African Art

Utah Museum of Fine Arts
Evening for Educators
February 19, 2003, 5:30 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.

Table of Contents

Evening for Educators is funded in part by the Katherine W. & Ezekiel R. Dumke, Jr. Foundation, The Emma Eccles Jones Foundation and the StateWide Art Partnership

Table of Contents (continued)

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List of Images

1. Southwest Mali, Sahel/Savanna region
   Bankoni-style Urn, c. 17th - 18th century
   Earthenware
   Purchased with funds from Friends of the Art Museum
   Museum # 1996.20.1

2. Southeast Nigeria, Cross River area, Igbo (formerly Ibo) people
   Figure of a King or Deity
   Wood and pigment
   Purchased with funds from the Marriner S. Eccles Foundation for the Marriner S. Eccles Collection of Masterworks
   Museum # 2002.1.1

3. Nigeria, Yoruba people
   Esu Elegbara Dance Staff
   Wood
   Purchased with funds from the M. Belle Rice Fund, the John Preston and Mary Elizabeth Brockbank Creer Memorial Fund and Friends of the Art Museum
   Museum # 1994.003.001

4. Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire), Chokwe people
   Divination Basket
   Wood with animal and plant materials
   Partial gift of Owen D. Mort, Jr. for the Owen D. Mort, Jr. Collection of African Art, with additional funds from the George S. and Dolores Dor? Eccles Foundation
   Museum # 1985.052.173

5. Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire), Kuba people
   Kasai Cloth
   Raffia cut-pile embroidery
   Partial gift of Owen D. Mort, Jr. for the Owen D. Mort, Jr. Collection of African Art, with additional funds from the George S. and Dolores Dor? Eccles Foundation
   Museum # 1985.053.286

6. Cameroon, Bamileke people
   Bush Cow Mask, early 20th century
   Wood, beads and fabric
   Purchased with funds from the Phyllis Cannon Wattis Endowment for 20th Century Art
   Museum # 1998.52.1

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Overview of African Art

Written and Compiled by Marni Wishart

History of African Art

Part of any study of the art and culture of Africa must acknowledge the sheer vastness of this varied continent not only in physical characteristics, but ultimately of the peoples who live there. The second largest continent in the world, spanning a territory over four times larger than the Continental United States of America, Africa is home to some 50 different countries and hundreds of different cultures speaking more than 1,000 different languages and dialects. Community life has, in the past as well as today, ranged from migratory, to rural, to urban. Government has spanned the spectrum from egalitarian to divine kingship. Climate, an equally important factor in the development and sustaining of culture and identity, ranges from the lush equatorial forest, to savanna woodlands and grasslands, to desert. With respect to the great diversity of such a continent of peoples--each with their own specific history, beliefs, systems of government, traditions, and art styles--one can tentatively begin to define what it means to say “African art” only while keeping in mind how regrettably easy it is to over generalize when speaking in terms of Africa as an imagined homogenous whole in this necessary process of defining what it means to be “African.”

The lesson plans which follow attempt to address African art in terms of themes which may apply to any given culture. Specific examples and illustrations are drawn from the collection of the Utah Museum of Fine Arts to represent a cross-section of African cultures to be compared and contrasted against one another. The objects chosen to illustrate each category can easily be considered in several other categories as well and have been chosen to be representative of a variety of time frames, materials, processes, purposes, and iconography. Although far from comprehensive, the topics and themes included in the lessons and the projects which are outlined enable the student to find the ultimately human and universal concepts that are addressed in the artwork of a continent perhaps foreign and different from their own, to find commonalities among all cultures of the world. Each lesson is easily adaptable to any grade level and a number of different core curriculum standards, though within the packet not every possible grade level and subject area is highlighted for reference. As a whole, the following lesson packet is particularly supportive of the Secondary Visual Arts, Art History and Criticism (7-12) core standards and objectives.

Key Elements of African Art

A. Dominance of a strong oral tradition pervades the history of Africa.

In the past, African cultures did not have a written language so to record history, these cultures relied on a strong oral tradition to pass down memorized stories from one generation to the next. Today, in reconstructing the past through modern archaeological and art historical efforts, scholars must unavoidably rely on sources other than written records and it is from the strength of oral traditions that much of Africa's past has been recovered. Furthermore, it is from these oral histories that many of the traditions of the past have not only survived but have come to inform cultures of modern-day Africa as well as cultures of the Americas.

B. Art is integrated into everyday life in traditional African cultures in a way that may be unfamiliar or opposed to Western views of "art."

As aptly stated by the National Museum of African Art: "One of the defining characteristics of African art is its integration into every aspect of life from formal ceremonies and religious rites to daily household tasks. Art permeates the entire cycle of life--from birth through initiation into adulthood, to death, to becoming an ancestor. Objects, by their material composition, quality and quantity, can indicate levels of status. A particular type of object can distinguish a leadership role. Some objects are only used by men; others, only by women. Occupations such as farming, hunting and weaving are identified by distinct tools as well as special regalia. Diviners, healers and other ritual specialists have sculptures, equipment, staffs and jewelry that focus spiritual power, providing both support and identification. While individual objects may appear distinctive, they often have more than one use. Items of adornment, for example, may indicate status, or marriage, or initiation depending on their cultural context. A bed can be a household object or a funerary bier. Whether an object is seen by a select few or stands in the heart of the compound, the individual and the community have standards for the selection and use of that object."

--excerpt: Smithsonian Institution
www.nmafa.si.edu/pubaccess/pages/usefrm.htm

C. The African society is based on a belief that the cosmos and all of life are made up of and sustained by a duality of linked and opposing characteristics.

While each culture has its own specific religious beliefs and cosmic view, there is a predominance of the theme of duality to be found in African cultures. Opposing characteristics such as light and dark, male and female, village and bush, physical and metaphysical, hot and cold, order and chaos, hard and soft, good and bad are each intrinsically linked and are considered equally necessary elements. These qualities can be thought of in simplified terms as two sides of the same coin, where one cannot exist without the other. In light of this view, an object that is meant for spiritual use or reference may be equally important in the realm of government or entertainment without losing validity in either context. And, in a similar way, objects of beauty and those of revulsion may hold equally important roles in perpetuating culture. The pairing of opposites highlights the notion that through the continual interaction and negotiation of divergent elements the universe is ordered and regulated, and that within this balance there is an inevitable and distinct dynamism.

D. Transformation and adaptation have always been a part of African aesthetics.

African artists traditionally learn their profession as apprentices, mastering the stylistic conventions of their culture, yet within these traditions there is still a great deal of individual style. As is often the mistaken view of ancient Egyptian art, the art of much of the continent of Africa has been classified as static and unchanging. In reality, artists who work in traditional styles add a great deal of innovation of form and content, reflecting contemporary themes. The conventions that are perpetuated often rely on the affective powers of form in evoking the proper social, spiritual, or aesthetic purpose and to these conventions is added the individual element that reveals a particular artist's style or timeframe.

In the face of outside influence, traditional African beliefs and practices have survived and transformed in a myriad of ways attesting to the vitality of these cultures. It is often noted that the spread of Islam, beginning in the 7th century AD, has had profound effects on many African cultures. In like manner, Christianity is typically seen as another more recent outside influence beginning with 15th century proselytizing of European missionaries. In reality, Christianity has existed in Africa nearly as far back as the time of Christ himself in the form of Coptic Christianity in ancient Egypt and Ethiopia. Nubia was also Christian from the sixth century indicating an unbroken stream of interaction between African and outside cultures. At times a purely African aesthetic has survived over generations and at times these aspects have been joined hand in hand with new influences and beliefs to create entirely new art forms. This is especially prevalent in the influence of African aesthetics and beliefs brought to the New World with the transport of slaves.

E. The Western view of Africa, from its very beginnings as a subject of art historical and archaeological studies, has at times been shaped more by Eurocentric views of superiority than by objective research.

As with any study of foreign culture, it is impossible to completely remove oneself from one's own point of view. Yet, in the study of the history, art, and culture of Africa, there is a considerable gap stemming from the earliest attempts of Westerners to classify and qualify the art of this continent. There is much work to be done to correct the faulty views of earlier centuries where much of the art of Africa was not even considered as such, but held value only in an ethnological framework. During early years of collecting African art objects, inadequate documentation perpetuated a myth of the "anonymity of the artist" as the names of artists were not recorded although they may indeed have been known and have held a great deal of fame in their community. In addition, the concept of the "primitive" and evolutionist theories of art left little room for the oftentimes abstract and stylized art of Africa to be appreciated as sophisticated art forms.

There still remain physical and cultural barriers to reconstructing Africa's past. Climate is just one such example that has shaped modern-day views of the artistic past of Africa, as wood sculpture is particularly subject to decay suggesting a shorter history than truly exists. Oral traditions have also acted as a double-edged sword, while drawn upon heavily in current scholarship, much of it was discounted as myth or fiction in earlier times and considered a lesser tradition than written records. And still, today, there remains much art historical writing with a predominance towards mystifying the art of Africa rather than clarifying the role of objects and aesthetic approaches. Objects in museums oftentimes continue to be isolated from a meaningful cultural context.

Masks, in particular, suffer from contextual isolation being removed from the element of an overall costume intended to be seen in animated motion, to be “danced” to music. The challenge as educators is to present the arts of Africa in a way that emphasizes the cultural ramifications as well as the formal concerns of design and production--coupling the strengths of anthropological and art historical endeavors to arrive at a clearer understanding of both art and culture.

Map of Africa

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Lesson Plan 1: Ancient Origins

The Role of Archaeology In Reconstructing The Past

Written by Marni Wishart

Southwest Mali, Sahel/Savanna region
Bankoni-style Urn, c. 17th - 18th century
Earthenware
Purchased with funds from Friends of the Art Museum
Museum # 1996.20.1

Background Information

Archaeology, the scientific study of material remains of human life and activities, uncovers important clues to reconstructing the past. In Africa, archaeological pursuits have brought to light the rich artistic heritage of many regions across the continent. The Bankoni-style Urn in the collection of the Utah Museum of Fine Arts is one such archaeological find from within the borders of present-day Mali. Currently, Mali holds the distinction of being the largest country in West Africa, at nearly twice the size of Texas. The expansive territories of present-day Mali hold a variety of archaeological treasures yielding a glimpse into ancient origins of life on Earth. Most of the northern half of Mali today falls within the Sahara, the largest desert on the planet which slowly, but relentlessly creeps southward overrunning vast amounts of land each year. It is speculated that there were inhabitants in this area as early as the mid-6th millennium B.C.. From archaeological research of more than 30,000 examples of known rock paintings and engravings it is apparent that people lived in the Sahara as far back as a time when the Desert had abundant rainfall to support a distinctly different ecosystem of lush forest, grasses, and animals now extinct in the region.

In the central section of Mali, from which this urn derives, is an area where archaeological work is still fairly recent and more work is needed. Part of a larger region known as the Sahel, an Arabic word meaning, “shore,” this area can be thought of as the shore of the desert rather than the ocean. It is clear from findings in the Sahel that an early tradition of works in terra cotta was common. Due to the nature of fired clay it can endure the elements of time and weather providing an important record for archaeologists to decipher. Clay vessels such as this can reveal a great deal of information about the culture from which they come, indicating the level of technological knowledge, suggesting social implications, and--through study of successive styles and decorative techniques--can often aid in determining relative dating of an archaeological site. As much as a

single object can tell us however, there remains much that is uncertain and speculative in archaeological practices, including processes of dating which can make it difficult to place an object in the proper context of history.

For more than 2,000 years the territories of present-day Mali have been a crossroads of culture and trade witnessing the rise and fall of such great ancient empires as Ghana (Wagadu), Mali, and Songhay. By about 300 A.D. camel caravan routes began to be established through West Africa and the Sahara Desert. In linking African cities with Europe and the Middle East, trade became a vital element in the rise and fall of empires in West Africa. Items such as salt, gold, silver, ivory, honey, jewelry, tools, metal and leather goods, rare birds, livestock, horses, cloth, and even slaves all became important goods in the trans-Saharan trade system. A typical caravan required approximately 40 days to cross the Sahara, along which experienced guides led traders on one of four major trading routes. Travelers along these routes had to endure extreme heat and sands as well as possible dangers from attack by thieves. Yet, once inside the territory of ancient Ghana, trade routes were well guarded and traders could expect to travel in safety.

A great deal of ancient Ghana's power was a result of its control of trade routes from the 4th to the 11th century. The king of Ghana controlled trading through taxation, especially the export of gold from Ghana and the import of salt from north of the Sahara. Salt was so important and valued that it was used as currency, traded for equal amounts of gold, and heavily taxed. Salt was greatly needed in West Africa as an important dietary supplement in the hot, dry climate in addition to its use in preserving and adding flavor to foods. Gold, for which salt was traded, was so abundant in West Africa that ordinary people adorned themselves in it making the area famous for its wealth. To protect this wealth the location of the gold mines was kept as a well-guarded secret.

Along with bringing needed supplies to West Africa, trade through the Sahara linked the ancient empires with the influence of outside cultures. One influence with significant impact on West African culture came through the spread of Islam. The first contact Ghana had with Islam was through merchants and travelers in about the 7th century A.D., shortly after the death of the Prophet Mohammad. Islam was becoming widespread through trade, cultural exchange and even violent conflict. So pervasive was the influence of Islam that Arabic became the first written language of the Soninke people of Ghana.

Ancient Ghana had risen to power as independent city-states were united. Ghana means "warrior-king" which was the title given Soninke rulers. Over time the term came to be used to refer to the king and the land. Before that, the land was known as Wagadu, "place of herds." The end of the great Ghanian Empire was marked by outside invasions and internal disputes. By 1067, Ghana was destroyed giving way to the rise of the ancient empire of Mali, which dated from the early 13th century to the late 15th century. Ancient Mali rose to greatness under the leadership of a legendary king named Sundiata, the so-called "lion king." At its height during the 14th century, Mali was a larger kingdom than all of Europe at the time and only smaller than the Asian kingdom of Genghis Khan. Mali's influence expanded over the large city-states of Tombouctou (Timbuktu), Gao, and Djenné, which were all major cities along the trade routes. They became important trading centers for all of West Africa as well as fabled centers of wealth, culture, and learning. It was in these cities that vast libraries were built and madrasas (Islamic universities) were endowed. They became meeting-places of the finest poets, scholars, and artists of Africa and the Middle East. Tombouctou, in particular, had become legendary in the European imagination, representing all the wealth of Africa.

It was during the height of the ancient Malian empire that Ibn Battuta visited Mali and became one of the first travelers to document in writing his experiences in Africa. Battuta was a Berber born in Morocco around 1304. He studied Islamic theology and traveled extensively throughout Africa and Asia over a 24-year span. He arrived in the western Sudan around 1353 to witness its grandeur. Mali's power did not last much longer. Smaller states of Mali that had been conquered in the past began to break off while at the same time outside attacks further weakened the empire. Mali gradually lost its hold on trade until the empire crumbled and was taken over by Songhay, which had been an important trade center. Under a later leader named Askia Mohammed Toure the Songhay kingdom extended farther than either Ghana or Mali had before and brought an organized system of government to the area. Songhay saw its peak in the 15th and 16th centuries.

In the late sixteenth century a Moroccan army attacked the capital. The Songhay empire, already weakened by internal political struggles, went into decline. The end of the Songhay empire also marked the conclusion of the region's history as a trading center. In the 17th century, European merchants established sea-trade along the West African coast. The old trans-Saharan trade routes lost their importance and were eventually shut down leaving the once rich cities along the overland routes to decline. Djenné and Tombouctou, once synonymous with fabulous wealth, became known as 'lost cities' and legends of remoteness.

Comparatively recent in the history of this region, the urn in the Utah Museum of Fine Arts collection, dating from the 17th-18th centuries A.D., was uncovered in the Bankoni region near the current-day capital of Bamako. Here, memorial mounds of stone-covered earth have been excavated. Studies have revealed that clay jars such as this example and various other kinds of ceramics were often buried with the dead or placed in memorial mounds to honor an ancestor or group of ancestors. The exact meaning of these vessels and the ceremonies that may have accompanied their use is not known to us today as many of the traditional practices have been abandoned.

Vessels in this style are typically in the form of sealed containers with a tapered stopper topped by a sculpted head. In this case, the spout of the urn is in the form of a goat's head which appears to be smiling on one side and frowning on the other. The body of the vessel is decorated with impressed cord designs in geometric fashion typical of similar vessels excavated in the same area. Though little is known of the specific purpose and meaning of this particular vessel, the style of this urn, especially in the understated character and apparent ability of the artist to capture the essence of the animal without overemphasizing details seems to reflect what African Art Historian, Robert Farris Thompson, characterizes as the primary and persisting Mande (the general linguistic group with common heritage in regions of current-day Mali) aesthetic value, namely the search for simplicity. (Flash of the Spirit, p. 196)

Lesson 1

Written by Marni Wishart

Objectives: Students will:

1. Hypothesize about probable cultural and historical significance
2. Compare ancient and contemporary objects as part of a comparison between a local Utah community to the sister community of Ouelessebougou in Mali, Africa
3. Speculate as to how archaeologists of the future will "read" their own material culture

Core Curriculum Reference:

*Social Studies-2nd grade, Standard 5: Objectives 1-2; Standard 7: Objectives 1-2
*Anthropology (7-12) Core Curriculum Standard 1: Objective 1-6; Standard 2: Objective 3; Standard 5: Objective 2

Materials:

*Image of Bankoni-style Urn, Utah Museum of Fine Arts African Collection
*Image or actual object from modern-day sister community, Ouelessebougou

Online Resources:

Sister City Ouelessebougou
http://www.sistercommunity.org/resources/resources.html

Object of students' own choosing or props provided by classroom teacher (tools are a good choice for this exercise, ask students to bring one or two objects that would pose a good mystery for the class to consider)

Procedure:

1. After reviewing information in the lesson plan, teacher should locate Mali, the Sahara Desert and the Sahel on a world map and present a short history of these regions of present-day Mali. By describing the rise and fall of ancient cultures and the grandeur of Africa's past, students will better be able to place the Bankoni-style Urn in a proper historical perspective.

2. Ask students to imagine they are archaeologists with an assignment to piece together the clues given in artifacts. Define the term artifact to mean "an object that has been manufactured or altered by human activity."

3. Introduce terms and practices of Archaeological Field Methods, such as surface survey, grid mapping, collection, labeling of objects, use of subsurface sensors and recording devices (such as a proton magnetometer), excavation, site plan recording, detailed note taking and reconstruction through drawings, maps, forms, and field diaries of area which is destroyed by excavation process.

4. Explain that materials that are recovered from archaeological sites are placed in clean, carefully-labeled bags, boxes, or vials that are systematically recorded both at the excavation and in the field laboratory so that all the information about the objects and their original location can assist archaeologists in reconstructing the meaning and use of these artifacts.

5. Students will use observational skills to describe and then hypothesize about possible origins/function/meaning of several objects. Each object will be the subject of one “observational data worksheet.” One object will be the Bankoni-style Urn, students may speculate about the purpose of the rounded bottom, and the meaning of the animal-head top. Next students should consider a cultural artifact from the sister community of contemporary Ouelessebougou.

6. Next, students will apply the same looking and observational skills to objects of their own material culture by trading artifacts of their own choosing. Tell students ahead of time that they will choose an “artifact” from their own life and times that will pose a good mystery for fellow classmates. Students will use the observational data worksheet to evaluate the object and develop a scenario for its use and the cultural context from which it derives.

7. After students have individually considered objects from each of these cultures and time frames, they will compare and contrast the variety found in differing situations and test their hypotheses against known facts.

Observational data worksheet: (Teacher should prepare a worksheet for use in considering each of the proposed "artifacts" to include the following suggested information.)

Student Name:

Date:

Time:

Artifact Observation:

What material is the artifact composed of?

Is the artifact a combination of materials? If so, identify each of the elements.

How large is the artifact?

Does the artifact appear to have been made with the use of tools or entirely by hand?

What processes appear to have been used in creating the artifact? (carving, beading, welding, hammering, moulding, etc.)

What texture does the artifact have? Describe multiple combinations and locations of textures.

What color(s) do you observe on the artifact? Are the colors added with paint or a similar substance or does the color come from the main material from which the object is made?

Does the artifact appear to have been damaged or missing any parts?

Does the artifact have any recognizable elements such as animal/human/geometric designs or features? If so, describe in detail.

Sketch the object, draw details of design or shape that seem unusual or particularly interesting.

Artifact Function/Meaning Hypotheses:

What do you think this object could have been used for?

What time frame do you think this object came from?

What meaning do you think this object had for its owner?

Support your conclusions with facts from
you

Evaluation:

Students should come to an understanding of the speculative nature of much information regarding the past, even in collaboration with observed facts and recorded histories. Students can compare their own observations and hypotheses with actual archaeological or known information for each object. Did the student overlook any important elements? If student conclusions do not match known information, ask students to describe how the known information may be revealed in the “clues” of the artifact. There are no right and wrong answers in this exercise, evaluation should be based largely on students’ ability to use observational skills and to draw conclusions based on these observations.

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Lesson Plan 2: Upholding Community Values

Leadership, Government, Kings

Written by Marni Wishart

Southeast Nigeria, Cross River area, Igbo (formerly Ibo) people
Figure of a King or Deity
Wood and pigment
Purchased with funds from the Marriner S. Eccles Foundation for the Marriner S. Eccles Collection of Masterworks
Museum # 2002.1.1

Power

Many cultures in Africa are ruled by kings who, much like ancient Egyptian kings, are considered to hold divine power. These kings link their heritage and right to rule directly to the gods or ancestors of their culture and are viewed to be of a superhuman status. The crowns and regalia created for such rulers often denote the mystical power and separation from ordinary worldliness that accompanies such high rank. In other regions and cultures of Africa, political systems are more egalitarian or decentralized. Yet, in similar fashion to the regalia of divine kings, these cultures, and all cultures of the world, use symbols to denote the power and ideals of leadership. Community values are upheld by the symbols which are chosen because they are readily recognizable by all members of the community.

The Igbo are spread across various geographical regions, living primarily in southeast Nigeria. They constitute a large and diverse population with varied practices and dialects. Their diversity and sense of individuality is similarly reflected in their system of leadership which is not centralized. Instead, the Igbo traditionally rely on the leadership of local village councils consisting of the heads of families, elders, and men viewed as important contributors to the society. With a history of warfare among the Igbo, localized groups continued to assert their individuality even during the era of British colonial rule, strongly resisting pacification and outside domination. In an Igbo community, a man can rise to leadership based on his accomplishments gaining social, economic, and political power. This political structure is supported by a traditional practice of ancestor worship, where it is believed that in order to attain success in this world, one must appease the spirits of deceased ancestors. Men's secret societies have played a large part in this practice, shaping the government of local communities.

Many of the ideas, motifs, and rituals that persist in modern Igbo life and art originated with the earliest known Igbo communities including the production and use of prestige objects denoting leadership and power. The first Igbo are believed to have migrated to current locations between four and five thousand years ago, growing and expanding with the development of agricultural practices to form the Igbo kingdom. Archaeology has shed light on the far reaching heritage of modern Igbo culture with the discovery of Igbo-Ukwu, an ancient site first discovered by chance in 1939 when a farmer digging a cistern unearthed several bronze objects. It was not until 1959 that the site, dated to the 9th or 10th century A.D., was excavated and a wealth of artifacts were recovered. Excavations at a single family compound have uncovered an elaborate burial shrine, a pit, and a storehouse filled with prestige objects. The people of Igbo-Ukwu, ancestors of present-day Igbo, appear to have been the earliest smithers of copper and its alloys in West Africa as this site represents the earliest smithing art yet discovered south of the Sahara. The extraordinary findings in copper-alloy works attest to a highly developed technological skill rivaling contemporary European techniques of the 10th century.

The burial shrine at Igbo-Ukwu is of particular interest in reference to the Figure of a king or god housed in the Utah Museum of Fine Arts Collection. Judging from the regalia and accompanying objects of the Igbo-Ukwu excavation, it is clear that the person ceremonially entombed there held a high office. The figure was discovered seated upright on a throne with his right foot resting on an elephant's tusk, a fly whisk held over his left shoulder, and a staff held in his right hand. On both arms and legs, the figure wore tubular ornaments of cast and hammered copper alloy. The burial also included vast amounts of imported glass beads, once used as currency in Africa. A crown and white-eye paint further denote his rank as eze nri, or "king." The Nri were an early specialized clan of ritual leaders and kings invested with great spiritual power. Such a leader was considered to have power to cause and prevent harm, stimulate fertility of plants and animals, grant titles, ritually purify communities, and prepare potent medicines. Today, the Nri continue to perform some of the same rituals apparent from the 10th century. Today, some scholars believe this person may have been a ritual or spiritual leader moreso than a political one, possibly similar in certain respects to more recent local practitioners.

While clearly an egalitarian people, another central group of Igbo today bestow the title of king, eze, not on one person alone, but on several who earn the highest title in a men's society known in some regions as Ozo, and in others as Ekpe (or Ngbe, meaning leopard). These graded title societies are hierarchical in nature producing a range of visual symbols indicating rank and prestige. Status is evident in dress, personal adornment, and possessions. Such prestige objects as stools, staffs, elephant tusk trumpets, fans, and fly whisks are still used on ceremonial occasions as they would have been in the past. Other symbols of rank include distinctive garments, eagle feathers, and jewelry made from elephant tusks and leopard teeth, and until recently many members of these societies wore ichi, facial scarification, as well. Still other areas of Igboland have had chiefs and kings more akin to other cultures in Africa relying on the concept of divine kingship, where the king acts as the living "mask" for gods and ancestors.

In keeping with the tradition of ancestor worship common throughout southeast Nigeria, seated figures of ancestors and kings are carved to be part of a shrine typically maintained by lineage groups. The carved sculpture in the Utah Museum of Fine Arts collection may also have held this same function. It is commonly believed that the life force of a person will persist after his death in memorial sculptures, thereby granting the living who attend to the shrines access to the spirit realm. In formal respects, the carved statue in the UMFA collection is remarkably similar to the

burial figure uncovered at Igbo-Ukwu. Similarities can be found in the seated pose, the staff, arm and leg ornaments, and painted face. Differences can be noted in the specific symbols of power, which in the case of the carved figure are clearly of European influence and derivation. The style of the chair and the top hat worn by this figure reflect the influence of British colonialism and trade with European countries prevalent from the mid 15th century until the abolition of the slave trade in 1807, revealing a remarkable ability to integrate contemporary influences into a purely traditional art form.

Lesson 2

Written by Marni Wishart

Objective:

Students will compare and contrast political systems of African cultures by studying objects of art which uphold the values of these governments. Students will apply this knowledge to their own country and local systems of government to determine how symbols in their own culture sustain and reinforce the values of such political systems. Finally, students will create an original work of art using symbols to communicate their own values or standards.

Core Curriculum Reference:

*Anthropology (7-12) Standard 4: Objective 2;
*Visual Arts-4th grade Standard 3: Objective 1-2

Materials:

*Image of Figure of king or god, Utah Museum of Fine Arts African Collection
*Art supplies per teacher's preferences, such as colored or patterned papers, paints, pas -tels, or colored pencils

Procedure:

1. Introduce the idea of symbols in the student's own culture that denote a person's status and prestige including styles of dress, objects, and even privileges. (i.e., wealth represented through luxury automobiles, expensive clothing, "Platinum" credit cards, etc. common in Western culture). Then compare these societal symbols of "power" to political symbols of power such as seen on flags, coins, seals, etc. Ask students to consider how these symbols reflect the common ideals of a society and the responsibilities of individual citizens.

2. Compare Western symbols to those used in ancient or traditional African cultures including such signs of wealth as glass beads or cowrie shells which were once used as currency.

3. Review information presented in lesson plan regarding the Igbo culture and symbols, both ancient and more contemporary. Explain such symbols of power included in the form of a fly whisk (horses were imported into Africa at great cost and denoted power and prestige in the ability to own one, they were also a source of political and military power), or elephant tusk (demand for ivory in trade systems with outside cultures made it an item of particular wealth, which added to the symbolism of the power of the animal from which it derives).

3. Students should conduct research to compare and contrast local, area, and country symbols researching the derivation and meaning of symbols with which they may not be familiar, i.e. eagle, laurel wreath, pyramid, etc. and compare these to symbols of various African cultures they may choose to research independently.

4. After students have researched and compared symbols of power in their own and African cultures, ask students to list some of the things they personally value and some of the goals or ideals they think are important for personal success.

5. Using a variety of art materials, students should create a prototype of a “prestige object” that reflects a purely personal symbol signifying their own values and ideals. When complete, students should present their creations to the class and explain the symbolic meaning.

Evaluation:

This lesson requires students to use comparative thinking skills in evaluating the symbols and values of a variety of cultures, to conduct independent research, and then to apply knowledge they have gained to their own lives. Creativity in producing a fitting symbol of their own should be weighed the highest in this process.

African Art

Utah Museum of Fine Arts
Evening for Educators
February 19, 2003, 5:30 p.m. - 8:30 p.m.

Lesson Plan 3: Tales, Traditions, Oral Histories

Keeping the Past Alive

Written by Marni Wishart

Nigeria, Yoruba people
Esu Elegbara Dance Staff
Wood
Purchased with funds from the M. Belle Rice Fund, the John Preston and Mary Elizabeth Brockbank Creer Memorial Fund and Friends of the Art Museum
Museum # 1994.003.001

Introduction

Until Muslim traders brought Arabic writing to the area, West Africa had no written language. Instead of writing histories, people in West Africa memorized and retold them from generation to generation. The job of memorizing and recounting such histories was a daunting task and was trusted to a specialist whose life's occupation it was to memorize and recount events and lineages of the past. Such oral historians still exist in many African cultures and can recite the entire history of a family to ancient times. Older "bards" or "griots," as they are often called, are very important because they pass on this history to their children, who grow up to become their patron family's next oral historian. As one Malian writer, Amadou Hampaté Ba, stated, "When an old person dies, a library burns."

Much of what we know of Africa's past comes from oral histories passed down from one generation to the next. Professional griots in African cultures have acted not only as historians but as genealogists, epic poets, musicians, and political motivators, charged with keeping historical traditions of society alive through stories of leaders and heroes. Known as "keepers of memories," every village, clan, and royal family had a griot to chronicle lineage and histories. A griot combines history with music, poetry, dance, and drama to entertain at the same time he teaches his audience. Symbolism and metaphor enliven these oral histories rather than specific dates, names, and details making them difficult to interpret as time goes on.

Motivation:

The Yoruba, of present-day Nigeria and Republic of Benin, have a rich oral tradition recounting the history of the culture, origins of mankind, and the mythology of the Yoruba gods and ancestors, known as orishas. One oral tradition tells of the Yoruba origin myth, describing how the Supreme Being, Olorun (or Olodumare), lowered a chain at Ile-Ife, the center of Yoruba culture.

Oduduwa, the ancestor of all people, climbed down the chain bringing with him a rooster, some earth, and a palm kernel. The earth was thrown into the water, which the rooster scratched to become land, and the kernel grew into a tree with sixteen limbs, representing the original sixteen kingdoms. As is common with oral literature, symbolism is more important to meaning than are facts. Many other passages of oral history describe the characteristics and histories of the more than 400 deities that make up the Yoruba pantheon and this story of the creation of the universe is but one version of many that are told.

The complex cosmology of the Yoruba can be viewed in two main categories: gods and goddesses with soothing, cool, and temperate attributes (orisa funfun), and aggressive, hot, and demanding spirits (orisa gbigbona). (Lawal, Gelede Spectacle) This duality of nature is central to the Yoruba conception of the universe as a whole, incorporating positive and negative aspects to divine power from the very beginning. The Yoruba conceive of the notion of a vital life force which is the power by which people and things exist. This power, known as ase (ashe), is considered "the power-to-make-things-happen," and literally means "so be it," or "may it happen." This power is seen as neutral in that it can give and take away, kill or give life, exalt or malign according to the purpose and nature of its bearer. Essentially, it is the Supreme Being's own enabling power made accessible to humans. The keeper of this power, who acts as the mediator between gods and humans is Eshu-Elegbara. Eshu, god of the crossroads, is the orisha who embodies the principles of duality and uncertainty and who figures largely in oral tradition. It is related through oral history that Eshu was granted by the Supreme Being the right to be the holder of ashe, becoming the keeper of the gate, and guardian of the threshold between the physical and spiritual realms.

Oral tradition and praise titles of Eshu illustrate the duality of his nature. The name Eshu-Elegbara even indicated the paired aspects of this god: Eshu means "the childless wanderer, alone, moving only as a spirit," whereas Elegbara (Elegba) means "owner of the power, royal child, monarch, and prince" Above all, Eshu is provocative in nature, the ultimate master of potentiality, representing the principles of life and individuality. Much of the oral literature concerning Eshu tells of his role as a trickster. Eshu can facilitate the good, but he can also provoke the bad. He can help or he can hinder. Praise songs often tell of his cunning, to turn right into wrong and wrong into right.

It is apparent that Eshu was not originally represented in art as taking human form, but later a highly developed system of worship came to be practiced in his honor, including the use of figurative sculpture. The *Top of Dance Staff with Figure of Esu Elegbara* in the Utah Museum of Fine Arts collection is one of many traditional forms this god takes. The dance wand is made to be worn over the shoulder of a devotee during processions or festivals held in honor of Eshu and to be "danced" by worshippers. Thus, the long projected headdress or hairstyle of the figure is functional as a hook to be held on the shoulder as well as symbolic. Often a second face is carved on the backside of the headpiece denoting Eshu's "two-faced" nature as well as the passage between the spiritual and the earthbound, and his nature to resolve or to make trouble. If respected, Eshu intercedes for human beings; if angered, he wreaks havoc.

Eshu also stands as the intermediary in Yoruba systems of divination, for in order to consult Orunmila--god of knowledge and fate--one must first approach and appease Eshu. In the Ifa divination system, an extensive body of oral literature accompanies a process where signs indicate verses to be rehearsed and applied to the situation at hand. This body of oral literature called Odu Ifa, is composed in prose and poetry. There are sixteen principal Odu, each with its identify-

ing sign and name with an additional sixteen subordinate Odu, making a total of 256 Odu. Each subsection tells a particular story about the lives of gods, humans, and animals, each with a moral intended to be applied to a client's problem. In order to keep the oral traditions of Ifa alive, diviners train as apprentices, learning the ritual procedures, and memorizing all the passages from the Odu Ifa.

While the strength of oral tradition can clearly be seen in Yoruba culture in Africa, it is this same tradition which brought tales of African culture and gods to the New World during the era of slave trade. Eshu became one of the most important figures in this cultural exchange because of his association with change. In the New World, slaves from Yoruba, Fon, Kuba, Dahomey, Angola, Ewe and other cultures came together developing new and transformed systems of belief. In addition to these beliefs, the attributes, images, and shrines of the Roman Catholic Saints melded together as African slaves found parallel characteristics linking Christian figures and powers to the forces of ancient African deities. While outwardly conforming to the Christian religion slaves were oftentimes forcibly baptized into by law, they were able to covertly practice a system of thought that was a creative reorganization of their own traditional religion. The hybridized systems of belief came to be known in various regions as Santeria, Vodun, or Candomble and Eshu became known as Legba, Papa Legba, or Leggua in various regions.

Lesson 3

Written by Marni Wishart

Objectives:

Students will recognize the value of oral traditions in African cultures as well as in their own culture in preserving history, teaching values, and linking generations. After learning of the importance of oral customs in African cultures, students will interview a family member or older acquaintance to obtain a more personal "oral history" using effective interviewing, listening, and note-taking skills. Students will prepare and practice to retell this story and perform for the class in a public speaking setting supported by props, costumes, music, or other visual aids to enhance storytelling techniques.

Core Curriculum Reference:

*Language Arts- 2nd grade Standard 10: Objective 1-3;
*Language Arts- 3rd grade Standard 9: Objective1-5;
*Language Arts- 4th grade Standard 9: Objective1-5;
*Language Arts- 5th grade Standard 10: Objective 1-4;
*Language Arts- 6th grade Standard 10: Objective 1-4;
*Language Arts- 7th grade Standard 12: Objective 1-3, Standard 13: Objective 3;
*Language Arts- 8th grade Standard 6: Objective 1-3, Standard 12: Objective 1-3, Standard 13: Objective 3;
*Language Arts- 9th grade Standard 3: Objective 1-3, Standard 11: Objective 1-3, Standard 12: Objective 3;
*Language Arts- 10th grade Standard 11: Objective 1-3, Standard 12: Objective 3;
*Language Arts- 11th grade Standard 9: Objective 1-3, Standard 10: Objective 3

Materials:

*Image of Top of Dance Staff with Figure of Esu Elegbara, Utah Museum of Fine Arts African Collection

*Art materials, assorted other props or costumes of students own choice and production to enhance storytelling performance

Procedure:

1. Review information in the lesson plan, relate stories of Eshu as part of the oral tradition of the Yoruba peoples of Nigeria and Republic of Benin. Point out that all African cultures have a strong tradition of oral history and storytelling.

2. Ask students to think of life stories their own family members often share and to think of someone who is a particularly good storyteller. Ask students to consider the qualities this person has and the techniques he or she uses while relating a story that makes them captivating and interesting to hear. (tone of voice, facial expressions, embellishment of facts, etc.)

3. Students should choose a member of their family or an older acquaintance to interview in order to prepare to share a story with the class in oral performance. Students should carefully choose the person they intend to interview, keeping in mind that the goal of much oral tradition is to preserve events of the past and to teach a moral or set of values.

4. Students should take the initiative to set up a special meeting for the purpose of the interview and to use good listening, questioning, and note-taking skills during this interview making sure they focus their attention, listen actively, and ask open-ended questions.

5. Students should not be concerned with writing the story word for word, but instead should focus on noting key components of the story most important to retelling it.

6. As students prepare to share their stories with the class, they should consider methods of effective storytelling and public speaking such as appropriate volume, eye contact, pacing, phrasing, pitch, enunciation, body language, variation of tone to hold audience interest, repeated phrases, etc. and should practice their delivery committing the story to memory.

7. Students may also choose to incorporate visual aids, props, gestures, music or costume into their performance.

8. During and after classroom presentations, students should be considerate of other students and provide positive feedback regarding the performances.

Evaluation:

This project requires that students use a variety of skills in researching, interviewing, public speaking/ performance and creativity. While the final performance of storytelling is the end goal of this project, students should be equally mindful of the role oral traditions play in their own lives and in the lives of cultures around the world. Extra effort should be noted in the props, costumes, or other visual aids students create themselves.

Extension:

Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire), Kuba people
Drum
Wood and animal hide
Partial gift of Owen D. Mort, Jr. for the Owen D. Mort, Jr. Collection of African Art, with additional funds from the George S. and Dolores Doré Eccles Foundation
Museum # 1985.052.010

Core Curriculum Reference:

Social Studies, United States History (7-12) Standard 3: Objective 3

Objective:

Students will study the impact of European exploration and the slave trade, applying this knowledge to an analysis of contemporary music styles.

One of the earliest surviving art objects made by an African in the New World is a bottle-shaped drum, typical of the style made in Ghana. This is just one of the many carryovers brought by slaves into the New World and just one example of how the melding together of cultural aspects kept African traditions alive. The drum is a fitting symbol of the strength of African traditions as in many African cultures, music takes the place of oral communication. African musical traditions are very different from European tradition. In Africa, music was not traditionally recorded or transcribed but was passed from generation to generation much as oral traditions were, being open to improvisation and change.

Students may study traditional African musical instruments such as the Kuba Drum in the Utah Museum of Fine Arts collection, typical in form of a "drum of office"--often covered with beads or cowrie shells, skins, and interlacing designs indicating the reign of a particular king. After studying African instruments and music styles, students should choose a contemporary music style such as rock, jazz, reggae, salsa, samba, bossa nova, juju, highlife, or mambo which all owe inspiration to musical traditions which crossed the Atlantic during the slave trade. Students may choose to apply this research to an individual song, or to a body of musical styles.

As described by Art Historian, Robert Farris Thompson: "Since the Atlantic slave trade, ancient African organizing principles of song and dance have crossed the seas from the Old World to the New. There they took on new momentum, intermingling with each other and with New World or European styles of singing and dance. Among those principles are the dominance of percussive performance style (attack and vital aliveness in sound and motion), a propensity for multiple meter (competing meters sounding all at once), overlapping call and response in singing (solo/chorus, voice/instrument--"interlock systems" of performance); inner pulse control (a "metronome sense," keeping a beat indelibly in mind as a rhythmic common denominator in a welter of different meters), suspended accentuation patterning (offbeat phrasing of melodic and choreographic accents), and, at a slightly different but equally recurrent level of exposition, songs and dances of social allusion (music which, however danceable and "swinging," remorselessly contrasts social imperfections against implied criteria for perfect living)." (Flash of the Spirit, p. xiii)

African Art

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Lesson 4: Facing Life's Challenges

Divination and Healing

Written by Marni Wishart

Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire), Chokwe people
Divination Basket
Wood with animal and plant materials
Partial gift of Owen D. Mort, Jr. for the Owen D. Mort, Jr. Collection of African Art, with additional funds from the George S. and Dolores Doré Eccles Foundation
Museum # 1985.052.173

Challenges

Life holds an innumerable amount of uncertainties and possibilities. Throughout time and across cultures, humans have been vitally concerned with processes of decision-making and predictability of the future. Individuals in African cultures have been equally concerned with these qualities of life and many systems of communication have developed to aid members of these cultures in confronting life's challenges. One method of dealing with the unknown is seen in divination systems, which are common throughout Africa. Within each culture that practices divination are many varied forms or systems. Divination encompasses methods believed to harness spirit powers in order to understand and gain guidance in dealing with change, death, accident, illness, decision-making, etc. While the procedures may seem to outside viewers as random or accidental, the signs and symbols of divination systems are seen by diviners and their client's as direct communication from the spirit realm, incapable of human manipulation.

Motivation:

Among the Chokwe of Angola, as in many African cultures, divination plays a large role in the way people conduct their lives. Divination is practiced by the Chokwe using a number of different methods including spirit possession, where the reflective surface of water or a mirror is used to reveal the source of a person's afflictions. Another method of divination practiced by the most highly regarded diviners in Chokwe society is basket divination. In this method, the diviner constantly searches out objects which represent a microcosm of the universe as in the example of a Chokwe divination basket in the Utah Museum of Fine Arts collection. Seemingly unrelated items, collectively known as ngombo, include such objects as carved figurines, animal horns, feathers, hooves, claws, bones, wood pieces, seed pods, nuts, and an assortment of other objects numbering up to 60 items. These objects act as a set of signs (tuphele), each associated with a fixed meaning. Within the basket are objects meant to represent all the possible problems or situations one could encounter in life.

The diviner (tahi) is specially trained to read and interpret the signs. Making contact with the spirit realm is key to divination practices. The Chokwe conceive of two distinct primal forces, the Supreme Creator (known as Kalunga or Nzambi) and the spirits of the ancestral founders of their empire, both of which are reflected in the contents of a diviner's basket in which raw materials and figural elements portraying the ancestors balance one another and act as allegorical and metaphorical references to human behavior.

According to the Chokwe belief system, forces and experiences in life may all be understood in objective terms, much in the way Western systems of physics underlie natural laws of matter, energy, or motion. By applying the techniques of divination, therefore, it is believed that one can uncover the underlying cause to any problem in life. The diviner applies the method of tossing up the items in the basket and then interpreting the configurations which develop. Through the assistance of ancestor spirits who act as intermediaries between the Supreme Creator and humankind, the diviner is specially adept at "reading" the signs provided. The spirits of the ancestors require a great deal of respect as they not only aid in revealing the causes of misfortune, but are also capable of inflicting harm and trouble in the lives of those who are neglectful in their duties towards them.

Diviners hold a position of leadership in Chokwe society second only to the chief due to their highly respected role in resolving conflict. They undergo an extensive and demanding course of study and initiation in order to practice divination after which it is believed that the ancestors bestow upon them supernatural powers. To prepare for a consultation, the diviner applies ritual white and red clay to the corners of his or her eyes and to the basket's rim, and invokes an ancestor by shaking a rattle. With the client seated opposite the diviner, the session is initiated by shaking the basket and its contents. Objects that come to rest at the side facing the client constitute a response to their inquiry and are read through their relative positioning. Although the accuracy of the diviner's reading is dependent upon spiritual possession and guidance, this technique inspires the clients' confidence because the visual evidence is openly accessible to them as well. The combinations of meaning and interpretations are almost infinite through the many varied combinations of configurations which can occur.

Lesson 4

Written by Marni Wishart

Objectives:

Students will learn to recognize the role that uncertainty, chance, and probability plays in their own lives. In keeping with the Utah Core Curriculum for the study of probability, students may choose to carry out experiments or simulations, construct a sample space, or compare experimental results with mathematical expectations using a probability model to develop an appreciation for the pervasive use of probability in the real world.

Core Curriculum Reference:

*Mathematics- Math 5 Standard 11: Objective 1-4;
*Mathematics- Math 6 Standard 11: Objective 1-4;
*Mathematics- Math 7 Standard 5; Objectives 1-2

Materials:

*Image of Divination Basket, Utah Museum of Fine Arts African Collection
*Objects such as dice,coins, or spinners
*Pencils and note paper
*Graph paper

Procedure:

1. Review information in lesson plan, ask students to consider something in modern life that is uncertain or open to chance. Possible topics may include sports or games of chance, the stock market, weather predictions, etc.

2. Remind students that although African systems of divination are entirely based upon religious belief systems, the concept of humankind's methods and abilities in dealing with the unknown elements of the past, present, and future are universal concerns. Students should compare and contrast how various systems of inquiry have been used in world cultures, such as astrology, math, statistics, astronomy, physics, and other systems that seek to act as predictors.

3. Students should set up experiments with such objects as die, spinners, or coins where probability can be tested and observed.

4. Keeping notes of the outcome of these tests, students should then predict future outcomes, noting the variance in the prediction and the actual outcome.

5. After sample tests of probability are constructed and carried out, students may choose to research other probability models describing them in mathematical terms.

6. Students should graph the result of each casting of dice/spinning of spinner, or flip of the coin assigning appropriate numbers to each (1 or 2 for coin, 1 through 6 for single die, etc.)

7. Ask students to examine the chart to determine what the most likely and least likely outcomes were and then compare individual charts against other student's charts. Combine the outcome of each related experiment (all dice experiments together, all coin experiments together, etc.) and evaluate as a class.

Evaluation:

Students should come to an understanding that probability and the related study of statistics are integral to Western methods of facing the uncertainties of life. Students should gain an appreciation for a variety of methods and beliefs concerning the predictability of life's situations and the search for knowledge of the unseen as practiced among various world cultures. Students should successfully complete experiments based on a probability model, making and testing predictions.

African Art

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Lesson 5: Encoded Meanings

Art That "Conceals and Reveals"

Written by Marni Wishart

Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire), Kuba people
Kasai Cloth
Raffia cut-pile embroidery
Partial gift of Owen D. Mort, Jr. for the Owen D. Mort, Jr. Collection of African Art, with additional funds from the George S. and Dolores Doré Eccles Foundation
Museum # 1985.053.286

Communication

The way we communicate is not always through words. Body language, clothing, jewelry, and hairstyles can all make a statement about us. They become a means of symbolic communication revealing status, wealth, ethnicity, age, occupation, even a sense of individuality. Traditions of elaborate personal adornment are especially common among nomadic peoples of Africa who must carry with them all of their belongings. Throughout Africa, art in many forms serves as a rich system of communication and has even been used to symbolically record history. In some ways, it is the symbols used in African artwork which can oftentimes be understood as their written language.

Not all symbols are meant to be readily recognized or understood. In fact, secrecy plays a large role in much of African art, artists use strategies that suggest the presence of a secret while at the same time they disguise or camouflage the meaning a symbol may hold. Often, this secret knowledge is not physically hidden, but is clearly visible for those who view it to either find meaning and understand, or not. Essentially, symbols are used in a way that demarcates the difference between looking and seeing. The goal of most art history is often to uncover meaning by entering another culture's systems of social organization, ritual, symbolism, belief and ideology. Yet, sometimes, this pursuit involves areas of knowledge concerned with mystery, and the complexities of the universe, which are meant to be feared and respected. Secret knowledge is often associated with ritual power but can also indicate the social boundaries between belonging to a specific group or being an "outsider." Oftentimes in African art, the more secret something is, the more nonrepresentational its form.

Motivation:

The art of the Kuba, who live in the southeastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, is rich in decorative pattern. Geometric and highly symbolic designs can be found in examples of architecture, basketry, sculpture, body scarification, and textiles. While much of the art of the Kuba is associated with leadership, the art of textile design in particular has many uses. Raffia textiles are considered to be prominent prestige objects. While raffia mats are traditionally used to separate the king from the earth indicating his elevated and sacred status, other raffia fabrics indicate a more personal level of social prestige and are worn as wraparound skirts reaching up to 25 or 30 feet in length. Squares of raffia cloth were once used as currency as well as tender in marriage contracts and legal settlements. Today, raffia cloth continues to hold an especially important role in funerary rites. The Kuba believe that high quality, correctly patterned raffia dress is key to being recognized by ancestors in the spirit world, so families accumulate specially patterned cloths and pass them down through generations. Raffia cloth is considered to be the only appropriate burial clothing. The body of the deceased is dressed in a prescribed number of textiles of varying sizes and style, with multiple skirts serving as a sign of prestige. Heirloom skirts are offered by the spouse of the deceased to the extended family of the deceased, and additional textiles of cut-pile embroidery are added in layers over the body. This purpose seems to have been the original use of these types of fabrics.

The production and design of textiles among the Kuba are collaborative undertakings including both men and women. The process begins with the cultivating of palm trees from which raffia fibers are harvested. Cultivation and harvesting is conducted by men, who then strip the raffia fibers and weave them into a basic cloth on a single heddle loom. The initial fabric is usually a plain weave onto which a number of different decorative techniques are applied by women using embroidery, appliqué, patchwork, open work, or dyeing.

> “The procedure for achieving the plush effect is simple, but requires dexterity. In her right hand, the seamstress holds the needle between thumb and first finger, and with the three remaining fingers she grips a little knife in her palm, the upright handle of the knife extending through the circle formed by her thumb and first finger. To found a plush stitch, she introduces a fiber strand or bundle under the weave, leaving a two to three millimeter tuft at one end. After drawing the strand through, she cuts it with the knife edge at the thumbnail of her left hand, thus, forming another tuft level with the first.”
>
> -Monni Adams, *Kuba Embroidered Cloth*, African Arts, Volume XII, No.1, pp. 24-39

The Kasai Cloth in the collection of the Utah Museum of Fine Arts is an example of cut-pile raffia weaving. In this process, the design is created using an embroidery technique in which raffia fibers are stitched with a needle under one warp or weft of the base cloth and then trimmed close to the front surface with a small knife. No knots are made in this technique, instead it is the tightness of the original weave that holds each embroidered and cut stitch. Cut-pile embroidery creates a final product with the appearance of velvet and are sometimes referred to as "Kasai Velvets" or "Kuba Velours."

It is typical for the geometric patterning of these textiles to appear, at first glance as a regular and unchanging design, but upon closer inspection, one finds varied and complicated designs with many minor variations. This reflects the method of production in which each cloth is individually conceptualized and designed. Sometimes these patterns are drawn onto the cloth with a writing

utensil prior to embroidering. Whereas, other times the patterns are not drawn out at all, but are worked out through improvisation over the course of production. Either way, individuality and creativity play a large role in the final product. Similar patterns can also be found in sculpture, metalwork, and body scarification. As many as 200 known patterns have been passed down through generations with names such as “interlace,” “tortoise shell,” and “feathers.” Though named patterns may suggest an open system of symbolic meaning, the truth is that the meanings of these designs and their relationships to the people who wear them are known only to the women who create them. Secret information is encoded through the irregularities in the geometric scheme. Different ethnic groups among the Kuba produce distinctly differing cloths. Interestingly, cloths embroidered by the royal clan of Bushoong are traditionally symmetrical while the work of other clans has historically included asymmetry.

Lesson 5

Written by Marni Wishart

Objectives:

Students will explore how symbols in art and life are readily understood by some and not by others. Such distinctions as age, profession, or culture may serve as the basis for this discussion. Students will compare symbols which they readily understand to those of an African culture which they, as well as much of the world outside of this African culture, do not readily grasp. Finally, students will create a collaborative work of art that will be in keeping with symbols they choose to have identity and meaning in the context of a class group.

Core Curriculum Reference:

*Visual Arts- 4th grade Standard 3: Objective 1-2

Materials:

*Image of Kasai Cloth, Utah Museum of Fine Arts African Collection
*Open-weave burlap cloth
*Raffia in various colors
*Blunt-end needles
*Scissors
*Paper and pencils

Procedure:

1. Review information contained in the lesson plan and begin by asking students to consider symbols with which they are familiar, but which may not be familiar to someone in another culture, age group, or other distinction (items such as popular articles of clothing that denote status or prestige or slang phrases common only to specific generations, or even gang signs and gestures may be considered).

2. Review the production and purposes of raffia cloth among the Kuba, describing how the symbols are known only to those who produce the cloth. Rather than speculating on the meaning of these symbols, which are not meant to be known outside of their original context, remind students that respecting the boundaries of other cultures is an acceptable approach to learning about the world around them.

3. Divide students into groups of a workable size, or enlist the entire class to develop a large cut-pile embroidery style cloth that reflects their unity as a class group and includes symbols to which only they will know the meaning.

4. Lead students in forming symbols and assigning meaning by asking students to consider what makes them feel connected to one another as a class group. Age, friendship, geographic location, time spent together, and other factors are some of the topics which may arise in this discussion.

5. Next, ask students to consider forms of communication that have symbolic meaning: traffic lights use color to denote meaning, mathematics uses numbers to indicate meaning, and art uses color, shape, size, repetition, variation, and value (light and dark) to indicate meaning. From infancy and early childhood, humans recognize and communicate in a world of symbols.

6. Students should individually sketch various symbols and their proposed meaning in relation to their class group identity to be voted upon by fellow class members.

7. After all proposals are displayed and viewed, class members may vote by ballot on the three symbols they find to be the most compelling and relevant designs.

8. The winning designs will then be considered again by the group in order to incorporate these symbols into an overall design.

9. Complete the project by following the method of cut-pile raffia cloth where strands of colored raffia are looped into the background burlap cloth and trimmed with scissors to a consistent length. This is a time-consuming effort which will take the hard work and concerted effort of each member of the class in order to finish.

10. When complete, ask students to reflect on their feelings about working on a group project and the final product that came out of this work. As with any group endeavor, the wishes of the individual members are sometimes overlooked for the benefit of the whole, discuss how this may have played a role in completing this particular project.

Evaluation:

Students should gain an appreciation for the role that symbols play in their lives and communication with others. Group participation is key to successfully completing this lesson, students should be evaluated on an individual basis on their contribution to group discussions and their effective communication and negotiation in agreeing upon symbols and their meanings. Finally, contribution of time, patience, and effort should be noted in the production of the final product.

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Lesson 6: Masking

Honoring Animals, Ancestors, and Gods

Written by Marni Wishart

Cameroon, Bamileke people
Bush Cow Mask, early 20th century
Wood, beads and fabric
Purchased with funds from the Phyllis Cannon Wattis Endowment for 20th Century Art
Museum # 1998.52.1

Masks

Masks are one of the most common forms of art in Africa, playing an important role in the daily life of a community. Masks are used for many purposes: to entertain, teach, initiate, honor ancestors, to mourn, to judge, to celebrate, to worship, or to venerate. They may be worn for important ceremonies or festivals such as coming of age, a wedding or funeral, as part of the ritual of secret societies, at the coronation of kings or chiefs, or to make crops grow or bring rain. They are also used in healing rituals to drive away illness and to frighten away evil spirits.

The concept of a mask in traditional African cultures is somewhat opposed to the typical Western view of masks, which are commonly used as disguises for occasions such as Halloween or for protection as in sports activities. In Africa, there are hundreds of different types of masks, many of which have religious significance. When a mask is viewed in a modern museum, the carved headpiece is typically all that is seen, and rarely is a full body costume meant to complete the "mask" also included. In addition to being displayed in such incomplete form, these masks are also separated from their intended context. Masks are meant to be part of a larger spectacle or performance in an arena of

sound and movement. Essentially, African masks are meant to be seen in motion, and the dance, song, and music which accompany these masks are just as important as the actual mask in the overall meaning and purpose of the masquerade. From an African point of view, the wearer of a mask animates the sculptural form in a similar way to spirits or souls which animate the physical body of humans on earth. In this way, masks are used as a method of making the invisible world of spirits visible to humans.

The production and performance of masks in African cultures is often accompanied by sacred ceremony and secrecy. Most African masks are made of wood that is carved by a professional carver or blacksmith, but masks can be made of a variety of materials. Each culture uses the natural materials abundant in their localities such as wood, gold, bronze, copper, ivory, bone, horse tail, raffia, animal skins, feathers, bark cloth, beads, precious and semiprecious stones, metal, and cowrie shells. More contemporary or modern masks may also include plastic or glass beads, bottle tops, aluminum, mirrors, rattles, or even toys. Paints and dyes are often used for decoration. The traditional colors used in Africa were made of natural materials. The most common colors were black, white, and red. White was made of a clay, black was made from the soot of burned wood, and red was made from the Camwood tree--when ground up and mixed with certain oils from the tree bark, it produced a red paint called tukula. In addition to the belief that it held magical properties, this red paint also protected wood carvings from termites. While children in African cultures do often create masks, they are not allowed to use certain sacred materials. For example, the wood adult carvers use to make masks may come from special trees that are considered to be sacred. Children more often use paper, raffia, leaves, or gourds for masks that may be used purely for entertainment.

Motivation:

Animal imagery plays a large role in many African cultures, both in stories handed down through oral tradition and in artwork. African artists use the inspiration of animals, both domesticated and wild, to describe human nature as well as spiritual aspects of the universe by highlighting unique animal characteristics. These characteristics are often used as symbols for human experiences and situations such as leadership, healing, divination, problem-solving, rites of passage, and religious ritual. Some of the animals more commonly seen in African art due to their unique abilities are birds, which can travel both on land and in the air; or crocodiles, which can live both in the water and on land. The extraordinary ability of these and other similar animals to adapt to different environments makes them special. Other animals may be admired for such qualities as strength, speed, or cleverness.

Many African cultures view wilderness as a space of dangerous animals and spirits and yet also as the source of magic, healing, power, and spiritual knowledge. Those who enter the wilderness learn of medicines and herbs that can be found there and seek to harness the supernatural energy of wilderness spirits. A hunter may search out certain animals for their connections with the spirit world. When captured, the teeth, claws, horns, or fur of these animals are collected to act as potent charms and are often used in various art forms and on masks. The Bamileke of the Cameroon Grasslands, who are primarily farmers--growing maize, yams, and peanuts also rely on raising livestock such as chickens and goats for daily sustenance. Largely because of their role in helping to sustain life, animals in the Grasslands hold a sacredness, and are believed to possess a soul and have magical powers.

Much of the artwork among the Bamileke employs animal imagery, including those with reference to the chief, or Fon. As in much of the western Grasslands, the Bamileke are led by individual village chiefs, supported by a council of elders, known as Kwifoyn or Kwifo. The Fon is elected to his position by his predecessor's council and is often an elder member of the most powerful extended family within the community. The chief is recognized as the owner of all the land belonging to his village and is seen as the dispenser of supreme justice. Secret societies and age-grade associations also play a large role in regulating village life and are ultimately overseen by the village chief.

Masks such as the Bush Cow Mask in the Utah Museum of Fine Arts collection typically act as messengers to announce the presence of the governing council for the Fon. These masks are also charged with conveying messages of the council's decrees in the marketplace as well as leading other masked performers to and from community celebrations of the passages of life such as burial ceremonies and commemorative death festivals of members of the council to pay homage to their ancestors. Such masks, viewed with awe and reverence, are based on the African "cape" buffalo, an enormous and unpredictable creature worthy of respect and wariness. Docile by nature, but ferocious when wounded or sensing danger, the buffalo is known to hide in mud ponds and brushwood despite their large size, unexpectedly emerging as if from nowhere. Admired for cunning and strength, they often confuse their adversaries by suddenly changing their direction of attack. With such qualities, the buffalo serves as a fitting symbol to instruct the proper rule of the ideal chief: intelligent and peaceful, although aggressive when threatened. Like the buffalo, a good leader must act decisively to enforce laws and social values. Each chief commissions a new mask to be used as a symbol throughout his reign which will be retired when a new chief takes office. The intricate and beautiful beadwork used in the construction of the UMFA Bush Cow Mask is commonly associated with the Fon throughout many regions of the Cameroon Grasslands. Along with the buffalo, other animal images are used as royal symbols. For example, the serpent, elephant and leopard symbolize the privileges and authority granted to the village council by the chief.

Lesson 6

Written by Marni Wishart

Objectives:

Students will study the role of masks in African culture to convey information, meaning, and entertainment in a variety of settings and for a myriad of purposes. The imagery of animals in African mask-making will serve as the inspiration for students to look to their own environment to research animals. Students should observe and record behavior of animals in local ecosystems and create a mask, realistic or fantastic, combining the traits of several animals or animal and human characteristics they admire.

Core Curriculum Reference:

*Science- 4th grade Standard 5: Objective 1-4;
*Secondary Visual Arts, Sculpture (7-12) Standard 1: Objective 1-2, Standard 2: Objective 1-2, Standard 3: Objective 1, Standard 4: Objective 1-2

Materials:

*Image of Bush Cow Mask, Utah Museum of Fine Arts African Collection
*Heavy weight card stock paper, brown paper grocery bags, or plastic mask forms
*Assorted colored and patterned papers
*Beads
*Shells
*Raffia
*Buttons
*Dry Pasta
*Burlap cloth
*Paints and brushes
*Cork pieces and sheets
*Assorted metal or plastic washers
*Metal wire
*Scissors
*Staplers
*Glue
*Hole punches
*Other supplies per availability to enhance texture or color options

Procedure:

1. Review information in lesson plan and present to students in a format that is appropriate for your classroom, either relate information verbally, or have students read about masks in African cultures and the Bamileke Bush Cow Mask in particular.

2. Describe how African, as well as many other cultures of the world--including the students' own

culture, use animals as symbols in artwork or other cultural applications such as mascots for sports teams or schools.

3. Ask students to recall some of the animal mascots they know and to relate which qualities of these animals are appropriate for comparison with the ideals and goals of the teams or schools they represent.

4. Students should choose a local animal to observe and research to apply admirable qualities of such an animal to their own endeavors and goals. Some local common animals as suggested in the Utah Core Curriculum may include one of the following: jackrabbit, cottontail rabbit, red fox, coyote, mule deer, elk, moose, cougar, bobcat, deer mouse, kangaroo rat, muskrat, beaver, gopher snake, rattlesnake, lizard, tortoise, frog, salamander, red-tailed hawk, barn owl, lark, pinyon jay, magpie, cow, trout, catfish, carp, grasshopper, ant, moth, butterfly, bee, wasp, pill bug, millipede

5. After choosing a local animal (or animals) to research, students should focus on the importance of animals' abilities to adapt to the environment in which they live and the impact such animals may have on human life around them. For example, ask students to consider the impact camels had in making trans-Saharan travel possible because of their adaptations to their environment. Camels have a double layer of eyelashes, hairy ear openings, the ability to close their nose openings, and can drink up to 25 gallons of water at a time and then go several days without food. Conversely, they are also known for their ill tempers, and tendency to spit, bite, run away, or refuse to move. Because of this they required specially trained handlers to move them across the desert. Based on this African example, ask students what qualities of a camel we can use to learn more about our own human behavior.

6. Students should make a list of characteristics they admire in the animal (or animals) they have studied and sketch these animals to plan to create a mask representing these qualities. Students' masks can be realistic or fantastic in form, combining various traits of animals and humans to form a composite image.

7. Students should consider not only the symbolism of their mask, but the form as well. As with African masks, there are a number of different forms, some are meant to be worn on top of the head, others cover the entire face. Students may also choose to incorporate a body costume into their design.

8. When complete, ask students to display or present their masks to the class and to describe the qualities they have incorporated into their masks.

Evaluation:

This lesson requires two distinct phases, first, that of research/observation and second, the application of research in a creative format to produce a three-dimensional work of art. Equal weight should be given to each phase of the project.

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African Art

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