How to Prepare your Class to Visit

THE AFRICAN ART COLLECTION
AT THE DE YOUNG MUSEUM
INTRODUCTION

This guide is intended to provide elementary and middle school teachers with materials and possible methods for preparing students to visit the de Young Museum’s permanent collection of African art. Our goal is to impress upon students the diversity and richness of African art and culture, give them some context for understanding the purpose and use of African art objects, and provide them with a contemporary time-frame for viewing traditional art. Incorporating traditional African art into your class curriculum can help your students develop awareness of cultural diversity and foster intercultural respect.

The main section of this guide is a slide lecture which offers suggestions on ways to introduce African art by incorporating information about Africa and African cultures with the art objects in our collection. This guide is written for your information and should be broken down and simplified to match your students’ particular curriculums, interests, and academic levels. To assist in tailoring the guide to different age groups, we have suggested topics and projects appropriate to particular grade levels.

We hope that you find this guide useful and welcome any suggestions or comments you or your students may have. We thank you for your active participation in helping to further your students’ development of cross-cultural understanding and involvement in art and museums.
PART ONE

WHAT SHOULD I KNOW ABOUT AFRICA?

Slide #1: Mask with Headdress, Deangle, We/Dan, Côte d’Ivoire or Liberia, 20th century

Many people find looking at African art to be an puzzling experience. Often they look at a mask such as this and wonder “What should I know about this?” or “What should I be looking for?” The best and easiest place to begin is with your eyes and your mind. Use your eyes; look carefully at this mask. Notice the smooth lines of the wood, the rough texture of the headdress, and the shapes that make up the face. What else do you notice? Use your mind; what does this mask look like, how does it make you feel, do you like the way it looks? Considering if you like the way something looks is an important part of exploring art. However, traditional African art is a powerful embodiment of much more than its appearance. To begin to appreciate the true nature of these objects it helps to consider the following questions. “What should I know about the continent of Africa? How were these objects used? Why do these objects look the way they do? Are these art objects traditional or modern?”
Many people find looking at African art to be an puzzling experience. Often they look at a mask such as this and wonder "What should I know about this?" or "What should I be looking for?" The best and easiest place to begin is with your eyes and your mind. Use your eyes; look carefully at this mask. Notice the smooth lines of the wood, the rough texture of the headdress, and the shapes that make up the face. What else do you notice? Use your mind; what does this mask look like, how does it make you feel, do you like the way it looks? Considering if you like the way something looks is an important part of exploring art. However, traditional African art is a powerful embodiment of much more than its appearance. To begin to appreciate the true nature of these objects it helps to consider the following questions. "What should I know about the continent of Africa? How were these objects used? Why do these objects look the way they do? Are these art objects traditional or modern?"
Before we begin to experience African art, it is important to know a few things about Africa itself. The African continent is very large; it is over three times the size of the United States (Alaska included). The African continent has many different climates and types of land. The environments range from savannah (grassland with few or scattered trees) to rain forest, from high mountains to flat plains. These different environments are one factor leading to the variety of art types produced in Africa.

Within the continent of Africa, there are 53 separate countries. Some well-known African countries are Egypt, Kenya, Somalia, South Africa, Mali, and Liberia. Many people think of the African continent as having a unified culture. Actually, there are many, many types of people in Africa. Africa has more different ethnic groups than any other continent. These groups speak different languages, practice diverse religions and customs, and of course create different styles of art.

The African art at the de Young Museum is from Sub-Saharan Africa, that means the countries located south of the Sahara desert. The Sahara is a vast desert stretching from Western Sahara to Somalia. Northern Africa is predominantly Muslim and identifies itself as a member of the Islamic rather than African world. (North African countries include Morocco, Algeria, Libya and Egypt.) Islam has its own rich tradition of art that differs greatly from that of the rest of Africa. Egypt and other countries north of the Sahara desert have stronger ties to the Mediterranean world than to Sub-Saharan Africa. Because of the barrier created by the Sahara desert, the cultures and the art of North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa are very different.

Because our collection focuses primarily on the art from West and Central Africa this guide will deal with only those two areas. (There are a few objects from East and South Africa in the collection). Some West African countries are Senegal, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Côte d’Ivoire (Ivory Coast), Ghana, Togo, Benin, Cameroon, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali. Some Central African countries are Chad, Central African Republic, Gabon, Equitorial Guinea, Congo, Zaire, and Angola. Within West and Central Africa there are also many different ethnic groups, languages, religions, and customs.

West and Central African art differs from art of the other regions of Sub-Saharan Africa. One major difference between East African and West African art is that East African cultures have not produced as much wood carving because their traditional way of life does not make it easy or desirable for these people to produce wooden art objects. East African cultures are traditionally and predomi-
nantly cattle herders. They are non-sedentary, that is they follow their herds and move their settlements frequently rather than remain in one locale. Some East African communities farm, but they likewise move frequently when their land fails to produce more crops. Because of their non-sedentary life styles, East African cultures do not produce or accumulate large quantities of sculpture or masks.

Wood is the primary material used in traditional African art. Most African forests are located in West and Central Africa and therefore wood is more readily available in these areas. The sedentary, agriculturally based communities of West and Central Africa have produced most of the African sculpture that is collected in Europe and in the United States.
Slide #3: Plaque, Edo kingdom of Benin, Nigeria, ca. 1600

In West and Central Africa there is a long tradition of great kingdoms with highly developed governmental and social systems. Many beautiful and elaborate art objects have been created for the royal courts of West and Central Africa. This example of royal art is from the kingdom of Benin, in present-day Nigeria. It is made from cast bronze. Bronze is an expensive material and is often used in court art.

The figure represented is probably a royal attendant to the Benin Court. Supported on the figure’s shoulder is a water vessel in the form of a leopard. The leopard is a royal emblem of kingly power. The plaque is pierced at the four corners so that it could be attached to the wooden pillars of the royal palace. Traditionally art of these kingdoms has been commissioned by governments and has served the purpose of enhancing and maintaining the status of rulers.
1. Geography and Topography
   Using photocopies of an African map, have students color in the different regions of West, North, East, and Central Africa and the Sahara Desert. Using supplementary materials such as atlases and encyclopedias, further discuss the characteristic geographies and topographies of these different regions. For more advanced students, also discuss ways that the environment in which a certain ethnic group lives shapes that group’s way of life and the art they produce.

2. Library Skills
   For more advanced students, have each student (or a group of students) select an African country and, using encyclopedia references, compile information about that country. Have students make oral presentations to the entire class about the different countries they researched. Pass out photocopies of an African map. At the start of each student’s presentation have the rest of the class color in the particular country being discussed.

3. Diversity of Africa
   For younger students, do a story time with the book *Asbani to Zulu: African Traditions* (see bibliography). While reading the book, locate on a large map of Africa the homelands of the different ethnic groups. Impress upon children the diverse characteristics of the various ethnic groups.
Slide #4: Mask with Headdress, *Deangle, We/Dan, Côte d’Ivoire or Liberia, 20th century*

Let's look at this mask again and consider its function. There are many masks exhibited in the African collection at the de Young Museum. Masks, like all traditional African art objects, are different from much of the art you will see in a museum because they were never created or intended to be in a museum! Most western and modern art is made to be hung on a wall or put on a pedestal and looked at. Traditional African art is functional; it is made to be used. Its purposes include being touched, talked to, danced with, slept with, sat upon, fed, worn as well as providing aesthetic impact and pleasure. Since African art is made to be used, it is important for us to understand some things about its functions.

Masks can serve many purposes, including teaching, making laws, policing, entertaining, and contacting the spirit world. This mask, made by the Dan people of Liberia, was used in bush schools to reassure and comfort boys who were about to go through initiation rites. Young men attend bush schools in order to learn about the responsibilities they will have as men and to prepare for their initiation ceremonies. Masks such as this are used in the teaching process and in the
celebration when the young men graduate from bush school.

Masks and other ritual objects are used only by certain people in the community. Usually these people must belong to a special group within the community in order to gain the right to use these special and powerful objects. Often, to join these groups people must undergo special training, trials, and tests before they can be initiated into (or join) these societies. For example, to use the *deangle* mask, someone must be involved with the male initiation ritual.

In the museum the mask is out of its context. It is not being used the way it was meant to be used and we are not seeing it the way it was meant to be seen.

![Image: Baule Masking Performance, Côte d’Ivoire, 1980](image)

*Slide #5: Baule Masking Performance, Côte d’Ivoire, 1980*

Just as there are many different ethnic groups in Africa there are also many different types of masks and masking ceremonies. This is a photograph of an African masking ceremony, or masquerade, among the Baule people of Côte d’Ivoire. Notice how this Baule mask is very different from the Dan mask.

We call the person who wears the mask and the costume a masker. Although masks can depict both males and females, maskers are usually men.

The costume of the masker is just as important as his wooden mask. The long fiber is called raffia. Raffia are fibers from the raffia palm. Often raffia is used to symbolize the power of the bush and the wild things that live in the bush.

The costume covers all of the masker’s body because the identity of the masker is meant to be hidden from the audience. The masker must put on his
mask and costume in private before the masquerade so that no one will know who he is. During the masquerade, the masker is no longer himself, rather he is transformed into the spirit of the mask.

Music and dance are also central to the masquerade. You can see several instruments in this photo such as a tambourine gourd and a drum. Certain masquerades are conducted only at night and the dramatic lighting of fires or torches is essential to fully experience the masks and the masquerade. There are many different elements to a masquerade: the mask, the costume, the masker’s movements, his words, the music, the audience’s participation, the lighting, and the spiritual beliefs. All of these elements put the mask in context. When we look at a mask out of its context we are missing a lot.

Slide #6: Maiden Spirit Mask, Igbo, Nigeria, 19th century

Another important function of African art is to honor ancestors or members of the family line who have previously passed away. In African society, even after a member of the family has died, they are still thought to participate in the family and are recognized through rituals.

This mask is a maiden spirit mask from the Igbo people of Nigeria. The white pigment informs us that this figure is a spirit because the Igbo, like many traditional African peoples, believe that in the afterlife everything is opposite from the living world: if people in the living world have black skin, spirits in the afterlife have white skin.

Masks like this represent beautiful young girls who have died. The shapes on the mask’s head form an elaborate hair-do and also represent the hornbill bird (this
can be seen when viewing the mask from behind). The hornbill is respected in Igbo
culture for its dedication to family life; it is considered a model for human behavior.

This mask was used in funerary ceremonies. Even though the mask depicts a
female, it would have been worn by a man. The pieces of fabric around the neck
of the mask are remnants of a costume. The masker who wore this costume simul-
ate the gait or quick steps of a young woman. He would speak in a feminine,
high-pitched voice, encouraging deceased spirits to pass to the afterlife in order
that they may become helpful ancestors.

**Slide #7: Drum, Senufo, Cote d'Ivoire/Mali,
20th century**

This drum was made by the Senufo people
who live in Cote d'Ivoire and Mali. It was
played in masking ceremonies and may have also
been used to communicate with other villages.
Drums not only give the beat for the dance but
also tell the dancers when to change their steps.

This drum is decorated with animals and
figures that have important meanings in the
Senufo cosmology. Cosmology is the system
of beliefs that deal with how the universe was
created and how it works. Animal forms –
including a turtle, a hornbill bird, an alligator,
and a snake – decorate this drum. The Senufo
people believe that the hornbill was the first
animal on earth and that it acts as a messenger
between humans and the gods. The alligator is
a symbol of fertility.

The animals depicted on ceremonial drums
often refer to the particular ritual or type of
masquerade for which the drum is used. Drums
are only one of many instruments used in rituals
or masquerades.
Slide #8: Nail and Blade Oath-Taking Figure, *Nkisi kondi*, Kongo, Coastal Zaire, 19th century

Not all African art objects are used in masquerades. Many objects are used for other purposes such as settling disputes, teaching people, marking an individual’s status in society, or everyday uses such as entertainment or cooking.

This figure is called a nail and blade oath-taking figure or *nkisi nkondi*. It was made by the Kongo people of Coastal Zaire. It was used during difficult times such as drought, famine, or personal arguments. The figure’s stance, hands on hips and feet apart, is meant to demonstrate the aggressive and powerful force of the object. It stands ready to take on any dispute. People who have an argument to resolve seek the assistance of a ritual expert, who helps them to settle their problems. To seal the new agreement, a nail or blade is inserted into the figure. (This practice can be compared to our signing contracts or shaking hands to formalize an agreement.) The many pieces of metal protruding from this statue represent different resolutions. If the agreement is broken then the nail or blade might be removed.

The mirror on the stomach of the oath-taking figure has many possible interpretations. It may scare away or capture evil spirits. It may represent a passage way to the spirit world. The open mouth and the bell may represent the figure’s ability to communicate with people in the living world.

After an oath-taking image has been carved, ritual materials are applied to the figure by a ritual expert. These ritual materials give the figure its power. Before this oath-taking figure was brought to the museum, the ritual materials were removed.

For the Kongo people the oath-taking figure is a forceful and living presence. The figure is considered so powerful that only one is made for each village. It is often kept in a special shrine outside of the village so as not to endanger the inhabitants with its great power. Generally, only a ritual expert is allowed to touch the figure.
Slide #9: Ibeji, Yoruba, Nigeria, 20th century

This nine-inch-tall figure is called an *ibeji*. *Ibeji* are made by the Yoruba people of Nigeria to commemorate the death of a twin child. The Yoruba people have an extremely high birth rate of twins; they also have a very high child mortality rate and oftentimes one or both of the twins die. An *ibeji* is carved when a twin dies. The mother then cares for the *ibeji* just as if it were a real child. She feeds it, dresses it, rubs it with special oils, and treats it just as she does her living child. The Yoruba people believe that twins share one soul which splits in half at birth and that each half lives in one of the two twins. If one twin dies, there is fear that the soul of the dead twin will convince the soul of the living twin to come join it in the spirit world. By obtaining an *ibeji*, the mother provides a place for the spirit of the deceased twin to reside. In this way the soul of the twins remains intact. By taking care of the *ibeji*, parents hope that the soul of the deceased child will bring them good luck.

This *ibeji* is dressed in an elaborate beaded gown that signifies the wealth of that particular family, as do the strings of cowry shells that drape from the gown. Beads and cowry shells are signs of wealth and prestige in many African societies.
Slide #10: Ivory Figurines, Lega, Eastern Zaire, 19th - 20th century

The Lega people of eastern Zaire created these small ivory figures. Almost all art in Lega society is made for and used by members of the Bwami society. The members of the Bwami society teach moral and ethical values through short sayings (proverbs and aphorisms). These figurines were owned by members of the highest level of the Bwami society and were used in initiation ceremonies when an important male member of the community gained status. Each figure expresses a particular saying which has an instructive meaning.

The ivories were sometimes displayed as a group or sometimes danced by their owners. When danced, the figures would be attached to the dancer's forehead, chest, arm, leg, or loincloth. When a member of the Bwami dies, his figurine is passed on to family members of similar Bwami status.
Slide #11: Gameboard, Dan, Liberia/Côte d'Ivoire, 20th century

Not all African decorative objects have ritual purposes; some are everyday objects. This is a makpon game board. Makpon is a traditional game played throughout Africa, but it is now also popular in other parts of the world, including the United States. It is played by moving game pieces from one cup to the next until someone moves all their pieces off the board.

Intricately carved makpon boards such as this example demonstrate the wealth of their owner. Sometimes the carved head is a generic representation of the game’s owner and/or a representation of the Dan’s ideal of feminine beauty.

PART TWO: SUGGESTED PROJECTS

1. Understanding Context
   Many of us have participated in or attended rituals or ceremonies. In our culture these events can include graduations, birthday celebrations, First Communions, Confirmations, Bar or Bat Mitzvahs, marriages, and inaugurations. These ceremonies and celebrations can mark important events in the lives of individuals and communities. They likewise involve special rituals and practices, costumes, music, and songs. Usually people gain new rights and responsibilities after they pass through these ceremonies.
Have children draw a picture of a festival, ceremony, or ritual in which they took part (cultural or religious ceremonies, weddings, graduations, or public celebrations). If possible, encourage children to bring photographs from home of themselves participating in these ceremonies. As preparation, have them describe the event. Discuss or write an essay including the ceremony’s name, when it occurred, why it was important that they participated, if they wore special clothes or used special objects, if there were special foods or music involved, if there were special processions or choreography involved, if there was an audience present, and if there were a special person who directed the event. Encourage them to illustrate as many descriptive elements as possible in their pictures. Explain how these details are the context of the event and discuss how without these elements the event would not be the same. Compare the children’s events to African ceremonies and discuss similarities and differences between the Baule masking ceremony and the children’s event. Be certain the children understand that one element seen separately from the ceremony to which it belongs cannot express the full context of the event. For example, a graduation cap on a shelf would not tell the whole story of the graduation day; we can understand more about the cap if we see it in context.

2. Membership Hats

Make hats or figurines which express membership in a group that is important to the student. Possible groups could be sports teams, clubs, religious groups, or hobbies such as horseback riding, reading, dancing, or playing a musical instrument. Encourage children to select a group that has special meaning to them. Discuss with children the group to which their hat/figurine belongs and why it is of importance to them. Ask them who else might be allowed to wear the hat: People who shared the same interest? People who belonged to the same club or team? Discuss how only certain people - initiates or other qualified individuals - are allowed to wear or use certain African objects.
PART THREE

WHY DOES THIS OBJECT LOOK THE WAY IT DOES?
WHY DID THE ARTIST CHOOSE TO USE THESE
STYLES AND FORMS?

Slide #12: Mask with Headdress, Deangle, We/Dan, Côte d’Ivoire or Liberia, 20th century

The first time you look at African art it probably will appear “different.”
Certainly it looks different from European, American, or Asian art. In Africa art
objects often look the way they do for specific reasons. If we know the reason
why an object looks as it does, it is easier to understand and appreciate the object.

A naturalistic or realistic art object has a photographic likeness to the real
thing which it is meant to represent. For example, a naturalistic portrait would
look like a real person. Most African art is not intended to look naturalistic or
realistic. Traditional African artists are usually more interested in depicting an
ideal or the world of the unseen: moral values, things from the imagination, from
the spirit world, or from mythological or religious beliefs. Although most African
art is abstract, some African groups like the ancient people of Ife, Nigeria (A.D.
1100-1500), chose to make realistic art.

We discussed this deangle mask before in terms of function and context. Now
let’s consider why it looks the way it does, remembering that traditional African artists are not interested in trying to make masks that look like naturalistic portraits. This mask is called a deangle mask; deangle means that it has female characteristics. It represents the Dan people’s ideal of feminine beauty. Ideal beauty is perfect beauty. In particular, the slit eyes with lowered eyelids, the small ears, and the full mouth with pointed teeth are thought to be beautiful. (Remember, although this is a female mask, it was still danced by a male masker.)

Slide #13: Helmet Mask with Vertical Ladder
Extension, Bobo, Burkina Faso, 20th century

African art can be characterized by pronounced stylization. A stylized art object conforms to an idea, a pattern, or a design rather than to a real appearance; it is an interpretation rather than a direct representation of the way something looks.

This is a helmet mask from the Bobo people of Burkina Faso. The shape of the mask is abstract, that is it is not immediately recognizable as a known animal, person, or thing. Sometimes African artists create objects that combine different animal characteristics in a single creature. The face of this mask is a combination of human and antelope elements. A bird-like form protrudes from the forehead. The ladder-like shape extending from the top of the head can be seen as either the bird’s wings or the antelope’s antlers.

Although it is difficult to differentiate these animal and human forms at first, after a while we can recognize them. This mask is decorated with many geometric patterns. Often geometric patterns and colors refer to moral values that are best understood by a community’s elders. Because this mask does not resemble a single animal and because it is decorated with geometric patterns, we consider this to be an abstract art work.
Slide #14: Ibeji, Yoruba, Nigeria, 20th century

The function of Ibeji figures has previously been discussed. This Ibeji is similar to the figure shown earlier but it does not possess a beaded costume. Let’s now consider the appearance of the carving. Although there is much variation among the art of different groups, within each group there are many limitations to what is considered appropriate for artists to carve. Traditionally, the art of a specific group is usually very consistent in appearance from one generation to the next. Each African culture has different expectations about how things should look.

The Yoruba have very specific ideas about how a piece of art should look. They believe a good carving should have ews. Ewa is the Yoruba word for character; it means well done or well made. To have ewa a sculpture must 1) be depicted in the middle (not too beautiful or too ugly, not too young but not too old, and not too abstract but not too realistic) 2) look human but not exactly like any one person in particular 3) show the mark of the knife 4) reflect the light.

If we consider the Ibeji by Yoruba standards for ewa, we can better appreciate and understand its beauty and value. Notice also how large the figure’s head is in relation to the rest of the body. To the Yoruba, the head is the seat of the soul and therefore the most important part of the body. Often in African art certain parts of a figure’s body are emphasized, or enlarged, to express their importance.

Slide #15: Chief’s Ceremonial Stool, Luba/Hemba, Zaire, 20th century

This is a chief’s ceremonial stool from the Luba or Hemba people of Zaire. The figure’s stomach is decorated with designs representing
scarification marks. Scarification is a process by which patterned cuts are made in a person’s skin and then rubbed with ash to make raised scars. Some scarification is done to enhance a person’s beauty while other scarification marks represent an individual’s membership in a particular ethnic group or their rank in society. Scarification marks are a common form of body decoration throughout Africa. (What forms of body decoration do we perform in this country?) The figure’s elaborate hairstyle and scarification marks tell us that this woman was of high status; she was especially important in her community.

This figure’s body may not look entirely realistic to us. Her arms are bigger and her legs are smaller than a real person’s arms and legs. The artist who made this object emphasized the figure’s arms to show that they are the most important and strongest part of the figure’s body. Because she is symbolically supporting the chief, she must have especially powerful arms. By holding the stool on which the chief sits, the woman becomes the symbol, or a representation, of the support and strength of the kingdom. By noticing what is emphasized in an African art object, we can sometimes better understand the meaning or message of the object.

Slide #16: Antelope Headdress, Chiwara, Bamana/Bamako, Mali, 20th century

Often the shapes and forms that an artist chooses to use on an object can convey ideas. For example, animal features are usually meant to give an object the power or authority of the animal they depict. In our culture we also often make use of animals to express ideas. The bald eagle symbolizes our country and a white dove symbolizes peace.
This is a headdress worn by members of the Chiwara society in the Bamana culture of the Bamako region of Mali. The animal represented is an antelope. The Bamana people believe that the antelope taught their ancestors how to farm. Therefore the antelope or *chwara* is a symbol for good farming and plentiful harvest. The Bamana people make headdresses in the shape of the antelope for use in harvest festivals.

This carving does not look entirely like a real antelope. The artist was more interested in suggesting qualities of the antelope such as speed, grace, and power than in depicting the actual appearance of the antelope. Notice the number of antlers. The artist has given this antelope several extra horns, which possibly symbolize power.

*Slide #17: Elephant Mask with Leopard Crest, Bamileke, Cameroon, 20th century*

This mask was made by the Bamileke people of Cameroon. The many intricately sewn beads are a sign of wealth and prestige. There are three animals in this mask. The principal animal depicted is an elephant (easily identified by the large flopping ears), the animal standing on top is a leopard, and above the elephant's left eye there is an outline of a frog. (It is very difficult to see the frog.) In understanding why these animals are depicted in this mask, it helps to think about the qualities each animal possesses or what importance each may hold for the Bamileke people. The elephant is a very big, strong, and intelligent animal. The leopard is graceful, cunning, and very fast. The leopard also represents the power of the chief in Bamileke society. The mask is decorated with a geometric pattern of white bead triangles. These
triangles are meant to represent the spots of the leopard’s coat, another reference to royalty. The frog is a sign of fertility, which means the ability to produce offspring.

By looking at the animals used to decorate this mask, we can decipher that this mask was meant to express strength, intelligence, cunning, and status (or importance in society). It was also meant to bring fertility and prosperity to the people who used it.

PART THREE: SUGGESTED PROJECTS

1. **Power Boxes**
   Discuss with students the importance of animals in traditional African art. Impress upon them the idea that certain animals can express certain meanings. Have students think about which animals they like most and why. Encourage students to choose animals that possess desirable qualities or powers. Gather a box (a shoe box, cigar box, large jewelry box) for each child in the class. Have children draw the animals they most like, admire, and respect. Many animals can be reduced to expressive elements such as horns, teeth, wings, or beaks. Have students attach their drawings to the boxes. Talk about how many traditional African societies believe that decorating objects with the images of animals gives these objects and the people who own them special powers. Decorate the boxes with other materials. (sequins, ribbons, yarn, etc.) Instead of boxes, shields or masks can be made using cardboard or paper.

2. **Realistic and Abstract**
   For more advanced students, discuss the terms realistic and abstract. Talk about ways to create abstract designs: geometric shapes and patterns; repeated patterns and shapes; stencils; irregular, uncontrolled lines and shapes. Discuss how to suggest natural forms using abstract shapes or patterns. Look at natural forms – animals, plants, people – and extract elements from them to create abstract images. Attempt to create realistic and abstract drawings. Discuss the pros and cons of abstract versus realistic images. Which involves more forethought for conceiving an idea? Which is more understandable to other people who view the object? Discuss how even though an image may not be immediately recognizable, it can still convey meanings.
PART FOUR

IS THIS OBJECT TRADITIONAL OR MODERN? WAS IT MADE FOR USE IN A TRADITIONAL AFRICAN CULTURE?

Slide #18: Mask with Headdress, Deangle, We/Dan, Côte d'Ivoire or Liberia, 20th century

This mask, like many African art objects, is made of wood. We know wood begins to disintegrate over time (especially in hot tropical climates) so most African objects in Western collections are, at most, 50 to 100 years old.

Because this mask was made for use in a particular African society, it is considered traditional. The Dan people have been carving masks like this for many generations. However, within the parameters of traditional art practices, innovations and changes are acceptable and reflect the changing needs of African societies.

Traditions are customs that are practiced by generation after generation. Some traditions in our culture are fireworks on the Fourth of July, passing out candy at Halloween, or putting candles on a birthday cake. The United States and Africa are alike in that they are both made up of many different cultures, ethnic groups, and religions, and the people who belong to these groups have many of their own traditions. Do you or your family practice any traditions that are particular to your culture or religion? These practices make our lives traditional. Even though we live in a modern world, there are traditions which we have practiced for many generations.
Slide #19: Granary Door, Dogon, Mali, 20th century

Here is another example of traditional African art. This is a portion of a door that was made by the Dogon people of Mali. It was used to close the small building in which a Dogon family would store their grain. These buildings are called granaries. Millet, a kind of grain, is the Dogon people’s staple food, so storing it carefully is of great importance. The designs on the door are traditional. They depict lizards, which symbolize fertility and bounty to the Dogon.

We don’t know exactly when this door was carved, but we know it was made in the 20th century. This door illustrates how wood looks after it has begun to disintegrate. Because the granary door was outside, the wood began to disintegrate faster than wooden objects stored indoors.

Slide #20: Dogon Village, Banani, Mali, 1979

This photograph of a Dogon village can give you an idea of how a granary door would look in context, as it was originally meant to be seen and used. This Dogan village looks very different from the neighborhoods we live in. What are
some of the differences? Many Dogon people live in a traditional manner, much as their ancestors have for many generations. Many wear traditional clothing, live in traditional homes, and practice many traditional ways of life.

![Modern African City, Dakar, Senegal, 1979](image)

Westerners often think of African art as timeless and unchanging and this is simply not true. While looking at the African art displayed at the de Young Museum, we must remember that most of these objects were made within the past 100 years and that the continent of Africa has changed a lot during this time. During this century some regions of Africa have become very modern while other areas have remained more traditional. Not all Africans live in villages. Many Africans live in modern cities such as this throughout Africa. The African people who live in urban areas do not necessarily wear traditional clothing. They often dress much as we do in the United States.

Today many African artists are interested in modern art forms and modern art techniques. Unlike traditional African art that is made to be used, modern African art (such as sculptures, paintings, textiles, prints, drawings, and photographs) are usually made to be hung or displayed in a museum or gallery.
Even though many Africans live in modern cities, many traditional objects and beliefs still play an important role in African life. Some traditions remain strong, some change with the times, and other traditions die out.

This is a picture of an Asante (uh-shahnt-ee) king (a ruler of the Akan people) in Ghana. We can tell that this ruler was very important because of the amount of gold he wears. His gold flywhisk is a sign of authority and rulership. He is dressed in a traditional manner, wearing a kente cloth robe. Kente cloth is a good example of an African object that has changed with the times but still retains some of its past significance.

In the 15th and 16th centuries the Dutch and East Indian Trading Company brought silk to Ghana. The people of Ghana unravelled the silk cloth and used this raw material to weave long, narrow strips which were sewn together to form the kente cloth. Every pattern of kente cloth had a name and a meaning. Kente cloth was traditionally worn only by royalty.

Today you don’t need to be royalty to wear kente cloth. Many people wear kente cloth in modern societies (including in the United States). Its traditional importance as a prestige item worn only by royalty has prompted modern people to wear it as a sign of pride in Africa or African heritage. Currently at many college graduation ceremonies African American students will wear a strip of kente cloth with their graduation gowns.
Slide #23: Photographs of Yoruba women with *ibejis*, 1970

These photographs illustrate another example of an African tradition that has changed to fit a modern lifestyle. All three women in these photographs carry *ibejii* figures.

We discussed the function and the appearance of the *ibejii* figures earlier. Traditionally, the mother whose twin child has passed on will commission a carver to make a wooden *ibejii*. We can see this kind of traditional *ibejii* in the two images on the left. However, today some Yoruba women purchase plastic dolls in modern stores which they then use as an *ibejii*. This type of *ibejii* is seen in the image on the right. By purchasing a plastic doll, modern Yoruba women are still expressing their traditional beliefs, although they are using modern rather than traditional objects to keep this tradition alive.

The traditional art displayed at the de Young Museum can provide a basis for learning about the diversity and richness of African cultures. Whether those cultures are modern or traditional, the values and heritage embodied in these objects offer a starting point for cross-cultural understanding and respect.
PART FOUR: SUGGESTED PROJECTS

1. Changing Traditions in our Lives

Talk to children about traditions. Name traditions in our society that are common to all and traditions that are particular to children’s own cultures. Talk about how some traditions change over time. Compare these changes to alterations in African traditions. For example, in discussing the tradition of Christmas, we can talk about how the traditional belief in the Christmas tree remains the same although some people buy plastic Christmas trees instead of real trees because it is more convenient or less expensive. Or we can talk about how people wear army fatigues or sailor uniforms even though traditionally these uniforms were worn only by people in the armed services. Now people wear this clothing as a fashion statement or to convey the idea of strength or power that is derived from the military. Compare the examples the students suggest with the changes in African traditions discussed in part four.

2. Changing Traditions in our Families

Have children pick an age-specific ceremony or event in which both they and their parents before them (or other adult relatives or friends) participated. Encourage them to select an event for which there was a substantial amount of time between when the adult and the child experienced the event. Have the child interview the adult as to the adult’s experience in the ceremony. Help children to prepare interview questions in advance such as: What did the adult wear for the event? How old was the adult when they participated in the event? Were there special costumes or clothing, foods, music, dances, songs, speeches, or prayers for the event? Where did the event take place? Who else was present at the event?

Have the child review their interview with the adult and make a list or write an essay about the similarities and differences between the adult’s and the child’s experiences in the same ceremony. What elements of the event had changed? What had remained the same? Discuss the results of the interview in terms of traditional, modern, and combinations of the two. Review the changes in the traditions of *ibeji* figures and *kente* cloth in African cultures and how these traditions have changed with the times. Be sure to include ways in which modern conveniences and technical achievements may have changed certain ceremonies. If possible, encourage children to bring photographs or objects to illustrate differences and changes in the ceremonies and events.
PREPARATION FOR THE MUSEUM VISIT

These notes suggest points to emphasize in order to concisely introduce students to the de Young Museum's African art collection. All the information needed for the discussions can be found in the teachers' guide. More advanced discussion topics may be used as follow-up lessons after the students have visited the galleries and established a basic familiarity with African art and the concepts and terms appropriate to their grade level.

Kindergarten and First Grade
1. Discuss with the class the presence of animals in African art. Identify animals in several of the objects in the slide show. Remind students that representations of animals and animal elements can embody characteristics of that animal (leopard = royalty; elephant = strength and wisdom).
2. Discuss materials such as wood, fabric, raffia, and beads. Help children to learn to recognize different materials and, if possible, the potential meanings of different materials. For example wooden objects imply forests and sedentary lifestyles, gold and beads signify wealth and prestige, raffia represents the power of bush and the wild things that live in the bush.

Second and Third Grades
1. Discuss the diversity of the African continent and its many cultures, geographic regions, ways of life, and styles of art. Discuss West African and Sub-Saharan art and its differences from art of other parts of Africa. Supplement slides with encyclopedia or book pictures.
2. Discuss the ideas of traditional and modern art. Remind students that the African art in the de Young Museum's collection is traditional but that Africa also has modern cities and modern art. Show students examples of modern African art (See Africa Explores in bibliography).

Fourth and Fifth Grades
1. Discuss how traditional African concepts of art and beauty differ from our own. Help children to gain an acceptance and appreciation for new things. Encourage children to use terms such as different, abstract, and patterned.
2. Discuss the functions of traditional African art and how this differs from Western art, which is usually primarily intended to be viewed. Talk about the way in which African art objects were meant to be seen and used (their contexts, such as the masquerade). African art objects in the museum are out of their original contexts; they are not displayed or used as they were intended.
Middle School

1. Discuss the importance of ritual and ceremony in marking important stages of life. Relate the Baule ceremony to Western graduation or religious ceremonies; both mark one's coming-of-age in society. Talk about the importance of bush schools – learning new skills and gaining new rights and responsibilities – as compared to students' own experiences in preparing for Western ceremonies.

Programs for Children at the de Young

The Education Department of The Fine Arts Museums sponsors a wide range of programs for teachers, adults, families, and students. To receive our annual listing of programs please call (415) 750-3640.

Docent School Tours

To arrange for a docent tour of the African galleries for your class please call (415) 750-3658. Please arrange docent tours eight weeks in advance of your visit.

SUGGESTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

For Teachers
Herbert Cole, Icons: Ideals and Power in the Art of Africa
Fred Lemp, African Art of the West Atlantic Coast
Jecelyn Murray ed., Cultural Atlas of Africa
Christopher Roy, Art and Life in Africa
Susan Vogel ed., Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art
Frank Willet, African Art, an Introduction

For Students
Deborah Chocolate, My First Kwanza Book
Elise Greenfield & Muriel Feelings: Maja Means One: Swahili Counting Book,
and Jambo Means Hello: Swahili Alphabet Book
Dakari Hru, Joshua's Masai Mask
Virginia Kroll, Masai and I
Margaret Musgrove, Ashanti to Zulu: African Traditions
Eva Sutherland, Playtime in Africa
Diane Wolkstein & Marc Brown: The Banza

SLIDE LIST

1. Mask with Headdress, Deangle, We/Dan, Côte d'Ivoire/Liberia, 20th century, wood, fiber, pigment, and feathers. Museum purchase, de Young Art Trust and Salinger Bequest Fund. (78.40)


4. **Mask with Headdress**, *Dangle*, We/Dan, slide 1. Repeated.


9. **Standing Female Figure**, *Ibeji*, Yoruba, Nigeria, 20th century, wood, leather, glass, shell, plastic, cotton and vegetable fiber. Gift of Thomas K. Seligman and Rita Barcla to The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. (1991.16.2)


12. **Mask with Headdress**, *Dangle*, We/Dan, slide 1. repeated.


14. **Standing Male Figure**, *Ibeji*, Yoruba, Nigeria, wood. (74.10.2)


17. **Elephant Mask with Leopard Crest**, Bamileke, Grassfields, Cameroon, 20th century, textile and glass. Gift of John Casado to The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. (1986.57.6a-b)

18. **Mask with Headdress**, *Dangle*, We/Dan, slide 1. repeated.

19. **Granary Door**, Dogon, Mali, wood. Lent anonymously. (L.71.34)


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