

**African Art through the Centuries – Online Course**  
**Smithsonian Associates**  
**Lecture Notes**

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**From Stone Age to Iron Age**

- ❖ Extant stone age art includes pottery and rock art. It was produced by mobile hunter-gatherers.
- ❖ The entrance into the Iron Age allows people to transition into a sedentary agricultural lifestyle. This allows you to start to see the rise of large, city-state and empires.
- ❖ Civilizations produce art on a more monumental scale because a) it no longer has to be lightweight and portable, and b) increased population size allows for a division of labor and the development of an artistic class that can produce objects of aesthetic value

**Kingdom of Nri (?? - 900/1000 CE)**

- ❖ Until the middle years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Euro-Americans had presumed that there was no such thing as antiquity in Sub-Saharan Africa.
- ❖ All this changed in 1939 when a farmer in eastern Nigeria dug up a cistern in his backyard. It took until 1959 for a full archaeological investigation to take place. It was at that time that they found evidence of a lost civilization, one that dates to between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. The vast majority of the 721 objects recovered came from a single grave.
- ❖ These were made in metal and came from a single source: metal ores found on the banks of the Benue River (about 100km from the site known as Igbo-Ukwu).
- ❖ Objects are all made using the incredibly complicated Lost Wax Technique. These are luxury objects. Surface detail is incredibly fine. They incorporate representations of things as small as insects that seem to have just alighted on the surface. None of these were made separately and then riveted or welded onto the discs. They come from a singular casting.

**Ancient Nigerian Civilizations: Nok, Sokoto, Katsina (500 BCE – 200 CE)**

- ❖ These are some of the oldest known civilizations in sub-Saharan Africa and they produced a remarkable array of figurative terracotta works
- ❖ The most famous of these sculptures come from the town of Nok, which sits on the Jos Plateau in central Nigeria, and they were discovered from around 1920
- ❖ In addition to these Nok terracottas, there were other types of terracottas found in Northern Nigeria, in both Sokoto and Katsina
- ❖ Scholars have long assumed these to be part of the same extended Nok kingdom, but some scholars (myself included) posit that they represent other more distinctive kingdoms or city-states

**Aksumite Empire (~100 CE – 940 CE)**

- ❖ Aksum emerges in northeastern Africa around the turn of the first millennium. Aksum were the descendants of native northeastern Africans and the Arabs from the Saba's Empire, who had crossed the Red Sea around 1000 BCE to expand their empire.
- ❖ Structurally, we know that the kingdom was ruled similar to that of feudal Europe, which means that there was a king—known as the *negusa negast* (king of kings)—and vassal kings. This suggests a high degree of social and political complexity.
- ❖ Surviving artwork includes monumental architecture, funerary monuments, and coins.
- ❖ In 330 CE King Ezana converted to Christianity, which dramatically alters the art of the empire.

### **Malian Empire (Founded circa 1235 CE)**

- ❖ The Malian Empire emerged after Ghana (Wagadu) when Sundiata Keita (the Lion King) united disparate polities into one Empire. Keita was not a Muslim and the Mali Empire began as a non-Muslim nation. Its art reflected this:
  - While very little survives, there have been hundreds of terracotta and clay figures unearthed in and around a town known as Djenné-Jenno
  - The earlier of these figures depict traditional scenes found throughout African art history (e.g. maternity figures, embracing couples)
  - These are not particularly well developed figures and the fact that many of them have been found suggest that they were placed in the homes of ordinary individuals, perhaps for spiritual purposes. This is just speculation, though.
- ❖ As the Mali Empire expanded and stretched across 2,000 square miles of territory, these figures became more and more refined:
  - Some of these depict the military prowess and might of the empire. These are formally defined by elongated faces, an emphasis on weaponry, and elaborate geometric motifs. These sorts of figures are much rarer
  - Others of these show diseased individuals or individuals in pain.
    - These figures are more widespread than the martial figures, suggesting that they were found in the homes of non-royal and non-elites.
    - Some scholars, based on ethnographic evidence, have suggested that these represented deities to which individuals paid homage to through placing them in personal shrines. Other scholars have suggested that these depict diseases like The Black Plague. Both of these claims have been greeted with much skepticism and it is unlikely that we will ever know definitively.

### **Kingdom of Benin (c. 1180-1897)**

- ❖ **Pre-15<sup>th</sup> century:**
  - Circa 900: The Ogo dynasty, the first, establishes itself as the rulers of Benin City (called at that time Igodomigodo). This is a city-state.
  - 1180: Eweka I ascends to the throne (1180-1216) and organizes the state, which was in chaos after the downfall of Ogo dynasty.
  - 1440: Ewure I (1440-1473), the twelfth oba in the second dynasty, assumes the throne and, through commerce and military might, brings about rapid expansion. Benin from a city-state to an empire. This begins the golden age of the Benin Empire.
- ❖ **15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century:**
  - Oba Ewure I is said to have brought about innovation in architecture and city planning and to have patronized wood and ivory carving. Ewure is also credited with establishing the royal ceremonial calendar.
  - Oba Esigie (1504-1550), grandson of Ewure I, is remembered for his encouragement of iron and brass casting. He also developed the institution of the Queen Mother
  - The Portuguese also probably reached Benin during the reign of Esigie
  - Iconography is dominated by themes of victorious warfare and courtly splendor
- ❖ **17<sup>th</sup> century:**
  - With the end of the civil war, art takes on a decidedly political function during the eighteenth century. It's main goal seems to be to re-establish dynastic legitimacy.
  - Iconographically, kings are marked less by symbols of military authority and more by symbols of supernatural authority.
  - Given the political instability, there is a distinctive lack of courtly artistic production.

- ❖ **18<sup>th</sup> century:**
  - The Benin monarchy destabilizes and weakens significantly in the mid-seventeenth century by a civil war caused by after a series of political moves that granted authority to local lords. It took until the last decade of the century to put the kingdom back together.
  - What distinguishes eighteenth century art from that of the preceding centuries is an overriding concern with themes of ancestral legitimacy and terrifying power.
- ❖ **19<sup>th</sup> century:**
  - The British sack the Kingdom of Benin in April 1897 and loot the royal palace, taking almost all art works out of the kingdom and destroying the contextual clues necessary for proper dating of the works

### **Sapi Communities from Sierra Leone**

- ❖ In the 13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century, the region now known as the Guinea Coast (largely today's Sierra Leone) was filled with a group of people known as the Sapi.
- ❖ Although relatively little is known about the Sapi, we do know that the area was governed by local chiefs aided by councils of elders and officials from the local men's and women's associations. This means that instead of the court being the main patron of artwork, it was religious organizations and men's and women's associations.
- ❖ Although very little is known about the artworks, we know that they come in a diverse array of forms, which perhaps reflect the personalities of individual subjects. The extant corpus of works are sculpted from soft stone, although several wooden figures from the same time period have been excavated.
- ❖ It is possible that these figures were made to commemorate the dead. Thus, the differences in material likely have corresponded to an individual's wealth and status.
- ❖ Beginning in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, new art forms began to emerge because of Portugal's increasing patronage of art in the coastal areas of west and central Africa
- ❖ Indeed, in 1472, twenty years before Columbus's first voyage to the Americas, European navigators reached the West African coast of what is now Ghana
- ❖ When the famous Treaty of Tordesillas was signed 21 years later, guaranteeing the Castilian monopoly of the Americas, it simultaneously accorded sub-Saharan Africa to the throne of Portugal
- ❖ Upon their arrival, the Portuguese were quite taken with the ivory works produced by these societies and commissioned the most skilled artists to create works for export
- ❖ These were frequently salt-cellars and other symbols of power (a horn, for instance) and are covered with intricately carved figural scenes and decorative designs.
- ❖ Many of these designs merge African and European features together. Indeed, it is likely that the artists who made these works were commissioned to create these pieces had never actually seen a European in person and were merely translating their own aesthetic principles into a form requested by Europeans.
- ❖ With that said, it is likely that the European patrons who commissioned these works asked for specific design elements (e.g. crests, scenes of hunting, etc.)

### **Key Dates in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade**

- ❖ **1450-1600:** Three percent of all slaves traded were captured during this time.
- ❖ **1640-1680:** Beginning of large-scale introduction of African slave labor in the British Caribbean. Slaves were used primarily for sugar production.
- ❖ **1600-1700:** Sixteen percent of all slaves traded were captured during this time.
- ❖ **1794:** France emancipates all slaves in their overseas colonies.

- ❖ **1803:** Denmark becomes the first nation to ban slavery
- ❖ **1700-1808:** Fifty three percent (over 5 million) of all slaves traded were captured during this time.
- ❖ **1807:** Britain and the United States ban the slave trade. Legislation takes effect in 1808.
- ❖ **1887:** Brazil becomes the last nation in the Atlantic World to ban the slave trade
- ❖ **Post-1808:** Slavery, though, illegal still continues. Twenty seven percent of all slaves traded were captured and sold during this time.

### Art in an Age of Terror: Kongolese Sculpture in the 19<sup>th</sup> century

- ❖ The Atlantic region of west Central Africa that is currently occupied by the states of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Angola was the part of the continent most affected by the trans-Atlantic slave trade.
- ❖ From c.1300 to the 1800s, this area was ruled by a large, complex, and highly-advanced state known as the Kingdom of Kongo. In 1483, the Kingdom of the Kongo established relationship with the Portuguese Empire, a decision that would prove fateful.
- ❖ From the fifteenth century onwards, Portugal began enslaving Kongolese citizens at a greater and greater rate. By the latter part of the nineteenth century, what was once a vast and wealthy empire had largely been reduced to a largely powerless figurehead ruling over a collection of isolated, fragmented, and depopulated communities.
- ❖ Artists responded to the rapid depopulation of the land in a variety of ways. The nineteenth century, is when we see a particularly intense explosion of artistic works which can be linked to the effects of the slave trade.

- *Phemba*

- *Phemba* figures are mother-and-child sculptures that emerge and flourish between 1860 and 1920. This period coincides with the end of the slave trade and the beginning of colonial exploitation.
- These figures are divinatory objects that were used by Kongolese societies as a way to stimulate fertility and prompt conception. Like *minkisi*, many of them were filled with ritual *bilongo* substances.
- At their core, these are objects that speak to the need of a society to replenish itself, to repopulate the land. In a time in which the effects of depopulation were reaching its peak, fertility was never more important. Indeed, these sculptures perfectly represent the Kongolese idea of *mbongo bantu*, or “wealth in people.”
- Equally as important, they also refer to the increasing authority and power of women in this area, which increased substantially as the the
- The form of these objects bear. Although *phemba* all depict mothers with young children, the women depicted are not just mothers. They are also leaders and warriors. Many have weapons strapped to their arms. Almost all are wearing an *mpu*, a woven hat worn by people in Kongolese society who wield power and have authority. They sit ramrod straight and are alert and focused. They are depicted in the multiple roles they played, as mothers, but also as societal leaders.

- *Minkisi Minkondi:*

- Kongo society had long created and used a class of ritual objects called *minkisi* (singular: *nkisi*). At their core, *minkisi* are nothing more than containers for ritual substances known as *bilongo*. Historically, a priest (*nganga*) would gather a special blend of these organic substances from the forest and then insert it within a sculpted container. These were then activated by the *nganga*.
- Up until the nineteenth century, *minkisi* were largely used for personal protection. They were thought to ward off evil, prevent harm, and even heal illness. Other times, they were used to seal contracts (e.g. both parties would go to an *nganga*,

There are very few of these *minkisi* still in existence, largely because their containers were probably made of organic materials.

- However, in the nineteenth century, there emerges a new type of *minkisi* known as *minkondi* (singular: *nkondi*). These are what is known as an attack, or blood, *minkisi*. The first recorded record of this type of sculpture comes in 1816.
- *Minkisi minkondi* are wooden containers for *bilongo* that take the shape of aggressive men and animals.
- Unlike the earlier *minkisi*, which would be used for personal protection, these *minkisi* were bring harm to those who had wronged people and communities.

### History of Colonialism in Africa

- ❖ Europe's colonization of Africa is generally thought to have begun at the **Berlin Conference (1884/1885)**. At this meeting, the major European powers divided the continent between them.
- ❖ Importantly, it was declared that rights over land would only be given if each nation state only after they could prove that had exercised what was deemed as 'effective occupation.' This meant that they had sovereign control over the territory as granted to them by treaties with African leaders or military occupation.
- ❖ Although Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Belgium, and Spain were given rights to land, Britain and France took the lion's share of the territory (and were given all of Germany's land in the Treaty of Versailles after World War I).
- ❖ The colonial strategy of each nation state can be summed up as follows:
  - Britain (**Indirect Rule**)
    - External relations were controlled and directed by the British state (e.g. military matters, international trade, etc.)
    - The British also collected taxes from the citizens of each "protectorate."
    - Internal relations were controlled by "pre-colonial" authorities under the supervision of the British colonial administrators.
    - Based on a logic of absolute "otherness." Colonial subjects were incapable of ever being citizens of British Empire. Also, it was administratively much easier to implement.
  - France (**Direct Rule**)
    - External relations were controlled and directed by the French state (e.g. military matters, international trade, etc.)
    - The French also collected taxes from the residents of the colonies. Certain residents (the citizens of the 'Four Communes' in Senegal—Saint-Louis, Gorée, Rufisque, and Dakar were given citizenship in the French state and sent representatives to the French Chamber of Deputies. These communes were thought of a *départements d'outre mer*)
    - Internal relations were also controlled by French officials.
    - Based on a logic of French cultural dominance and universalism. All citizens, should they choose to adopt French traditions and the speak the French language, were capable of being citizens of the French Empire.
  - Portugal, Italy, Belgium, Germany, Spain (**Exploitative Rule**)
    - Belgium, Germany, Portugal, Italy, and Spain did not have large colonial holdings in Africa.
    - Their attitudes were all slightly different, but in general all three countries viewed their colonies through an extractive logic (i.e. they were only there to provide raw goods to the metropole).

- As a result, there was little thought about the “natives” at all. These regimes were incredibly brutal.

### How Colonialism transformed the Art of Africa (Some Examples)

- ❖ The decorative art of nomadic and semi-nomadic societies of inland, eastern Africa (**MAASAI, SAMBURU, TURKANA** to name a few) were entirely transformed by British colonialism reaching the inland parts of eastern Africa.
  - Prior to the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, the vast majority of these groups wore jewelry and other decorative works that were monochromatic, in large part because they were made from local, organic materials like hide, leather, iron, and ostrich egg shells.
  - The introduction of colored-glass beads—first from Venice and then, later, from Czechoslovakia—changed all of that.
  - These beads allowed artists—mainly women—to craft an entirely new designs, ones that could be differentiated and specialized by both color and shape.
  - As time wore on, the relatively fluid ethnic identity of inland, eastern Africa began to be more and more concretized. In part, this was because of the introduction of “native reserves” (discussed above). However, what also helped with this transition to a more fixed and static ethnic identity, was the creation of ethnically-distinct jewelry design and color patterning. Indeed, it was through jewelry and design that social identities across the board (e.g. ethnic identity, marriage status, gender, etc.) were defined.
- ❖ The influx of anthropologists dramatically changed the arts of Africa. Take, for instance, the art of the **DOGON** ethnic group of southern Mali
  - Members of the Dogon ethnic group historically lived in a remote part of central Mali known as the Bandiagara Escarpment, which their ancestors fled to escape the slave raiders
  - On the Escarpment they developed an extensive masquerade complex, one that was, according to prominent anthropologists, supposed to be deeply engrained within the spiritual universe of the Dogon people. Some of the most important masks:
    - *Kanaga*: Thought to represent the movement imposed upon the universe by Amma (supreme God)
    - *Amma tā*: Thought to depict the opening from which all beings were birthed from Amma
    - *Sirige*: Represents the stars in their infinite nature
  - The first European to become aware of this masquerade complex was the French anthropologist Marcel Griaule, whose book *Conversations with Ogotemmêli* became a bestseller and introduced the world
  - The success of this book prompted tourists to pour onto the Bandiagara Escarpment, seeking to catch a glimpse of the masquerades. Over time, this fundamentally altered the nature of ceremonies and of the people who danced them. As Dogon artists and viewers became increasingly exposed to Western ways of life, the beliefs faded.
  - The masks are still danced, but really only for tourists.