



## Art History

### Sub-Saharan Art Forms

Name:

Section:

Score: \_\_\_\_/5

Directions: Read the following article about Sub-Saharan Art and answer the thought questions at the end.

### Sculptures

The earliest known sculptures are the remarkable terracotta pottery heads, most of them fragments of figures, from the Nok culture of Nigeria and are dated around 500 BC through to 200 AD.

They are made from grog and iron rich clay but none of them have been found in their natural settings and they demonstrate that strong abstract figural representation has existed in Africa for over 2500 yrs.

Their strong formal elements and expressive quality places them at the start of the African sculptural tradition.

They are remarkable for their sense of caricature and have a strong sense of style showing elaborate hairdos and ornamentation.

Nok terracottas currently occupy an important but isolated space in African art history.

By around the 1st C AD, figures of an intriguing severity are being produced in the Sokoto region of north western Nigeria. Sokoto itself is at the confluence of ancient trade routes. These figures tend to have heavier brows and are less ornamented than Nok figures, but there is undeniably a link even if we are yet to fully comprehend the connection between the two seemingly isolated cultures.

The fired, earthenware Lydenburg heads were found in the same named district in South Africa and it has been established that they were buried there in 500 AD making them the oldest known African artworks south of the equator. Little is known of the ancient culture that produced this group of seven heads but the careful manner in which they were buried reveals the significance and respect they had for the people who laid them under the ground.

The large furrowed rings around the neck may signal prosperity and power but it cannot be known for sure. We can only speculate and place them in context with what we know about African art history.

Terracotta sculptures have been unearthed by archaeologists in the area of Jenne in Mali and at Ife in Nigeria and date from 1000 to 1300 AD. Powerful terracotta sculptures continued to be made throughout Africa in the 19th and 20th Centuries.

Stone sculptures exist from the Kongo people and the Sherbro from Sierra Leone dating no later than the 16th C. Ivory was carved with great skill in Benin at the same time.



Nok head  
Northern Nigeria  
500BC - AD500



Lydenburg Head, South Africa, ca. 500 C.E.



Ife Terracotta Queen with elaborate headdress (1000-1300 C.E.)

## Metal sculptures and carvings

Cast metal is the only other material to withstand the continent's termites.

Dating back to the 9th C AD is the bronze casting tradition of the Igbo-Ukwu tribe of Nigeria. Sites have revealed cast bronze regalia as well as other works of art. This superb tradition reached its peak with the Ife people from Yoruba, Nigeria who began to produce very fine brass and bronze castings in the 12th Century and continued to the 15<sup>th</sup> century C.E.

Life size heads and masks and smaller full-length figures achieved astonishing realism and reflected a quiet intensity that was the forerunner to that quality which we now admire so much in traditional African sculpture. Sometimes they also cast in pure copper, technically much more challenging than brass.

From the 15th C even to today, the Yoruba people in Benin created sculpted heads that today are known as the Benin bronzes but are in fact made of brass which arrived in the form of vessels and ornaments on the trade route and melted down. In both these cultures their works were often produced for their Kings and had magical powers, reflecting their beliefs and the socio-political organizations and chiefdoms which existed under the rule of a divine King or Ife.

The arrival of the Portuguese prompted Benin sculptors to produce brass plaques with scenes in relief. These plaques were nailed as decoration to the wooden pillars of the royal palace.

## Textiles and Weights

These two areas of art can also give us some chronological order in trying to understand the nature and time sequence of African art history. The earliest textile remnants are found again from Igbo-Ukwu and date to 9thC AD while the Tellam caves in Mali were found with cotton and woolen cloths preserved since the 11th C.

The Akan of Ghana manufactured small cast copper and bronze gold weights from the 18th C which came in all forms, animal, human, fruits, even abstract geometric shapes. They stood as little figurines, many less than 5cm high and expressed a liveliness and spontaneity not often found in African sculpture.

## 19th and 20th C African wood sculptures

Wood carving remains today the primary sculptural art form of the sub Saharan continent. African art history shows the earliest wooden sculptures from the 17th C are attributed to the Kuba, central Zaire but the earliest surviving sub-Saharan sculpture is a zoomorphic head found in 1928 in Central Angola. It is dated to the 8th-9th C and survived being buried under the water table.

The finest examples of surviving wood carving date around 1920, some collected as early as 1890 and generally gathered before 1945 while tribal art was still very much in practice.

## Influence on modern art and architecture of African art history

At the start of the 20th C, many artists such as Derain, Picasso, Matisse and Modigliani became enthralled by African art and began to visit the Trocadero museum in Paris to gaze upon the unique forms, absorbing all that was presented before them. These artists saw in this art a formal perfection countered by abstraction,



Brass figure Oni (King) of Ife, 14th-15th C.E., Lagos Nigeria



Brass plaque Benin. 16th century C.e.



West African Textile pattern

asymmetry by balance, primitivism with sophistication of design. They responded to this raw expressive power with all their faculties, not only with sight but with imagination and emotion and experienced a mystical and spiritual encounter.

This absorption exploded in a fascination in abstraction, organization and reorganization of forms, and the exploration of emotional and psychological areas that had not been investigated before. It helped them move beyond the naturalism that had defined Western art up to this point.

Now, the status of visual art was changed forever and Cubism was born, influenced by the African sculptor's simplified use of planes and forms and the rearrangement of human form that was based, in fact, on disproportion.



Picasso and the other group of avant-garde artists from the 'School of Paris' began themselves to collect tribal sculptures and artifacts that were beginning to appear in great numbers in Paris as a result of French colonization in Africa. Picasso incorporated the ceremonial masks of the Dogon tribe into his groundbreaking work like *Les Femmes d'Alger*, (1907-1909) and the influence of his Gabon masks he acquired is also seen in his white sculpture, *Head of a Woman* (1929-1930).

Modigliani was singular in his adaptation of the stylistic influences of the work of the Baule tribe, from the Ivory Coast. Brancusi adopted not so much the form but the use of wood as a sculpting medium just as on the other side of the world in America, sculptors such as William Zorach and Chaim Cross rejected Rodin's cast-bronze stronghold in favor of direct carving in wood.

Matisse was influenced not only by the sculptural forms of African art but also by the handcrafted textiles he, as a member of a family of generational weavers, was drawn to Kuba cloths from the Congo, in particular, with their all-over patterning became inspirational for his paper cutouts with their perspectival shifts. He noted that his impulsive use of bold color stirred the emotions and related to the ritualistic origins of African Art.

In architecture, two new principles had radical influence on design. One was the visual effect of decorative patterning on surfaces, most notably exterior walls and the other was a new attitude to spatial environments, spaces that do not just conform to human size, to function and form but also to the psychology of human nature.

Architects such as Le Corbusier and Oscar Niemeyer expressed themselves giving brutal form to structures and monumentalized buildings. They introduced long linear vertical lines and embellished their structures with textured murals and large bas-reliefs based on the nonlinear scaling of geometric shapes that is particular to African decoration.

African art history has had untold influence on the global art world.

*Evans, Bronwen. "African Art History." African Art History. Contemporary African Art, 2013. Web. 03 Nov. 2014.*

### Thought Questions

1. What type of materials are primarily used to make sculptures in Sub-Saharan Africa?
2. What do the materials used display about the connection that the people have to the land?

3. What type of Artistic styles are most often incorporated into sculptures of Sub-Saharan Africa? Metal vs. Terra-cotta
  
4. Based off of information from the reading, which areas/countries seem to be cultural centers for art in Sub-Saharan Africa? Explain your reasoning.
  
5. Why might the sculpting of heads be such a prominent theme in African Art? Defend your answer using the assertion, reasoning, evidence method.
  
6. Why were European artists so attracted to African Art?
  
7. What type of Artistic forms art directly connected to African based artistic forms?