



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1987 Volume III: Writing About American Culture

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## **The Roots of the Afro-American Culture: The Artistic Approach**

Curriculum Unit 87.03.07  
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### *Introduction*

The entire way of life of a particular people, including its customs, religions, ideas, inventions, and tools, is the definition of culture as found in a standard dictionary.

These topics are brought out when the history of a country is discussed. Of course, when we think of the history of the United States of America, it reflects that of the white Europeans. However, for a long time, the history of black Americans was least appealing to historians. In recent years, due to the actions of black Americans, much is being done to add blacks to the history books. When we take a look at the history of American, we note that blacks faced discrimination and segregation. Even with these obstacles, black Americans have struggled continuously to progress and have made countless major contributions to American civilization.

Some historians have not dealt honestly with the black man's situation in America. Very often the harsh treatments received have been hidden and/or ignored. Many Americans have accepted, without challenge, the fact that black Americans have been treated well and therefore have been satisfied living here. The time has come when we as a people are forced to take a look at all groups of people who are an intricate part of the mold of America. This adaptation will be a definite support for the statement that the United States is the melting pot of the world. When all cultures of America are combined, we become a great nation. It is very difficult to live in a nation and not make a major contribution to its progress. An ethnic group is deprived if it is not allowed to share in the development of a nation to make it great.

The main purpose of this unit is to provide a type of reference that represents, in large measure, the totality of the past and present life and culture of Afro-Americans through art. In order to deal with the subject matter successfully, a section of this unit will be devoted to the history of Africa. I will focus my research on how the equality for Blacks has been a long and hard struggle. I will also discuss in brief, the scattered and elusive facts about the social, political, and historical progress of Blacks in America.

The main portion of this unit will deal with the art work of some of the many tribes and kingdoms found in Africa. It is through the understanding and appreciation of these works that we learn the history and background information of the Afro-Americans.

Every human being must have some concept of who they are and why they do some of the things they do. Due to the fact that the Blacks were taken from their native land and scattered about, they are unable to accurately trace their heritage. Blacks lost contact with their immediate family causing an astronomical and sad gap in their family trees and heritage. Much can be told about Blacks through their art work. It is important to know how and why the ancestors of Blacks expressed themselves.

The art of the black culture is one in which all Americans can take pride. A better American can be seen when there is a better understanding. When we are able to truly accept a culture, we honestly accept a people.

When this unit is completed, the teachers and students will be able to:

1. Appreciate the art of the black culture.
2. Recognize African art by regions and/or tribes.
3. Show a correlation of Old African Art and Modern African Art.
4. Understand feelings through pieces of art.
5. Recognize and discuss famous Afro-American artists.
6. Recognize some of the works of famous Afro-American artists.

Although this American society has set aside in its culture a month to observe the contributions of Blacks, it is difficult to learn all there is to know about this race of people in such a short time. The history of Afro-Americans should be an ongoing subject during the school year. It is my intention to correlate the Black culture with disciplines of the curriculum other than history. The sample lessons found at the end of this unit will provide some ways in which this can be done. Although this unit is designed to be taught during a span of 4-6 weeks for grade 6, it can easily be adapted for grades 5-8. The following format will be most appropriate to reach that goal.

1st Week: The students should:

1. Be introduced to the geographical structure of the continent of Africa.
2. Discuss how and why there are so many tribes and kingdoms of Africa.
3. Discuss customs and traditions to determine how they come about in any ethnic group.

2nd Week: The students should be introduced to the ages of history and shown which kingdoms made major contributions during these periods.

3rd Week: The students should be introduced to art and how forms of art can be appreciated.

4th Week: The students should be taught the function and meaning of African art.

5th Week: The students should be allowed to visit an art museum or an art gallery to develop an awareness and better understanding of pieces of art.

6th Week: The students should be able to create a piece of art work and write the meaning and/or significance of their creations.

The success of this format depends greatly on the levels of concern as well as the levels of achievements of the students involved. The lesson plans found at the end of this unit will provide activities with easy, average, and difficult tasks which will enable the teacher to reach the stated goals and objectives of each lesson.

*(figure available in print form)*

### **History of African Art**

During the period of the 16th and 19th centuries, the people of Europe overflowed into the rest of the world. The Indians in North America and the Aborigines in Australia soon became minorities in their own lands. The tribes of Africa were faced with the same type of invasions. Due to the vastness of the continent, the Africans were able to take refuge in the forest and hills in order to survive. In many of the areas of Africa, the tribesmen outnumbered the invaders. In addition to those points, the tribesmen of those areas had mastered their environment and therefore could not be overthrown nor their culture destroyed. Due to the vast wealth of the people and the land, Africa became the envy and interest of the Europeans and other fellow men. We can still see the struggle of the Africans to keep their territory under their control. Although many centuries have gone by since the sub-Sahara was discovered beyond the Mediterranean Sea, there is much of the area which has not been explored. The natives of this continent are looked down upon because their way of life is different from supposedly the normal way of life. Who is qualified to make such an understatement? If these people are so backwards why has it become such an interest to find out where they came from and how have they been able to survive? In order to understand this land one must first begin to understand how and why the kingdoms of Africa flourished centuries ago.

For many centuries, Africa and its people seemed mysterious and even perverse to the rest of the world. Although Africa is still noted for its value of gold and ivory, the continent still remains a mystery. Where did Africans come from? Why were they so different from other men? What was the explanation for their strange customs, so unlike those of Europe? These and many other questions were proposed, but most of them only deepened the darkness that surrounded the image of Africa. The Europeans finally came to a conclusion that Africans were savages, inferior beings, and had always been so. <sup>1</sup> This conclusion reflected the European's ability to judge any culture except in terms of their own. This simple minded answer to the riddle of Africa has lasted right up to modern times. As we have seen already, Africa has not been a land of unrelieved savagery and chaos. We can now see that its people have had a long and lively history. We know they have made an impressive contribution to man's general mastery of the world. They have created cultures and civilizations, evolved systems of government and systems of thought, and pursued the inner life of the spirit with a consuming passion that has produced some of the finest art known to man.

Art is an important part of the African way of life and is tied closely to everyday activities. We are becoming more and more aware of the range and importance of African art. However, this has not always been the case. The Western world has long accepted and recognized ancient Egyptians' remarkable expertise in many forms of art for thousands of years. The art of other African cultures are labeled "crude and primitive" until the late 19th century, when it became known that countless varieties of European and American art sprang directly from the creations of African cultures. The interest in African art was confined to a handful of enthusiasts, mostly painters, who discovered it in museums of ethnology and curio cabinets and drew inspiration from it. Some of

those great artists are Picasso, Vlaminck, Derain, Modigliani, Matisse, and Braque in Paris as well as Nolde, Kirchner, and Pechstein in Germany. <sup>2</sup>

Today there is an established place in the collection of our museums and art galleries for a critically assembled selection from the outstanding examples of African art. Since that time, we have learned new ways of looking at things as well as set new standards by which to judge what we see. We no longer look at art and feel that it is the Greek ideal of beauty. Neither do we measure art by the degree to which it is true to life. We have a tendency to look at art to seek the expression of spiritual meaning in mind.

Africans have no desire to imitate nature in their art work although they are able to accurately observe it. Their art work deals basically with ancient tribal traditions. Africans try to conceive a tangible image for the many spiritual beings which inhabit their environment. They also put forth much effort to produce something which is transcendent such as the masks and a variety of animal and human motifs.

Just as we are constantly trying to acquire a better understanding of different civilizations, we are also concerned to go beyond superficial appearances and gain a more profound insight into their African art. We as a society would like to have a clearly defined picture of a particular situation. We would also like to be able to assess all the factors which have gone to form the cultural pattern of the community. Those cultural patterns which have been created have a definite influence on the environment which involved the thoughts and feelings of individual groups and persons. The cultural pattern of present day Africa is very complex and difficult to explain because its sources go back to the period before recorded history. Interpretations of Africa's history which are not backed by research in the field are questionable. The complexity of the African ways of life and their art work is due to the fact that what is true for one village is completely different for the next.

You will find several variations of cultural patterns found in Africa. When we think of the black races, we must be able to distinguish between the genuine Negroes and races of those of Ethiopian type and Hamitic culture.

The Negroes, who practice agriculture and manual work, can be divided into four main groups: <sup>3</sup>

1. The Sudanic peoples of the Western Sudan and neighboring countries;
2. The Bantu people in the southern and eastern part of the continent and in the Congo region;
3. The Nilotic people of the Eastern Sudan, with a considerable in mixture of Ethiopic blood;
4. The Palaenegrades, sturdy in statue, the Negroes of the tropical forests, who often live in symbiosis with the Pygmies of the jungle.

The pygmies are the real primitives of Africa. They have remained in the hunting and collecting state and have no representative sculpture. The Bushmen, one of a nomadic people of South Africa, contributed to the rock paintings of prehistoric times. <sup>4</sup>

Materials and styles of art work differ from village to village. Plastic art which is of high standards has flourished above all among the settled agricultural people of the western side of the continent from Senegal and the Western Sudan, through the countries of the Atlantic coast into the Congo, with offshoots into the

region of the Rovuma River of the east coast. <sup>5</sup> It is at this point that the dry steppe turns into the fertile moist savannah and you find the Sudanic and Bantu people who cultivate their fields and bury their dead. Because these people remain in the place where the dead are buried, their faith in their ancestors and spirits is constantly nourished.

Not only does the savannah provide the most favorable conditions for life, it also is accessible and open to new immigrations, new ideas, and new influences. For thousands of years, Blacks in that area have accepted ideas and beliefs from outside, however, they have integrated new ideas into their own lives and made use of them to develop a higher culture.

The history of Black Africa teaches us that there have always been considerable population movements in Africa. It is also known that non-Black groups followed the courses of the great rivers and used various routes to reach the interior of this vast continent. The development of the higher Black civilizations came by way of the Nile valley. It has been documented that the spread of iron-using culture in Black Africa shows overwhelmingly convincing signs of an origin in the ancient Near East. The main role of cultural mediation was played by the Nubian kingdom, the ancient Cush of the middle Nile, in the present day region of Dongola. <sup>6</sup> It is believed that when political crises and revolutions took place the defeated ruling class of kings, officials, and priests fled the area. Although there are no records of the course taken by their flight, the traces of their cultural influence on the usages and regalia of the Black African kingdoms is unmistakable. One of the routes followed by the kingship led out of the Nile valley towards the Sudan, through Ethiopia and the lake region to southeast Africa. Evidence of this can be found in the ruins of Zimbabwe and the kingdom of Monomotapa.

The kingdoms which were founded through the influence of the intellectually and technically superior immigrants, shared with the Napata-Meroe and Egypt the institution of divine kingship. Even though there is great similarity in their customs of their royal courts, there is a difference in the detailed works of art. If we were to take a close look at the artifacts found in these regions, we can note that these people took great pride in the king thus regarding him as the incarnation of the god. Most of the sculpture found depicted the kings laden with gold beads from head to toe. It was thought that the king brought prosperity to his country. The king was never allowed to touch the ground nor reveal his face to the people. No one was ever allowed to see him eat. The section on the function and meaning of African art will give some insight on the connection of these customs and historical origin.

Some of the representations of art work by the Nok civilization emphasize the importance of the king to their culture. This group of people were the first to produce full human figures of their leaders made of iron. Keeping this in mind, we can safely say that a very early date can be placed on the introduction of iron-using civilizations in Nigeria. This group of people also produced the earliest known sculptures of Black Africa. This is evident of the discovery of terracotta figures which dates back to 360 B.C. One can easily conclude that the African kingdoms were not as primitive as it was made to believe. It takes great skill to be able to create a piece of art work made of iron even in today's modern society of improved technology. Iron using civilization was also introduced to southern Africa by the Bantu tribe. According to many historians, the iron age reached its full development in western and southern Africa in the first half of the year about 300 A.D. In addition to the use of iron there were other influential groups. These influences came by way of Northern Africa and the southernmost tip of Arabia. The degree to which the Blacks accepted the outside influences which swept in on them varied greatly. Many of these influences were totally ignored or perhaps over a long period of time were completely forgotten.

There were negative factors which affected Africa's history due to outside forces. Black Africa was threatened

by wars, slave hunts, religious and tribal feuds. These disturbances drove the tribes from their homelands and forced them to intermingle or ban together for one cause. Tribes moved to the mountain or forest regions to protect themselves. Because of this isolation no one was able to destroy nor detect their traditional practices. In 1871 a German geologist, Karl Mauch, wandered through Rhodesia and found a valley filled with houses of stone which he took to be Solomon's Temple and the Queen of Sheba's Palace. Archeologists who later explored the ruins discovered the relics of a vanished African civilization which had erected sweeping granite walls in the pattern of Africa's own circular mud and thatch villages. <sup>7</sup> It is obvious that the struggle for survival of Blacks, past and present, has been a long and painful one.

### ***The Function and Meaning of African Art***

Africans create their art mostly as an instrument by which to contact the spirit world using supernatural forces. They also use their art to help them to overcome the dangers of their environment. Their art is also used to express their religion. Basically we can say that Africans believe in the universal life force which the almighty creator pours into the world and gives life to every created thing, human beings, animals, plants, and stones. They even believe that the dead retain their living force. The divine power is manifested in partial aspects as "sons of God" but it is also present in the ancestral father and mother of the tribe and in great heroes of tribal mythology. <sup>8</sup> The creations are also at work in the elemental forces of nature or in the powerful animals of the wilds.

Africans feel that their life forces can be controlled through their good deeds and sacrifices. Their rituals and ceremonies enforce these beliefs. They feel that through sins the life force is taken away and misfortune is brought down. Sickness, fires, conflicts, and premature death are regarded as the consequences of evil actions. There is a magician or witch found in each tribe who has been designated the powers to remove evil spirits from the villagers. The witch or magician uses sinister activities to remove these evil spirits. The whole community becomes involved in an effort to restore sacred order as well as prosperity to their village. It is at this point that the Africans develop a devoted commitment to these figure heads. Having made this commitment, they feel that they are under the protection of the divine powers.

According to the Africans' beliefs, every new phase of human life is inaugurated by magical practices. These practices are very lengthy and quite detailed at the time of death, which is regarded as particularly dangerous and sinister. Africans are afraid of the souls of the dead, because they believe that the powers of the soul of someone to whom injury was done during his life and those powers were not released in death are now intent on doing harm by using a revengeful force. <sup>9</sup> Through the ritual of burial, they attempt to rid the soul of uncanny comings and goings of the ancestral spirits. It is during these ceremonies that they call on the souls who are favorably inclined towards them for counsel and help.

In some villages there is a priest or medicine man who is believed to be able to create a force which causes the divine power to flow and control its people in a meaningful way. The medicine man undergoes a long period of training, studies practical means of healing, and tests the effectiveness of plants and minerals to be used as treatment of illnesses. He is regarded as a wise man who knows how to convince the use of his methods to heal his victim. He also has the ability to appear in a mysterious and uncanny form. He has a recipe for every circumstance of life which is used effectively until new signs of danger call for more magic. Due to the fact that everyone who is having difficulties turns to the priest, he is the one person in a village who is aware of all the troubles of that village. Being in that position, this provides the priest with enough knowledge and power to give genuine advice, warning, and help. In many parts of Africa, the priest is assisted by a secret society. The secret society is a social and religious organization which provide most opportunities

for the carving and exhibition of works of art in Africa. These groups are able to carry out the ritual sacrifices handed down from the past. Due to the fact that the secret societies are assistants to the priest, they are authoritarian. They are able to supervise morality and the keeping of the tribal traditions. This practice alone guarantees the sacred order of a village. The society is able to dispense justice when necessary. In some special camps in the Bush, they are able to educate the young men to be fit for the struggle of life and to show respect to the spirit world.

Although Africans are inspired by what they do at the rituals, they also like invisible spirits to be tangible. Because of this reason, they create a sculpture which serves as a medium giving access to the spirit world. The figures of ancestors and spirits, masks, and other cult objects are used for this purpose. The ancestors' figures symbolize the tribal hero. These figures are inspired with power which provide the link between God and man. The inspired figure is suppose to mediate fertility, riches and the blessing of children, and makes its advice and will known by the use of certain signs. Some tribes believe that the spirit of the ancestor is present in the image only during the ritual, while others believe the figure as being constantly indwelt by the soul of the tribe, as long as sacrifice and worship is offered at regular intervals. <sup>10</sup>

Masks are used by Africans to enable the souls of the dead to make their appearance in a tangible or visible form. The design of the mask depends upon its major purpose. They must be as unreal and weird as possible. In order to know the full meaning of a mask, one must be able to witness the ceremonies of which the mask is used. Not only the mask but any other sculpture used in the African's rituals. Due to the fact that most people are unable to see a mask or other sculpture in use, they must rely on their own interpretations of its meaning. This can and usually is deceiving. However, since more and more people are exploring the continent of Africa, much is being discovered. Also due to the fact that more of Africa is becoming modernized and westernized, much of the unknown is being revealed. It is thought that the origin of the mask goes back to a vision in a dream. This vision was given shape and proved to be effective for the people of that time. As a result the mask was preserved and reproduced constantly. The African mask may be made to cover the face, head, or the entire head and face. Some of the masks of Africa are not to be worn at all. Such masks are used as sacred objects of the priest and/or society to inspire their sacrificial powers. Once a mask has been placed over the face, the priest is no longer a human being but a spirit. Everything about him becomes disguised including his voice and his walk. The entire community joins in with the exciting rhythm of drums, rattles, flutes, and singing.

There is a whole hierarchy of masks, extending from the highest great spirit masks which appear only in the decisive moments of the life of the tribe, through smaller masks which may act as judges, peacemakers, debt collectors, policemen, nocturnal expellers of witches, the souls of the dead or personal protective spirits, right down to the masks which act as entertaining buffoons. As you can see, the importance of these masks is sociological, political, and psychological. The functions of these masks help to reduce people's tension from time to time as well as relieve them of fears.

There are some tribes who produce beauty in the form of carvings. These intricate designs can be seen through the observance of their everyday objects. As we've already seen, Africans center all of their activities around their religious beliefs. To ensure their constant contact with the forces which protect and strengthen their lives, they use the symbols of the holy, ancestors, and spirits. Because their beliefs differ from village to village, they are confusing and it is very difficult to determine the meanings of the various pieces of art work. The patterns seen in the art work could represent any one of the many things seen and used in their daily lives. Some of the designs could possibly represent acts of nature such as lightning, flooding, rain, or even droughts.

If you were to take a look at a piece of art which contains a plant motif, you would be just as confused. As you might guess, the plant motif is quite uncommon. Human motifs have first priority to all tribes. They form an analogy to particular divine forces and myths. The navel and genitals signify the continuance of mankind. <sup>12</sup> The sculptures seen with a large navel can be interpreted as a sign that a very powerful spirit has left the body or womb. A large head could be an indication that great intelligence and willpower of the spirit world.

Animal motifs are found less frequently in the art work of Africans. However, for reasons unknown to outsiders, they use an antelope, spider, and the bird as an indication of a savior or tribal ancestors. We could very easily think of the characteristics of these animals ourselves and come up with a rationale for their use. On the other hand, we can understand why the buffalo, elephant, hippopotamus, boar, crocodile, and ram are used to represent bodily strength. The tortoise has a very long life span; thus we can see the relationship of the representation of this animal to interpret long life. The fish, frog, or snake are used to represent life; giving water. A bird can be justified to serve as the mediator between this world and the world beyond because of its characteristics. The monkey is used as the jester or as the judge of the souls of the dead. One rationale for this is because of its ability to act in a playful or trifling manner. Sometimes the parts of some animals are used to symbolize the whole animals such as the horns, claws, feet, and fangs.

*(figure available in print form)*

## **Benin Culture**

The Metropolis of Benin was a powerful nation which was located in what is now southern Nigeria. This dignified and law abiding group of people bestowed great respect upon their king, or Oba, who ruled through a well ordered hierarchy of counselors and local governors. For centuries, Benin was one of the most important commercial and cultural centers of western Africa. Due to the fact that the Benin had no written language, there was little known about them except what was reported by early European explorers. However, they leave an eloquent record of their civilization interpreted through their art work. Benin' ivory carvings and bronze plaques as well as Ife's terracotta sculptures, cast in bronze were equal to the world's highest artistic achievements during the Middle Ages. <sup>13</sup> An outstanding example of this art work is the famous Benin Head, an exquisitely carved ivory pendent mask. This ivory mask was carved in the early 16th century. According to the customs of this kingdom, only a king was permitted to wear ivory. The Portuguese heads carved on top probably symbolized the king's relationship with this particular group of people. Our own history books tell us that there were strong ties between Portuguese and Africa. Samples of Benin art work with an explanation are found below.

*(figure available in print form)*

## **Nok Culture**

The earliest known sculptures are the pottery heads, figures, and fragments of the Nok culture. This group of people occupied the central area of Nigeria. Their pieces of art date back to the period of 500B. C. and 200 A. D. A few of the Nok sculptures show the basic forms which would be traditional of wood carvings. Relics of this group's art were found along with finely polished stone axes and the remains of an iron-working industry. <sup>14</sup>

The Nok sculpture vary in sizes from a few inches to several feet in height. The limbs and bodies usually simple in structure covered with strings of beads are characteristic of this culture's art work. The head is usually cylindrical, spherical, or conical in shape with an elaborate head-dress. (See Figure Below) The human figures depicted the styles which were prevalent while all animal forms were more naturalistic.



Between the Nok and Ife there appear to have been a shift of emphasis of the stylization and naturalism. Nok sculpture is predominantly stylized through the animals are naturalistically represented while at Ife both human faces and animal figures are naturalistic. <sup>15</sup>

*(figure available in print form)*

## **Ife Culture**

The origins of the Ife sculpture are uncertain for there are no obvious ancestors which would suggest the development of their style. However, their style has many features common with the Nok culture. This art style, religion, and government is that of the peoples of South-western Nigeria. The art style of the Ife is characterized by an idealized naturalism in both human and animal form. In the Ife art, it is possible to distinguish a large number of sculptures which show an increasing degree of stylization in the representation of the human face: the eyes begin to bulge, the lips protrude as two horizontal projections while a variety of simplified forms is used to represent the ear. These three features, within a general tradition of moderate naturalism, are characteristics of modern Yoruba sculpture. <sup>16</sup>

A comparison of Nok and Ife sculpture leaves very little doubt that there is a cultural as well as artistic connection between the two kingdoms. These two groups were the first to leave artistic traditions as far as we know in the whole of Africa which have attempted human life sized figures. The figures are heavily beaded with large numbers of anklets and bracelets worn. <sup>17</sup> (See Figure Below)

*(figure available in print form)*

## **Ghana Culture**

Once upon a time there was a great West African Kingdom called Ghana, the first known kingdom south of the Sahara. Ghana is interesting because of both its history and location. Perhaps it is because this land is found between the river and the desert that we may find the answers to the following questions: Why were there no Egyptian crops below the desert? Was it due to the harsh hot climates? Were the native domesticates simply substitutes?

Nobody knows just how old Ghana is. It has been speculated that the kingdom was founded in the fourth century. Nobody living along the northern coast of Africa has any certainty of Ghana's exact location. The only thing for sure was that every now and then caravans appeared from out of the desert laden with gold—gold from Ghana. <sup>18</sup>

*(figure available in print form)*

There is no real connection between ancient and modern Ghana, though both had a reputation for treasure. Gold was everywhere as well as silver too. Gold was found on the king, his counselors, the royal drums, the royal horses, and even the royal dogs. It is thought the king apparently monopolized all gold nuggets found in his domain.

## **Blacks As Artists And In American Art**

Near the end of the nineteenth century, Black Americans began to paint and model. It was thought strange and unusual for them to do so because art was regarded as the ultimate expression of a civilized people. For Blacks to identify themselves with the creative art was thought of as a pretension. Little did the people of the Western world know that the so-called primitive civilizations had not only artists, but also great artists. The

people of the Western world had yet to learn that of the many types of primitive art, that of the Black Africans was one of the greatest and most sophisticated. Artistic tradition and skill in all major craft arts run back for generations, even centuries, among the principal African tribes, particularly those of the West coast and Equatorial Africa, from which Afro-Americans are descended. <sup>19</sup> The art of wood and metal sculpture, metal forging, wood carving, ivory carving, bone carving, weaving, pottery-making, and skillful surface decoration in lines and colors has distinct evidence of a previous background and knowledge. In fact, everything in the category of that which was classified as European fine arts including the techniques of engraving and etching was represented in the surface carvings of much African art.

African art was lost and had to be found in Afro-American history. This lost heritage can readily be explained as the result of slavery. Slavery not only transplanted Blacks physically, but also cut them off from their cultural roots. Taking away their language, making an abrupt change in their habits, and placing them in a strangely different civilization reduced the Blacks to what might be called cultural zero. Anyone in his right mind could see that no human civilization, regardless as to how primitive it may seem, could have a cultural zero. There is one thing that we must realize about Africans; that is that one of the high developments of African civilizations was dexterity of hand and foot and co-ordination of eye and muscle. It is obvious that these abilities were useful in the creation of the elaborate native crafts. These traditions had been built up through generations of trial and error. These skills were lost in the horror of where families, casts, and tribes were ruthlessly disrupted. This new environment was a tremendous set back to the Black Africans. The hardships of cotton and rice fields labor and the crudest of tools took its toll on the hands of the Blacks, making them incapable of any type of fine craftsmanship. Even if the material had been available it would have been impossible. Their built up frustration began to come out by way of song, graceful movements, and poetic speech. <sup>20</sup> It was the Western environment which forced Black Americans away from the craft arts and their old ancestral skills to the emotional art of song and dance for which they are known and noted for in America.

Although there were times when Black Americans were able to revive their artistic ability, it was done in reverse of their heritage. Sculpture, metal-working, and weaving were the dominant arts in Africa while dance, music, song, and poetry were the focal point in America. African art is expressive; therefore, its characteristics were sober, conventional, and restrained. That of the Black American was freely emotional, exuberant, and sentimental. African art is very subtle in color while the Black American's art is very colorful. Looking at the comparison and contrast in the nature of the art produced by the Africans and Black Americans, we can see the results of the emotional hardship. This emotional hardship can be seen in other situations other than their artistic ability. It was generations before Blacks were able to create any type of artistic craft. During this time, African art was forgotten. Gradually, American artists began to treat Black art as something more than a passing subject. Black art is presented with dignity and understanding. Their art work is the major theme in programs of developing a "Native American Art".

A lot can be told through art work as has been pointed out in the history of Africa. A keen and perceptive eye could tell from the way in which Blacks were artistically depicted what the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries thought of them—portraying them as singers and dancers rather than what they were really able to contribute to the Western world. Blacks have been persistent in reviving their lost heritage; thus, changing the images depicted years ago. Although these are positive attributes, the road ahead still has many obstacles to get around.

### ***Teaching Strategies***

This unit is designed to be taught at a minimum of three forty minute periods a week for a duration of four-six

weeks. If the students involved are functioning below the sixth grade level, it may take the full five days. This section of the unit will provide the reader with some possible strategies which could be used as motivating factors in teaching the goals of the unit. These strategies will also provide techniques which would be useful in accomplishing weekly goals. A sample lesson plan will be provided for each week's goal. The reader will be able to use these plans as guides to make additional ones to reach the stated goals of each week listed.

### ***1st Week: Geography of Africa***

The first step in teaching the geography of any region is to find out its location. The use of political and physical maps of Africa is a must for this week's lesson. The political map is to be used to identify the boundaries of the continent. The students will also be able to use the political map to identify the regions, major countries found in each region, and major waterways of the continent. The physical map is to be used to show the terrain of Africa and to identify the physical barriers of this vast continent. The students should use the two maps to try to determine the reasons for Africa's varied climactic zones. Once the students have mastered the concept of the region, they should be guided to a discussion on why people live in different areas. This could be achieved by using the following questions for brainstorming ideas.

1. Why do we have several classes of a specific grade level in each school?
2. Why can't all of your family members live in the same house?
3. Why are there different standards and/or values for each household, neighborhood, town state, and country?
4. Why are there so many tribes and/or villages in Africa?

Questions of this nature will lead to an understanding of customs and traditions of ethnic groups around the world.

### ***2nd Week: The African Kingdoms***

Now that the students have a general concept of customs and traditions of groups of people, they can intelligently begin to explore some of the more outstanding kingdoms of Africa. The kingdoms and tribes listed earlier in the unit should be discussed. More abled students should be given the task of researching those kingdoms more noted in a particular region. The following chart headings could be used as a guide for listing facts of such groups of people.

KINGDOMS NATIONS REGIONAL LOCATION NOTED ART

Once the students have acquired a good background of these facts, they should be ready to move on to the discussion of the types of art produced by various kingdoms.

### ***3rd Week: An Appreciation of Art***

No one can begin to appreciate art without knowing the tones or moods which cause a person to express himself. This discussion can begin by asking students to give an appropriate phrase in response to the following words. The technique of clustering used in creative writing would be most appropriate to implement as an introduction for this lesson.

happy ugly    bored    anxious  
sweet angry    cold    temperamental  
sad    frighten hot    morbid  
sour    pretty    quiet    loud  
shy    fear    tough    smooth  
nature humane hate    love  
brave strong    confident pleasant

The teacher can now read several well-known phrases which the students could express their feelings of the saying such as: 1. Happy as a lark, 2. The world in my hand, and 3. Sour deal. The students might be able to come with additional movie and song titles that express specific feelings. Once the students have mastered tone and/or moods-they should be introduced to a picture of a human face or an animal for the purpose of getting an opinionated interpretation. As the students get the feel of tones, they can be shown some pictures of African art to set the mood of interpreting this kind of art work. Remind the students that African art was really the history produced by the craftsmen of the tribes and kingdom. Also point out that colors have a lot to do with setting the tone of art appreciation. During the presentation of this week's lessons, it would be a good time to seek the help of the art teacher in reaching your goal. He/She will be able to go into great detail of different styles of art.

#### ***4th Week: Function of African Art***

This week's goal is to continue the activities of last week's learning. At this point of the unit the students should be able to look at pieces of art work and get a feeling of the artist's purpose of the masterpiece. The teacher should be able to produce pieces of art work and ask the students to share their feelings or interpretations. Some students may be ready to produce and share some of their own creations. As the students proceed through the week, have them to write about their own masterpieces. Remind them that some artists can produce a masterpiece in a few hours while others may take several months.

#### ***5th Week: Field Trips***

The students should have a good concept of the roots of the Afro-American culture. To enhance their learning, contact one or more of the following places to schedule a field trip to enable the students to use what they have learned during the past few weeks.

Metropolitan Museum of Art

5th Ave. & 87th Street

New York, N. Y.

(212) 535-7710

(212) 879-5500

Schomberg Library

135th Street

New York, N.Y.

(212) 862-4000

Afro-American Culture Centre

Orchard Street  
New Haven, CT

Yale Art Gallery

1111 Chapel Street

New Haven, CT

(203) 436-0574

### **6th Week: Enrichment and Culminating Activities**

During the teaching of this unit, the teacher and students should have developed a Mini Afro-American Culture Center in the classroom. It is at this point that they can share what they have learned with other students and teachers in the building. This could be interesting enough to have outsiders such as the news media to give added publicity to the class, school, and district. This activity alone would produce some hidden talents of the students involved. It is the hope of the writer of this unit that some future Afro-American artists might be born.

## **Sample Lesson**

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### **The Geography of Africa**

#### **Objectives The students will**

1. identify the regions of Africa.
2. identify the important physical features of Africa.
3. name some important resources found in Africa.

#### **Material Needed Wall map of Africa, student outline maps of Africa, colored pencils**

#### **Vocabulary region, political map, physical map, waterways, straits, savanna, velds, plateau, tropical, desert, drought, oasis**

Brainstorming Questions:

1. What five parts can any substance or area be divided into?
2. Can the Sahara Desert be a dividing point of Africa? What does it divide?
3. What do you think the land of Africa is like?
4. What are the main rivers of Africa?

5. Why do you think the rivers would be of great importance to the people of Africa?

***Procedures Introduce the vocabulary above. Tell the students that there is evidence that all of the continents of the world used to be joined together. Using a wall map of the world, point out how each of the continents seem to be a giant puzzle piece. Focus on the point that although Africa is the second largest continent, it only has about 10% of the world's population. (500 million People) Also point out that from time to time, some parts of Africa are plagued by severe drought which causes much suffering for the people and animals. Make sure the students are aware that the equator runs through Africa which contributes to the hot temperatures of the region. Indicate to the students that there is an abundant supply of resources in Africa. Among these resources are diamonds, gold, cobalt, and ivory.***

### ***Related Activities***

1. Have the students to use their desk outline map to label the five regions and major waterways of Africa. (Use a color code to identify each region.)
2. Have the students to research and identify where the following minerals are in abundance in Africa. (gold, diamonds, and silver) Use color codes to identify them.
3. Start an African Culture Center in the class.

## **Sample Lesson**

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### **An African Kingdom: Nok**

#### ***Objectives The Students will***

1. list some advantages of iron tools and weapons.
2. identify the second largest continent of the world.
3. identify the largest desert in the world.
4. identify the Nok culture as the earliest known iron makers of West Africa.

**Materials Needed** *Map of Africa, student outline map of Africa, colored pencils*

**Vocabulary** *desert, isolate, culture, savanna, barter, Sahara Desert, Niger River, Benue River, sub-Saharan, Nok, Nigeria*

Brainstorming Questions:

1. What do you think was the easiest way to travel about 2000 years ago?
2. What is iron?
3. What are some uses of iron?
4. What would be some advantages of iron tools and weapons?
5. How do you think a savanna region helped the African cultures of long ago?
6. Would the same reasons apply today? Why or why not?

**Procedures** *Introduce the vocabulary to the students by pronouncing them and providing them with the meanings of these words. Make sure the students understand the prefix sub-means below or under. Use the map of Africa to point out that Africa is the second largest continent in the world. Have the students to locate the Sahara Desert and explain to them that it is the largest desert in the world. Proceed to find all of the other places listed under the heading vocabulary above. Allow the students to label these places on their desk outline map. By doing this they will be able to tell which section of Africa they are found. Go over the background information of the Nok culture found earlier in this unit. Show the students the illustration of the terra cotta, the baked clay figurine, and discuss it.*

**Related Activities**

1. Have the students to scan magazines and newspapers to find articles and pictures of Africa. Discuss how times have changed the ways of life of these people.
2. Have the students to add to the African Culture Center by making drawings, modeling clay figures, or reports of a specified topic of Africa.

## Sample Lesson

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### Art Appreciation

#### **Objectives The students will**

1. identify feelings and moods.
2. get an awareness of why painters and sculptors create pieces of art.
3. create a piece of art work using tone or mood.
4. study a piece of art work to develop feelings or tones.

#### **Materials Needed paper, pencils, pictures from magazines**

Vocabulary:

fear, anger, happy, sad, anxious, tone, mood, synonym, abstract

Brainstorming Questions:

1. What's an artist? Do you think you are an artist? Why or Why not?
2. What causes you to notice certain pieces of art?
3. What causes an artist to become famous?
4. Do you think any of your classmates or schoolmates may become famous artists? Why or why not?
5. Do you know any famous artists. Name one.

***Procedures Introduce the vocabulary above. Point out to the students that each of the words used above has several synonyms which express the same feelings. Review the techniques of clustering. Have the students to take a close look at a picture and write as many mood words which come to mind as they observe it. After about two minutes have the students to discuss the picture using their lists as guides. Show the students a famous picture and have them to find some small detail in that picture which caught their attention. Do this activity several times using a variety of expressions. Allow the students ample time to discuss what they see and feel. It will amaze you how the students will begin to note minute details.***



## **Related Activities**

1. Divide the class into groups of threes or fours. Give them a picture to observe. Encourage them to use the technique of clustering to write a brief description of that picture. Share their writings with the class.
2. Have the students to use any one of the mood words of a previous lesson and make a sketch which would depict that mood. Encourage the students to give their work a title. Write a brief description of their work and add it to the Mini Afro-American Center which has been created in the room.

## **Sample Lesson**

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### **Meaningful Art of Africa**

#### ***Objectives The students will***

1. give an interpretation of a piece of art work.
2. show the relationship of African art with its history.
3. produce a creation of their own, giving it a title and write a brief description and/or interpretation of their work.

#### ***Materials Needed barbie doll size figures, paint, construction paper, glue, discarded sewing notions, scraps of material***

Vocabulary: function, interpretation, rituals, ceremonies, customs, traditions

#### **Brainstorming Questions:**

1. Why do people dress up for Halloween?
2. What other times do people disguise themselves?
3. Why do you think Africans disguise themselves during some of their ceremonies?

***Procedures Introduce the vocabulary above. Discuss with the students that the pieces of art work***

**produced by Africans since the beginning of time had a definite purpose. Discuss thoroughly the section in the unit titled Functions and Meanings of African Art . Remind the students that their art work was a means of recorded history for them. Point out to the students that the earlier African art work can't be truly interpreted because of the mystery of the many groups of people found in the region. Discuss with the students that although there has been much exploration of Africa, there are areas which are too remote for outsiders to penetrate. This means that there are still areas unknown to our modern society.**

Related Activities:

1. Divide the students into groups of threes or fours. Next have them to choose a village and dress up a doll as one of the villagers. Make sure that the students give a brief description of the tribe they chosen as well as the purpose of the disguise. Add this art work to their Mini African Culture Center.
2. Have the students to create an African village and write a skit including the various figure heads of that village. This skit could be video taped and shown to the class later.
3. Arrange for a speaker to come in to discuss African Art.
4. Arrange a field trip to the Afro-American Culture Center located on Orchard Street.

## Notes

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1. Basil Davidson, *African Kingdoms* , p. 17.
2. Elsy Leuzinger, *The Art of Black Africa*, p. 5.
3. Ibid., p. 6.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., p. 8.
7. Basil Davidson, *African Kingdoms*, p. 178.
8. Op. Cit., p. 9.
9. Dennis Duerden, *African Art* , p. 16.
10. Ibid., p. 21.
11. Basil Davidson, *African Kingdoms*, p. 12.
12. Ibid., p. 12.
13. Shirley Glubok, *The Art of Africa*, p. 10.
14. Dennis Duerden, *African Art*, p. 68.
15. Ibid., p. 75.
16. Ibid., p. 76.

17. Ibid., p. 72.
18. Olivia Vlahos, *African Beginnings* , p. 55.
19. Margaret Just Butcher, *The Negro in American Culture* , p. 14.
20. Ibid., p. 209.

## Student's Annotated Bibliography

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Bernheim, Marc and Evelyne. *The Drums Speak: The Story of Kofi, A Boy of West Africa*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1972.

This is a story of Kofi, a boy of West Africa. It is of modern setting with many illustrative photographs. It is an easy reading book.

Campling, Elizabeth. *Africa in the Twentieth Century* . New York: David & Charles Inc., 1980.

This book deals with the problems and promises of modern Africa.

Cross, Wilbur. *Egypt* . Chicago: Children's Press, 1982.

This book describes the history, geography, culture, economics, and people of Egypt.

Gibbs, James L., editor. *Peoples of Africa* . New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1978.

This book covers a diversity of African cultures.

Gordon, Rene. *Africa: A Continent Revealed* . New York: St. Martins Press Inc., 1981.

This is a well-illustrated book which covers sights and peoples of North, West, East, and South Africa.

Feelings, Muriel L. *Moja Means One: The Swahili Counting Book* . New York: The Dial Press, 1981.

This book explains how to count in Swahili.

Fox, Paula. *The Slave Dancer*. Boston: Bradbury Press, 1973.

This is a novel that describes thirteen-year-old Jessie Bollier and how he was kidnapped in 1840 to play his fife on a slave ship.

Jenness, Aylette. *Along the Niger River: An African Way of Life* . New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1974.

This book discusses the many different tribes who live in northern Nigeria.

Lester, Julius. *To Be A Slave*. New York: Dial Press, 1968.

Based on material gathered from men and women who had been slaves, this book describes how it felt to be a slave. It begins with the African slave trade and concludes with the Reconstruction Period.

Murphy, E. Jefferson. *Understanding Africa* . rev. ed. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1978.

This book describes the political, social, and cultural history of the African continent as well as its diverse geography and peoples.

Shachtman, Tom. *Growing Up Masai*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1981.

This book follows two children through a typical day and captures the world of this nomadic tribe in East Africa.

## **Teacher's Annotated Bibliography**

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Butcher, Margaret J. *The Negro in American Culture*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956.

This book deals with what America has done to the Negroes and what the Negroes have accomplished in and for America.

Davidson, Basil. *African Kingdoms* . New York: Time Inc., 1966.

This book gives a detailed description of some of the well-known kingdoms found in Africa from 300 B. C. to the 19th century.

Duerden, Dennis. *African Art*. Italy: Hamlyn Publishing Group Ltd., 1968.

This book deals with the tribes of Africa and their sculpture found in various regions. It also gives a brief description of some of the archeological finds of Africa.

Glubok, Shirley. *The Art of Africa* . New York: Harper and Row, 1965.

This book gives a brief description of some of the historical finds of African art.

Lamp, Frederick. *African Art of the West Atlantic Coast* . New York: L. Kahan Gallery Inc., 1979.

This book is the results of field research which deals with the study of the arts and rituals of the Temne of northern Sierra Leone.

Leuzinger, Elsy. *The Art of Black Africa* . New York: Graphic Society Ltd., 1972.

This book describes the tribes of Africa and their art work. It also tells of archeological finds in some of the regions.

Vansina, Jan. *Art History in Africa*. New York: Longman, 1984.

This book deals with art in Africa and its history focusing on the historical problems of the art work of the great nations found on that continent.

Vlachos, Olivia. *African Beginnings* . New York: The Viking Press, 1967.

This book gives the reader a vivid sampling of the many diverse cultures that have emerged out of the past to illuminate the present struggles for unity of the new African nations.

Willett, Frank. *African Art* . New York: Oxford University Press, 1971.

This book is one of the volumes of *The World of Art* . It deals with the main periods, cultures, and artists, from the ancient world to the present.

Zaslusky, Claudia. *Africa Counts* . Boston: Prindle, Weber, & Schmidt, Inc., 1973.

This book deals with the mathematical contributions of many African peoples in the context of their social and economic development.

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