

Touring the African Galleries: General Suggestions and Guidelines

Tour Objective and Means

During any tour of the Africa galleries, explore the rich diversity of African art. You can accomplish this objective through the study of a variety of object types (masks, pots, staffs, thrones, etc.), materials (wood, ceramics, metal, etc.), and cultural groups/geographic regions.

Below are suggestions for key ideas to explore and stereotypes to avoid when giving African art tours. Be careful about making generalizations; though there are some concepts, conventions and practices that can be seen throughout much of the African continent, each cultural group also maintains its own belief system, language, traditions/adaptations, and system of governance. When you speak in general terms, avoid using words like "always" and "never;" "sometimes" or "often" are better. Look for a balance between the continuity and the diversity of the African continent. For example, we can assume some shared characteristics within U.S. culture, but we would also differentiate between a person from New York City, Los Angeles, or Minneapolis, based on regional culture and ethnic diversity.

Geography

The African continent is over three times as large as the contiguous U.S., composed of many countries and nearly 1000 ethnic groups. Its geography and climate vary from deserts to tropical rainforests, forested savanna grasslands, mountains, and great rivers. The geography and climate have a direct bearing on the art that is produced.

Key Ideas for Touring

Explain to your audience that most African art was made to serve some purpose, whether utilitarian, ceremonial, or spiritual. Generally, the African artist does not produce art to be hung on the wall or displayed in a museum case. Many African art works represent ideas about something, rather than the thing itself. In Africa, art is a universally understood central part of community life. Its function is to embody and transmit society's values and traditions. Religion, the arts, and the basic structure of the community are one. Art is frequently an agent of social stability, religion, or social control.

Discuss the role of the artist in African cultures. Men and women commonly play very different roles in art production and use throughout Africa. Plan to feature objects made and used by both. Although we have not retained the names of the artists who produced most of the older objects in our galleries (as is the case in most museums with collections of African art), in their own communities, artists were known and recognized as skilled professionals.

Although many of Mia's objects date from the 19th to 21st centuries, this does not mean that art production in Africa is new. There are centuries-old traditions of art production and use throughout Africa. Although our galleries do not lend themselves particularly to a chronological tour format, you may want to point out older works from the kingdoms of Mali, Ife, Benin, and Egypt to reinforce this point.

Tour Vocabulary

When discussing African art, use language that is non-judgmental. 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, tribe, superstition, voodoo, cult, and witch doctor.

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

Tribe and *tribalism* should also be avoided whenever possible. Tribe is a Western word and concept used to describe non-Western cultures. It is used by some Africans to refer to cultural groups, but it can be easily misconstrued as pejorative. It can connote a lack of sophistication and development that is inaccurate when discussing African cultures. You can substitute **cultural group**, **language group**, or **people(s)** for the word tribe in virtually all situations.

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 many cultures encompass many religious beliefs, is to deny the validity of religions which are unfamiliar to us.

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

It is possible that someone on a tour might use one of these words to ask a question or make a statement. It is important that you do not judge that person based on his/her choice of vocabulary; we want to encourage a learning environment. Also, do not correct the person overtly—especially in front of the group. The best way to introduce culturally sensitive words is simply by modeling; use appropriate terms in your own vocabulary and many of your audience members will hear that and incorporate them into their own speech.