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U.S. Museums with African Art Collections

The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Ill.
http://www.artic.edu

The High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Ga.
http://www.high.org

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, N.Y.

Museum for African Art, Long Island City, N.Y.
http://www.africanart.org

The Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham, N.C.
http://www.duke.edu/web/duma/

National Museum of African Art, Washington, D.C.
http://www.nmafa.si.edu

National Museum of Natural History, Washington, D.C.
African Voices, http://www.mnh.si.edu/africanvoices/

Saint Louis Art Museum, Saint Louis, Mo.

University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa
Art and Life in Africa Project, http://www.uiowa.edu/~africart/

University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and
Anthropology, Philadelphia
http://www.museum.upenn.edu

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Va.
Our Collections: African Art,
http://www.vmfa.state.va.us/collections/collect_african.html

RELATED WEBSITES

(continued)

HOW BIG IS AFRICA?

Information from the poster How Big Is Africa? African Studies Center, Boston University

Approximate Area in Square Miles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
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<td>3,979,405</td>
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<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>3,678,235</td>
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<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
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CHINA 3,681,089 sq. mi.
EUROPE 3,979,405 sq. mi.
UNITED STATES 3,678,235 sq. mi.
The ten African objects selected for this teaching kit are relatively recent, dating from the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The histories and the traditions they embody, however, resonate with the echoes of past eras. Several of the objects summon up the glory of ancient empires such as Ghana, “the land of gold” (c. 500), and powerful rulers like Sundiata, the Lion King of Mali (who ruled in the 1230s) and Alfonso I, King of the Kongo (c. 1456–1543). Other objects are vital components of time-honored rituals and performances used to resolve conflicts or to hold individuals accountable for their actions. Some are key ingredients in traditional rites of passage such as school graduations, weddings, and funerals. A few contemporary pieces reflect the unique ways in which African artists today combine a modern technology like photography, or knowledge of ceramic traditions from around the world, with their particular indigenous and individual sensibilities.

In Africa, art is a multisensory experience. The various materials used in the objects gathered here include cloth, gold, animal skins, bird feathers, bee venom, baobab flowers, wood, raffia, nails, mirrors, glass beads, and clay. In Africa, the objects made of these materials are used and therefore seen in many different ways depending on a variety of light conditions—in the dusky corners of small houses or outside in bright sunlight or moonlight, for instance. Because they are worn or used during rituals and performances they are seen in motion and in stillness. The sounds they make, how they feel when held or worn, and their odors and tastes are all part of how African art is known and experienced.

Keep in mind that museum exhibitions and photographs strip African art objects of these vital sensory qualities, and we can and must try to understand and imagine them as they exist and are used in their African contexts. The ten objects presented here provide precious clues to some of the complexities and achievements of the many peoples of the vast, diverse continent of Africa. The information and related learning activities also provided here will, we hope, help our minds and our imaginations expand with a deeper appreciation of the objects’ many meanings and purposes.
KWAME NKRUMAH
Ghana’s first president, Kwame Nkrumah (KWA-may nnh-KROO-mah), wore a kente cloth with this Mmeeda design on February 12, 1951, the day he was released from prison. Nkrumah had been jailed for his opposition to the British government, which had made Ghana its colony in 1908. His political party won in the elections held four days before his release. On the day he was freed, Nkrumah wore this design to emphasize that this historic event was “something that had not happened before.” In 1957, Ghana became an independent country under Nkrumah’s leadership, and he became the country’s first president in 1960. While in office, Nkrumah continued to wear kente cloths with strategic messages to communicate with the Ghanaian people. For instance, when he waved from a balcony following the announcement of Ghana’s independence from Britain, Nkrumah wore a cloth called Adwini asa, or “I have done my best.”

In the United States, kente cloth has become an important symbol of identification with Africa. Kente is often used at African American graduations and other ceremonies honoring people for their accomplishments. Some Ghanaians feel that American uses of kente cloth have become more commercial than celebratory, reducing the cloth to a generic symbol for anything African. It is important, then, to remember the complicated message in each cloth’s design and that kente comes from a specific country (Ghana) with its own particular history.

KENTE CLOTH
(Mmeeda, “something that has not happened before”)

20th century
Cotton and silk
Length 92 1/2 in. (235 cm.)
Asante kingdom, Ghana
Seattle Art Museum: Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company, 81.17.434

The Asante (ah-SHAHN-tee) and Ewe (AY-vay) peoples of Ghana in West Africa make kente (KEN-tay) cloth, the best known of all African textiles. Asante kente, such as the cloth shown here, has beautiful, brightly colored geometric patterns. Kente cloth expresses different proverbs or ideas through different designs. More than three hundred different kente designs have been recorded, and each one has its own particular message. For example, this cloth is called Mmeeda (MEE-dah), which translates to “something that has not happened before.”

Kente cloth is woven primarily by men and is made up of many strips, each four to eight inches wide. These strips are cut into pieces and sewn together side by side to make a large cloth. The weaver must have the colors and design of the cloth in mind before he begins to weave. He may add variations of his own into a well-known, traditional pattern to make the design a unique one.

Historically, kente was royal cloth, and the king controlled the use and fabrication of it. With time, however, the use of kente became more widespread, and non-royal Ghanaians came to wear it on special occasions. When worn, kente is wrapped around the body and draped over the shoulder. The strips of the cloth must be straight, both horizontally and vertically, and the bottom of the cloth should hang at the same length all the way around the wearer’s ankles.

LOOKING QUESTIONS
How many different colors can you find in this cloth? List them. Each rectangle in the central part of the cloth has a different design. Draw three different rectangles and compare them. Do you think this cloth was made by hand or by a machine? How can you tell?

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS
ART
Make your own patterned cloth using strips of colored paper, pipe cleaners, or colored wire. To weave, you must have two sets of strips: vertical and horizontal, called the warp and the weft. The horizontal strips go over and under the vertical strips at right angles. What could your design mean?

Try draping a cloth of the same size as the Mmeeda design (approximately 90 x 60 inches) on a classmate. Remember, kente is wrapped around the body and draped over the left shoulder. The bottom of the cloth should hang at the same length all the way around the wearer’s ankles.

ENGLISH/LANGUAGE ARTS
One design of kente cloth is called “wise old lady.” Another is called “liar’s cloth.” Write a story in which you imagine how one of these messages came about.

SCIENCE
Find out how the dyes for the threads used in kente cloth are made. What elements from nature are used to make different colors?
Gold is an important part of Asante culture and history. Because it is considered to be the sun’s earthly counterpart, it represents the force of life, or “soul” (kra). As early as the 1400s, European explorers and traders wrote about the richness of West African gold objects. By 1800, Asante was a powerful empire and enjoyed much wealth through military conquest and control of the gold routes to the north and south. The gold trade grew until the slave trade overtook it around 1750. When the British prohibition of the slave trade began to be enforced around 1825, however, the gold trade flourished again for several generations, ending around 1900.

The Asante region still holds some of the richest goldfields in Africa, second only to those in South Africa. As a result, gold is one of contemporary Ghana’s main exports, along with cocoa. The areas of Ghana that contain gold overlap with farming regions and natural forests, so mining operations can disrupt other economic activities as well as the natural environment. Farmers who have had their land taken away for mining purposes are often given money as compensation for their crops and loss of livelihood, instead of replacement land and the opportunity to keep farming. These issues have caused protests in major mining areas, and continue to pose a challenge to modern-day Ghana.

**ENGLISH/LANGUAGE ARTS**

Find proverbs in English that are similar to Asante proverbs.

**Recommended books:**

**SCIENCE**

Do some research using the World Wide Web and find out how gold is formed in nature. Describe the chemical process. **Recommended reference:**

**SOCIAL STUDIES**

Research how leaders in the United States and Africa communicate messages to the public through what they wear. How do American leaders’ styles compare to Ghanaian leaders’ styles?
“TO BE A MAN IS TO HAVE MANY SECRETS.”
—Bamana proverb

Hunters’ shirts show the hunter’s mastery of jiridon (jeer-ee-don), or the “science of trees,” gained from journeys and apprenticeships with other hunters. Hunters create new amulets after a long, private period of time spent learning new information. This shirt is covered with amulets made from the tips of the horns of bushback antelope, encased in leather. The mixture of ingredients placed inside each horn is a closely guarded secret, and the steps for gathering and combining the ingredients are complicated. For example, venom from bees or snakes, plants from seven different paths, a flower from a baobab tree, and the washsloth of a woman might be collected and mixed together, then boiled, pounded, and burned. One type of amulet is intended to make an animal’s eyes fill with tears so that it cannot see to run away or defend itself.

Today, young Malian men, like young people everywhere, leave home to pursue the challenges of finding jobs and educational opportunities. They travel to large African cities and to countries on other continents. In Bamako, the capital of Mali, hunters’ associations focus on preserving their traditions and knowledge to share with future generations.

Because Salif Keita’s parents were from the noble class, he was not supposed to become a singer. Consequently, he left home to seek his fortune in Bamako, where he sang in the Super Rail Band and Les Ambassadeurs.

Recently, Keita has begun singing internationally about Sundiata and the Mande tradition of hunters.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

ART
Compare the amulets found on Mande hunter shirts to types of jewelry that we wear. Can amulets and jewelry increase our sense of power or safety? Why? How are amulets and some jewelry related to various belief systems (Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, etc.) or cultures (Egyptian, Native American, Indian, etc.)? Create a personal amulet using natural materials, such as bones, stones, leather, shells, and plant materials that symbolize special qualities to you.

ENGLISH/LANGUAGE ARTS
Brainstorm a list of people who have had a strong connection to nature and living outdoors. For example: Henry David Thoreau, the explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, or even fictional characters like Mowgli in Rudyard Kipling’s The Jungle Book. Imagine or recall a time when you went camping, or took a long hike. Describe what clothes you wore and the special gear you carried for the time you spent away from civilization.

SCIENCE
Research the animals and habitats native to Mande territory. Make a chart showing what the animals look like and how they blend in with their environments. Are any of these animals endangered?

SOCIAL STUDIES
The Mande people live in regions of many different West African countries: Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, The Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Senegal, and Sierra Leone. Can you find all ten on a map?

LOOKING QUESTIONS

Describe the kind of person you think might wear this shirt. (Each student contributes one word to a list of adjectives.) Explain why you chose your word.

What is attached to the shirt? Where do you think these things were found?

What colors do you see? How would wearing a shirt like this help you blend into a forest?

Mande (MAN-day) hunters wear shirts like this one on special occasions. Can you imagine what the occasions might be? Think of a special occasion in your life. What kind of clothing did you wear? What did you do?
TRADITIONAL BELIEFS

In the early twentieth century, German colonizers forced the Ejagham people to resettle in larger villages. Soon after, the British brought in their system of government, courts of law, schools, and clinics. In order to reinforce their own traditional methods of resolving conflicts, transmitting knowledge, and restoring communal life, Ejagham groups increased their practice of Basinjom.

Ejagham culture places a great emphasis on closeness with one’s extended family group. Too much personal achievement for any one individual is questioned. Basinjom deals with this tension between the group and individuals. When a person is believed to misuse the strength they gain from an animal such as a leopard or a force of nature like lightning by using it to make themselves more important than others, Basinjom must discover the problem and resolve it.

Although Christianity and other Western influences, as well as ideas from neighboring groups and the modern world, have affected Ejagham traditional beliefs, their belief in Basinjom has not lessened, and Basinjom still appears in the modern era. In 1982, for example, he was observed performing in Nigeria at the coronation of a new ruler. Today, the Ejagham people rely both on traditional beliefs, such as Basinjom, and on Nigerian and Cameroonian courts of law.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

ART
Design a costume or a disguise that features at least two materials that represent or resemble elements from animals. What do these animals symbolize to you?

ENGLISH/LANGUAGE ARTS
In pairs, imagine a conflict between an individual person and a group. Write a short dialogue in which the conflict is resolved with the help of a teacher, parent, friend, counselor, policeman, or judge.

SOCIAL STUDIES
The Ejagham people live in Nigeria and Cameroon. Find these two countries on a map of Africa. (Note that African ethnic groups are not necessarily confined to one country.)

SCIENCE
A material from the forest, called raffia, is used for Basinjom’s hair and the hem of his gown. Find out what raffia is and where it comes from. Recommended reference: The Raffia Palm, http://www.dipbot.unict.it/Palms/Descr04.html

Looking Questions

What words would you use to describe this mask and gown?

What kinds of materials were used? Look for two materials that come from animals.

When worn and performed, this mask and gown is called Basinjom, or “God’s medicine.” On what occasions do you think the mask and gown appear? Why?
funeral processions; and when newly initiated girls come out, which is the ceremonial highlight of the year. These events usually take place at night, when the shiny black surfaces of the masks’ faces both catch the light and blend into the darkness.

SOWEI MASK FEATURES

- The wood of this mask has been rubbed with palm oil or shoe polish to make it look both black and wet. These qualities connect it with the source of Sande knowledge—nature spirits that live in rivers.
- The tightly braided hair in crisp rows signifies control and sanity. The mask forehead is high and broad because the forehead is the place where prosperity enters into one’s life. The eyes are small and narrow to conceal the eyes of the person wearing the mask and to protect the spirit who lives in the mask. In addition, for females, direct eye contact is considered disrespectful.
- The mouths of Sowei masks are tightly closed because the masks embody spirits who never gossip or giggle the way people do, reinforcing the belief that much human suffering is caused by inconsiderate remarks, mean-spirited criticism, and angry cursing.
- The necks of Sowei masks are wide because they must fit over the heads of the people wearing them, like helmets. The rings on the necks have several possible meanings. They may represent rings of fat, signs of a well-fed person. They may refer to a water spirit rising up from the depths of the river, creating concentric circles on the surface of the water. Or they may signify divinity, much as haloes do in Christian art.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

ART
Use light cardboard or stiff paper to create masks or headdresses that celebrate a rite of passage and completely disguise the wearer. Include animal, human, and other natural elements in the design. How could exaggeration of one or several features communicate the purpose of the mask symbolically?

MATH
Discuss the patterns, geometry, and symmetry in this object. Explain that carving is a subtractive process and working with clay is an additive process. Have students measure their heads and calculate the inside and outside dimensions of a mask/headdress.

SCIENCE
Research medicines used today that are based on traditional, herbal remedies from the rainforests and bush areas of Africa and other parts of the world. To learn how some traditional remedies can be integrated with modern medicine, visit this site by Andrew Weil, M.D.: DrWeil.com, http://www.drweil.com

SOCIAL STUDIES
Compare rites of passage for girls and boys in different cultures, for example, quinceañeras, school graduations, obtaining a driver’s license, registering to vote.

The Mende (MEN-day) people in Sierra Leone made this mask for a secret women’s society called Sande (SAHN-day). Because Sande practices are secret, information about them was limited until the 1970s, when women researchers did fieldwork in Sierra Leone, Côte d’Ivoire, and Guinea. Traditionally, Sande societies provide special schools, separate from the community, where girls are initiated into adulthood. Girls learn practical skills such as farming, spinning, child care, diagnosing illnesses, and treating illnesses with herbs. They are also introduced to the myths, history, and customs of their culture. This helps them become adult community leaders who can resolve conflicts through storytelling and debates. Singing and dancing and knowledge of ideal feminine beauty are also important parts of the curriculum.

This mask is made of carved wood, metal, raffia, leather, and plant fibers. The top of the head is crowned with swooping bush cow horns, a pattern of cowry shells is carved into the hair border, and remnants of a star appear on the forehead. Certain features are exaggerated for symbolic or practical purposes: the tiny, slit eyes; the small, tightly closed mouth; the large forehead; and the wide, ringed neck.

Small groups of performers wear Sowei masks as they dance for special occasions: when a Sande school opens or a new chief is installed; at
KONGO CONCEPTS

pakalala: Ready to attack and defend
This nkondi stands with his hands on his hips, his head held slightly forward, and his white eyes wide open—the stance of a powerful being in a heightened state of alert, poised to attack or defend. The Kongo word *paaka* means to cut meat into pieces, symbolizing the nkondi’s role of analyzing and resolving complicated situations by making them smaller and more manageable.

mooyoo: the belly/life
Only a rolled up scrap of cloth remains in this nkondi’s belly. When it was used in rituals, however, a packet of medicines concocted by the nganga would have been placed in the cavity, then sealed and covered with a mirror. The medicine packet gave the nkondi its energy.

kalunga: ocean, door, and wall between two worlds
The eyes of this nkondi reflect light because they are made of mirrors. Mirrors evoke the shimmering quality of *kalunga*, the thin, shiny barrier between the living and the dead. Kalunga allows souls to move into another world where they are washed clean and made ready to be born again.

The Kongo approach to life included principles of moral conduct, powerful medicines derived from nature, and sensitivity to the relations between living persons and the deceased. Far-reaching Kongo influences can be heard in samba music in Brazil and observed in drawings in Cuba. The work of contemporary African American artists David Hammonds and Renée Stout reflect Kongo ideas and beliefs.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

**ART**
Draw, model, or construct a standing figure whose body language communicates a specific attitude or mood.

**ENGLISH/LANGUAGE ARTS**
Write several paragraphs describing your first impressions of the nkondi. Read and discuss the information provided. Write several new paragraphs describing what you learned. Can you think of aspects of your own life that relate to the nkondi and his role in Kongo society?

**SOCIAL STUDIES**
What kinds of contracts do people in the United States negotiate? Think about contracts between individuals, between groups, and between individuals and groups. Who and what make a contract official or valid? How are contracts enforced?
ASSEMBLY OF NECKLACES

20th century

Wire, glass beads, and plastic

Diameter (largest) 13 1/2 in. (34.3 cm)

Kaputiei section, Merrueshi community, Maasai culture, Kenya

Seattle Art Museum: General Acquisition Fund, 2000.12–7

A community of Maasai (MAH-sigh) women in Kenya created this collection of necklaces for a young bride. On the morning of her wedding, the bride’s female relatives dress her in an ensemble of necklaces, bracelets, earrings, a headdress, and a belt. Then, wearing her full bridal ensemble, she walks to her new home, accompanied by her new husband and his best man. After her new relatives rush out to welcome her, there is a feast.

Before 1900, bridal ornaments were made mainly of iron, copper, and brass wire worked by men who were blacksmiths. Additional ornaments were woven of fresh leaves and grasses. Beginning in the early 1900s, Maasai women were able to buy large quantities of small, hard, brightly colored beads sold along the east coast of Africa. Soon only Maasai women made ornaments.

Maasai territory is divided into sixteen regions and each region is known for its beadwork patterns. New generations of Maasai women are expected to invent distinctive new patterns and ornaments. They work together to create a collection of beadwork ornaments whose patterns and colors will display their skills and show at a glance where a bride is from.

A bride’s ornaments are very expensive. In fact, one of these necklaces (shown at bottom in the photograph) is called the “bull necklace” because the bride’s parents had to sell a bull in order to raise enough money to purchase the beads for it.

RESEARCH AND CONSERVATION

In 1999, a young Maasai man named Kakuta Ole Maimai Hamisi (kah-koo-tah o-lay my-my hah-mee-see) went to college in the United States and did research at the Seattle Art Museum on its Maasai collections. Hamisi was disturbed because he found many photographs of his people but no information about them, their lives, or their culture. In response, Hamisi organized a project for the Seattle Art Museum in which people from his community created and collected objects that are important to their identity, like these necklaces. He carefully documented the owners’ and creators’ names and their actual words. The funds they received from the Museum made it possible for the people in Hamisi’s village to build their first school.

The Maasai people live in Kenya and Tanzania on savannas, or dry grasslands, which are particularly suited to herding cattle. The arid climate and daily requirements for woold to burn as fuel have led to ecological and economic problems. In 1977, a Kenyan woman named Wangari Muta Maathai (wahn-GAH-ree MOO-tah MAH-thy) founded the Green Belt Movement (GBM), one of the most successful environmental conservation and development programs in the world. GBM promotes tree planting by local community groups, a process that improves the quality of the environment and empowers women by generating income, providing leadership roles, and giving them a positive image. Many women’s groups have sold millions of seedlings and used the profits to feed and educate their children. Today, GBM methods have spread to Tanzania, Uganda, Malawi, Lesotho, Ethiopia, and Zimbabwe.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

ART, ENGLISH/LANGUAGE ARTS, AND SOCIAL STUDIES

What special objects from your life would you like people from another culture to have in order to understand your accomplishments and know who you are? Brainstorm and make lists in small groups. Draw, paint, or videotape your special objects. Be sure to include written or oral documentation that explains who they belong to and why they are important to you. Learn about Kakuta Ole Maimai Hamisi and the Maasai culture at:

Maasai Association, Olympia, Wash.

ART AND MATH

Calculate the dimensions of a series of four to six necklaces in the shape of flat, concentric circles. The smallest necklace will encircle the base of a person’s neck; the largest will sit on the shoulders. Using these dimensions, measure and cut the necklaces out of light cardboard. Design a different symmetrical, geometric pattern for each necklace, using symbolic colors. Use paint, colored pencils or markers, or glue colored paper, colored beads, or dyed macaroni to the cardboard necklaces to make your designs.

SOCIAL STUDIES

Compare Maasai bridal necklaces and customs with American bridal gowns and customs.

SCIENCE

Learn more about the Green Belt Movement at these websites:

The Greenbelt Movement, Nairobi, Kenya
The Greenbelt Movement at these websites:

Nairobi, Kenya
WomenAid International, London, England
Malick Sidibé (mah-LEEK see-DEE-bay), a photographer in Bamako, the capital of Mali, made this small, postcard-size, black-and-white portrait in 1986. The photograph is arranged symmetrically with two girls standing on either side of a seated girl holding a baby in her lap. The bold horizontal stripes of the skirts and blouses contrast strongly with the backdrop of vertical stripes. Sidibé used striped backdrops to create striking combinations of patterns in many of his photographs.

When he was seventeen years old, Sidibé moved to Bamako and attended art school, studying jewelry making. After graduation, he learned photography by watching French photographers as they worked. Sidibé then began making formal portraits like this one, as well as candid snapshots of young people at parties, clubs, and Sunday outings by the Niger River. The candid shots have become especially well known in Europe and America, yet Sidibé prefers making portraits. He finds portrait-making more artistic and likes having control over the final image: “For me, setting up a photo shoot isn’t so different from drawing a scene: I decide what goes where, I decide how to pose the person...”

After Sidibé opened Studio Malick in 1960, his popularity grew quickly. On Saturdays and around Muslim holidays, people wearing new hairstyles and clothes would be seen waiting in line in front of his studio. Sidibé’s black-and-white portrait business declined with the arrival of color photography in Mali in the 1980s. Today, however, he enjoys an international reputation and teaches young people in his neighborhood how to make inexpensive pinhole cameras and create beautiful black-and-white photographs.

I KA NYÈ TAN (YOU LOOK BEAUTIFUL LIKE THAT)
—Bambara expression

Sidibé’s photographs are primarily keepsakes for his clients, but they are also symbols of wealth, social importance, and modernity. Signs of his clients’ affluence, like stylish shoes, jewelry, or clothing, are often visible in their portraits. Can you spot different pieces of jewelry worn by the girls in Untitled (Three Girls and a Baby)? Sometimes these objects are noticeably European or American to emphasize the sitter’s wealth and familiarity with foreign goods and contemporary taste.

While Sidibé enjoyed having control over his portraits, his clients also like to assert their individuality in their images. One man had himself photographed with his sheep, another with a sombrero. Even the ways people choose to stand or place their arms express their personalities. How do you think the girls in Three Girls and a Baby show what they like and who they are?

Sidibé’s role as a Malian photographer was groundbreaking because in French colonies like Mali, the French government prohibited Africans from working as photographers. After Mali gained its independence from France in 1960, Sidibé became one of the first West African photographers to create images of African people for an African audience. Although he felt his work was beautiful and artistic, Sidibé did not consider himself an artist at the time he was making a large number of portraits. As a commercial photographer, his job was to please his customers by showing them at their best. Paradoxically, Sidibé’s photographs are now collected by museums and admired the world over as art.


CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

ART
Work in pairs to draw, paint, or photograph portraits with patterned backdrops. One person will be the artist or photographer and the other will be the client. Discuss which aspects the artist and the client will decide (backdrop, pose, lighting, clothing, jewelry, etc.) When one portrait is completed, switch roles.

ENGLISH/LANGUAGE ARTS
Write a story or dialogue about the people you see. How are they related? What happened just before the photograph was taken? What will happen next?

MATH
Malick Sidibé made small photographs so that his clients could put them in envelopes and mail them to family and friends. Collect different sizes of envelopes and figure out the dimensions photographs would need to be to fit inside, in inches and centimeters.

SCIENCE
“A MERCEDES-BENZ IS FOR WEALTHY MOTORISTS.”
—Kane Quaye

In Ghana, when members of wealthy families are close to death, custom-made coffins are ordered. In 1995, a former apprentice to Kane Quaye named Paa Joe estimated that his workshop, called Six-Foot Enterprises, produced approximately ten coffins each month. The professions and interests of the deceased inspire the types of coffins produced:

- A shoe for a man who owned a shoe shop
- A chicken and chicks for a woman with many children
- An oil can for a garage owner
- A parrot with a pen in its beak for a university teacher
- An airplane for a Ghana Airways employee

In Ghana, coffins like this one are not viewed as art, or as objects that are displayed for decoration or enjoyment. They are made to hold the remains of deceased persons throughout elaborate funeral ceremonies attended by hundreds of friends and relations. There is food and dancing, then the deceased is carried around town in the coffin to say goodbye to everyone before being buried. Typically, families spend as much money as they can on relatives’ funerals. After Ghana gained independence in 1957, a surge of industrial growth and new jobs made expensive funerals available to many more people.

In the 1970s, an American art dealer commissioned seven coffins for her gallery, calling them “fantasy coffins.” Since then, similar coffins have been exhibited in several important exhibitions of contemporary African art. In fact, this coffin was specially constructed for an exhibition at the Seattle Art Museum.


CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

ART
Using colored pencils, design a “fantasy coffin” for a dead relative or friend, a world leader, a personal hero or heroine, or a beloved pet. How can the coffin reflect what you know about this person and his or her contribution to the world, the neighborhood, or your family?

Design a box that resembles an object, plant, or animal that is important to you. Start with a cardboard shoebox or a cigar box and add found objects, colored paper, papier-mâché, etc. Make sure that your box can open and close. Don’t forget to transform the inside as well as the outside of the box.

ENGLISH/LANGUAGE ARTS
Write a poem, prayer, eulogy, or obituary for someone who might be buried in the Mercedes-Benz coffin created by Kane Quaye.

MATH
Learn how to make scale models. Create a scale model of a “fantasy coffin.” For a grade 6-8 lesson plan that can be adapted for lower and higher grades, see: Architects in Action, http://school.discovery.com/lessonsplans/programs/architectsinaction/ Hempel, Jessi. Discovery Communications, Inc., Silver Spring, Md.
VESSLE

2001
Polished and carbonized terracotta

Magdalene Anyango Namakhiya Odundo
Kenyan, resides in England
Born 1950

Seattle Art Museum: General Acquisitions Fund, 2002.41

LOOKING QUESTIONS

How do you think this ceramic vessel was made? How did the artist make the surface so smooth and the shape so symmetrical?

What colors do you see on the surface? Which color do you think is the natural color of the clay?

Vessels are often compared to humans. Find parts of this vessel that could be a lip, mouth, neck, ears, shoulders, belly, and foot.

Do you think this vessel was created for everyday use? Why?

Magdalene Odundo (mag-dah-LANE-ah-o-DOON-doe) was born in 1950 in Nairobi, Kenya’s capital city. Today, she is a professor of ceramics at the Surrey Institute of Art and Design in England and exhibits her work all over the world.

Odundo builds her pots by hand, making long, snakelike coils of clay and then pushing them together to form the walls of the vessel. She shapes and smooths the walls using gourd scrapers. A lengthy process of burnishing (polishing), applying slip (a liquid made of clay dissolved in water), and burnishing again produces the lustrous surfaces. Finally, the vessel is fired (baked) in a very hot oven called a kiln. During the firing process, oxygen is removed from the kiln’s atmosphere, and this creates unpredictable variations of color on the surface of Odundo’s vessels.

The shape of this vessel is perfectly symmetrical, yet uneven areas of velvety black appear to float across its bright red-orange surface. The vase-like shape and tiny round handles suggest a practical purpose. They also subtly echo aspects of female bodies, such as a long elegant neck and tiny, round ear lobes or earrings.

Odundo attended schools in Kenya and India before moving to England for college. Her distinctive style combines a great variety of elements and influences from around the world—including the British potter Bernard Leach, modern artists like Constantin Brancusi and Jean Arp, the women potters of San Ildefonso Pueblo in New Mexico, and the simplicity and purity of Asian ceramics, as well as the arts, culture, plants, and animals of Nigeria, rural western Kenya, and Zimbabwe.

PERFECT SYMMETRY AND PERFECT BALANCE

“I still make vessels, this has not changed, and this is strictly a deliberate choice. It helps me avoid being distracted from my quest to one day make the piece that achieves perfect harmony—having perfect symmetry and perfect balance.”

—Magdalene Odundo

A ceramic vessel created by Magdalene Odundo is intriguing because it can remind us of many different things while being completely unique. Odundo says she might get an idea from watching the growth of plants, seeing how the sleeves of a Victorian dress hang, or observing the silhouette of a Kenyan woman wearing layers of cloth. The ways in which various standards of beauty in different time periods and places have dictated the shapes of women’s bodies is a topic she studies avidly. These standards include elongated foreheads in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, tiny wasp waists held in by corsets in nineteenth-century Europe and America, and the unnaturally slender fashion models of today.

Odundo also draws inspiration from the traditions of female potters in Kenya and Nigeria and from San Ildefonso in New Mexico. Women potters who live in rural African villages make pots that meet their practical needs and their community’s standards. Odundo, on the other hand, like other African artists who work in cities and travel throughout the world, is free to develop her own individual sense of beauty. The simple shapes of Odundo’s vessels span centuries and continents, recalling sculpture both ancient and modern. Although they are in the form of containers, she does not intend them to be used.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

ART AND ENGLISH/LANGUAGE ARTS

To see more work by Magdalene Odundo, visit the website below. What do these vessels remind you of? Which one is most similar to the vessel on the image card? Why?

Magdalene Odundo,
http://www.uam.ucsb.edu/Pages/odundo.html

Berns, Marla C. University Art Museum, University of California at Santa Barbara, Calif.

Name the parts of this vessel using names for parts of the human body. Then, think of examples of common expressions that use body part names, such as “the long arm of the law,” “you hit it on the nose,” and “they ran neck and neck.”

ART AND SOCIAL STUDIES

Research standards of feminine beauty and pottery traditions found in different periods of history and cultures. Draw or create a ceramic vessel that incorporates one or more of the design elements you discover.

SCIENCE

Find out why clay vessels are fired in hot ovens. What happens to the clay when it reaches certain temperatures? Research various methods of reduction firing for pottery. Design a simple kiln, or adapt an existing one, for a reduction firing. If possible, try it out.
Recommended Resources

BOOKS FOR EDUCATORS


CHILDREN’S BOOKS


This magical story uses the same rhythm and repetitive structure as “The House That Jack Built” to tell how young Ki-pat helps end a terrible drought on Kapiti Plain and saves his cows “so hungry and dry.” The colorful, stylized illustrations vividly convey a sense of vast space and sky on the savanna. (Preschool–grade 4)

Assembly of Necklaces, Masai culture, Kenya


This upbeat story is about an old, blind storyteller named Grandfather the Onlooker, who is loved by all the children in the village of Amuru. After his death, the children find a special way to honor him, which involves helping their parents understand that some of the village customs must change in order to have meaning when new circumstances arise. (Grades 3–8)

Mercedes-Benz Coffin, Kane Quaye, Ghana


The relatives of an orphan boy named Mbi (mm-BEE) treat him poorly until he discovers a magic tree. When Mbi sings to the tree, it quickly grows and provides wonderful fruit. As soon as the villagers understand that the tree will respond only to Mbi, he earns their respect and love. The watercolor illustrations are exquisite. (Grades 1–6)

Hunter’s Shirt, Bamana culture, Mande tradition, Mali


In this humorous tale, monkeys teach BaMusa the hat seller an important lesson through a proverb: An empty satchel cannot stand, or, it is with a full stomach that one thinks best. The Fulani culture of Mali provides the setting for this story; there are also European and British versions. (Kindergarten–grade 5)

Kente Cloth, Asante kingdom, Ghana

Porcupine Ring and Bird Ring, Asante kingdom, Ghana
CHILDREN'S BOOKS


After learning about the Maasai people of East Africa in school, Linda feels a sense of kinship and imagines how her life would be similar and different if she lived with the Maasai on the open plains instead of in an American city. The realistic oil and colored pencil illustrations feature people and scenes in both locales, including traditional Maasai beadwork necklaces. (Grades 1–5)

Assembly of Necklaces, Maasai culture, Kenya


Inspired by a theme that runs through African folklore—the myth of a boy with miraculous powers—the author sets this story in contemporary Tanzania, his native country, and gives it a realistic spin. (Kindergarten–grade 3)

Hunter's Shirt, Baranana culture, Mande tradition, Mali


This traditional creation story from the Dan people of northeastern Liberia teaches the value of each part of the body, or each member of a family or community, working together cooperatively. (Preschool and kindergarten)

Assembly of Necklaces, Maasai culture, Kenya


Based on a story collected in Zimbabwe, this beautifully illustrated book describes the adventures of two lovely daughters of marriageable age invited to come before the King, who is looking for a wife. As the story unfolds, the daughter’s different personalities determine their fates. (Grades 4–12)

Assembly of Necklaces, Maasai culture, Kenya

Sowei Mask, Mende culture, Sierra Leone


This story, which originated with the Bini people of Nigeria, addresses the universal issue of teasing. When an unusual old man encounters a young boy who can't refrain from making fun of him, there are consequences. (Grades 3–6)

Basinjom Mask and Gown, Ejagham culture, Nigeria and Cameroon

Standing Figure, Kongo culture, Democratic Republic of Congo


A professional storyteller retells six traditional African stories, which are enhanced with watercolor illustrations of rural African life. “Shansa Mutongo Shima,” from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, describes how a beautiful young woman outwits a suspicious suitor by using a clever disguise made of leopard skins and antlers. “The Wedding Basket,” from Nigeria, and “The Roof of Leaves,” from the Congo, describe what can make or break a marriage. “The Talking Skull,” from Cameroon, is a comical story about the dangers of talking too much. (Grades 3–12)

Assembly of Necklaces, Maasai culture, Kenya

Basinjom Mask and Gown, Ejagham culture, Nigeria and Cameroon

Mercedes-Benz Coffin, Kane Quaye, Ghana

Sowei Mask, Mende culture, Sierra Leone


Generations of griots (GREE-ohs), storytellers who preserve history and wisdom for many African ethnic groups, inspired this telling of the epic of Sundiata, from his birth to his exile to his triumphant return. Magnificent cut paper illustrations and an extended note on the history of Ghana, the first great empire of West Africa, make this book an excellent resource for teaching. (Grades 3–12)

Hunter's Shirt, Baranana culture, Mande tradition, Mali

General


Each book in this series contains brief histories of important kingdoms of Africa, well-researched biographies of three rulers, a look at contemporary African life, a glossary, recommended books and websites. The books are well organized, well written, and liberally illustrated with photographs of the art and peoples of each region. (Grades 3–8)
CHILDREN’S BOOKS (continued)

From Algeria to Zimbabwe, the incredible diversity of the fifty-three countries that make up the continent of Africa is presented through brief descriptions of the everyday lives of children who live in them. Colorful illustrations depict children walking to school on city streets, playing games in rural villages, riding ponies down snowy mountains, drinking tea in a desert tent, and cavorting on sandy beaches. (Kindergarten–grade 4)

This is a lively, lovely selection of proverbs from various African countries and cultures, including Ghana, Sierra Leone, Kenya, and the Asante people. (All grades)

RELATED WEBSITES

Related to the Objects Featured in This Guide

*African Art, African Voices: Long Steps Never Broke a Back*
http://www.philamuseum.org

*Art from Africa: Long Steps Never Broke a Back*
http://www.seattleartmuseum.org/Exhibit/Archive/Longsteps/default.htm
Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, Wash.

*African Art, African Voices: Long Steps Never Broke a Back*
http://www.philamuseum.org

*African Museums and Artists*

African Crafts Online, Inc., Washington, D.C.
Showcases traditional artisans and modern artists, as well as designers whose work incorporates African materials or designs. Includes several lesson plans and opportunities to shop

*African Arts and Related Organisations on the Internet*
http://www.icom.org/afrcim/afrcim1.htm
International Committee for Documentation, International Council of Museums, Paris, France
A checklist of museums in Africa, organized by country, with website and e-mail information

Universes in Universe—Worlds of Art, Berlin, Germany. (Pat Binder and Gerhard Haupt, editors)
Lists a limited number of exhibitions, publications, and museums related to traditional and contemporary African art

*Culture, Anthropology, and History*

Africa Resource Center, Inc., Binghamton, N.Y.
*IJele* is an electronic journal on “modern and contemporary art and photography, iconography, symbolism, and aesthetics of Africa and African artists around the world.”

The online guide and information resource for the PBS television series *Wonders of the African World*, an exploration of the wealth of African history and culture.

*Africa: One Continent, Many Worlds*
http://www.lam.mus.ca.us/africa/main.htm
Natural History Museum of Los Angeles, Los Angeles, Calif.
Features maps, stories, an activity guide, classroom ideas, and lesson plans

Madunia Foundation, Amsterdam, Netherlands
Presents information about African hip-hop around the world

*Modern African Art: A Basic Reading List*
http://www.sil.si.edu/SILPublications/ModernAfricanArt/modern-african-art.htm
An annotated bibliography of recent publications and exhibition catalogues as well as popular and scholarly periodicals

Roy, Christopher. University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa
Explains techniques of traditional African pottery-making through slides, videos, essays, a list of publications, and a DVD available for purchase.
U.S. Museums with African Art Collections

The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Ill.
http://www.artic.edu

The High Museum of Art, Atlanta, Ga.
http://www.high.org

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, N.Y.

Museum for African Art, Long Island City, N.Y.
http://www.africanart.org

The Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, Durham, N.C.
http://www.duke.edu/web/duma/

National Museum of African Art, Washington, D.C.
http://www.nmafa.si.edu

National Museum of Natural History, Washington, D.C.
African Voices, http://www.mnh.si.edu/africanvoices/

Saint Louis Art Museum, Saint Louis, Mo.

University of Iowa, Iowa City, Iowa
Art and Life in Africa Project, http://www.uiowa.edu/~africart/

University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and
Anthropology, Philadelphia
http://www.museum.upenn.edu

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Va.
Our Collections: African Art,
http://www.vmfa.state.va.us/collections/collect_african.html

How Big Is Africa?

Approximate Area in Square Miles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>11,668,545</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>3,681,089</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>3,979,405</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>3,678,235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>11,338,729</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Information from the poster: How Big Is Africa?, African Studies Center, Boston University
### Vocabulary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>additive</td>
<td>Refers to the process of adding. In making clay sculpture, the artist adds small pieces of clay to form the figure or shapes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>amulet</td>
<td>A charm used to ward off evil or to bring good luck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>apprenticeship</td>
<td>A period of learning from a master or someone highly skilled or knowledgeable in a specific area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blacksmith</td>
<td>A person who forms objects by heating and hammering iron</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>candid snapshot</td>
<td>An informal, unposed photograph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>camouflage</td>
<td>The technique of disguising objects or people so that they blend in with the surrounding environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>commercial photographer</td>
<td>Someone who makes photographs to sell to clients as mementos, for advertising or business use, or for other purposes—in contrast to someone who makes photographs primarily as art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>composition</td>
<td>The underlying structure or arrangement of the different elements of a work of art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>concentric</td>
<td>Having a common center. Usually said of circles or spheres</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>contrast</td>
<td>Opposition or juxtaposition of different forms, lines, or colors in a work of art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>custom-made</td>
<td>Made specifically for an individual customer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>design element</td>
<td>The building blocks used in art: line, shape, value, color, space, form, and texture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ensemble</td>
<td>An entire costume or outfit, with all the parts in harmony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>formal portrait</td>
<td>A painting, photograph, sculpture, or other representation of a person who sits or stands in a deliberate pose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>geometric</td>
<td>Having the straight or curving lines or shapes used in geometry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>geometry</td>
<td>The branch of mathematics that deals with the properties, measurement, and relationships of points, lines, angles, and figures in space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gourd</td>
<td>The hard-shelled fruit of any plant belonging to the family that includes pumpkins, cucumbers, and zucchini. Gourds are sometimes called calabashes. When the insides are removed and the shell is dried, gourds can be used as bottles, dippers, spoons, and scrapers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>horizontal</td>
<td>Parallel to level ground or the horizon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lustrous</td>
<td>Shiny, luminous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>palanquin</td>
<td>An enclosed chair suspended from poles and carried on the shoulders of four or more people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pattern</td>
<td>A decorative design composed of elements in a regular arrangement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pose</td>
<td>A body position assumed deliberately for an artistic purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>raffia</td>
<td>A fiber obtained from the leaves of the raffia palm and used for making mats, baskets, hats, and costumes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reduction firing</td>
<td>A technique in which the amount of oxygen is limited inside a kiln in order to produce special, unpredictable effects on the surface of the clay. This process is popular with artist-potters who enjoy the surprising results.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>right angle</td>
<td>The angle formed by two intersecting, perpendicular lines; a 90-degree angle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rite of passage</td>
<td>A ceremony or special event marking a person’s change of status, such as the entrance into a special group, or passage from one stage of life to another</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ritual</td>
<td>A ceremony or rite; any pattern of behavior regularly performed in a set manner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>subtractive</td>
<td>Refers to the process of taking away. Carving wood or stone is a subtractive process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>symbol</td>
<td>Something chosen to represent something else. In a work of art, colors and objects are often used symbolically.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>symmetry</td>
<td>A situation in which the size, shape, and location of parts on the left and right sides, or top and bottom, of a composition or object are the same on opposite sides of an imaginary center dividing line (bilateral symmetry) or are arranged regularly around a center point (radial symmetry)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>vertical</td>
<td>In a position or direction that is perpendicular to the horizon; upright</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>warp</td>
<td>The set of yarns or threads placed lengthwise in a loom, crossed by and interlaced with the filling or weft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>weft</td>
<td>The yarns or threads drawn under and over the warp in a crosswise direction to create a woven fabric</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>