African Art
7th Grade Curriculum
Get Smart with Art is made possible with support from the William K. Bowes, Jr. Foundation, Mr. Rod Burns and Mrs. Jill Burns, and Daphne and Stuart Wells.

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Get Smart with Art @ the de Young

Get Smart with Art is an interdisciplinary curriculum package that uses art objects as primary documents, sparking investigations into the diverse cultures represented by the collections at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. Using works of art as the foundation of every lesson, each guide is designed to increase visual literacy, historical knowledge, and expository writing skills. In an effort to reduce the burden of teacher preparation time, historical texts are written at the reading level of the intended student audience.

The enclosed materials may be used in preparation for a museum visit or over the course of the school year. Get Smart with Art differs from previous curriculum series in that it is a “living” curriculum which the Education Department seeks to revise through teacher and student feedback. As part of the preliminary assessment of this project, we are conducting pre and post student interviews. If you would like to participate in this process or have any questions regarding the curriculum, please do not hesitate to contact the Education Department.

Get Smart with Art curricula is available in the following subject areas:

1st–3rd Learning to Look at Art
4th California History: Native American Culture and Westward Expansion
5th American History: Colonial – Revolution
6th Ancient Western Civilizations
7th The Art of Africa and Mesoamerica
8th American History: Revolution – Reconstruction
9th–12th Site in Sight

To order these materials, please call 415. 750. 3522 or email ejennings@famsf.org
African Art Introduction

Africa is a vast continent made up of more than fifty countries with many different climates and types of land: hot savannas, deserts, green rain forests, large river valleys and snow-covered mountains. The Niger, the Nile, and the Congo are Africa’s three major rivers. Africa is inhabited by a greater variety of ethnic groups (or peoples) than any other continent. These groups speak hundreds of languages, practice diverse religions and customs, and—of course—create a wide variety of art.

Most of the African art at the de Young is from the area south of the Sahara desert, with a strong focus on West and Central Africa. This part of Africa has seen:

- the rise and fall of great trading empires;
- the development of sophisticated kingdoms with related court art and luxury items;
- the continuation of traditions—many centuries old—that dominate rural life outside of the big cities;
- the introduction of Islamic and European influences that have challenged and, in many cases, changed traditional religions, lifestyles, and art forms.

These historical trends can be followed and illuminated by examining objects in the de Young’s collection. We hope that studying these objects will help bring greater understanding of this huge and diverse continent.

Special thanks to Dr. Herbert M. Cole and Dr. Diala Touré for generously reviewing and providing invaluable additions to these materials.
GETTING STARTED

Part 1:

Building Background Knowledge and Developing Observational and Analytical Skills

Materials:
• Maps-Sub-Sahara Africa and world maps (wall and text)
• Student resource packets developed from Oakland Unified School District website (see bibliography)
• Description of DeYoung African Art Collection
• chart paper, overhead or chalkboard/erase board and writing utensils

Time: 30-45 minutes

Class work:

• Ask students to read background information on African art using DeYoung descriptions, texts, websites, reference and research materials. Review the geographical region of Sub-Sahara Africa using world and Africa maps. The teacher may also want to present some background information through a brief introductory lecture to the class.

• Brainstorm with class, using chart paper, overhead or writing board using these headings:

  What we know so far about African art:

  What questions we have/what we want to investigate:

Part 2

Sharpening observational/visual skills and note taking-Preliminary viewing of The African Collection at the deYoung Museum

Materials: Writing utensils and Artifact Note taking worksheets (see Appendix A) for each student

Time: 60 minutes
Class work:

If you have an LCD projector, use the DVD provided to introduce the objects to the class and review the meaning of each artifact.

If your classroom does not have computer availability, use the Object Information Sheets and place them in different stations throughout the classroom. Hand out Artifact Note taking Sheets to students and review these sheets with class. As students to rotate through the stations, until all students have seen all artifacts and have taken notes about these objects.

*This activity could be done in partners or teams of three.

Part 3
Researching artifact and creating first draft of exhibit display

Materials:

• research texts, website information, maps, art history books, history books

• notetaking materials

• scanner or photography materials for display

• art materials

Time: 90 minutes

Class work:

• Divide students into Museum Design Display teams, three students to a team. Assign one of the African exhibit artifacts to each team. Their task is to create an exhibit for that artifact. Using the Previewing the Artifact note taking sheet (see Appendix B), students jot down what they notice and what they wonder about the artifact. This process narrows the focus for their research and writing.

• Explain to your students that the deYoung is searching for an outstanding design display team. A competition will be held in your classroom and judges* (*you and your class or invited guests from your school) will choose teams that are eligible for the competition based on the development of their exhibit and the tour they offer of the exhibit.
• Design displays for each team include written description of the artifact, photo or drawing of the artifact, and an oral presentation by the team about the artifact.

• Students then research information about their object and its importance to the collection.

• Students write a description of the artifact including its history, uses, materials, artist, cultural importance, factual information about the country of origin, relevance during historical time period, archeological facts, museum involvement (acquisition/preservation/donor). Teachers may want to use descriptions from DeYoung Museum catalogue as writing models for students. From the written description, the audience should understand the relevance of this artifact to the African Collection. Using the writing process, students read their descriptions aloud to each other, checking for coherence, clarity of ideas and information, and logical order of information presented. After drafts are completed, students edit for grammatical and spelling correctness.

• Students design their display using their writing, artwork, labels, etc.

Part 4

Presentation Preparation and Rehearsal

Materials: All materials necessary for mounting Design Display Exhibits in classroom, such as scissors, tape/glue, yarn, paper, stencils, tagboard, colored pencils, etc.

Time: 45 minutes

Class work:

• Students prepare and mount their museum exhibit for Design Display competition.

• Students prepare an outline for the oral presentation of their artifact exhibit. These presentations should take into consideration how to create interest about their artifact for the audience of judges. Students should then rehearse their presentations so that each team member knows what they will show and what they will say. Review with students the pointers of a good oral presentation, including use of voice modulation, use of eye contact, enunciation, etc.
Part 5

Presentations to judges

Students present their Design Display Team Artifact Exhibit to the panel of judges. Presentations are judged on quality of written material, oral presentation, and design display. Rubric for judging can be created by the class.

DeYoung Visit

Students are ready to enjoy a real-life tour of the African Exhibit at the deYoung Museum. Arrange a time to take students to the deYoung Museum. After the tour at the deYoung Museum, ask students to individually write up a summary of their tour and a comparison between their classroom exhibit and the deYoung exhibit. They can discuss their ideas with their groups first. What were the differences? What were the similarities? How would they change their own exhibit after seeing the deYoung exhibit?

Extension:

Art activities related to the African collection at the deYoung Museum can be found at www.thinker.org. If collaboration between social studies, language arts, and art instructors is a possibility, the classroom exhibit could feature the visual and written work of the students rather than the art objects from the deYoung Museum.

• Students could create a museum catalogue of their exhibits, including their written and pictorial work for the competition.

• Students could create a virtual tour of their exhibits from the competition using a variety of technology programs such as a slide show.

• Students could invite other classes, parents, or administrators for a docent tour of their exhibits.
# Artifact Note Taking Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Object Name:</th>
<th><strong>Main Ideas:</strong> Take notes on the significant details of the person, role, when, where and function of this piece.</th>
<th><strong>In your own words:</strong> Put these notes in your own words.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Who/What</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Role</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>When/ Where</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Function</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other information: <em>Materials and Details on Piece</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Appendix A*
## Previewing the Artifact

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I Notice</th>
<th>I Wonder</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Write down things you see in your artifact</td>
<td>Write down questions you have about your artifact</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Appendix B*
Additional Reading
Fiction and Non-Fiction
7th Grade African Get Smart with Art @the de Young

Fiction:


Non-Fiction:

1. Ayo, Yvonne. AFRICA. Photographs by Ray Moller and Geoff Dann. DK, 2000. This introduction includes information on the gold of the Asante, rulers and leaders, masks, musical instruments, and many other topics.

2. Azuonye, Chukwuma. DOGON. Rosen, 1996. Describes the Dogon people of Mali and Burkina Faso, primarily grain farmers, noted for their colorful masks and symbolic wooden statues. Part of The Heritage Library of African Peoples. Also: ASANTE; IGBO; MALINKE; YORUBA.


List prepared by:
Grace Ruth, Office of Children & Youth Services, San Francisco Public Library.
**Prestige Trumpet**
Mende, Sierra Leone  
Early 20th century  
Elephant ivory  
5¾ x 30¼ x 3 7/16 in. (14.9 x 78 x 9 cm)  
Gift of Peter and Ann Wengraf  
1994.169.1

I wonder...
Ivory Chief’s Trumpet  

**West Africa**

**Age:**  
Around 100 years old

**Size:**  
2½ feet long

**Function:**  
To announce the arrival of high-ranking chiefs

For hundreds of years, ivory trumpets such as this were used in West Africa to announce the arrival of high-ranking chiefs. The music made by an ivory horn of this size is similar to the trumpeting sound of an elephant. This horn retains the shape of the elephant’s tusk. Within Africa, the elephant has long been respected for its power and wisdom. The ivory from its tusks is also admired for its hardness, color, rarity, and shine. Ivory has played an important role in Africa’s history. It has been made into luxury items for traditional African use such as this trumpet. It has been traded to Arab merchants who crossed the Sahara Desert. Over the last 200 years, huge amounts of African ivory were exported by colonial powers. As a result, the African elephant is now an endangered species, and the international trade of ivory has been banned.

Why does it look like this?

The *Mende* carver who made this trumpet playfully carved the hole (used to blow into the trumpet) in the figure’s chest, exactly where the lungs would be. The figure wears a western style hat, influenced by European hat styles. During the late 1800s, Great Britain began to trade with the Mende people; at the same time European-style clothing began to appear on traditional Mende art objects such as this.

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**Colonial powers:** During the 1800s, many European countries claimed land in Africa. These European countries or colonial powers were interested in Africa as a source of wealth through the supply of slaves and raw materials. Between 1900 and 1975, African countries won their right to self-government.

**Mende:** a group of African people who live in Sierra Leone and Liberia.

**Traditional:** In this discussion, the term “traditional” refers to older African ways of life, beliefs, art styles, and religions that were in place before the arrival or great influence of European and Muslim cultures.
• I notice. . .

Plaque: Girl with Leopard
Kingdom of Benin, Edo, Nigeria
Ca. 1600
Bronze or brass, 17¾ x 7 in. (45.1 x 17.8 cm)
Museum purchase, William H. Noble Bequest Fund 1980.31

• I wonder. . .
This young female figure was probably a royal servant in the Benin court. On her shoulder is a water jug in the form of a leopard. Actual leopard jugs like this were used in Benin court ceremonies. The leopard is a symbol of the Benin king. For many years the Benin kings actually kept leopards at the royal palace, and they were also given as sacrifices to royal ancestors.

**Why does it look like this?**

The detailed marks on the royal servant’s body might have been patterns of body paint. The plaque is pierced at the four corners so that it could be attached to a pillar of the royal palace.

---

**In West and Central Africa** there were many great kingdoms built, in part, on the wealth that resulted from long-distance trade. Many beautiful pieces of art were made for these royal courts. This plaque was made over 400 years ago to decorate the royal Benin palace in present-day Nigeria. The plaque is made from bronze, a costly and rare metal often used in royal art. The artists of Benin were experts in bronze casting. In fact, this part of Africa had perfected metalworking long before Europeans arrived on the coast in the 1470s and 1480s.
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Kingdom of Benin, Edo, Nigeria

Ca. 1600

Bronze or brass, 17¾ x 7 in. (45.1 x 17.8 cm)

Museum purchase, William H. Noble Bequest Fund

1980.31
I wonder...
Age: Around 100 years old
Size: Around 1 foot long
Function: To assist in sales transactions

Until around 1900, the Akan people of Ghana used gold (dust and nuggets) as their currency. The price of an object was measured using balance beam scales such as this. The buyer and the seller each had their own scale and set of fifteen or more brass weights. On one side of the scale was placed a brass weight, representing the agreed-upon price. On the other side, the gold was placed. The buyer adjusted the gold dust with a spoon until the scale balanced. Both the buyer and the seller weighed the gold dust on their own scales to be sure the transaction was fair. If there was a dispute, they went to another person whose weights they both trusted. This system of weighing gold came to this area through Muslim traders from the great trading kingdoms of Ancient Ghana and Ancient Mali.

West African gold comes from many locations in the forest and the savanna, especially from parts of what is now modern Ghana. Gold occurs naturally in some dirt, sand, and river gravel, as well as deep within the ground. Small amounts could be obtained by the simple panning of river sand and gravel. To find the rich deposits, however, workers had to dig shafts up to one hundred feet deep to reach the gold-bearing rock called “ore.” It was dangerous work, because the mine shafts could collapse.

Akan chiefs commonly charged taxes on miners and claimed ownership of all nuggets over a certain weight. Akan gold production reached its peak in the 1600s. Before that time, much gold was transported across the Sahara Desert, ending up in Europe. Many mines have been closed over the centuries, but some in Ghana are still open and producing gold today. Gold continues to be an important and symbolic material in the regalia of Akan chiefs and kings.
Gold Weight Scale

**Age:**
Around 100 years old

**Size:**
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**Function:**
To assist in sales transactions

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Gold Weight Scale with Funnel and Spoon
Ghana
20th century
Copper alloy metal and cotton fiber
10 x 8 x 2 3/4 in. (27 x 16 x 6 cm)
Gift of James and Lin Willis
2004.98a–e

I wonder...
I notice... 

I wonder...
Wooden Carving of an Ancestor or Deity

Age:
About 800 years old

Size:
Almost 7 feet tall

Function:
To aid in communication with the spirit world

This wooden figure is around 800 years old. It is very rare for a wooden object to survive for so many centuries in the African climate. This figure was made during the time of the great Mali and Songhai empires. Both of these empires were heavily influenced by the religion of Islam. As these empires expanded, the Dogon people left their early homelands to avoid confronting Islamic influences. They fled to the steep cliffs of an area called the Bandiagara plateau. This plateau, located in a remote part of Mali, provided the Dogon people with a geographically isolated homeland. This isolation was very beneficial for the Dogon during the time of the slave trade. The Dogon were among the few West African peoples who were able to avoid being taken as slaves. Since the Dogon had little contact...
with outside groups, their culture did not change much and remained very **traditional** until the early 1900s. During the mid-to-late 1800s and early 1900s, Islamic beliefs—which discouraged art in the image of people—eventually reached the region. This wooden figure was most likely hidden to keep it from being destroyed. It was probably placed out of sight in a dry cave. This would explain why the carving has survived for so long and why the wood has not disintegrated.

This figure represents an **ancestor** or a water spirit. In most traditional African religions great respect was paid to both ancestors and nature spirits. This figure would have served as a kind of altar and aided in the important communication between humans and the spirit world.

**Why does it look this way?**

The figure is both a male and a female! Most traditional African artists were not interested in showing the actual physical world or realistic human beings; they wanted to show the unseen world of legends and spirits. The artist who made this carving was perhaps demonstrating the Dogon cultural values of balance and male/female **duality**. The Dogon believe that at birth, each person has characteristics of both sexes; it is only later, in the teenage years, that people become fully male or female. Spirits, which are not human beings, also may be a combination of both male and female.

The figure’s upraised arms probably represent prayer or communication between this world and the unseen spirit world. The figure has marks, known as scarification, on its stomach and sides. Scarification is achieved when skin is cut and then rubbed with ash to make raised scars. Its purpose is to make a person more beautiful or to show membership in a group or status level in society.
Standing Ancestor or Divinity
Dogon, Mali
Ca. A.D. 1027–1209
Wood and metal, 68 x 12 x 10 in. (172.7 x 30.5 x 25.4 cm)
Museum purchase, gift of the Wattis Family, in loving memory of Phyllis Wattis, and Roscoe and Margaret Oaks Income Fund
2003.65
I notice. . .

I wonder. . .
Age:  
Over 100 years old

Size:  
1 foot high

Function:  
To play a central role in a masking ceremony

From around the year 1000 to the 1400s, the large trade networks of the empires of Mali, Songhai, and Ghana brought the religion of Islam, as well as the first systems of writing and numbers, to the west coast of Africa. This area already had a strong and important masking tradition. Masks and
**masquerades** served many functions. They helped people to
- contact the spirit world,
- teach proper behavior,
- celebrate farming rituals,
- enforce laws,
- or amuse and entertain an audience.

This mask, carved by an artist of the **Mano** people of **Liberia** in the 1800s, represents a human face with a huge bird beak. Along the edge of the mask are three rows of parallel lines and holes where a costume was once attached. A **masker** rarely wore a mask without wearing an entire body costume.

Also, this mask shows how Islam blended with **traditional** African religious practices such as masking. On the inner surface of the mask is Arabic writing from an Islamic prayer, included—no doubt—to give the mask the added power of Islam. Islam, as practiced in West Africa, flourished in part because of its flexibility in mixing with earlier traditional African religions. The older African religions survived because they possessed great strength and the ability to adapt to new influences.

**Why does it look like this?**

The forehead of this mask is covered with dried blood, feathers, and chewed kola nuts. These are the remains of ritual offerings made to the spirit of the mask. The bird represented in this mask is a hornbill, a large bird respected for its loyalty to family members, strong hunting abilities, and skill in nest building. The hornbill is a perfect symbol for the Mano society, a society that stressed loyalty, hard work, and achievement.
Hornbill Mask for Poro Society
Mano, Northwestern, Liberia
19th century
Wood, metal, cloth, fiber, and ink
12 x 5 ¾ x 15 in. (30.5 x 14.6 x 38.1 cm)
Museum purchase, gift of the Museum Auxiliary
73.9
I notice. . . . I wonder. . .
Power Figure, Akua’ba

Age: Around 100 years old
Size: Around 1 foot tall
Function: To ensure the birth of a healthy baby

Continuity of the family is a large concern in traditional African village society. The future of the family and of the group depends on having children. Human fertility is the subject of a number of art or ritual objects. This figure, made by the Asante people of Ghana, is called an akua’ba. These figures are made to aid in fertility or, if used by an already pregnant woman, to ensure the birth of a healthy, handsome baby. In order for the carving to work, a ritual expert (or priest) must first give it power through a ritual.

This Asante woman is modeling the way an akua’ba figure is worn tucked in her skirt wrapper in exactly the same position her now unborn child will later take. (Ghana, 1976)
usually done at the **shrine** of a nature spirit. A woman who wants to have a baby then ties the *akua’ba* in the back of her skirt, in the same position her real baby will later take. She treats the wooden figure like a real child, feeding it, rocking it to sleep, and adorning it with beads or a necklace. After the birth of her child, the mother may give the *akua’ba* to her daughter to play with like a doll. More likely though, the woman will return the *akua’ba* to the shrine of the nature spirit who helped her have the child.

An *akua’ba* is usually in female form. This is because Asante society is **matrilineal**, meaning that the line of descent is passed from the mother rather than the father. Thus, it is important that a woman have daughters to keep her family line going.

**Why does it look this way?**

The *akua’ba* reveals Asante ideas of beauty, but in an exaggerated form. A high, oval, flattened forehead, shiny black skin, and a ringed neck are all important beauty features. Mothers gently massage an infant’s skull to get a high, slightly flat forehead. (No real child has a head this thin or this flat.) The rings around the neck represent the fat of a healthy and well-fed child. Notice too that the *akua’ba* does not look like a child, but rather a young woman. Almost all traditional African art shows people as young adults in the prime of life.
I notice. . .

I wonder. . .
The productivity or fertility of gardens or farm crops is important among traditional African groups such as the Bamana. The Bamana are farmers who live in the dry grassland region of Mali called the savanna. The Bamana have a special association called Chi Wara that teaches its members about growing successful crops. Chi means to work or plant, and wara means wild animal.

This Chi Wara headdress shows a mythological or legendary being—a working wild animal—that taught the Bamana how to farm in ancient or legendary times. A headdress like this was tied to a basket worn on the head of a masker. A masker is the person who wears a mask or a headdress in a ceremony. During the
**masquerade**, the masker is no longer a person but is changed into the spirit represented in the mask—in this case, a “working wild animal spirit.” During the masquerade, the Chi Wara masker represents an antelope, leaping and pawing at the ground. The masker’s body is covered with long strips of plant fibers. The fibers hanging down from the mask represent the water necessary for successful crop growth. Young men dance with Chi Wara headdresses when they have finished an initiation to show their new adult status, promising to farm and provide for a family. They may also dance after having contests that determine the best farmer in the group.

Masks and headdresses are important art forms in West and Central Africa. They serve many purposes, including teaching, celebrating, and contacting the spirit world. They are ritual objects that are used only by certain people. Usually these people must belong to a special group in order to gain the right to use these ceremonial objects.

**Why does it look like this?**

Rather than making the headdress look like a real antelope, the artist wanted to highlight certain traits of the antelope such as speed, grace, and power. The artist gave this headdress several extra horns that probably symbolized the animal’s strength and power.
Antelope Headdress (Chi Wara Kun)
Bamana, Bamako region, Mali
20th century
Wood, brass, iron, and fiber
16 1/4 x 61/4 x 28 3/4 in. (41.3 x 17 x 73 cm)
Gift of Professor Erle Loran to the Fine Arts
Museums of San Francisco
1991.90
I notice.

I wonder...
The Kongo people live along the Atlantic coast and inland from the mouth of the Congo River. During the late 1400s and 1500s, the powerful Kongo kingdom grew even stronger through trade with the Portuguese. However, by the 1800s, civil wars and conflict had broken the kingdom into smaller, independent villages.

To create an object such as this required the skill of two important men in a traditional Kongo village. First, an artist would carve the figure. At this point, the wooden object was considered just a container. Then the carving would be passed on to a ritual expert or priest. This person carefully selected medicine...
items to give this carving its power. These items could be clay and dirt from graves, crystals, feathers, horns, fibers, beads, resins, and leaves. The powerful items were placed in or tied onto the head and stomach of the figure.

Figures such as this were used in taking oaths. People came before the figure and its ritual expert to make promises or finalize an agreement. Nails and blades were inserted in the figure to seal the promise or stir the figure to action. To identify the oath taker, hair or saliva was placed around the nail or blade before insertion. This identification allowed the figure (or its spirit) to know exactly where to find the oath taker if a promise was broken.

Why does it look like this?

Notice the way the figure is standing, hands on hips and feet apart. This stance is meant to show the aggressive and powerful nature of the spirit that lives in the image. The spirit stands ready to take on any problem. The figure’s open mouth shows its ability to talk. The tongue sticking out may refer to the oath taker licking the nail prior to its insertion.
Oath-Taking Figure (Nkisi Nkondi)
Kongo, Democratic Republic of the Congo
19th century
Wood, textile, bronze, branches, glass, nail, and horn
32½ x 12 in. (82.6 x 30.5 cm)
Museum purchase, gift of Mrs. Paul L. Wattis, and the Fine Arts Museum Acquisition Fund
1986.16.1
I notice. . .

I wonder. . .
Ancestor worship is central to most traditional African religions. **Ancestor worship** is giving honor and respect to one’s dead relatives. It is based on the belief that a person’s spirit lives on in the afterlife and continues to affect living family members and the productivity of farming land. It is crucial to please the spirits of **ancestors**, because they can influence the gods and help bring forth plentiful crops and healthy babies.

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**Reliquary Figure**

- **Age:** Around 100 years old
- **Size:** 1½ feet tall
- **Function:** To protect the bones of an important ancestor

**ancestor**: a relative from whom a person is descended, usually more remote than a grandparent, and usually not named

**ancestor worship**: honor and reverence paid to one’s deceased relatives

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**Winged Genius**

**Reliquary Figure**

**Ancestor worship** is central to most traditional African religions. **Ancestor worship** is giving honor and respect to one’s dead relatives. It is based on the belief that a person’s spirit lives on in the afterlife and continues to affect living family members and the productivity of farming land. It is crucial to please the spirits of **ancestors**, because they can influence the gods and help bring forth plentiful crops and healthy babies.
The bones of important ancestors were sometimes stored in special containers called reliquaries. This figure, made by the Sango people of Gabon, guarded a reliquary and its bones. The attached bundle contains powerful medicines and objects to help the figure do its work.

**Why does it look like this?**

Although the form of this reliquary figure is based on a human body (the diamond shape below the head suggests shoulders and arms), it is quite abstract. Faces and bodies in traditional African art were not meant to look realistic, because they usually referred to the unseen world of spirits.
Reliquary Figure (Mbumba Bwiti)
Sango, south-central Gabon
Early 20th century
Wood, bone, copper, brass, raffia, and pigment
18 3/8 x 4 1/2 in. (46.7 x 11.4 cm)
Gift of Janine and Michael Heymann
1993.91
I notice...

I wonder...
Age: Around 100 years old
Size: 8 inches tall
Function: To discover hidden knowledge through contact with unseen spirits

Traditional African religions sought to connect our physical world to the unseen supernatural or spirit world. One way to accomplish this was through divination, which is another word for “fortune-telling.” Divination is a process of trying to discover hidden knowledge through contact with unseen spirits. People throughout Africa (and around the world) use rituals of divination. Among the Yoruba, who live in Nigeria, the most popular form of divination is called Ifa. A Yoruba person experiencing bad luck or poor health, or wondering about going on a journey or starting a business, might go to an Ifa priest seeking knowledge and advice from the spirits. An Ifa priest must have many years of training to prepare him for his role in interpreting the wisdom of the spirits for his clients.
A bowl such as this would have belonged to an Ifa priest about one hundred years ago. Today ceramic divination bowls are more common. Divination bowls are used to store sacred palm nuts. The palm nuts—together with a divination tray and divination powder—are important tools in the divination ceremony. They help the priest to recognize which verses from a complex system of memorized knowledge he should recite to his client. These verses contain the answer to the client’s questions.

Why does it look like this?
The two kneeling figures, a male and a female, may represent people who have come to the diviner for answers. They support the bowl used to store the palm nuts. They kneel before the spirits with offerings. Here the woman makes an offering in a bowl, and the man offers the music of his drum.

The Yoruba have very specific ideas about how a piece of art should look. They believe a good carving should have *ewa*, which translates as “beauty” or “well made.” In order to have *ewa*, a work should

1) be depicted in the middle (not too young, but not too old; 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 this bowl by Yoruba standards, we can better appreciate and understand its beauty and value. Notice how large the figures’ heads are in relation to the rest of their bodies. To the Yoruba, the head houses one’s character, personality, wisdom, and potential. An artist will show the importance of the head by enlarging it in relation to the rest of the body.
Divination Bowl
Yoruba, Osogbo, southwestern Nigeria
Early 20th century
Wood, 8¼ x 6½ x 5 in. (21 x 16.5 x 12.7 cm)
Museum purchase, Phyllis C. Wattis Fund
1984.5