

African Arts and Artists

The continent of Africa is enormous! It comprises 54 countries and is home to over a billion people. Many of the African artworks at Mia were made to be used in daily life, on special occasions, to show status, and to communicate with the spirit world. Because artists made these cultural resources/artworks to be used by individuals and communities, they designed them to communicate meanings through visual clues, ranging from images of humans and animals to patterns, colors, shapes and writing that symbolize diverse meanings depending on who sees them. Sometimes the artists integrated sounds, textures, and smells to enhance the power of these cultural resources to communicate. Let's look at artworks from ancient Egypt through today from throughout the African continent and beyond to learn about what they communicated when they were made and what they say to you now!

ARTWORK 1:

Ancient Egyptian, Egypt, Africa

Cartonnage of Lady Tashat, 945–712 BCE, Painted and varnished linen

The William Hood Dunwoody Fund, 16.414

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. This mummy case from Egypt (Kemet) in North Africa was created for Lady Tashat, the daughter of a provincial governor. She died when she was a teenager.
2. Most of the painted designs on the case are typical of mummies from Egypt (Kemet) in this time period, which showed idealized faces, huge beaded collars, and chest ornaments in the form of a winged sun disk.
3. Painted scenes arranged in horizontal bands show a lot of different Egyptian gods and symbols that could help protect the person who died as they journeyed to the next world. These symbols include an ankh which signifies life, and an eye that refers to the protector bird Horus.
4. The inscriptions written in hieroglyphs on the coffin are prayers to the gods for offerings of food and clothing in that afterlife.

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. Look closely at this painted case that was made to hold the mummy (wrapped body) of a young girl. What do you see? What else? What colors do you see?
2. This mummy case contains a lot of messages to the Egyptian gods that helped guide Lady Tashat from her life on earth to the next life. Look at the mummy case to find an ankh (looks like a loop on a cross), which symbolizes life. Why might a symbol of life be a good thing to have on your mummy case? Look for a protective eye symbol. Why do you suppose it might be useful to have an extra eye on the long journey to the next life?
3. Find the picture that shows a green man on a throne. This is Osiris the god of the afterlife, the place Lady Tashat was destined to go. What about this image communicates that he is an important god? Why would someone want a picture of him on their mummy case?
4. Look at the picture of Teshat inside of the coffin. What details do you see? How might having your picture in your coffin help your soul connect with you in the afterlife?

ARTWORK 2:

Ancient Yoruba, Nigeria, Africa
Shrine head, 12th–14th century, Terracotta
The John R. Van Derlip Fund, 95.84

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. Royals in the ancient city of Ife, in present-day Nigeria, often hired artists to create life-like portraits like this in clay or bronze of themselves, friends, and family. This portrait was painted to add even greater realism. This portrait head was likely part of a full-bodied sculpture before being broken.
2. The vertical lines following the natural contours of this royal woman's may be shadows cast by the veiled royal crown worn by royalty in her day, like the one you can see on the King's Crown in these galleries. The rings of flesh around her neck communicate that she and her wealthy household had all the food and drink they needed and then some.
3. This woman's inventive and unique headdress or hairstyle features seven parallel ridges. Other clay portrait heads from the same place and similar time also feature hairdos that demonstrate the importance of standing out from the crowd!
4. Some people who study the art of the Yoruba speculate that these portraits made of clay were created by female artists.

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. Look closely at this clay portrait of a royal Yoruba woman from ancient Ife, the homeland to the Yoruba in Nigeria. Describe her. What do you notice? What do you wonder about? How do you think she is feeling? What do you see that makes you say that?
2. The lines on her face might be shadows cast from a veiled crown. Why do you suppose the artist chose to show the veil as shadows rather than as a real veil? Why might the royal woman shown here want people to see all of the features of her face?
3. The lines on her face, rings of flesh on her neck, and her headdress or hairdo all communicate the status of this woman. This was important to people of her social class at the time. What do you think would be most important to communicate in a portrait sculpture of a leader today? Of yourself? Of a hero?

ARTWORK 3:

Somalia, Africa

Qur'anic writing board, 20th century, Wood, ink

The Rebecca and Ben Field Endowment for Art Acquisition, 2017.92

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. This is a writing board made to help students in Somalia, in East Africa, learn Arabic grammar, the holy text of the Qur'an, and the art of calligraphy. In Somalia and elsewhere in Africa, Muslim children frequently learn to read and write on boards like this. They use ink made of soot and water that can easily be washed!
2. The text on the two sides of this board show Surah 49, Verses 11-12 from the Qur'an, which warn against ridiculing, insulting, and backbiting each other.
3. The artistic form of this tablet is distinctive to a geographical area or group. This tablet is recognizable as coming from Somalia because of its large size, long and narrow silhouette, the "feet" at the bottom, and the rounded handle at the top.
4. Label by Fadumo Anshuur, Somali American: I have never personally used a Loox (Writing Board), yet for me, the Loox represents the very foundation of education and literacy in Somalia. It represents young children sitting near a fire and using ink to write the verses of the Quran from memory. It represents the start of a child's path to education. No child goes to school, picks up a book or pencil, if they first have not sat down in front of a Loox. Education is a guarded treasure, and to prove their readiness for it, children must first start by learning the patience to sit, write, read, and memorize the words of God.

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. Look closely at this writing board from Somalia made from a plank of wood. What do you notice about the writing board? How would you describe it? What do you wonder about it?
2. Learning to read and write Arabic is an important part of Muslim children's education in Somalia. How do you think the size and shape of this writing board once used by groups of children and their teachers helps to communicate the importance of these skills?
3. The writing shows Quranic verses which warn against ridiculing, insulting, and backbiting each other. Why are these important messages to communicate and learn? From whom or from what sources do you learn about good behavior?

ARTWORK 4:

Aziz Osman, United States, 1948

Wonder of the Night, 2018, Acrylic on canvas

Gift of funds from the Mia Docent Class of 2015, 2019.46, © Aziz Osman

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. Aziz Osman's painting *Wonder of the Night* reflects the artist's experiments with fluid acrylic paint; he allowed the colors to flow and mix on the canvas.
2. This nighttime scene painted from memory shows a market bustling with activity. Some shapes are recognizable, including faces, arms, robes, and headdresses. Osman focuses largely on female figures.
3. One of seven children, Abdulasis "Aziz" Osman grew up in Mogadishu and enjoyed an aristocratic upbringing. After studying academic painting in Europe and returning to Somalia, He escaped death by firing squad during the civil war.
4. Since coming to Minnesota in 1991 Osman has painted scenes of his homeland. He views his paintings as a fight for cultural survival so that no one will forget Somalia.
5. Based on Islamic teaching, many practitioners of Islam believe that artists should not make images of humans or animals—anything with a soul. Osman was criticized for showing figures. In response he said, "I can do my painting and no one can stop me—only god." (KFAI's Minneculture)

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. Look closely. What do you see? What else? What's going on in this scene? What do you see that makes you say that? What else can you find? What do you wonder about this painting?
2. The painting's title is *Wonder of the Night*. Why might Aziz Osman have wanted to paint a group of people at night? What is unique about nighttime that artists might find particularly interesting or challenging?
3. How does the painting make you feel? What about it makes you feel this way?
4. Engage your senses. This is a picture of largely Somali women at an outdoor market. Think about a memorable outdoor, nighttime experience that you remember because of the smells, sounds, sight, and maybe even the tastes. What do you think the people in the picture might be hearing? Seeing? Smelling? Touching? Tasting.
5. Aziz Osman endured criticism from members of his Muslim community who hold the belief that depicting beings with souls, including humans and animals, is prohibited by Islamic teachings. Osman, however, was driven by a sense of urgency to document the Somalia he left behind as a means of preserving culture. He also wanted to teach Somali children about their roots and inspire them in their own artmaking. What, if any, experience have you had with being so committed to your own goals or belief system, that you risked offending others who did not share your opinion.

ARTWORK 5:

South Africa, Africa

Beaded Apron (Jocolo), 20th century, Leather backed by cloth, glass beads, 2 leather thongs

The William Hood Dunwoody Fund, 90.51

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. This apron from South Africa, communicated that the Ndebele woman who wore it was married. This is recognizable as a married woman's apron because it is elaborately adorned. Additionally, the five rounded flaps identify this apron as a special kind reserved for special occasions, called a jocolo. The apron may have been beaded by her mother in law. Or she might have beaded it herself on a plain leather skirt with five flaps given by her husband's family. The panels, referred to as "calves," symbolized children in her future.
2. Throughout their lives, many Ndebele women traditionally wear various aprons that show their stage in life from pre-adolescence to marriage. Each one is recognizable by its shape and designs. The colors and designs on each apron communicate other information about the wearer, her identity, and her family as well.
3. Some Ndebele decorate their homes with geometric wall paintings, which include abstract designs of rectangles, lines, and triangles, to represent the homestead. Around the early 1900s this same design type became popular on jocolo.
4. The very small glass beads used to make this also help us figure out that it was made between 1900 and 1950. After that time, larger beads—some made of plastic—became more popular.

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. Look closely at this beaded apron. Describe what you see. Think about how the artist might have embroidered all the beads together to create this. Describe the designs. How did the artist use color to make the design so bold?
2. Some of the shapes (rectangles and triangles) and lines on this skirt refer to the home or homestead. Some Ndebele also paint these designs on the outside of their houses. Where do you see designs that might be about a house or home? Why do you suppose they would want to make designs about their home?
3. The five flaps and elaborate design of this apron communicated to the community that the wearer was married. When she was younger she wore different aprons to show her social status. What traditions does your family, community, or culture have for communicating that someone is married? What other types of status do people communicate through their clothes?
4. What do you hope to communicate through the clothes you wear?

ARTWORK 6:

Lobala, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Africa

Slit gong, 1940, Wood

The Mary Ruth Weisel Endowment for Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, 2012.66

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. This slit gong from the Democratic Republic of Congo in Central Africa is an instrument sometimes called a “talking drum.” Technically speaking, it is not a drum since it has no membrane (the surface stretched across a drum that one hits to make sound). A slit gong is an instrument type called an idiophone, since the instrument vibrates to produce sound when struck.
2. The artist who carved this formed it by hollowing out a log through a long narrow opening. One edge of the opening is thicker and emits a low tone when struck, while the thinner side gives a high tone. Slit gongs are usually played with sticks, the ends of which are sometimes covered with rubber.
3. Because slit gongs can mimic the tones of human speech, they are used to transmit messages over long distances. Slit gongs are also used in parts of Central Africa to make music during dance performances. A performance could include an orchestra of different sized slit gongs, each of which produced a unique range of tones.
4. Based on comparison to other Lobala slit gongs, it is likely that the form itself refers to a water buffalo or other large animal. Artists made these instruments large and impressive because they represented the power of forest spirits and community chiefs.

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. Look closely at this very large wooden instrument called a slit gong. How would you describe it? What details do you notice? What does it remind you of? What do you see that makes you say that? How do the designs around the body of the instrument make you feel?
2. This large instrument (it is about 7 feet long!) communicates the power of forest spirits and community chiefs. How might the size alone communicate power? How does the animal-like form of the slit gong convey power? While this slit gong is pretty abstract, others more clearly show large animals like water buffalo.
3. This drum also communicates through the sounds it makes. When a performer struck the instrument with a stick, mallet or bare hands. It produced different pitches (high tones and low tones) that mimicked tonal language or talking. What are some ways that sounds communicate meaning in your life? What kinds of messages are communicated through sound? What are some instances when you change the tone of your voice to communicate something?

ARTWORK 7:

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. This mask was made by a Mende artist from Sierra Leone to be worn by a mature woman, a member of the community's Sande Society, as part of a ceremony to celebrate young girls becoming adults.
2. The masking tradition of the Sande Society is nearly unique in West Africa. Though it is common practice in Africa for masked dancers to participate in coming of age ceremonies it is only among the Mende, Temne, and a few other groups in Sierra Leone and Liberia that women own and wear masks for this purpose.
3. The mask was not intended to be a specific portrait; rather, it communicates ideals of behavior and beauty of Mende women. For example, the smooth high forehead indicates wisdom and success. In Mende thought, a woman's future may be told by her forehead. The eyes and mouth both communicate the idea of discretion—not confronting someone with your eyes and not speaking badly. The lines on her neck signify good health (and, to some, wealth and status). Her intricate hairdo is a sign of beauty associated with orderliness.
4. The mask is not just decorative—it is worn to call in a special spirit during the ceremony. The woman who wears the mask covers her entire body to let the spirit take over.
5. Sande Society provides women the opportunity to acquire political expertise and a strong support base for those who pursue political careers. Owing to their strong Sande Society, Mende women have held a significant percentage of paramount chieftaincies in Sierra Leone.

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. Look closely at this mask. The mask represents ideals of beauty and behavior that are highly valued among Mende women. What do you see? What ideals of beauty do you think the mask is communicating? What do you see that makes you say that? The mask suggests that women should be modest and tidy. What are some ways the mask suggests these ideals?
2. The artist carved the top of the mask from wood and attached dyed palm fiber called raffia for the bottom portion. Imagine the artist carving away small pieces of wood, bit by bit, to achieve the details of the eyes, lips, hairdo and even the ears. How do you think the different parts of this mask would feel if you could touch it? How would the bottom of the mask feel? Now imagine the woman who wore it spinning around. What would happen to the fibers as she spun?
3. The community that would see this mask being performed understood the ideals of beauty it promoted. Where do you look for your ideals of beauty? Who is determining the ideals of beauty that you see and hear all around?

ARTWORK 8:

Amoako Bofo, Austria, 1984 (Born in Accra, Ghana)

2pc Floral Suit, 2020, Oil on canvas with collage

Gift of Mary and Bob Mersky, 2021.115.11

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. Amoako Bofo painted this portrait using his fingers to apply oil paint to the unnamed person's face and hands. The painting is very gestural, but also detailed. As described by Bofo, "I use painting as an instrument, both literally and to navigate the human experience. The hands and faces of the figures in the works have been finger-painted, [which] allow[s] me to create freely and to achieve an expressive skin tone, formed by blue, red and brown tones." (Wallpaper.com)
2. Bofo enjoys the lack of control he has with using his fingers and appreciates that the organic nature of his technique shows through in the abstract forms that create the "beautiful faces of my subjects."
3. Amoako Bofo, a Ghanaian artist who works in Ghana and Austria, honors Black peoples' place in the pictorial tradition of portraiture by "documenting, celebrating and showing new ways to approach blackness." (UnitLondon.com) He breaks boundaries in his non-traditional portraits by showing the wide range of experiences of Black masculinity, including gender ambiguity, as in this portrait.
4. Bofo loves fashion. The patterned garments are often created from Bofo's collection of European wallpaper or gift wrap paper through a photo transfer process. He hopes to elevate the environments of his subjects through vivid color and intriguing patterns.
5. The sensuality of Bofo's treatment of skin has led to comparisons with Austrian painter, Egon Schiele.

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. Look closely at this portrait painting by Amoako Bofo, a Ghanaian artist who works in Ghana and Austria. How would you describe the figure in the portrait? What do you see that makes you say that?
2. Look very closely at the way the paint on this figure's face and hands is applied to the canvas. What do you notice? The artist applied the paint to the canvas using his fingers! He enjoyed not having as much control of the paint when he used his fingers. Where might you see examples of this happening in this painting? How does the application of the paint make you feel?
3. Bofo wants to break boundaries in his non-traditional portraits by showing the wide range of experiences of Black masculinity, including gender ambiguity. How has he achieved this goal in this portrait? Why is communicating this diversity so important today?

Other Options!

ARTWORK 9:

Bwa, Burkina Faso, Africa

Plank Mask, 1960, Wood, pigment

The William Hood Dunwoody Fund, 98.2

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. This painted wooden mask from Burkino Faso, called Nwantantay ([n]wahn-tahn-tay), was used to help celebrate the graduation from childhood to adulthood of Bwa young men and women. It communicated that the young men and women had completed receiving education in Bwa values, histories and ways of doing things from their elders.
2. Part of what the boys learned was how to make elements of masks like this one and how to perform in them. The girls learned songs to sing while the mask was performing.
3. They also learned about the symbols on masks like this one which communicate important meanings to the community. The symbols include:
 - Black-white-red is the important relationship between elders and young
 - Round projecting mouth = may represent ancestors' sacred wells that never go dry
 - Hooked nose = some Bwa refer to this as a hornbill beak. This bird is an intermediary between the living and dead
 - X = a mark of devotion
 - Zigzag lines = path of ancestors. It is also a symbol of the path of proper behavior, which can be difficult to follow
 - Upward crescent = quarter moon, under which some education to become an adult takes place
 - White triangles under crescent = "bull roarers" which are a type of sound maker swung on long cords during masquerades to recreate spirit voices
4. The performer who wore this mask on various occasions, including harvest celebrations and funerals, danced alongside others in a variety of masks. His body was fully covered in an outfit made of hibiscus fibers dyed red, black and white.

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. This is a very large mask. What do you see that tells you it is a mask? How is it similar from other masks you have seen? What do you see that makes you say that?
2. Describe this mask. What colors do you see? What kinds of designs do you see? All of these colors and designs have special meaning to the Bwa in Burkino Faso. What colors and symbols have special meaning in your daily life? At your school? In your community?

4. This mask connected the community to their elders and ancestors--the people that were once part of their families who died. How do you connect to your elders and ancestors in your community?

ARTWORK 10:

Yoruba, Nigeria, Africa

Crown, 1920, Glass beads, leather, canvas, wicker

The Ethel Morrison Van Derlip Fund, 76.29

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. This beaded crown was worn by a Yoruba king on ceremonial occasions as a sign of his divinity, authority, and power. It was part of an entire ensemble of clothing and accessories that communicated his power.
2. The birds on the top of the crown showed people his relationship to the spirit world and the powerful women in his community. The birds symbolize the women's power and send the message that the king can not act alone--he must consider the wisdom of the women in all that he does.
3. The veil on the crown symbolically represents the king's power because it prevented the people from making direct contact with the king's face. Instead they could focus on the face on the crown that connected them to their ancestors, including the founder of all Yoruba, Oduduwa.

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. Look closely at this crown from the West African country of Nigeria. What do you see? What recognizable images do you see? What colors do you see in the beads? What shapes do you see?
2. Look carefully at the texture of the crown. If you could touch it, how do you think it would feel? What sounds would it make as the king moved? What do you see that makes you say that?
3. The Yoruba king's crown identified the wearer as a king and gave him special powers to interact with the spirit world for the benefit of his people. What kinds of hats or other headwear do people wear today to identify their special role or status in the community? What would you choose to wear to tell other people something about yourself?
4. The birds on this king's crown symbolize the power of older wise women in the king's community. Why might the Yoruba place such value on older women? What about birds might make them a great image to symbolize the women's power?

ARTWORK 11:

Djenne, Mali, Africa

Equestrian figure, 1450, Wood

Gift of Aimée Mott Butler Charitable Trust, Anne S. Dayton, Mr. and Mrs. Donald C. Dayton, Mr. and Mrs. William N. Driscoll, Clarence G. Frame and Mr. and Mrs. Clinton Morrison, 83.168

Key Ideas (provide 2-4 per artwork)

1. This rare wooden sculpture of a horse and rider was made over 500 years ago in West Africa during an age of great empires. Early Arabic documents written by travelers to the great kingdoms of West Africa stress the importance of the court's cavalry and describe riders dressed just like this one.
2. The horse is clearly smaller than the man. This could be a way to communicate that the man is more important than the horse. On the other hand, some writers of the time describe the horses as being small. The small scale of the horse in this sculpture might be a realistic way of representing these small horses and their importance to the expansion of trade, wealth and territory during the age of Africa's great West African empires. Islamicized Berbers crossing the Sahara Desert brought horses to the region to establish trade routes and convert people to Islam around 800 CE.
3. Although the identity of this particular rider is unknown, his body language, fancy dress, and stock of weapons indicate he is a wealthy, commanding leader, much like the men described by Arab visitors to the Mali kingdom. The artist has focused the most naturalistic detail on the rider's emblems of rank—his weapons, costume, and jewelry.
4. The purpose or use of this sculpture, with its unusual-shaped base, remains unclear. Scholars have suggested that perhaps the object served as a stopper for a large clay pot or a container made from a big gourd. It also might have been used in ceremonies, perhaps as a staff-top for a very large pole

Suggested Questions (provide 2-3 per artwork)

1. Look closely at this wooden sculpture of a horse and rider. What do you notice first? What else do you see? What words would you use to describe the sculpture. What do you wonder about?
2. You probably noticed that the horse is very small, so small, in fact, that the man has to bend his legs to ride it. Think about whether or not the rider and his horse could get very far with his feet dragging on the ground. No! So why might the artist who made this sculpture show it this way? What message might the artist have been communicating by making the horse so small?
3. How does the artist communicate that this man is powerful? Look closely at his face, body language and the things he wears and holds. How do you communicate and demonstrate your strengths and special skills to others?