



The History and Aesthetics of African Jewelry

Curriculum Unit 93.04.02
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I. Introduction

While doing my undergraduate work in Art Education, I had the opportunity to study the history of African Art. I found myself very interested in the uniqueness of various groups from the many regions. Most of these groups still practice the traditions of their ancestors and are quite interesting.

I teach elementary art in kindergarten through fifth grade, in a predominantly Afro-American school. Here is the perfect opportunity to share the history of their heritage with them. I will build up around them what is already there, history and beauty.

II. Overview

The jewelry of Africa is not just ornamental. For each group, rituals and religion play a major part in the adornment of jewelry. Each piece is represented and worn for a particular reason, ranging from aesthetics to identifying marks of a society or group. The climate also has a lot to do with the materials used to make the jewelry.

My curriculum unit will focus on the jewelry from various groups from Africa. I will bring into view the history behind the jewelry. I feel that because the African-American culture shares a direct link to its past, that it is important for my students to know all they can about themselves while they are creating beautiful art.

III. Three regions of Africa

The three areas I will concentrate on in this unit are the Equatorial region, the Savannah and the Sahara regions of Africa. Using these three regions will give a well rounded view that will encompass most of Africa's climates. What is so important to realize is that the dryness of the Sahara offers little or no chance or availability of materials for making jewelry. They get their materials from animal skins and from trade from

other places. Brass and copper are widely used in the Savannah region because they are in the heart of trade routes between north and west Africa. The people of the equatorial rain forest have derived their wealth from trade. In the beginning of the fifteenth century gold and ivory were traded for glass beads, copper, brass and coral.

IV. Jewelry from Africa

The kingdom of Benin is located in the tropical rain forest of southern Nigeria. Here the “Oba” rules over the life and death of his subjects. In the Equatorial rain forest, ivory is plentiful and valued for its rich patina and magical powers. People of royalty in Benin wear hip ornaments made from brass that are worn for very special events. These are intricately carved and are held in high regard by its people. The Oba, or king is celebrated by the wearing of these pieces. The method of making these pieces is called bronze casting. The lost wax method of bronze casting was started in the thirteenth century by the Yoruba. The process was done by modeling a form in beeswax and coating it with clay. When the clay is dried, it is heated and melted wax is poured through vents into a hollow mold. When it has cooled the clay coating is broken away. Many pieces of jewelry are made by this method including wide bracelets that are worn by women in Nigeria. These bracelets are worn to entice young men, limit movement of walking, affording them a handsome wiggle. They are made of thin plait brass, are very wide and are not removed for many years.

One of the groups located in the rain forest region is known as the Yoruba. Their religion has many spirits, more commonly known as orishas. Because of these beliefs, many ornaments are worn and designed according to the wearers group and can protect against evil spirits. The Yoruba still believe that the buried ancient glass beads that belonged to chiefs and kings in the region are growing like plants on the ground and are worth their weight in gold. This prompted the blacksmiths in the fourteenth century to make their own beads from clay and even today, fine replicas have been made from this material.

The West African Savannah stretches from the Atlantic coast of the Senegal to lake Chad in central Africa and separates the Sahara Desert from the equatorial rain forest belt. Here is found the bush scrub and grass plains which is the home of farmers and herders. The land is much drier and infertile but is in the heart of the trade routes linked with north and west Africa. Gold is a commodity and is lavished on the gilded courts and riches of royalty. The Dogon of Mali are found here, high up in the Bandiagara Escarpment, which are a row of cliffs that stretch one hundred twenty five miles from northeast to southwest, parallel to the Niger River. Some of the cliffs are two thousand feet high. The cliffs are separated by narrow gorges. They live high up on the cliffs to protect themselves from attacks from other groups. Most of the Dogon people are farmers and living on the cliffs, they do not have a permanent resource for water. The Dogon tradition is presented as a network of man-made objects and beliefs that are linked to the powers of myth. Necklaces are made of iron and copper alloy. The jewelry is simple and each piece holds a special significance to real and mystical ancestors. For instance, the dugo necklace is made up of a series of rings and spirals, each having a connection to the identity of the wearer, family and group. It is made up of different elements from the earth, keeping close to the spirits. Most of the jewelry from this area is worn because of their religious beliefs.

The Sahara Desert is the largest desert in the world. It is infertile, covered with gravel plains and plateaus of sandstone and has dry river beds. At night the temperature can drop to below freezing and during the day the horizon shimmers in the heat.

This is the home of the descendants of the Berbers, the Tuareg and the Moors. These are just two of the many

groups that live in the Sahara. The jewelry of these two groups reflect the way in which their lives evolved. The Tuareg are fiercely independent, maintaining their Berber ways and characteristic bold and simplistic designs. The design of their jewelry is geometric, largely formed and symmetrical.

One piece in particular, the Tuareg Cross, which was passed down from father to son when the boy reached puberty, is made up of silver and represents the four corners of the world because one does not know where one will die and it is important to be wearing this cross when one dies. The Tuareg prefer to wear silver because it is the metal of the prophet. They use their jewelry for trade in exchange for food and cloth and rings pass between men and women as a sign of affection.

Unlike the Tuareg, the Moors intermarried with the people from the west Savannah and later with the Arabs. This widened the knowledge of diversity in design and created a larger variety of jewelry throughout the Sahara. Jewelry represents capital to the people of the desert and is important for the trade of salt from Arabia and Europe. Once per year the nomads from the desert meet to have their camels graze on the salt, which is needed for their diet, that surfaces to the top of the grass from the rains of August and September. While the camels graze, the people have a festival in honor of the gathering. It is called Cure Salee and this is the time that jewelry is traded. The hair of beautiful girls is wrapped in brass as are their ankles. The anklets are called jabo and are worn to attract young men. The Moorish girl wears these until the birth of her first child. Necklaces of Carnelian and Venetian glass are believed to help cure sicknesses of the blood and are worn by women from the Sahara.

All these groups are highly religious, very creative and innovative. From dowries to the pendants, their beliefs are strong and practiced. The jewelry is magnificent!

V. Goals, objectives and organization

One of my objectives is to introduce the various African groups that I have selected to my students. My goal in introducing these groups is to stir interest in my students to know more about themselves and their heritage. These groups include; the people from the Saharah Desert, The people from the Savannah and the people from Equatoria. We will be discussing how these people live, what their customs are and how all this relates to my students directly and indirectly. Another objective I have is to discuss the history each group possesses, such as religious background and customs. Reading material and visuals such as pictures I have found of the people in these groups will help stir an interest in my students to ask questions and get involved. Because of the short period of time I get to spend on each lesson, I will concentrate on each objective separately. My third goal is a hands-on experience which will give them a clearer sense in what they are doing. My objective for this part of my unit is not only to create the jewelry, but to learn technique, create and use tools for making the jewelry and to brainstorm ideas on the making of the jewelry.

I feel that there is a great need to get my students involved in the history of their people. They really do not know enough about themselves, their culture and how beautiful the designs and patterns their people have created throughout history. I would like my students to come away from this unit with a better understanding of themselves and a clearer picture of what exists right before them.

Organization is a large part of putting this unit into motion as there are so many parts that go into the history and aesthetics of the jewelry of Africa.

1. Gathering general information on Africa such as, books, pictures, a piece of African art.
2. Putting together information that pertains to the group I am discussing. Religious beliefs, reasons for materials used in making jewelry in that area; Ornamental pieces and how and where they are worn. How the jewelry is made, what materials are used, etc..
3. How to plan the actual making of the jewelry, what materials to supplement, if needed, and how much
4. Other things like glossaries, a bibliography and important footnotes also need to be included in the organization of this unit.

VI. Similarities and differences

There are many similarities and differences that come from the three regions I am discussing in my unit. For many, religion plays a huge part in group tradition. For instance, many groups wear jewelry to prevent harm from coming to them or their families. Jewelry is also handed down from mother to daughter as part of a girls dowry. Bartering jewelry is another similarity that is used by many groups for the exchange of cloth, glass beads and food. So many groups believe in the evil spirit and protect themselves by wearing pendants and amulets.

Different kinds of metals rank high on the priority list of various groups. Gold is considered bad luck or “work of the devil”, among the desert people so silver is the only metal worn. Glass and shells are valued for their association with protection and fertility and are worn by slaves and used as hair ornaments by Moorish women. As for the people of the Savannah region, gold is used most lavishly and hair sculpture is a sign of a woman’s status and reflects the different stages in her life. Her hair is greased with butter and decorated with glass beads and metals. One of the most precious materials that is used in the equatorial region is ivory. This is held to be very sacred. Only kings were allowed to wear ivory in earlier days of the settlers. Now, tradition still holds that only people of importance wear ivory.

VII. Terms for student awareness

1. Group: a tribe or group of people living together.
2. Rituals: an established procedure in a religious rite.
3. Patina: A film of green over an object.
4. Oba: A king or ruler in Benin, in Africa.
5. Lost wax process: A process of bronze casting, started in the thirteenth century.
6. Myth: Legend, belief or traditional story.
7. Orishas: Spirits in Yoruba tradition.
8. Dogon: Group in the Mali region of Africa, located high in the cliffs of the Bandiagara Escarpment.

9. Yoruba: Group located in the equatorial rain forest of Africa.
10. Tuareg/Moors: Descendants of the Berbers of the Sahara Desert.
11. Geometric design: Shapes that have angles and lines in curve or rectangular form.
12. Symmetrical: Each side being the same.
13. Nomads: People of the Sahara Desert
14. Jabu: Anklets worn by Moorish women.
15. Heritage: Something that comes or belongs to a person by reason of birth.
16. Culture: A particular form or stage of civilization

VIII. Unit I. Equatorial necklaces; bracelets and pendants

Lesson I. Overview

Objective:

The student will be able to identify:

1. The region we will be discussing, Equatoria.
2. The Yoruba and people from Benin
3. Preview the jewelry from this region
4. The student will also be presented with an overview of each lesson that will cover jewelry-making.

Materials needed:

1. Map of Africa
2. Books on African jewelry

Procedure:

1. Discuss the area of Africa we will be working with
2. Discuss the climate and customs of the people
3. Questions and answers
4. Discuss in general how you plan to make the jewelry
5. Discuss what will happen for the next lesson.

Lesson II. Making the mold.**Objective:**

The student will learn how to make and pour a plaster of paris mold.

Materials needed:

1. Plastic inserts from boxes will do. (approx. 2"x 12")
2. Plastic drinking straws
3. Petroleum jelly (to lubricate straw)
4. Plaster of paris and mixing bowl with spout for pouring.

Procedure:

1. Have students mix plaster of paris with water
2. Have students prepare forms by placing a straw in each form and filling it with plaster.
3. Set aside to harden.
4. Discuss problems that arose and introduce next step.

Lesson III. History and design of jewelry**Objective:**

The student will begin to understand the history behind the jewelry by discussing the jewelry they are making.

Materials needed:

1. Slides

2. Books on jewelry
3. Example of jewelry
4. Paper for designing

Procedure:

Show slides from Equatoria and discuss the designs that are used on jewelry from that area. Have the students break up into small groups to help each other come up with designs and jewelry pieces. (the molds that were previously made can be used for all the selections).

* This lesson should take 30-60 min.

Lesson IV. Filing and incising jewelry pieces

Objective:

The student will learn how to use incising tools and will also learn how to file the plaster.

Materials needed:

1. Emery boards
2. Incising tool (I use a tool that is made for getting the meat from the inside of walnuts).
3. Designs made from previous lesson
4. Plaster molds

Procedure:

1. Trim plaster pieces and file
2. Transfer design onto jewelry pieces
3. Demonstrate incising techniques
4. Have students start to incise their work

* This lesson should take approx. 60 min.

Lesson V. History and color theory

Objective:

The student will learn how the people from Equatoria used color by experimenting with the various dyes from

plants, fruits and berries.

Materials needed:

1. Berries, fruits and plants that exude juices that can be used as color and dyes.
2. Sample of plaster for testing
3. Books on color and dyes
4. Brushes, water, etc. (materials needed for painting).

Procedure:

1. Discuss the various plants, etc. that were used when jewelry was first being made and what can be used now.
2. Experiment with these on sample pieces of plaster.
3. Plan a color scheme for pieces

Lesson VI. Painting of jewelry

Objective:

The student will paint each part of his/her jewelry using a planned color scheme.

Materials needed:

1. Jewelry pieces
2. Brushes, water, etc.

Procedure:

1. The students will paint their pieces, using two coats of color for each piece.

Lesson VII. Putting the jewelry together

Objective:

The student will be able to put his/her jewelry together by using string or thin cording.

Materials needed:

1. Thin cording or string
2. a needle if string is being used

Procedure:

1. Each piece needs to be strung and tied securely. This is repeated to the end and knotted or a set of hooks can be store bought and added to each end of necklace or bracelet.

Lesson VIII. Varnishing**Objective:**

The student will complete his/her piece by varnishing it to protect the colors.

Materials needed:

1. Varnish
2. Brush (I prefer to use something like Q-Tips so I can discard them when finished).

Procedure:

Have the students brush on the varnish on one side of their piece and let dry. If time allows, varnish the other side. Let these pieces stay overnight to dry thoroughly.

The following two units will follow the same pattern as in unit I. The materials and techniques will be different.

Unit II. The jewelry from the Savannah

Lesson I. Overview of jewelry from the Savannah**Lesson II. Forming the jewelry****Objective:**

The student will create his/her own piece of jewelry by forming wire in a circular fashion and connecting objects to it.

Materials needed:

1. Wire that can be molded (craft wire)
2. Found objects such as stones, feathers, etc..

Procedure:

Through demonstrating, the teacher will show students how to form and add objects to jewelry pieces.

Lesson III. History of Savannah jewelry

Lesson IV. Designing jewelry on paper

Lesson V. Continuing to put jewelry together

Unit III. The Sahara Desert

Lesson I. Overview of the history and jewelry of the Sahara Desert

Lesson II. Beading of jewelry pieces

Objective:

The student will learn how to string beads and make patterns from the way they place the beads on string.

Materials needed:

1. String for necklace or bracelet
2. Beads (a few sizes and lots of colors)
3. Needle for stringing
4. Latch for each end of jewelry piece
5. Container to store work for each student

Procedure:

Demonstrate the different techniques used for the jewelry of the Sahara. Have students practice threading a needle and stringing beads.

* This lesson should take approx. 60 min.

Lesson III. History and jewelry of the Sahara

Lesson IV. Making beaded necklaces and bracelets from the Sahara

* This lesson should take approx. 60-90 min.

IX. Conclusion:

Each region has its own uniqueness and I have tried to give you a variety of lessons to choose from. Emphasize to your students that all the jewelry is worn by both male and female and therefore boys should feel comfortable making and wearing the jewelry. Also remember that patience is a virtue when you decide to undertake this project.

I have done many projects similar to this with my students and have found that taking the time, rather than rushing to get to the next step is better because it is very difficult to get the children to understand how to do certain things. They need to be able to make mistakes first, if for no other reason but to build up enough confidence to do it correctly.

Have fun and good luck!

Appendix

Equatoria

Slide #1 Ivory necklace from the Songye of Zaire. It is carved in the shape of teeth with human faces on each tooth.

#2 Pendant representing ancestors from Zaire. They are worn for protection and are said to bring about strength of character.

#3 Ivory bracelet from the Cameroun and surrounding areas of the Equatorial region. Notice the coloring and design of each piece.

#4 Bronze collars worn by women in Yoruba, in Nigeria.

#5 Akan gold weights, beads and necklaces. Ashanti people.

#6 Yoruba beaded crown. The sculpted birds and human images tell us that the Oba's head (chief) is sacred and very powerful. He wears a veil of beads to protect his face from commoners looking at him.

#7 From the Bantu of southern Africa comes the bead jewelry. It is worn permanently by its people.

#8 Old glass from Nigeria made for priests to wear as necklaces.

Savannah Jewelry

#9 Here you can see young men dressed for the Geerwol festival. They are Wodaabe nomads that gather to impress the young girls and perform the dances that are a major part of the festival.

#10 Brass and copper are worn by men of this region. They wear pendants of heavy head plaques.

#11 The anklets worn by this young woman signifies that she is available for marriage. She will wear these until she gives birth to her first child. The other jewelry she wears is ornamental.

#12 Serendipity is a Wodaabe must. Young men and women search for the most outlandish objects to adorn themselves with.

#13 Adornments for the Geerwol festival

#14 "" ""

#15 Necklaces and bracelets from the Savannah include groups of Fulani, from Nigeria, Timbuctu and upper Volta.

The Sahara

#16 The Tuareg from the desert have geometric designs in all of their jewelry.

#17 A girl from Mali wears gifts of leather and brass and her hair is elaborately adorned.

#18 Tuareg crosses. Each piece has its own special meaning. For example, protection from evil, etc.

#19 Little girl in all her refinement of leather and glass beads. She is Moorish and from the desert.

#20 Mauritanian woman wearing carved shells and pendants of glass beads and amber.

** Slides available at the institute office **

Bibliography

Fisher, Angela. "Africa Adorned." New York: Harry N. Abrams 1984.

In this book you will find lots of information on the groups of people from many regions in Africa. The adornments are spectacular and explanations for wearing the jewelry can be found here also. Many pieces of jewelry were obtained from this book and slides are available at the institute office.

McRae, Bobbi A. "Colors From Nature." Pownal, Vermont: Storey Communications, Inc. 1993.

"Colors From Nature" is a rare find. It includes recipes for dyes and paints that can be used for painting jewelry. It discusses where natural colors have originated from and how they can be obtained.

The Perls Collection, "Royal Art Of Benin." New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art 1992.

This book offers many pieces of jewelry that can be found in Benin, southern Nigeria. It also talks about the customs, the people and rituals that these people believe in today as well as in the twelfth century.

Willett, Frank. "African Art." New York: Thames and Hudson 1985.

An information guide to the history of the group being discussed. This book includes illustrations of the early cave drawings from Benin from the tenth to the fourteenth century.

Van Offellen, Marion. "Nomads of the Niger." New York: Harry N. Abrams. 1983.

This is a wonderful book. it is jam-packed with colorful pictures of jewelry. It also has lots of information on the customs; illustrations of designs used by various groups on their clothing; in their make-up and hair and their jewelry.

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