

## Living Arts of Africa

### Tour Description

From objects meant for daily use to regalia fit for kings, explore Mia's diverse collection from the continent of Africa. Learn about cultural topics such as masquerade and divination, as well as customs for settling disputes and initiating young men and women into the community.

### Tour Objective

This tour explores the rich diversity of African art through close study of masks, textiles, sculptures, and other objects from various parts of the continent. The collection is strong in the areas of West and Central Africa; however, be sure to include objects representing other regions as well (East, South, and North Africa—which includes Egypt and Morocco).

### Means

Be sure to include a variety of types of objects: sculptures, masks, textiles, furniture, containers, and/or accessories. Also try to include objects made of different media: wood, ivory, beads, shells, raffia, metal, and/or ceramics.

The galleries are not arranged chronologically or geographically. Rather, the layout stresses relationships among cultural groups and the mobility of people and objects throughout Africa.

The digital resources in the gallery will be helpful for some aspects of the tour. For example, the digital map is a good tool to orient people to Africa's rich diversity of countries, languages, religions, cultural groups, and practices. Pointing out iPads in the galleries to your groups gives them the opportunity to explore objects more deeply on their own after the tour.

### Important Tour Points

When touring the African art collection, talk about how these works were made to serve some purpose, whether utilitarian, ceremonial, or spiritual, in the daily lives of the people who produced them. Generally, African artists do not produce art to be hung on a wall or displayed in a museum case. Many objects serve more than one purpose and convey multiple meanings. Today, contemporary works are also produced for collector, tourist, or museum markets (for example, baskets or ceramics made for sale or fantasy coffins made for museums).

Many works of art in the African art galleries were made by or for women. Many others represent women as powerful life forces in their cultures. Be sure to include objects that address the contributions of women.

African art objects often depict human beings and animals. In contrast to the Western genre of portraiture, African figural art is not usually intended to be a portrait of a specific individual or a completely naturalistic rendering of the human or animal depicted. African artists often use size, shape, color, and pattern in non-naturalistic ways to emphasize certain aspects of an

TOUR DESCRIPTIONS:  
Living Arts of Africa

object. The result is the abstraction of human and animal forms, ranging from slight to severe, depending on the artist, the patron, and the cultural group. The embodiment of concepts and ideas is generally more important to African artists than accurate representation.

Because most of the works on view date from the 19<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, the galleries do not lend themselves to a chronological tour format. However, you can point out centuries-old traditions of art production and use by including older works such as the Ife *Shrine Head* (12-14th c., 95.84), the Djenne *Equestrian Figure* (about 1450, 83.168) or an ancient Egyptian object in order to talk about Africa's rich history.

**Vocabulary**

When discussing African art, use non-judgmental language. Many words that have commonly been used in the past are considered by many people today to be pejorative. These words include: *fetish*, *idol*, *magic*, *pagan*, *primitive*, *superstition*, *tribe*, *voodoo*, *cult*, and *witch doctor*.

For example, the term *primitive*, when applied to African culture, implies the art is crude or simplistic or the artist lacks skill or knowledge. African art is in fact, highly sophisticated and requires great skill to produce.

When referring to the *religious practices* or *beliefs* of a particular people, use those words to describe them rather than *superstition*, which suggests belief based on fear or ignorance. *Pagan* was a term commonly used in the past to describe a belief or practice that was not Christian, Jewish, or Islamic. *Pagan* today suggests that a person or culture has no religion, so to use this term in regard to Africans, whose cultures embrace many religious beliefs, is to deny the validity of religions unfamiliar to us.

Many non-Western cultures have *medical practitioners* or *ritual specialists* that utilize methods that may seem foreign to some of us. However, it is inappropriate and disrespectful to call a practitioner a *witch doctor*, refer to a religious practice as *voodoo*, or call the objects they use *fetishes* or *idols*. Use the proper name of the objects in the gallery as given on labels. Refer to objects used in religious practices as *sacred objects*.

For more information about touring, also see the following documents:  
Touring the African Galleries: General Suggestions and Guidelines  
Tips for Touring African Art with Young People

**Tour  
Organization**

Organize the tour according to different purposes for which art is made: political power and prestige, initiation, economic and social well-being, daily life, performance and spiritual practices, expressions of identity, and more. Most of the themes given below address several of these aspects.

## Themes

### **Art Reflects the Culture**

Convey the richness and diversity of Africa's many cultures through close study of the art works they create.

### **African Art in the Cycle of Life**

Discuss the many purposes for which art is made in Africa: political power and prestige, initiation, economic and social well-being, daily life, departure. Remember to focus on the art works themselves. Consider how the purpose might have dictated the way objects look.

### **Art as Communication**

Discuss the diverse ways that African artists communicate cultural traditions, ideals, and spiritual beliefs through shape, colors, pattern, scale, and proportion.

### **Humans and Animals**

Explore the many ways and reasons African artists represent humans and animals in art.

### **The Power of African Art**

Examine the ways many African art objects express political, economic, ancestral, religious/ceremonial and gender-related (generative) power and authority.

### **Spirituality in African Art**

Explore many different types of objects that serve religious/ceremonial functions and embody spiritual concepts central to various African cultures. Africans practice not only traditional religions, but also Christianity, Judaism and Islam, all of which are evidenced in objects in the collection. How do these objects visually express spiritual concepts?

### **Encounter and Exchange**

Discover the relationships among African cultures through trade and migration and explore Africa's connections to the rest of the world via trade and colonialism by focusing on objects that reflect encounters and exchanges of ideas and iconography.

### **Personal Adornment and Dress**

Look closely at examples and representations of clothing, jewelry, accessories, hairstyles, and scarification to discover how they communicate status, gender, rank, occupation, and age of the wearer and inform us about the political, economic, and social structures of African cultures.