

African Art

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial covers African art. By the end of this lesson, you'll be able to identify and define today's key terms, describe the thematic elements of African art in the examples from this lesson, and identify examples of African artwork. This will be accomplished through the exploration of:

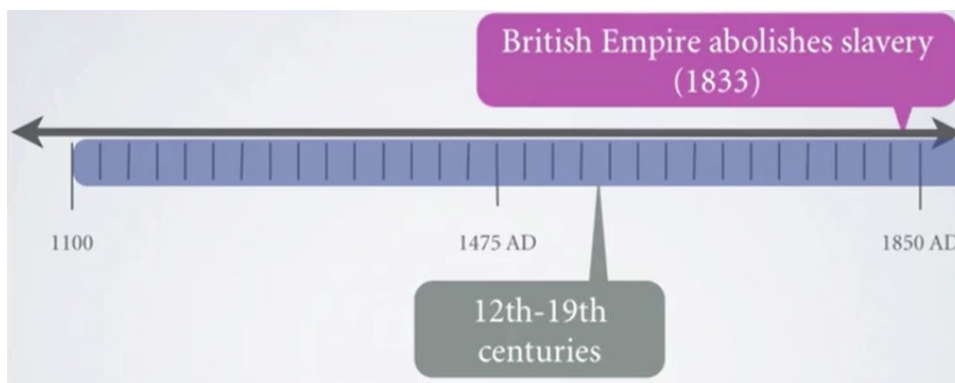


BIG IDEA

The concept of art is not universal. The examples of African art you'll examine today were meant to be functional as well as aesthetically pleasing.

1. Period and Location: African Art

The African art that you will be looking at today dates from between the 12th and 19th centuries. It focuses geographically on several places in Africa, centering around Benin City, Nigeria.



2. Perspective of African Art

African art has a different perspective as it pertains to art in general. There are always exceptions, of course, but we will generalize and say that the Western approach to art consists of creating art for profit and/or with the intention that it will be viewed in a particular setting, such as a private home, gallery, museum, or in public. African art, by contrast, has functionality beyond its aesthetics.

Art is created with aesthetics in mind, which is clearly open to interpretation, and usually has some sort of message. Keep in mind, though, that the creation of objects of aesthetic value often has a different function or

purpose depending upon culture. This is true of many cultures in Africa. In the art that you will examine today, the *meaning* associated with them changes depending on the context of the art. Any perceived power in these objects is lost when placed in a museum, for example. They weren't intended for display or simply to be looked at. They are functional, and retain their significance as long as they're serving their particular function.

3. Thematic Elements of African Art

As you explore the following examples of African **artifacts**, note these common thematic elements:

- Abstraction
- Emphasis on the human figure
- Emphasis on sculpture
- Sensory overload
- Performance aspect
- Leadership aspect

Akuaba figures such as the one shown below are the most common among the Ashanti people in and around Ghana and the Ivory Coast in Western Africa. As mentioned above, the meaning associated with this art changes depending on the context. Women carry these objects in order to help them conceive or to help them have beautiful children.



Akuaba Figure

Date unknown

Wood (carved)

Ghana, Africa

Notice the emphasis on **abstraction**. These figures are reduced to their most essential elements, which in turn are very stylized. This element was seen in earlier examples, such as supposed fertility idols of prehistoric Europe, but it could be said that the level of artistry is more apparent in Akuaba figures.



DID YOU KNOW

These figures are an example of how certain types of art are associated with certain groups—they tend to be gender-specific. It would be unlikely to see men carrying these around.

African art is steeped in tradition with an emphasis on community rather than individuality. It lacks the association with artistic originality. Tradition and consistency of design are much more important than artistic originality. That isn't to say that there aren't professional artists. On the contrary, there are certain disciplines that require the dedication and time to learn that only a professional can afford.

The Ashanti people are also known for their production of kente cloth, such as the examples shown below. This is a very symbolic and important form of art. The cloth is typically worn during ceremonies, and it originally could only be worn by kings, although such restrictions have eased over time.



Kente Cloth

Date unknown

Silk and cotton

Each color has a different symbolic meaning. While the exact meaning of this particular cloth isn't known, an educated interpretation based on known color symbolism might be that these examples are meant for females. Pink and purple tend to be closely associated with the feminine essence, or with feminine aspects of life, such as motherhood. Gold or yellow can have an association with fertility.

Nkisi Nkondi figures are sculptures thought to contain a spirit, or a "nkondi." You may initially equate these with a voodoo-type idol, given that the nails are driven into the figure. This isn't the case, but there is some truth in terms of the connection to the living that these figures were thought to have. The nails actually function as a way for the spirit to see into the other world. Sometimes figures would have mirrors on their bellies, which served a similar purpose.



DID YOU KNOW

Nkisi Nkondi figures were also used when an oath was taken or to resolve disputes.



Nkisi Nkondi Figure

19th-century

Wood and metal

Democratic Republic of the Congo, Africa

There's a **performative** aspect to the figure as well. In ceremonies, the nails were driven into its body, which served to activate its power. These figures were used in ceremonies to heal or cause sickness or as a way to detect whether someone committed wrongdoing. Again, the perceived power that these objects had was context-specific. These were functional, not just aesthetically pleasing.

Professional artists did exist in African cultures, as is the case with bronze casters such as the one who created this Yoruba mask from Benin, shown below. Again, these had a specific performance and functional aspect to them. In terms of aesthetics, it's a beautiful example of the artistic skill of the Yoruba artist. The bronze casting skill of the Yoruba is arguably second to none, particularly in the way they were able to achieve such realism, for example, in this object.



Yoruba Bronze Portrait Head

12th-century

Bronze

West Africa

In terms of function, they were ceremonial items intended to be worn, and were believed to function as an intermediary between this world and the spirit world. They were representative of a particular person, given the level of realism that you see here.



THINK ABOUT IT

What might this level of realism say about the importance the Yoruba placed on tradition and ancestral connections? Well, to the Yoruba, death was just a point of passage onto another plane of existence. Like altars, bronze portrait heads express ideas about the importance of leadership. This was obviously made to depict an important person. During a ceremonial performance, the mask would be worn by someone who functioned as the intermediary between the two worlds and allowed the living to reconnect with the spirit of an important leader from the past.



TERMS TO KNOW

Artifact

An object made by a human being, in particular an object of historical or cultural interest.

Akuaba

Wooden dolls from Ghana and nearby areas that are used to ensure fertility and/or a beautiful child, they are characterized by their heads, which are large, flattened, and circular.

Abstraction

In the arts, the simplification of form down to its most basic elements.

Nkisi Nkondi

A type of sculpture consisting of a wooden human figure that is thought to embody a spirit, and is used to take oaths and figure out who has been committing wrongdoings.

Performative

In the arts, used for, or relating to, performance.



SUMMARY

Today you learned about African art. You learned how to identify and define today's key terms and how the **perspective of African art** differs, in general, from the Western approach to art. You also learned how to describe the **thematic elements of African art** in the examples from this lesson and how to identify examples of African artwork.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Ian McConnell.



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