

AFRICAN ART

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PART I : **Arts, Crafts, and Architecture**

INTRODUCTION: African art has gone a very long way from the time it was described as fetish by European missionaries and colonialists through the time Benin artworks burst into Europe after the British Punitive Expedition of 1897 to now when African arts can be found in major museums and galleries across the globe. Factors such as the vegetation and climate of an area, social and political organizations, and functionality of the work affect artistic productions in African culture. For instance, the availability of timber could affect the production of wooden figures and masks and architecture as in West Africa and Central Africa. Patriarchal societies tend to focus on drums and masks while a matriarchal society as the Ashanti's produces things that relate to women such as the *akuaba*, the so-called fertility doll that Ashanti and Fanti women carry on their backs either to induce fertility or when already conceived to enhance their chances of having beautiful female children.

KINDS OF ARTS: African arts could be described as glyptic or plastic arts; glyptic art mainly rock engravings and paintings found in caves in desert areas as in the Sahara and Namib Deserts while plastic arts include metal, ivory, and wood works. Sculpture is the most popular plastic art form in African culture and includes works done in terra cotta, copper alloys (bronze and brass), and wood. Art works are also done in ivory, gold, and iron. One can talk of mixed media in African sculptural figures and masks as other materials other than wood are used. African rock art goes as far back as the Stone Age some 7000 years ago and might have been part of rituals of nomadic people in desert caves. Wood work is common in the rain forest and lower savannah belt areas of West Africa and Central Africa with West Africa renowned for human figures and Central Africa for huge masks as of the BaLuba and BaKongo groups. It is difficult to tell where crafts end and arts begin in Africa; they are all functional artistic productions.

AFRICAN WORLDVIEW affects the artistic productions. The belief systems of the people that involve gods/goddesses, ancestors and spirits are reflected in works. Thus there is the importance of religion and rituals or spirituality in African traditional art forms. The worldview and belief systems make African art generally representational or abstract. For instance, the African sculpture allots space according to importance; hence in human figures the head is exaggerated to show its importance in the body. Likewise, the woman's breasts and a man's genitals are also exaggerated because of their importance as life-giving forces.

FUNCTIONALITY: African art is generally utilitarian, unlike European/Western art for art's sake concept of art. Even walking sticks show social status as plate covers given by mothers to their daughters going into marriage meant to indicate the married woman's interest in resolution of marital problems. In architecture, the impluvium shows how houses are built to gather rain water in the Yoruba and Edo areas of Nigeria. Thus, functionality is a very important principle of African aesthetics because the "beauty" and "pleasure" of an African artwork lie in its function.

ARTISTIC TRADITIONS: Africa has a variety of artistic traditions and among the most famous are the Yoruba, Benin, Dogon, Bamana, Senufo, and Ashanti in West Africa; the BaKongo, BaLuba, and BaTeke in Central Africa; and the Zulu in South Africa.

Discussion Questions

1. Write a brief history of African art.
2. How has reception of African art changed in the West?
3. What are the aesthetic criteria of art in African culture?

Required Text

Frank Willet. *African Art*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 2002.

Other Readings

Suzanne Preston Blier. *African Royal Art: The Majesty of Form*. New York: Prentic Hall, 1998.

---. *Butabu: Adobe Architecture of West Africa*. Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004.

Jean Laude. *The Arts of Black Africa*. Berkeley/Los Angeles: U of California Press, 1971.

Phyllis M. Martin and Patrick O'Meara, eds. *Africa*. Third Edition. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1995.

Susan Mullin Vogel. *African Aesthetics: The Carlo Monzino Collection*. New York: Center for African Art, 1986.

PART II : African Arts today and Their Transformation

CHANGES: The arts, especially art and music, continue to evolve in every culture but so many factors have brought about changes in African arts to the extent that these artistic traditions have become more hybrid than purely African. This is expected of every culture but African culture has been more changed by forces from outside than Africa has changed other cultures. Excepting the role of African representational or abstract art on Cubism and Pablo Picasso, what else of significance has Africa done to change the artistic productions of others? Following from the earlier discussion of the arts, sculpture which used to be the main art form in traditional African art is losing its foremost position to painting which used to be practiced mostly in mountain caves in both the Sahara and Namib Deserts.

FACTORS OF CHANGE IN AFRICAN ARTS: Christianity, Western education and art teachers, Islam, and forces of modernization have all accelerated changes in African art. The tourist industry and the pressure of making money in a modern urban society have made artists more conscious of profit than at any time before. In the past, many traditional artists worked for the gods/goddesses or ancestors that made them look towards spiritual fulfillment and a sense of kinship among their communities. Other artists, as in Benin and other kingdoms, were patronized by the ruler and they were highly regarded in their societies. Today tourists have influenced art as among Dogon who perform with old masks to the Europeans and other foreign visitors who cherish the old ones over the new masks they wear to perform among themselves. Five-star hotels and airport shops sell African arts to foreigners and tourists that do not understand the tradition of the works, and so though the artists may make more money but art is being adversely affected as quality is ignored at the expense of quantity.

OTHER FACTORS that have changed the arts include increased means of communication, urban movements, mass media like the radio and television, and international art trade that has led to the theft of many African works. With improved means of communication, African artists can now procure materials and tools from anywhere in the world within weeks; instead of relying on their local environment they now have more materials and tools to work with.

CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN MUSIC is a good example of changes that the culture has incurred in recent decades. Improved communication now means that Africans consume on radio and cable television what is current outside Africa, especially in the United States and Europe, and that affects the artists' own productions. Almost every musical piece, even from little-known African groups can now be accessed through You Tube. Such a global village we now live in that once a musical piece is aired in any part of the world, it instantly reaches everywhere else. African hip-hop is thus an extension of African-American hip-hop that blares in FM radio stations across the continent.

CONCLUSION: African art, music, and other artistic productions are changing fast. Such traditional architectural constructions as the impluvium have changed with new metal roofs and underground tanks in compounds. Some African art has become part of international art trade at Christie's and Sotheby's. And contemporary music has become more diversified in the blending of indigenous African rhythms with new borrowings as of Fela Ransome-Kuti's Afro beat; a mixture of Yoruba and jazz music traditions.

Study Questions and Activities

1. Go to You Tube and listen to or watch some African music performances of Senegaese Youssou N'dour, Nigerian Fela Kuti, Ghanaian E.T. Mensah, and South African Hugh Masekela, among others to see the combination of modernity and traditionalism in African artistic transformation.
2. Will you consider African art and music benefitting or losing from the features of globalization?
3. How is tourism impacting on African arts?

Readings

Frank Willet. *African Art*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1985.

Wolfgang Bender. *Sweet Mother: Modern African Music*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

April A. Gordon and Donald L. Gordon, eds. *Understanding Contemporary Africa*. Fifth Edition. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2013.

Phyllis M. Martin and Patrick O'Meara, eds. *Africa*. Third Edition. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1995.

J.H. Kwabena Nketia. *The Music of Africa*. New York: Norton, 1974.

PART III : **Performing Arts** (Music and Dance)

DIVERSITY: African culture has a diversity of musical traditions which are connected to hundreds of ethnic groups, each with some type(s) of music for which it is known. Despite the diversity, there are common features in African traditional music. While there are professional musicians and dancers, everybody living the culture is expected to sing or dance. Music assumes a higher profile in the traditional non-literate culture. Music is communal and is tied to rites of passage such as birth, marriage, and death in different ceremonies. The professional musician is expected to have a good memory, a sweet voice, and a supple wrist to beat the drum and should apprentice himself or herself to a master musician/singer from an early age. While traditional African music is often accompanied with dance, there is personal music, group music, and what Mario Azevedo describes as "listeners' music" that is performed by professionals (254).

MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS are of different varieties in Africa and one should not get the impression that Africans use only drums. Perhaps the most comprehensive classification of African musical instruments has been done by Kwabena Nketia in *The Music of Africa*. African musical instruments fall into one of these categories: 1) idiophones which are self-sounding instruments that are either rhythmic such as rattles, bells, slit drums, or melodic such as xylophones and mbira (also called sansa); 2) membranophones which are instruments with a parchment head which are single-headed or double-headed drums of different shapes, sizes, and weight; 3) aerophones that include flutes, reed pipes, horns, and trumpets; and 4) chordophones of the plucked and struck varieties that include the harp, zither, lute, and lyre. Some instruments tend to be more found in some areas than others depending upon the environment. It must be noted that Africans have names for the instruments that are often called by Western names such as the Yoruba *sekere* called the gourd rattles, the Igbo *ogene* called the slit-drum, the *bata* drum called the hourglass drum, and the Shona *mbira* called the thumb piano.

SINGING STYLES: There are a variety of singing styles in African culture. These styles are often attributed to ethnic groups. However, across Black Africa there is the lead singer followed by a chorus, what is also called "call-and-response." Choral singing seems to be limited to Southern Africa. There are work songs, abuse songs, and praise and celebratory songs. African music is distinct in its polyrhythms and reliance on percussive rhythms. Other features include repetition and improvisation; both qualities are reinforced by the orality of African culture.

DANCE in African culture is social and artistic. According to Kwabena Nketia, African dance can be simple or intricate and each type of dance accentuates a body part such as breasts, trunk, belly, chest, shoulders, upper part of the body, and buttocks/hips. Men and women tend to dance differently even in the same dance tradition and dance drama is of three types: memorial as of hunters, chiefs and priests; drama of worship as in festivals; and social dance drama.

MUSICAL TRADITIONS in Africa include Juju music among the Yoruba, highlife music in West Africa, especially in Ghana, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone; rhumba/soukous in Central Africa, especially in Congo DR, and mbira among the Shona of Zimbabwe.

CONCLUSION: Music is always evolving and, as will be studied in Unit Three, there are many factors that influence the dynamism of African music.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the main features of traditional African music?
2. Discuss the main classification of African musical instruments.
3. How are music and dance related in traditional African culture?

Required Text

J.H. Kwabena Nketia. *The Music of Africa*. New York: Norton, 1974.

Other Readings

Mario Azevedo, ed. *Africana Studies: A Survey of Africa and the African Diaspora*. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2005.

Francis Bebey. *African Music: a People's Art*. NY: Lawrence Hill, 1975.

Paul F. Berliner. *The Soul of Mbirá*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978.

Graeme Ewens. *Africa O-Ye!: A Celebration of African Music*. London: Guinness Publishing, 1991.

Ronnie Graham. *The Da Capo Guide to Contemporary African Music*. NY: Da Capo Press, 2000.

Phyllis M. Martin and Patrick O'Meara, eds. *Africa*. Third Edition. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1995.

Alan P. Merriam. *African Music in Perspective*. New York: Garland, 1982.