



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1998 Volume III: Art and Artifacts: the Cultural Meaning of Objects

African Art and Aesthetics

Curriculum Unit 98.03.02
by Val-Jean Belton

Introduction:

Westerners discovered African art near the end of the last century. Many European and American artists have emulated African art for its refreshing and simplified forms, yet have failed to realize that the works were produced to conform to specific aesthetic statements. Picasso, Matisse, and other artists were influenced by the geometric qualities and abstract forms of African sculpture. One can appreciate African art most by regarding it as generally intuitive and symbolic. People created these works to secure a relationship between themselves and unknown forces. African art springs from a thought process unfamiliar to the Western world.

In African art, 'aesthetics' is a term used to sum up the characteristics and elements clearly present in all arts objects. These elements, include, for example, the resemblance of sculptures to human beings, the luminosity or smoothness of an objects surface, the youthful appearance of sculptures, and the way sculptures portray a reserved or composed demeanor. Similarly, in Western art aesthetics is also the term used to sum up the search for beauty, balance, proportion and conscientious use of materials, in order to achieve good craftsmanship in art objects. (Bromer, Gerald F. *Discovering Art History*, 1981.)

In conclusion, African sculptures reflect the various traditions and beliefs of different regions. The political, religious and historical aspects of each region are evident in their artistic products. The similarities and differences however subtle, should help to provide my students with ample materials for their analyzation, drawings and designs of the world of African art.

I am an art teacher at Hillhouse High School, whose population is predominantly African American. Many of the students I teach come from regions that have direct links to African culture - the Bahamas, West Indies, West and South Africa. Due to this dominance of African ancestry, I felt students in Introductory Art classes would benefit from learning about African art and aesthetics from a different angle. In my classroom, routinely, I teach art assignments through a hands on experience. I give students information or history concerning some area of art, and then ask them to create something artistic and imaginative which is related to the material they have just studied. I have discovered through my participation in the seminar, "Art and Artifact: The Cultural Meaning of Objects", that there are other creative and effective approaches to teaching art. This unit will take a interdisciplinary approach to teaching. It will bring together the history of African art and the meaning of African art aesthetics using a methodology involving description, deduction and speculation. The African art objects that will be analyzed, examined and focused upon in this unit for aesthetic

meaning are as follow:

1. "Ibeji" Twin Statuette (19th c.) (fig. 1) Yoruba Civilization, Nigeria.
2. "Sowo Wui Helmet" (20th c.) (fig. 2) Mende Civilization, Sierra Leone.
3. "Aron Etoma Mask" (20th c.) (fig. 3) Temne Civilization, Sierra Leone.

These artifacts are on display at The Yale Art Gallery as part of the permanent African art collection so students will view them first hand. There will also be exposure to other art object included in this collection, but this unit will primarily concentrate on the elements of African art aesthetics and how they relate to these particular art objects.

The unit is designed mainly for students in Introductory Art Classes who have not previously had art courses on the high school level. The time period between implementation and completion for the unit will be approximately eight to ten weeks. To assist the teacher with effective implementation of the unit, I have provided student handouts that should be helpful with the activities. The first handout lists the elements of African aesthetics with definitions that describe what the elements mean aesthetically. The next three handouts are drawings of the three objects which are the major focus in this unit. Also included are a list of vocabulary words that relate directly to the activities, student question worksheet, videos that can be used for background information, and cultural music to establish motivation and the mood for the unit.

Specific Unit Activities:

Lesson One:

Lesson One involves students in the study of the history and cultural beliefs that shaped and influenced African art, focusing on the three pieces mentioned in the introduction. Besides providing appropriate background, the activity stimulates the thought process and allows students to focus on these objects aesthetically, using the methodology of object analysis.

In this methodology, objects are analyzed in three stages. Description, the recording of internal evidence of the object. Deduction which consists of perceiver interaction with the object and speculation, which takes place in the mind of the investigator. Description begins with substantial analysis, i.e. the physical dimensions of the object, the articulation, and materials. To determine the dimensions, the object must be measured and possibly weighed. Next is the material description. The material used determines what qualities the student will examine. For example, with wood objects, students would look at the distribution of patterns, joints, and glue. The next step in description analysis is to examine the content, which may include designs, inscriptions, scarification embossments, engravings, carvings, drawings, adornments, or etchings. Finally, the object's form and configuration is studied. This stage helps to describe the two dimensional organizations, including lines, areas, surfaces, color, light and texture.

Deduction is the second stage of analysis. The perceiver can either handle, lift, use, or otherwise experiment physically with the object. The criteria for deductions are drawn from description analysis and not from the perceiver's prior knowledge. In Deduction, the first stage is the sensory experience of the object. One may

touch the object to feel its texture and weight. The second stage is the intellectual engagement or apprehension of what the object does, or how it does it. Finally, the last stage is the viewer's emotional response to the object. This stage can trigger different responses to the object, such as joy, fright, awe, or curiosity.

Speculation is the final stage of analysis. There are two steps in the speculation process. The first step is to review the information in the Descriptive and Deductive stages and formulate hypotheses. This process provides the time to sum up the objects internal evidence. The second stage is the development of a program that validates the investigation of questions posed by the material evidence. (Prown, Jules D., "Mind in Matter. An Introduction to material Culture Theory and Method," Winterhur Portfolio Vol. 17, No. 1 Spring 1982). Finally, this lesson also addresses the object proportion, textures, and surfaces in relation to aesthetics, and lends opportunity for ongoing classroom discussions.

Lesson Two:

Lesson two focuses on the comparison of the sculptures aesthetically. Students will be engaging in various drawing assignments that will allow their own interpretation of their perceptions and focus on their particular style of drawing and design.

Lesson Three:

In lesson three, the activities ask students to differentiate between a practical experience and aesthetic experience. The objectives and strategies for this unit are threefold. First, students will take numerous class trips to the Yale Art Gallery. During their visit, students will study and observe the African art collection, utilizing the methodologies of Description, Deduction and Speculation described in Lesson Two.

Background Information on African Art and Sculpture:

The beauty of African art can convey various feelings and messages to the casual observer. However, true appreciation can only arrive through an understanding of the culture and environment that influenced the art. It would be easy to understand African art better if it were possible to study it using Western methods. The majority of the books on Western art history focus on the changes in style and ways that various artist have influenced each other. Because there is no chronological record of style changes in African art, it cannot be studied in the same manner. Moreover, some existing studies of African art were done by researchers who were not familiar with the native languages of Africa. Nor with its native customs, which are necessary to make accurate interpretations of African art. But, from the little data that was collected, some generalizations about the sculptures can be made.

First, sculpture was used as an additional language through which Africans communicated their inner feelings to the world. The lack of writing in African cultures resulted in an oral tradition, where mythology and literature was recited from generation to generation. African sculpture has also served as communication between people and supernatural forces. Finally, sculpture may have indicated the wealth and status of its owner; carefully made objects such as stools, cups, boxes, staffs, neck rests and pipes can proclaim the taste and social position of those who use them. However, a more useful way to look at African sculpture is through common or recurring themes. These themes relate the artworks to their cultural setting, making it possible to understand the aesthetics, values, purpose and significance of a particular art object. When you compare the ways various cultures express a common theme, the similarities and differences among them become more

obvious.

Sculpture is the best known African art form. The primary materials used to make African sculpture are wood, iron, clay, bronze, ivory, and textiles. Many African sculptures are heavily ornamented. They share many of the same characteristics, such as arms held to the side, eyes in the frontal position, and weight equally distributed on both feet. Other characteristics include heads that are enlarged, large stomachs, large hands and feet, and protruding navels. The heads on African sculptures are often exaggerated because it is thought to be the center of character and emotion. The protruding navel is symbolic of creative power. (Segy, Ludislas. *African Sculpture Speaks*. 1969). The rhythmic repetition of bulging and swelling body parts moves the viewer's eye from head to toe.

Religion is the dominant force in African life and society. It greatly determines the nature of African art forms. It is most often manifested in masks, sculpture, ancestor or cult figures, fetishes, and reliquary figures. Sculptures that are considered to be religiously empowered are rarely displayed in public, and are usually stored in small chambers and shrines. Some of them are also clothed and placed in containers made from gourds, in pots, or buried in the ground.

In contrast, masks that are considered to be sculptures are meant to be seen. Ritual masks used in religious ceremonies are considered sacred. While women rarely performed in mask rituals, many African myths suggest that mask rituals were initially created and performed by females. Basically, the role of a performance and ritual mask is threefold. First, the mask may be used to hide the identity of the person who is wearing it. For example, among the Dan culture of Liberia, the Deangle Masks are feminine masks worn to collect and take food to boys in the seclusion stage of their tribal initiation. The mask were used to withhold the food giver's identity. Secondly, mask are used to free the wearer, a person that may hold a public position in the African culture from their identity. And finally, masks allowed the wearer to become something different or take on the identity of what the mask suggests or represents. For example, in ritual dance for ceremonies, the dancer ceases to be himself and becomes the spirit of the mask. From an artistic point of view, the objects may be either realistic or highly styled. Naturalistic and geometric shapes can combine to represent a recognizable human face. By contrast, other masks only faintly resemble natural forms. The wart-hog masks of the N'Geere people of Liberia are highly stylized representations, employing a wide range of materials in their construction, such as wood, fabric, tin, cotton cord, fiber, cloth, and paint.

Wooden images from the Bamara tribe of Mali show another type of mask, those which are worn as headdress. These masks are carved of wood and painted sparingly with white paint. The mask, which depicts antelopes, takes on a surreal appearance in its disproportion, geometric simplicity, and contrast of textures. Masks may also serve other functions, such as ancestor masks, the representations of deceased relatives, or deformity masks, which represent the results of disease.

Cult or ancestor figures are full-body images kept in homes. These figures are presented offerings on a daily ritualistic routine. Sometimes these figures indicate the social rank within the tribe, or may function as a fertility doll for a woman who is trying to get pregnant. These sculptures may also be carved in the form of stools. Other figures may be carved holding an offering bowl, or as mother and child figures.

Fetish figures, designed to hold a set of ingredients endowed with a mystical power, are human forms to which many types of materials can be affixed, such as rope, string, feathers, or shells. Reliquary figures are carved guardians which stand above basket receptacles for ancestral remains. In these figures, art historians note an obvious geometric stylization of humans and cones to symbolize the guardian spirits. The Skua Iba doll of the Ashanti tribe, for example, mixes geometric forms with realistic facial motifs. (Brommer, Gerald F.,

Discovering Art History. Davis Publication, Inc. Worcester, Mass. 1981.)

In conclusion, possibly the greatest contribution Africa has made so far to the cultural heritage of mankind is its varied sculpture. African sculpture was hardly known outside its own continent until the late nineteenth century, but during the twentieth century, its effects on Western art have been immeasurable.

Aesthetics and African Sculpture

How do aesthetics affect one's understanding of African art and sculpture? Are there absolute standards of beauty which operate transculturally, or is there a specific aesthetic for each society? Certainly in our own American culture, artistic appreciation and aesthetics are not the same as in African culture, where aesthetics generally have an ethnical basis. In all African languages, the same word means "beautiful" and "good". Sculptures are considered to be "good" if they fulfill their function and purpose. These words are consistent with the use and meaning of African sculpture because art is intended not only to please the eye but to uphold moral values. The ethnical and religious basis of African art may explain why the human figure is the principle subject of African art. African art often appears in ritual contexts that deal with the vital moral and spiritual concerns of the human condition.

In African art aesthetics, there are clearly standards of beauty. These standards are four precise qualities that describe sculpture and indicates what is "good" "bad": resemblance to a human being, luminosity, self-composure, and youthfulness. First, the quality "resemblance to a human being" is one of the elements used by African artists to praise a carved figure. This element is used because African artists seldom portray particular people, actual animals, or the actual form of invisible spirits in their sculptures. Rather sculptures were intended to be likenesses of their living subject. Sculptures are not portraits of individuals, but they are supposed to look as if they might be. The second quality is luminosity, or the play of light and shadow over the sculpture's. Another quality is self-composure, a straight and upright posture and symmetrical arrangement of the part of the sculpture. This does not exclude asymmetry, but it does restrict it to fairly minor details. Finally, youthfulness is also important, the representation of the subject in the prime of life.

To analyze these four qualities further, we will use the example of the "Ibeji" figures of the Yoruba People. Yoruba describes a number of semi-independent peoples loosely linked in geography, language, history and religion. Art and sculpture in the Yoruba culture were made to be used. Many writers and critics on Yoruba art long believed that African languages provide no specific vocabulary or elements for aesthetics, although Robert Thompson's research concerning the Yoruba of Southwestern Nigeria, (*African Art in Motion*, 1974), suggests they have precise vocabulary that describes and evaluates their art aesthetically. Thompson discovered nineteen criteria, "the most frequent being *jijora*", a moderate resemblance to the subject, a balance between the extremes of portraiture and abstraction. The Yoruba esthetics and terms including the following:

Ifarahon -	visibility; the various parts of a sculpture should be clearly formed both in the initial stage of	blocking out of masses and in fine detail.
Didon -	luminosity, or shiny smoothness of a surface, so that the whole sculpture offers a play of light	and shadow.

Gigun - a straight upright posture and symmetrical arrangement of the parts of the sculpture.

Odo - representing the subject "in the prime of life."

Tut - serenity, coolness, or composure.

The Yoruba sculptures "Ere Ibeji Twin Figures" symbolizes the birth of special children whose births can bless their parents with good fortune. The Yoruba have one of the highest rates of twin births in the world, and if a twin dies, it is considered a great misfortune. After the death, the mother commissions a memorial figure (two if both twins die), and the soul the deceased twin is transferred to it. In the figure, emphasis is placed on human resemblance rather than photographic likeness. The facial features, though stylized, are carefully delineated and delicate. The mother dresses the statuette in cloth, adorns it with jewelry, and keeps it near her bed. She also offers it good food and weekly prayers, and performs more elaborate rituals on the occasion of birthdays and annual festivals.

The Ibeji statuettes are ones that conform to the Yoruba aesthetic of physical proportion focusing on the straight upright posture and symmetrical arrangement. The head is on third the size of the body, disproportionately large and infantile in representation. An infantile representation is an apt expression of the desire for children. The head is associated with the person's destiny or inner head, which determines success and failure in life. If "Ere Ibeji Twins" (fig. 1) are analyzed using the methodology, the following observations can be made. First, the objects are 10 inches tall, and approximately 3 feet and 3/4 inches wide. The primary material used is wood, but there are some metal pieces located on the objects. There are also some small plastic materials located on the left and right sides.

The object consists of three separate parts - head, body and feet. The lower section below the body is a square shape, the upper part a cone shape. The middle section of the object is a rectangle with two elongated cylinders on the left and right that are attached to the upper portion. The objects are somewhat rounded in form. The larger portion suggests the head, and contains smaller shapes that could indicate facial features, such as bulging pupils indicates by nails, scarification marks on both cheeks, and small lips. The rectangular middle section is the body and exhibits various body parts, including cylinder shapes for arms, and representations of clothing. If one speculates about these objects, the strong, noble poses speak of the power of the twins. This is also a metaphor of the aesthetic element of self-composure. It suggest that these objects present themselves as composed proud, dignified, and reserved.

Secondly, the smoothed surface of the Ere Ibeji Twin Figures which is difficult to achieve without sand paper, expresses the desired quality of light and shade over the entire sculpture. In African sculpture the lustrous and smooth appearance of the objects is a indication of healthy skin. These surfaces are also often embellished with decorative scarifications. Figures with rough surfaces and deformities are intended to appear ugly, and thus morally flawed.

It is easy to analyze the formal characteristics of African sculpture in terms of vertical, horizontal or diagonal emphases; of relative naturalism or abstraction; of rounded, angular or cubic elements; or in terms of tension, rhythm and movement.

In comparison to the Yoruba art and aesthetics, the Mende and Temne societies in the Sierra Leone civilization have their own meaning for aesthetics among their art. Many of the sculptures of the Sierra Leone civilizations exhibit the head also large, featuring domed foreheads with faces that are depressed underneath. The eyes have groove-like lines. The mouth is extremely small. The necks are long, the body slender with large breast, legs thin and straight and arms and hands close to the body. Most of the facial features are portrait like.

Positions are also varied: standing, kneeling, sitting.

The sculptural masks of Sierra Leone are hollow helmet-like heads carved from the full trunk of a large tree, worn over the entire head with rims resting on the mask wearer's shoulders. Most masks have characteristics similar to that of humans, but very exaggerated. The forehead is more than half the size of the entire head, and ends in a point. The face is depressed and the eyes, chin, and mouth are small with very elaborate hairdos.

Like the Yoruba, the Mende and Temne civilization have precise terms and theories that describes their art aesthetically. These terms and theories are as follows:

Inner serenity - composed expressions.

Nobility and Intelligence - exaggerated, smooth and broad foreheads indicates intelligence.

Youthfulness - a youthful appearance connotes fertility, vigor, productiveness, and ability to labor.

At the heart of Mende society stand Sands, the only known African initiation society in which women customarily wear masks. Sands masks bear the name Sowo-Wui: worn on top a black robe of raffia and brought to life by a graceful dancer, the mask becomes Sowo - goddess and river deity, embodiment of the philosophies and ideas carried by Sands. The mask is 26 inches tall, and approximately 12 inches wide. The primary material used is wood. It is Sands's role to guide their initiates passage from girlhood into womanhood, and to ensure that as adults they measure up to the Mende society's exalted yet demanding vision of the female community. Simultaneously expressed in the conception and execution of the Sowo-Wui are notions of feminine beauty, grace, goodness, and social success. The creases that adorn the mask's neck function as a metaphor for wealth and status, and by extension beauty and sexual allure. The mask's pursed lips, tiny nose, sealed ears, and heavily lidded eyes are images of discretion, chastity and dedication to high moral standards. (Willet, Frank., African Art. Thames and Hudson, 1992.)

There is little information available concerning Temne masquerade traditions. The Temne are from the Sierra Leone civilization. Research conducted in the early 1900's suggests that Aron Etoma masks are associated with Obenle, an initiation society whose members play a crucial role in coronation and burial ceremonies held for the Temne people's paramount leader. Obenle's masks are worn in the context of chiefly funerals, along with a bushy ankle-length robe of palm fiber, the natal. The mask is carved in the form of a highly abstracted bush cow, and worn horizontally on the head so only the snout, the large nostrils and teeth are visible atop of the Natal. The mask is 24 inches tall, and approximately 18 inches wide. The primary material is wood.

Sample Lesson Plans:

Activity One:

Objectives:

1. Students will think about the conception, planning, and skillful execution that went into each object, as well as their function.

2. The student will appreciate the design, pattern, shape, form, color, and materials used to create the object.
3. Students will be introduced to the methodology of Description, Deduction, and Speculation in relation to aesthetics.
4. Students will write critical observations of the artwork.

Resources that will be used include: books, journals, Yale Art Gallery, and slides of African artwork.

Motivation and Pre-Gallery Visit: Teacher will begin by introducing students to the Yoruba, Mende, and Temne cultures through the use of African art books and slides.

Teacher will show slides of African art from the Yale Art Gallery. Teacher will explain to students how the Yoruba twins came about, discuss the beliefs that surround the twins; discuss with students the process of Describing, Deducing and Speculating about artwork. Teacher will then discuss the aesthetics that surround these works. Teacher will also talk to students about the purpose of the Yale Art Gallery field trip.

Purpose: Students will learn about materials, techniques, aesthetics and functions of everyday African objects. Unit objects will be discussed with this purpose in mind.

Yale Art Gallery Activities:

1. Students will take a tour of the African Art collection at the Yale Art Gallery.
2. Students question worksheets will be completed.
3. Students will work in cooperative groups of four, with paired partners.

Vocabulary:

1. Aesthetics - the description and explanation artistic phenomena by means of psychology, sociology, ethnology or history; pertaining to beauty.
2. Oral aesthetics - the ability to verbally define aesthetics, creative processes, and cultural forms that derive from the African oral-life and cosmology.
3. Sculpture- a freestanding three-dimensional object.
4. Object - a material thing.
5. Artifact - an object designed and created by man, usually having a useful purpose.
6. Description - what can be observed in the object.
7. Deduction - the relationship between the object and the perceiver.
8. Speculation - the formulation of hypotheses.
9. Proportion - relationships of size or amounts of color, line, space, and shapes.
10. Symbol - an object or design used in art which signifies a particular meaning.

Activity:

1. Students will look at the slides and describe orally what they see. (Examine the colors, patterns, materials and detail of sculptures).
2. Students will study the sculptures in the slides and the Yale Art Gallery. After studying the sculptures, students will list the details that they can remember about the sculpture and draw them without looking. Discussion will take place.

Questions:

1. Describe what you see in these sculptures.
2. How many sections are each sculpture divided into?
3. What makes the sculptures seem balanced?
4. Describe each sculpture. What does it remind you of?
5. Which sculpture is more concerned with life and death?
6. How has distortion been exaggerated in of the sculptures?
7. Why would you guess that African sculptors do not portray the human body the way that it looks to us in human life?
8. Which sculpture is smoother in texture? Which has a rougher surface?
9. What do sculptures like these make you think of or deduce about them?
10. What can you speculate about these sculptures?

Lesson Two:

Aesthetic Comparison:

Materials: Slides (Yale Art Gallery), pencils, drawing paper.

"Ibeji Twins" (20th c.); "Sowo Wui Helmet": (20th c.); "Aron Etoma Mask" (20th c.).

Students will use pencil and paper during this activity.

Questions:

1. Think of the various ways these sculptures can be interpreted? Draw your own interpretation of these sculptures.
2. What makes these sculptures art?
3. What makes these sculptures alike?
4. What makes these sculptures different?

Lessons Three:

Aesthetic Experience:

Objectives:

Students will:

1. Define aesthetic experience and differentiate it from a practical experience.
2. Write about their aesthetic response to simple practical experiences from their everyday lives.
3. Write about their aesthetic response to a selected piece of artwork.

Bibliography:

Teacher Reading List:

1. Vogel, M. Susan. African Aesthetics. New York. Center for African Art, 1986.
This book focuses on Aesthetics as a precise African language. The author gives detailed examples of African aesthetics.
2. Thompson, Robert Farris. African Art in Motion. Los Angeles/Berkeley, CA. University of California Press, 1986.
An illustrated book that focuses on the History of African art. It also gives detail information about various regions and how their art was influenced.
3. Thompson, Robert Farris, Ed. Yoruba Artistic Criticism: The Traditional Artist in African Societies. Indiana University, 1980. This book focuses on the contribution of African artists and their criticism in African art and sculpture.
4. D’Azevedo, Warren L. The Traditional Artist in African Societies. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1973. Based on a collection of papers presented at a conference in 1965, some of the commentaries are on the role of the artist in such societies as Yoruba, Ashanti, and Mende.
5. Hornburger, Jane M. and Whitney, Alex. African Countries and Cultures. New York: David McKay Co., Inc., 1981. An illustrated dictionary. Helpful when gathering background information about African cultures.
6. Naylor, Penelope. Black Imalies: The Art of West Africa. Garden City, Doubleday and Company, Inc.
Interesting book that explains the relationship between the sculpture of Africa and the cultural belief of societies. Filled with artistic examples.
7. Price, Christine. Made in West Africa. New York, E.F. Dutton and Co, 1975. Many different forms of West Africa are featured in this books. Photographs of artwork and sculptures. The art objects are organized in alphabetical order by sculpture names.
8. Segy, Ladislas. African Sculpture Speaks. New York, Hill and Wang, 1969. A beautiful and interesting book filled with photos of African sculpture. This book gives much detail about various African sculpture and where the ideas that inspired them came from.
9. Willet, Frank. African Art. New York, Praeger Publishers Co., 1975. An extensive study of all African arts. Very informative, covers the history of African art.
10. Chanda, Jacqueline. African Arts and Culture. Worcester, Massachusetts, Davis Publication, Inc., 1993. This book represents an introduction to African art and culture.
11. Eaton, Marica. Basic Issues in Aesthetics. Belmont, CA, Wadsworth, 1988. This

book represents the basic issues that involve aesthetics in sculpture and art. 12. Lanksford, Louis. Aesthetics: Issue and Inquiry. Reston, VA, National Art Education Association, 1992. This book discusses basic aesthetics and how aesthetics relates to art. 13. Drewal, Henry John and Margaret Thompson Drewal. Glede: Art and Female Power Among the Yoruba. Bloomington, Indiana, University Press, 1983. This book focuses on the fetish among the Yoruba and culture and the female sculpture.

Suggested Video:

1. African Art and Sculpture. Junior High-adult. 1971. 21 minutes. Reveals the African’s sense of beauty and curiosity as displayed in works of art.
2. Yaaba Soore: Path of the Ancestors. Senior High-adult. 1987. 17 minutes. This film explains what the various African tribal masks represent.
3. African Art. Junior High-adult. 13 minutes. The influence of contemporary African history on today’s artist is outlined.

Slides: Courtesy of Yale Art Gallery:

1. “Aron Etoma Mask” (20th c.) Temne Civilization, West-Central Sierra Leone.
2. “Ibeji Twins” (20th c.) Yoruba Civilization, West Africa, Nigeria.
3. “Sowo Wui Helmet Mask” (19th c.) Mende Civilization.
4. “Opon Ifa Divination Tray” (875-1900) Yoruba Civilization.
5. “Agere Ifa Palm Nut Container” (19th c.) Yoruba Civilization.
6. “Kanaga Mask” (20th c.) Dogon Civilization.
7. “Figure of an Ancestress” (19th c.) Luba Civilization.
8. “Mboko Bowl-Bearer Figure” (19th c.) Luba Civilization.
9. “Gu Mask” (20th c.) South Central Ivory Coast.
10. “Zamble Mask” (19th-20th c.) South Central Ivory Coast.
11. “Nkisi Figurine” (19th-20th c.) Kongo Civilization.

Hand drawings by the author taken from Chanda, Jacqueline; African Art and Culture, Worcester, Massachusetts, David Publication, Inc., 1993.

Classroom Music: Hancock, Herbie. Watermelon Man. Hancock Music Co. (BUI) 1992.

Student Question Worksheet:

1. Describe what you see in these sculptures. _____

2. How many sections are each sculptures divided into? _____

3. What makes the sculptures seem balanced? _____

4. Describe each sculpture. What does it remind you of? _____

5. Which sculpture is more concerned with life and death? _____

6. How has distortion been exaggerated in the sculptures? _____

7. Why would you guess that African sculptors do not portray the human body the way that it looks to us in the human life? _____

8. Which sculpture is smoother in texture? Which has a rougher surface? _____

9. What do sculptures like these make you think of or deduce about them? _____

10. What can you speculate about these sculptures? _____

STUDENT HANDOUT

Elements of African Aesthetics

Resemblance to a human being:

African artists praise a carved figure by saying that it “looks like a human being”. Artists seldom portray particular people, actual animals, or the actual form of invisible spirits.

Luminosity:

The lustrously smooth surface of most African figural sculpture, often embellished with decorative scarification, indicates beautify, shiny, healthy skin. Figures with rough surfaces and deformities are intended to appear ugly and reflect moral flaws.

Self-composure:

The person who is composed behaves in a measured and rational way; he or she is controlled, proud, dignified, and reserved.

Youthfulness:

A youthful appearance connotes vigor, productiveness, fertility, and an ability to labor. Illness and deformity are rarely depicted, because they are signs of evils.

STUDENT HANDOUT

ERE IBEJI. TWIN FIGURES, 19TH CENTURY. YORUBA NIGERIA (fig. 1)

STUDENT HANDOUT

SOWO WUI. HELMET MASK, 19TH-20TH CENTURY. MENDE CIVILIZATION (fig. 2)

STUDENT HANDOUT

ARON. ETOMA MASK, 20TH CENTURY. SIERRA LEONE (fig. 3)

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