom of Benin, located in present-day Nigeria. Collectively, the plaques form the best known examples of Benin art created by the Edo people from the 13th century; other forms of Benin art consist of additional sculptures in brass or bronze, including some famous portrait heads and smaller pieces.

History and Seizure of the Bronzes

Bronzes are believed to have been cast in Benin since the 13th century, and some of the Benin Bronzes in the collection date from the 15th and 16th centuries. Today, it is clear that the bronzes were made in Benin from an indigenous culture, centuries before contact with Portuguese traders. It is believed that two "golden ages" in Benin metal workmanship occurred during the reigns of Esigie (1550) and of Eresoyen (1735–50), when their workmanship achieved its highest qualities.

At the end of the 19th century, most of the plaques and other objects were removed by the British during the Punitive Expedition of 1897 as imperial control was being consolidated in Southern Nigeria. Two hundred of the pieces were taken to the British Museum in London, while the rest were purchased by other European museums. Today, a large number are held by the British Museum. Other notable collections are in Germany and the United States. In 1936, Oba Akenzua II, the traditional leader of the Edo people in Nigeria, began a movement to return the art to its proper place in Nigeria; however, only two of the 3,000 bronzes were returned by the end of his reign in 1978. Nigeria has since bought around 50 Bronzes from the British Museum and has repeatedly called for the return of the remainder.

Production and Style

While the collection is known as the Benin Bronzes, like most West African "bronzes," the pieces are mostly made of brass of variable composition. There are also pieces made of wood, ceramic, ivory, and mixtures of bronze and brass, among other materials. The metal pieces were made using lost-wax casting and are considered among the best sculptures made using this technique.
The lost-wax method

Modern-day view of bronze casting using the lost-wax method. The molten metal is poured into the mold. The Bronzes depict a variety of images, including animals, fish, humans, and scenes of court life. Some of the reliefs represent important battles of the 16th century wars of expansion; however, the majority depict noble dignitaries wearing splendid ceremonial dress. Most of the plaques portray static figures either alone, in pairs, or in small groups arranged hierarchically around a central figure. They were cast in matching pairs, although each was individually made. The bronzes are more naturalistic than most African art of the period, and the surfaces are designed to highlight contrasts between light and metal. The features of many of the heads are exaggerated from natural proportions, with large ears, noses, and lips, which are shaped with great care. The most notable aspect of the works is the high level of the great metal-working skill at lost-wax casting.
Benin bronzes

Two Benin bronzes in London's Victoria and Albert Museum

Function and Importance

Bronze and ivory objects had a variety of functions in the ritual and courtly life of the Kingdom of Benin. They were used principally to decorate the royal palace, which contained many bronze works; many were hung on the pillars of the palace by nails punched directly through them. As a courtly art, their principal objective was to glorify the Oba—the divine king—and the history of his imperial power or to honor the queen mother. Art in the Kingdom of Benin took many forms, of which bronze and brass reliefs and the heads of kings and queen mothers are the best known. Bronze receptacles, bells, ornaments, jewelry, and ritual objects also possessed aesthetic qualities and originality, demonstrating the skills of their makers, although they are often eclipsed by figurative works in bronze and ivory carvings.

An important aspect of the works is their exclusivity: property was reserved only for certain social classes, reflecting the strict hierarchical structure of society in the Kingdom of Benin. In general, only the king could own objects made of bronze and ivory; however, he could allow high-ranking individuals to use such items, such as hanging masks and cuffs made of bronze and ivory.
The Obas of Benin with attendants and Europeans.

27.3.2: Art of the Igbo

The Igbo people are well known for their music, dance, traditional masks, and Mbari architecture.

Learning Objective

Describe the instruments and masks of Igbo performing arts and the origins of the Igbo language and ideographic script

Key Points

- The Igbo people have a musical style into which they incorporate various percussion instruments, such as the udu, the ekwe, and the ogene.
- Masking is one of the most common art styles in Igboland and is linked strongly with Igbo traditional music. A mask can be made of wood or fabric, along with other materials including iron and vegetation.
- Igbo art is generally known for various types of masquerade, masks, and clothing symbolizing people, animals, or abstract conceptions.
- Igbo art is also famous for Mbari architecture, in which large, opened-sided, square planned shelters house many life-sized, painted figures that are sculpted in mud, often to appease a deity.
- One of the unique structures of Igbo culture is the Nsude Pyramids, a group of ten pyramidal structures built out of clay and mud that served as temples for the god Ala/Uto, who was believed to reside at the top.

Key Terms

Uli

The name given to the traditional designs drawn by the Igbo people of Nigeria; the drawings are strongly linear and do not have deep perspective, but they balance positive and negative space; designs are frequently asymmetrical and are often painted spontaneously.

satire

A literary technique of writing or art that principally ridicules its subject often as an intended means of provoking or preventing change; humor is often used to aid this.

Background: Igbo Culture

Igbo culture includes the various customs, practices, and traditions of the indigenous Igbo people of southern Nigeria. It comprises archaic practices as well as new traditions introduced to the Igbo culture either through evolution or outside influences. These customs and traditions include the Igbo people's visual art, music, and dance forms, as well as their attire, cuisine, and language dialects. Because of their various subgroups, the variety of their culture is further heightened.
Performing Arts

The Igbo people have a musical style into which they incorporate various percussion instruments: the udu, which is essentially designed from a clay jug; an ekwe, which is formed from a hollowed log; and the ogene, a hand bell designed from forged iron. Other instruments include the opi (a wind instrument similar to the flute), igba, and ichaka. A widely popular musical form among the Igbo and throughout West Africa is Highlife, a fusion of jazz and traditional music. The modern Igbo Highlife is seen in the works of Dr. Sir Warrior, Oliver De Coque, Bright Chimezie, and Chief Osita Osadebe, who were among the most popular Igbo Highlife musicians of the 20th century.

Visual Arts

It is almost impossible to describe a general Igbo art style due to the heavy fragmentation of the Igbo people. This has added to the development of a great variety of art styles and cultural practices. Igbo art is generally known for various types of masquerades, masks, and clothing symbolizing people, animals, or abstract conceptions.

Bronze Castings

Bronze castings found in the town of Igbo Ukwu from the 9th century constitute the earliest sculptures discovered in Igboland. Here, the grave of a well-established man of distinction and a ritual store, dating from the 9th century CE, contained both chased copper objects and elaborate castings of leaded bronze. Along with these bronzes were 165,000 glass beads said to have originated in Egypt, Venice, and India. Some popular Igbo art styles include Uli designs.
Igbo bronzes

Bronze from the 9th century town of Igbo Ukwu, now at the British Museum.

Masks

Masking is one of the most common art styles in Igboland and is linked strongly with Igbo traditional music. A mask can be made of wood or fabric, along with other materials, including iron and vegetation. Masks have a wide variety of uses, mainly in social satires, religious rituals, secret society initiations (such as the Ekpe society), and public festivals, which now include Christmas celebrations. Best known are the Agbogho Mmuo (meaning "maiden spirit") masks of the Northern Igbo, which represent the spirits of deceased maidens and their mothers, symbolizing beauty.
Igbo wooden complex

Igbo Wooden Complex, currently in the British Museum.

Architecture

Mbari Houses

Igbo art is also famous for Mbari architecture. Mbari houses of the Owerri-Igbo are large, opened-sided, square planned shelters. They house many life-sized, painted figures (sculpted in mud to appease the Alusi, a deity, and Ala, the earth goddess, with other deities of thunder and water). Other sculptures are of
officials, craftsmen, foreigners (mainly Europeans), animals, legendary creatures, and ancestors. Mbari houses take years to build in what is regarded as a sacred process. When new ones are constructed, old ones are left to decay. Everyday houses were made of mud and thatched roofs with bare earth floors and carved design doors. Some houses had elaborate designs both in the interior and exterior, including Uli art designed by Igbo women.

**Nsude Pyramids**

One of the unique structures of Igbo culture was the Nsude Pyramids, at the town of Nsude, in Abaja, northern Igboland. Ten pyramidal structures were built out of clay and mud. The first base section was 60 feet in circumference and 3 feet in height; the next stack was 45 feet in circumference. Circular stacks continue until they reached the top. The structures were laid in groups of five parallel to each other and served as temples for the god Ala/Uto, who was believed to reside at the top of the pyramids. Because they were built of clay and mud, time has taken its toll on the monuments, requiring periodic reconstruction.

**Attributions**

- The Benin Bronzes
  
- Art of the Igbo
27.4: Contemporary Art

27.4.1: Effects of Colonialism on Nigerian Art

The art of Nigeria was greatly impacted by colonialism, and the importance of European techniques and training grew during this period.

Learning Objective

Discuss the cultural impact colonialism had on art in Nigeria

Key Points

- The modern state of Nigeria originated from British colonial rule, beginning in the 19th century and the merging of the Southern Nigeria Protectorate and Northern Nigeria Protectorate in 1914.
- This era of European colonization had a tremendous impact on the art and culture of Nigeria.
- Aina Onabolu (1882–1963) was a pioneering Nigerian modern arts teacher and painter who was an important figure in the introduction of arts into the curriculum of secondary schools in the country.
- Onabolu was also the major figure in Nigeria that promoted the drawing of environmental forms using European techniques and was known for his early modern work in portraiture.
- During this era, Eurocentric beliefs and worldviews made it so that it was often considered important, even essential, for African artists to receive training in Europe in order to prove their merit.
- At the same time, in the early 20th century, African artwork was being brought back to Europe where it influenced and inspired the work of many European artists, including Pablo Picasso's so-called "African Period."

Key Term

verisimilitudinous

In a style reflecting the philosophical concept that distinguishes between the relative and apparent (or seemingly so) truth and falsity of assertions and hypotheses.

Background: Colonialism in Nigeria

The modern state of Nigeria originated from British colonial rule, beginning in the 19th century, and the merging of the Southern Nigeria Protectorate and Northern Nigeria Protectorate in 1914. The British set up administrative and legal structures while practicing indirect rule through traditional chiefdoms. Nigeria did not become a formally independent federation until 1960. This era of colonization had a tremendous impact on the art and culture of Nigeria.
The Introduction of European Art Styles

Aina Onabolu

Aina Onabolu (1882–1963) was a pioneering Nigerian modern arts teacher and painter who was an important figure in the introduction of arts into the curriculum of secondary schools in the country. He was also the major figure in Nigeria that promoted the drawing of environmental forms in a verisimilitudinous style and was known for his early modern work in portraiture.

When the colonial government in Nigeria took control of formal education in 1909, the curriculum in the schools was geared toward the provision of suitable education to train clerks for the colonial administration. Little was thought of arts education in secondary schools until a report recommended the teaching of native indigenous hand craft. Prior to the report, Onabolu had formally presented requests for the introduction of modern arts education in secondary schools, but his option was rejected by the colonial education officers.

Onabolu returned from London and Paris in 1922, where he had acquired knowledge of European painting techniques and the characteristics of European art education. Around this same time, a new perspective on introducing indigenous art education in the country was emerging. Onabolu began teaching in a few top schools in Lagos such as King's College and CMS Grammar School. His themes dealt primarily with the science of perspective, human proportions, drawing, and watercolor painting. During this era, Eurocentric beliefs and worldviews made it so that it was often considered important, and even essential, for African artists to receive training in Europe in order to prove their merit.

Re-emergence of Traditional Arts

Onabolu also encouraged the adoption of European teachers in art instruction in the country. His effort led to the hiring of a foreign art teacher named Kenneth Murray, who led a gradual re-awakening of traditional handicraft and arts. The new approach of promoting indigenous African arts and staying within the native repository of knowledge was introduced into the curriculum of various secondary schools in the country. The efforts of the new instructor yielded early dividends, as the number of Nigerian art instructors increased, and knowledge of traditional works became more pronounced. However, Murray's effort meant little in the long run as the country was increasingly westernized by its colonial rulers.

Nigeria's Influence on European Art

In the early 20th century, African artwork, including that from Nigeria, was being brought back to European museums as colonists were expanding through sub-Saharan Africa. In a growing climate of interest in Africa, artists such as Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse began to look toward African artwork as inspiration for some of their work. Picasso's so-called "African Period," which lasted from 1906 to 1909, was the period in which he painted in a style that was strongly influenced by African sculpture and particularly traditional African masks. This proto-Cubist period following Picasso's Blue Period and Rose Period has also been called the Black Period.
In May or June 1907, Picasso experienced a "revelation" while viewing African art at the ethnographic museum at Palais du Trocadéro. Picasso's exposure to African art influenced the style of his painting Les Demoiselles d'Avignon (begun in May 1907 and reworked in July of that year), especially in the treatment of the two figures on the right side of the composition. Although Les Demoiselles is seen as a proto-Cubist work, Picasso continued to develop a style derived from African art before beginning the analytic cubism phase of his painting in 1910. Other works of Picasso's African Period include the Bust of a Woman (1907), Mother and Child (1907), Nude with Raised Arms (1907), and Three Women (1908).

*Les Demoiselles d'Avignon, 1907 by Picasso*

The two figures on the right are the beginnings of Picasso's African period.

**27.4.2: Nigerian Art Post-Independence**

Art in Nigeria post-independence has been characterized by a continued fusion of European and traditional Nigerian arts, along with a movement to break away from European styles.

**Learning Objective**

Evaluate the societal trends seen in Nigerian art produced after independence

**Key Points**

- Nigeria became a formally independent federation in 1960; it has since alternated between democratically elected civilian governments and military dictatorships, until it achieved a stable democracy in 1999.
Art in Nigeria post-independence has been characterized by a movement to break away from European styles and embrace purely traditional styles once more, as seen in the works of Enwonwu and Okeke and the emergence of the Négritude Movement.

Odinigwe Benedict Chukwukadibia Enwonwu (1917–1994) was a premier Igbo Nigerian modernist painter, sculptor, and pioneer whose career opened the way for the postcolonial proliferation and increased visibility of modern African art.

Christopher Uchefuna Okeke (1933—2016), known as Uche Okeke, was another important and influential contemporary Nigerian artist.

The Négritude Movement is an artistic, literary, and ideological philosophy developed by French-speaking African intellectuals, writers, and politicians during the 1930s.

The initiators of the movement disapproved of European colonialism and claimed that the best strategy to oppose it was to encourage a common racial identity for black Africans worldwide.

Key Term

Francophone

French-speaking.

Background: Independent Nigeria

The modern state of Nigeria originated from British colonial rule, beginning in the 19th century, and from the merging of the Southern Nigeria Protectorate and Northern Nigeria Protectorate in 1914. The British set up administrative and legal structures while practicing indirect rule through traditional chiefdoms. Nigeria became a formally independent federation in 1960 and plunged into a civil war from 1967 to 1970. It has since alternated between democratically elected civilian governments and military dictatorships, until it achieved a stable democracy in 1999.

Art in Nigeria post-independence has been characterized by a continued fusion of European and traditional Nigerian arts, along with a movement to break away from European styles and embrace purely traditional styles once more, as seen in the works of Enwonwu and Okeke and the emergence of the Négritude Movement.

Enwonwu

Odinigwe Benedict Chukwukadibia Enwonwu (1917–1994), better known in the western world as Ben Enwonwu, was a premier Igbo Nigerian modernist painter, sculptor, and pioneer. His career opened the way for the post-colonial proliferation and increased visibility of modern African art, especially that of Nigeria. His work has been exhibited around the world.

During his time, Enwonwu was well regarded as an artist, and his art is described as a "unique form of African modernism." Enwonwu studied Fine Arts under Kenneth C. Murray at Government Colleges, Ibadan and Umualia, 1934–1937. Murray was an education officer in charge of art education in the colonial civil service and later director of antiquities. Enwonwu attended Goldsmith College, London, in 1944, and then continued his studies at Ruskin College, Oxford, England, from 1944 to 1946, and at Ashmolean College and Slade School of Fine Arts, Oxford, 1946–48, graduating with first-class honors. During their time together, Enwonwu became Murray’s assistant and was recognized as one of the most gifted and
technically proficient students of the “Murray Group.”

His career teaching art, touring, and lecturing spanned the next several decades, all while he held many art exhibitions in London, Lagos, Milan, New York, Washington D.C., and Boston. During her visit to Nigeria in 1956, Queen Elizabeth II commissioned and sat for a portrait sculpture by the artist. During the Royal Society of British Artists exhibition in London of 1957, he unveiled the bronze sculpture. Recognition of his bronze sculpture of the Queen proved that he, as an African modern artist, used his practice to develop a new kind of modern art whose ideals of representation and notions of artistic identity were different from conventional art-historical narratives of European modernist practice.

Okeke

Christopher Uchefuna Okeke (1933–2016), known as Uche Okeke, was a contemporary Nigerian artist. Between 1940 and 1953, he attended St. Peter Claver’s (Primary) School, Kafanchan, Metropolitan College, Onitsha, and Bishop Shanahan College, Orlu, during which time he had already begun to demonstrate an avid interest in drawing and painting. Before being admitted to the Fine Arts program at Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology in 1958, Okeke—together with Yusuf Grillo, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Demas Nwoko, and others—inaugurated the Zaria Art Society. In that same year, he opened a cultural center in Kafanchan that later became the Asele Institute, Nimo, which hosted many cultural activities.

In the early 1970s, Okeke was appointed lecturer and acting head of the Fine Arts Department at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, where he introduced many new courses into the Igbo Uli art tradition. In 1973, he also designed the first course program of the Department of Fine and Applied Arts, Institute of Management and Technology, Enugu, and initiated postgraduate courses in the Department of Fine Arts, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

The Négritude Movement

Négritude is an artistic, literary, and ideological philosophy developed by francophone African intellectuals, writers, and politicians in France during the 1930s. Its initiators included Martinican poet Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor (a future President of Senegal), and Léon Damas of French Guiana. Négritude intellectuals disapproved of French colonialism and claimed that the best strategy to oppose it was to encourage a common racial identity for black Africans worldwide. They included the Marxist ideas they favored as part of this philosophy. The writers generally used a realist literary style, and some say they were also influenced somewhat by the Surrealism style; in 1932, their manifesto "Murderous Humanitarianism" was signed by prominent Surrealists including the Martiniquans Pierre Yoyotte and J. M. Monnerot.

The term négritude was meant to be provocative, as it took its roots from a word that was used exclusively in a racist context within France. Negritude sought to re-claim and appropriate the word. The term was first used in its present sense by Césaire, in the third issue of L’Étudiant noir, a magazine he had started in Paris with fellow students Léopold Senghor and Léon Damas, as well as Gilbert Gratiant, Leonard Sainville, Louis T. Achille, Aristide Maugée, and Paulette Nardal. L’Étudiant noir also includes Césaire’s first published work, Conscience Raciale et Révolution Sociale with the heading "Les Idées" and the rubric "Négrierie," which is notable for its disavowal of assimilation as a valid strategy for resistance and for its use of the word nègre as a positive term. The problem with assimilation, Césaire argued, was that one assimilated into a culture that considered African culture to be barbaric and unworthy of being seen as "civilized." The assimilation into this culture would have been seen as an implicit acceptance of this view. Nègre previously had been used mainly in a pejorative sense, but Césaire deliberately incorporated this
derogatory word into the name of his philosophy.

Aimé Césaire, 2003


27.4.3: Contemporary African Art

The countries throughout Africa are home to many diverse and thriving contemporary arts cultures.

Learning Objective

Identify the leading artists, styles, and exhibitions of contemporary African art

Key Points

- Contemporary African art was pioneered in the 1950s and 1960s in South Africa by artists like Irma Stern, Cyril Fradan, and Walter Battiss and through galleries such as the Goodman Gallery in
Many contemporary African artists are represented in museum collections, and their art may sell for high prices at art auctions. Despite this, many contemporary African artists tend to have difficult times finding a market for their work. Many contemporary African arts borrow heavily from traditional predecessors. Ironically, this emphasis on abstraction is seen by Westerners as an imitation of European and American cubist and totemic artists, which itself was influenced by traditional African art in the 20th century. A wide range of more traditional forms of art, or adaptations of traditional style to contemporary taste, are made for sale to tourists and others, including so-called "airport art."

**Key Terms**

Documenta 11

An exhibition of modern and contemporary art that takes place every five years in Kassel, Germany; this particular iteration in 2002 was organized around themes such as migration, urbanization, and post-colonialism.

airport art

Traditional forms of African art or adaptations of traditional style to contemporary taste made for sale to tourists.

**Overview**

The countries throughout Africa are home to many thriving contemporary art cultures. This has been unfortunately understudied until recently, due to scholars' and art collectors' emphasis on traditional art from the region. Notable modern artists include El Anatsui, Marlene Dumas, William Kentridge, Karel Nel, Kendell Geers, Yinka Shonibare, Zerihun Yetmgeta, Odhiambo Siangla, Olu Oguibe, Lubaina Himid, Bili Bidjocka, and Henry Tayali. Art biennials are held in Dakar, Senegal, and Johannesburg, South Africa. Many contemporary African artists are represented in museum collections, and their art may sell for high prices at art auctions; however, other artists have difficult times finding a market for their work.

**Development of Contemporary Art**

Many contemporary African arts borrow heavily from traditional predecessors. Ironically, their emphasis on abstraction is seen by Westerners as an imitation of European and American cubist and totemic artists, such as Pablo Picasso, Amedeo Modigliani, and Henri Matisse, who, in the early 20th century, were heavily influenced by traditional African art. This period was critical to the evolution of Western modernism in visual arts, symbolized by Picasso's breakthrough painting *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. 
Wood carving has a long history in Zimbabwe, and this contemporary art piece takes from this tradition.

Contemporary African art was pioneered in the 1950s and 1960s in South Africa by artists like Irma Stern, Cyril Fradan, and Walter Battiss, and through galleries such as the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg. More recently, European galleries such as the October Gallery in London and collectors such as Jean Pigozzi, Artur Walther, and Gianni Baiocchi in Rome have helped expand the interest in the subject. Numerous exhibitions at the Museum for African Art in New York and the African Pavilion at the 2007 Venice Biennale, which showcased the Sindika Dokolo African Collection of Contemporary Art, have gone a long way to countering many of the myths and prejudices that haunt contemporary African art. When Okwui Enwezor from Nigeria was appointed as artistic director of the international exhibition Documenta 11, his
African-centered vision of art propelled the careers of countless African artists onto the international stage.

A wide range of more traditional forms of art, or adaptations of traditional style to contemporary taste, are made for sale to tourists and others, including so-called "airport art." A number of vigorous popular traditions assimilate Western influences into African styles, such as the elaborate fantasy coffins in shapes such as airplanes, cars, or animals of West African cities and the banners of clubs.

Well-known Artists

Gilbert G. Groud

Gilbert G. Groud (born 1956) is a painter, illustrator, and author from Toulépleu, Côte d’Ivoire. Groud is active against the military use of children in his homeland Côte d'Ivoire and the world in general. He is working on the preparation of several exhibitions and writes a comic book about the topic of child soldiers to increase awareness. He has released one of the pictures of the exhibition on creative commons license in the hope that it will be used in ending the use of children in war.

Gilbert G. Groud, Child soldier in the Ivory Coast, 2007, mixed materials: tusche and wax crayon

Groud is active against the military use of children in his homeland Côte d'Ivoire.
El Anatsui

El Anatsui (born in 1944) is a Ghanaian sculptor active for much of his career in Nigeria. He has drawn particular international attention in recent years for his iconic "bottle-top installations," distinctive large-scale assemblages of thousands of pieces of aluminium sourced from alcohol recycling stations and sewn together with copper wire, transformed into metallic cloth-like wall sculptures in a way that links the themes of consumerism, waste, and the environment.

Man's Cloth by El Anatsui (1998–2001), on display at the British Museum

El Anatsui (born in 1944) is a Ghanaian sculptor who has drawn particular international attention in recent years for his iconic "bottle-top installations."

Yinka Shonibare

Yinka Shonibare (born 1962) is a British-Nigerian artist living in London. His work explores cultural identity, colonialism, and post-colonialism within the contemporary context of globalization. A hallmark of his art is the brightly colored fabric he uses. Having a physical disability that paralyzes one side of his body, Shonibare uses assistants to make works under his direction. Shonibare’s work explores issues of colonialism alongside those of race and class, through a range of media including painting, sculpture, photography, installation art, and, more recently, film and performance. He examines, in particular, the construction of identity and the tangled interrelationship between Africa and Europe and their respective economic and political histories.

27.4.4: Yoruba Artwork in the transAfrican Context

Over the years, many Yoruban artists have merged foreign and contemporary influences with the traditional art forms found in West Africa.
Learning Objective

Identify the traditional Yoruba references found in contemporary Trans-African style art

Key Points

- The Yoruba people of South Western Africa have a rich and vibrant artisan community, creating both traditional and contemporary art.
- The traditional art forms among the Yoruba include beading, braiding, tattooing, clay molding and ceramic work, bronze casting, weaving and dyeing (such as the traditional adire indigo-dyed cloth), sculpting, and others.
- Over the years, many Yoruba artists have come to merge foreign ideas of artistry and contemporary art with the traditional art forms found in West Africa.
- The transAfrican style of art was manifest in the work of Jeff Donaldson, an African American visual artist whose work helped define the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s.
- Many works within the transAfrican style of art are filled with references to Yoruba traditions and styles and are characterized by rhythmic use of lines, vibrant colors, bold patterns, motion, and often an emotional intensity.

Key Terms

orisha

A deity that reflects one of the manifestations of the Supreme Divinity (Eledumare, Olorun, Olofi) in Yoruba religion.

Black Arts Movement

The artistic branch of the Black Power movement, started in Harlem by writer and activist Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones).

Ifá

A religion and system of divination; refers to the verses of the literary corpus known as the Odu Ifá.

transAfrican

Belonging to a style of work coined by Jeff Donaldson in the 1960s, aiming to synthesize an all-encompassing transnational aesthetic and unify the then-fragmented concept of black art.

yoruba

An ethnic group of West Africa.

Background

The Yoruba of South Western Africa (including the areas known today as Benin Republic, Nigeria, Togo, and parts of Ghana, Cameroon, and Sierra Leone) have a very rich and vibrant artisan community, creating both traditional and contemporary art. The custom of art and artisans among the Yoruba is deeply rooted in
the Ifá literary corpus, indicating the orishas (or dieties) Ogun, Obatala, Oshun, and Obalufon as central to creation mythology, including artistry.

The traditional art forms among the Yoruba include beading, braiding, tattooing, clay molding and ceramic work, bronze casting, weaving and dyeing (such as the traditional adire indigo-dyed cloth), sculpting, and many other forms. There is also a vibrant form of customary theater known as Alarinjo, which has its roots in the medieval period and has given much to the contemporary Nigerian film industry. Over the years, many Yoruba artists have come to merge foreign ideas of artistry and contemporary art with the traditional art forms found in West Africa.

Yoruba art

Two painted wooden figures depicting Europeans in Africa and Yoruba people, West Nigeria; 1st half of 20th century.

The transAfrican Style in Yoruba Art

The transAfrican style of art was manifest in the work of Jeff Donaldson, an African American visual artist whose work helped define the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. In the midst of the racial and cultural turmoil of the 1960s, a group of African-American artists endeavored to relate its artwork to the black masses. Aiming to use art for social impact, artists such as Jeff Donaldson strived to create an "art for the people:" an art form that was recognizable by and directed toward everyday people, rather than a group of well-educated elite. Within his works and collaborative efforts, Donaldson essentially became the
founder of the new, uniting aesthetic known as transAfricanism. TransAfrican art is characterized by rhythmic use of lines, vibrant colors, bold patterns, motion, and often an emotional intensity. Much work made within the transAfrican style borrows heavily from Yoruba traditions.

One of his key works, Victory in the Valley of Eshu (1970), depicts an elderly black couple holding what appears to be an eye-shaped pinwheel. The work is filled with Yoruba and traditional African references, including the Yoruba Sango dance wand in the right hand of the man, references to deified ancestors (a Yoruba belief), the name Esu (the Yoruba god of fate), and others. The newly prominent element of shine, an aesthetic effect mimicking or displaying physical shine in order to reflect the bright, star-like quality of ordinary African Americans, is also visible in this piece. This effect achieves the celebration aspect of black art: an art that, as stated by Donaldson, defines, glorifies, and directs black people—an art for the people's sake.

The notion of shine is conveyed through the collection of small dots of color in the figures' hair and surrounding their bodies. Additionally, the hair of the couple seem to mimic halos. These elements, in combination with the couple's bright white clothing, complete the celebration of the ordinary in this African diasporic work. The little splotches and dots of color seem to emanate from the bodies and to dance their way around the edges of the portrait, conveying that notion of a rhythmic motion, which was integral in transAfrican work.

27.4.5: Domestic Architecture in Modern Africa

African architecture is exceptionally diverse from region to region and has had numerous external influences.

Learning Objective

Evaluate the influences of Baroque, Arab, Turkish, and Gujarati Indian architectural styles on traditional African architecture

Key Points

- Traditional African architecture uses a wide range of materials, including thatch, stick/wood, mud, mudbrick, rammed earth, and stone, with a preference for materials varying by region.
- During the early modern period, new and diverse influences such as Baroque, Arab, Turkish, and Gujarati Indian style began to be absorbed into African architecture.
- By the late 19th century, most buildings reflected the European preference for eclectic and mixed styles, taking from Mediterranean and northern European influence.
- The revival of interest in traditional styles can be traced back to the 19th and early 20th centuries, as colonial buildings began to mix European and vernacular African styles of architecture.
- Modern architecture expanded through the 1920s and 1930s, while today a great deal of domestic architecture reflects a fusion between modern and neo-vernacular styles.

Key Terms

eclectic

    Unrelated and unspecialized; heterogeneous.
vernacular architecture

A category of architecture based on localized needs and construction materials, and reflecting local traditions.

Overview

The architecture of Africa, like that of any vast region or continent, is exceptionally diverse. Many ethnolinguistic groups throughout the history of Africa have had their own architectural traditions. As with most architectural traditions elsewhere, African architecture has been subject to numerous external influences from the earliest periods for which evidence is available. The Islamic conquest of North Africa saw the development of Islamic architecture in the region; western architecture has had an impact on coastal areas since the late 15th century, and is now an important source for many buildings, particularly in major cities.

Common Characteristics

One common theme in a great deal of traditional African architecture is the use of fractal scaling: small parts of the structure tend to look similar to larger parts, such as a circular village made of circular houses. Vernacular architecture uses a wide range of materials, such as thatch, stick/wood, mud, mudbrick, rammed earth, and stone, with a preference for materials varying by region. North Africa primarily used stone and rammed earth; West Africa tends toward mud and adobe; central Africa uses thatch, wood, and more perishable materials; southern Africa uses stone, thatch, and wood; and in East Africa the materials have varied.

Ten broad categories of traditional hut and house structures have been identified throughout Africa:

1. Domical (beehive)
2. Cone on cylinder
3. Cone on poles and mud cylinder
4. Gabled roofed
5. Pyramidal cone
6. Rectangle with roof rounded and sloping at ends
7. Square
8. Dome or flat roof on clay box
9. Quadrangular, surrounding an open courtyard
10. Cone on ground
Lunda street and houses

Lunda dwellings (from the Kingdom of Lunda, a pre-colonial African confederation of states in what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo, north-eastern Angola, and northwestern Zambia from c. 1665–1887) display the square and the cone-on-ground types of African vernacular architecture.

History

Early Modern Period

During the early modern period, the absorption of new diverse influences such as Baroque, Arab, Turkish, and Gujarati Indian styles began with the arrival of Portuguese Jesuit missionaries in the 16th and 17th centuries. Castles were built by arriving colonizers as defensive fortresses during times of war. Early Europeans invaded and set up colonies around the West African coast, building large forts that can now be seen at Elmina Castle, Cape Coast Castle, Christiansborg, Fort Jesus, and elsewhere.

Under colonial rule, the tradition of building houses out of mud walls, thatched roofs, and other traditional materials decreased while the use of cement blocks and zinc roofs became more common. By the late 19th
century, most buildings reflected the European preference for eclectic and mixed styles, taking from Mediterranean and northern European influence. Examples of colonial towns from this era survive at Saint-Louis, Senegal, Grand-Bassam, and elsewhere. A few buildings were pre-fabricated in Europe and shipped over for erection. This European tradition continued well into the 20th century with the construction of European-style manor houses, such as Shiwa Ng'andu in what is now Zambia and the Boer homesteads in South Africa.

![Image of Shiwa Ng'andu, Zambia](image)

**Shiwa Ng'andu, Zambia**

Main house on the estate at Shiwa Ng'andu in Zambia, built by Stewart Gore-Browne.

The revival of interest in traditional styles can be traced to Cairo in the early 19th century. Afterward, it spread to Algiers and Morocco by the early 20th century, and soon colonial buildings across the continent began to mix European and traditional African styles of architecture.

**Modern Architecture**

The impact of modern architecture began to be felt in the 1920s and 1930s. Le Corbusier (Algeria), Steffen Ahrens (South Africa), and Ernst May (Nairobi and Mombasa, Kenya) were influential architects at the time. Villages in Libya and Italian East Africa began to incorporate modern Italian designs.

A number of new cities were built following the end of colonialism, while others were greatly expanded. In the city of Abidjan, the majority of buildings were still designed by high-profile non-African architects. Experimental designs have also appeared, most notably the Eastgate Centre, Harare in Zimbabwe. With an advanced form of natural air conditioning, this building was designed to respond precisely to Harare's climate and needs, rather than import less suitable designs. Neo-vernacular architecture (or new forms of vernacular architecture) continues, for instance, with the Great Mosques of Nioro or New Gourna.
Eastgate Centre, Harare, Zimbabwe

The pink-hued Eastgate Centre, with its distinctive chimneys.

Attributions

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- Nigerian Art Post-Independence
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