

Art
ToGo

The Cleveland
Museum of Art

African Art: Art
from West and
Central Africa

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One of the Department of Education's goals through this Art to Go presentation is to view its world renowned collection of sub-Saharan African art.

We also encourage teachers and students to visit the museum's website for useful information and images from all CMA collections and programs.

Cover (from the permanent collection):
Crown (ade), 1900s. Africa, Nigeria, Yoruba people. Cloth, glass beads, basketry, cardboard, wood, feather quills. Andrew R. and Martha Holden Jennings Fund 1995.22

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The Presentation

The Art to Go lesson “African Art: Art from West and Central Africa” focuses on three major art-producing peoples: the Yoruba, the Asante, and the Kuba. Most museum collections of African art feature works by these cultures. Though it is impossible to give a full sense of the variety in African art, its diversity is evident even in the small selection of works included in this lesson.

Objects range from metal to textile to wood. Forms and styles differ, from the abstract two-dimensional patterning of a Kuba raffia-palm textile to the whimsical naturalism of an Asante goldweight. Some works are objects of status or emblems of power, while others help their owner to interact with the spirit world.

What do all these objects have in common? All were considered beautiful by the cultures that created them and are considered beautiful by the Western museums that house them. But more than skin-deep, their beauty is fully tied to each object’s purpose. For example, past rulers of the Asante wore beautiful silk *kente* cloth to draw attention to their status. A highly polished, well-carved memorial figure known as an *ere-ibeji* better pleased the spirit of the deceased twin whom the sculpture honored.

Yoruba

The Yoruba culture is surprisingly old. Archaeologists have uncovered material evidence of the antiquity of the city of Ile-Ife, where found objects date as early as AD 800. The Yoruba consider Ile-Ife to be their place of origin and the center of civilization. Yet the city is the center of only one of 16 Yoruba kingdoms. Today, the Yoruba remain strongly tied to their cities of origin rather than to modern nationalism. Modern Yoruba live in southwestern Nigeria and southern Benin.

Much of the early art recovered from Ile-Ife was designed to glorify rulers or nobility. Many of the objects, art forms, and styles developed in this early period are still used to ennoble the royal court. The king of a city-state, or *oni*, is considered semi-divine, since he traces his lineage back to Oduduwa, the first divine ruler of Yorubaland. The king, however, does not maintain absolute authority over his people; to the contrary, an elite society of male and female elders called the Ogboni serves to keep his power in check.

The duties of the Ogboni (variously translated as “thirty” or “wisdom”) include the selection of the king, his installation and later his burial, and the implementation of punitive action against him, even his removal from the throne. Various forms of artwork identified membership levels in the Ogboni society, but perhaps the best-known membership emblem consists of a pair of male and female figures known as *edan* (1971.1005), joined at the top by a chain.

Joined Male-Female Figures (Edan), 20th century, Africa, Nigeria. Brass. The Harold T. Clark Educational Extension Fund. 1971.1005.



These male and female figures differ very little from each other; note that in the particular example in this lesson, both wear beards—a stylistic feature found on all *edan*. Perhaps the lack of gender specificity helps to emphasize the balance of power between male and female forces that must occur for the society to achieve its goals. Men and women are often considered to be “attracting opposites” in African thought and art. Although men and women are not equal in Ogboni society, they must come together to continue the human race and work together to ensure the survival of mankind.

The choice of materials used to create the *edan* is significant. Brass used for the male and female figures signifies a desire for longevity and well-being. The figures are attached to iron stems so that they can be driven into the ground to announce that a meeting is in progress and outsiders should not approach. Iron is sacred to Ogun, god of creative energy and industry.

While figures like the *edan* of the Ogboni society serve to call attention to status, other Yoruba sculpture is created to facilitate transactions between those in the visible world (*aye*) and those in the otherworld (*orun*). Dwellers in the otherworld—spirits, ancestors, and gods (*orisha*)—frequently enter the world of the visible and interact with its inhabitants. Yoruba people often consult with diviners who are trained to interpret the actions of inhabitants of the divine realm. They believe that when people of the visible world are knowledgeable about the invisible forces at work in their lives, they can influence the course of events through prayer and sacrifice.

One situation that calls for a diviner's consultation is the death of a twin. In such a tragic circumstance, the grieving parents generally are advised to commission a figure of the deceased, known as an *ere-ibeji* (1969.506). This figure must be cared for as if it were a living infant. The mother carries the figure in her wrapper on her back, and feeds and dresses the statue.

The Yoruba have a high incidence of twin births, and twins are particularly susceptible to infant mortality. Living or dead, twins represent powerful spirits who are capable of bringing riches to their parents and misfortune to those who do not honor them. If one twin dies, he or she is thought to become an *orisha*. Such a spirit can be unpredictable or even harmful, perhaps trying to tempt the surviving twin to join his sibling in the spirit world.

As the *ere-ibeji* represent *orisha*, they must not be depicted as helpless little infants, but instead as youthful adults at the height of their powers. Eyes bulge to represent the *ashe*, or life force, filling the figure. The figure in this lesson wears a strand of beads that represents the mother's association with the cult of a particular *orisha*, as does the copper ring around its wrist. Originally, the figure would have been highly polished to emulate the sheen of gleaming, healthy skin.



Male Twin Figure (*Ere-ibeji*), 20th century, Africa, Nigeria. Wood, beads, metal, indigo. The Harold T. Clark Educational Extension Fund. 1969.506.1.

If a parent who owns an *ere-ibeji* dies, care of the figure rests with the twin's surviving sibling. If that is not possible, such figures often are placed in a shrine dedicated to Shango, the Yoruba god of thunder, lightning, and storms, to whom twins are sacred. Shango is thought to have been a historical king of the city-state of Oyo who became corrupted by power and was forced to take his own life to end his tyrannical rule. Shango's supporters believed that he did not die but became an *orisha*, hurling lightning at unbelievers.

Shango worshipers carry his emblem, an axe, and his shrine contains calabashes to hold the axes that are filled with his spiritual power. The calabash included in the lesson (1921.1603a-b) may have been so used in a shrine devoted to Shango. Intricately carved calabashes also find use in domestic contexts. The figure-eight pattern on our example's lid may have been inspired by contact with Islamic traders, who were resistant to figurative motifs and preferred abstract, geometric designs in their art. A tightly closed calabash is well known in the Yoruba world as a metaphor for the form of the universe, with one half representing the visible world and the other the invisible or otherworld.

Calabash, 20th century, Africa, Nigeria. Gourd. Gift of W. A. Price. 1921.1603, 1921.1603.1



Asante

West of the Yoruba in the area once known as the Gold Coast, the Akan-speaking Asante have dominated the coast for centuries. The founder of the Asante kingdom, Osei Tutu, rose to power in the early 1680s and established many of the aspects of rulership that continued through the 19th century. Today, the Asante live somewhat inland, concentrated in the forest areas of south-central Ghana around their capital, Kumasi.

Asante visual arts are among the most colorful and vibrant of African arts. Their art encompasses many references to oral culture, particularly proverbs for which the Asante are famous. Many works, especially those relating to the state, make reference to layers of complex thought. Reference to proverbs is so important in official communication and daily speech that the Asante say, “We speak to a wise man in proverbs, not in plain speech.”

Gold is the ultimate material for objects of statehood. As the term Gold Coast implies, the region had something that almost every other nation wanted. Gold was panned from the riverbeds, creating a brisk trade between the Asante state and nearby Islamic cultures of North Africa, as well as distant nations in Europe. One of the most important objects in the Asante kingdom is the golden stool, which according to legend descended from the sky onto the lap of the first king, Osei Tutu. It is said to contain the soul of the nation, and is so sacred that even the king touches it only on important state occasions.

When the king himself appears in public, he is weighed down with many gold objects and textiles, giving rise to another Asante expression: “Great men move slowly.” Although the technology used to create Asante textiles is thought to have been learned from nearby peoples and the materials for important royal textiles once came from trade with Europeans, the production of brightly colored, strip-woven cloth, or *kente*, is an inherently Asante art form.

Silk textiles were once unraveled to make the finely patterned cloth, adding to its intrinsic value. Silk *kente* with certain patterns formerly were reserved for use only by the royal court, but today are made with rayon and worn by all members of Asante society. *Kente* is, in fact, the national dress of Ghana.

Every *kente* includes one of 300 named patterns easily identifiable by Asante viewers. The *kente* in the lesson (1972.1056), a more modern version of the type, includes patterns such as *nnwotoa*, or “snail’s bottom,” a red-and-yellow checkerboard pattern; *babadua*, or “tree,” a horizontal striped pattern; and *nykemfere*, or “broken pots,” a design of stacked parallelograms. The cloth’s smaller size indicates it was likely worn by a woman.

Asante artwork that predates the kingdom’s founding in the 17th century has yet to be discovered. While the technologies for weaving textiles and casting metal were likely introduced from neighboring cultures, it is thought that the use of terracotta and wood for sculpture more religious in nature is inherent to the Asante culture.

Cloth (Kente), Late 20th century, Africa, Ghana. Cotton and Rayon. The Harold T. Clark Educational Extension Fund. 1972.1056.



The Asante used wood to represent a figure called an *akua'ba* (plural *akua'ma*), or ideal feminine child (1969.527). Such figures were commissioned by women who hoped to conceive and successfully deliver a beautiful, healthy, and preferably female child. To ensure a positive outcome, women cared for the figures as if they were real infants and carried them in wrappers tied to their backs. After a daughter's birth, mothers might give the figures to their other children to play with, or place them on altars to give thanks.

In the museum's *akua'ba*, a beautiful human form is conveyed through the use of symmetry, frontality, and balance. The features are simplified and delicate, with a high forehead as if to imply wisdom and a small mouth perhaps to convey that one should not speak without careful consideration. The rolls of fat surrounding the neck and the high polish of the overall surface, like gleaming, dark skin, indicate good health.

Great humor often characterizes African art. For example, many of the weights used in financial transactions of the gold trade appear humorous to Western eyes, even without immediate knowledge of their meaning. Gold was traded and used as currency in the form of dust or nuggets; a fixed weight was placed on one side of a scale and gold was added to the other side until both sides balanced.

Early weights often were cast with geometric designs. But a vast repertoire of images are found in the majority of brass weights—from items probably cast directly from nature, like seeds and nuts, to multi-figure animal and human groupings. Many weights refer to proverbs, such as “The rain does not wash off the leopard’s spots” (referring to the power of the king), or “The hen knows it is dawn, but leaves it to the rooster to announce” (referring to the prerogatives of men). This lesson contains a weight in the form of a tiny, charming bird (1953.459); if it refers to a proverb, its meaning has been lost to us.



Female Figure (Akua'ba), 20th century, Africa, Ghana. Wood. The Harold T. Clark Educational Extension Fund. 1969.527.



Gold Weight, 19th century, Africa, Ghana. Brass. The Harold T. Clark Educational Extension Fund. 1953.459.

Cup, 19th century,
Africa, Democratic
Republic of the Congo.
Wood with brass inlay.
Gift of W. A. Price.
1942.1127



Kuba

The earliest evidence of Kuba civilization in the center of the modern Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) dates to the 17th century, but by the 19th century, when Europeans first came in contact with this reclusive group, the Kuba dominated the ivory trade in Central Africa and thus were very wealthy. American and European museums became the recipients of Kuba artwork collected by late 19th- and early 20th-century missionaries, scientists, and explorers. Museum curators and the public at large quickly concluded that Kuba art was the product of a highly sophisticated civilization.

The king, or *nyim*, was one of the great patrons of Kuba art. At his ascension he commissioned a new capital with new buildings, as well as cowrie-encrusted regalia and portrait statues, or *ndop*. Although the king was at the apex of the social hierarchy, there were a great number of nobles in Kuba society; in fact, more than half of Kuba men were titleholders in the late 19th century. Competition for influence at court was fierce, and the use of art helped to distinguish one's status.

One way for a noble to attract favor was to host gatherings and distribute large amounts of palm wine. Such events prompted use of some of the most spectacular Kuba prestige objects, including palm wine cups. Presumably, the quality and fine detail of the host's cups came under scrutiny, and the example in this lesson (1942.1127) likely was admired for its fine and detailed carving.

Tiny cuts on the cup's surface create rich textures to indicate hair and rolls of skin on a woman's neck. Brass tacks adorn the temples and the center of the forehead—perhaps to suggest ethnic scarification marks, but undoubtedly to add intrinsic value to the cup, as brass tacks were the most precious metal commodity used in the Central African region. This cup is remarkably thin-walled for an object made of wood.

Another object of status that no noble would be without was a short knife called an *ikul* (1915.497). The *ikul*, or “peace knife,” was of a type introduced by a Kuba *nyim* to replace the fatal throwing knife favored at the time. The peace knife, with an unsharpened iron blade not meant to cut, was worn tucked into a wrapper on its owner's back.

The wood handle of the *ikul* in this lesson has been inlaid with tiny ribbons of copper or zinc to form an elaborate, detailed pattern. Brass tacks have been added for greater intrinsic value. This example was collected around 1915, a time when the knives were still in use.

Dagger (ikul), early 20th century, Africa, Democratic Republic of the Congo. Iron and wood. The Educational Purchase Fund. 1915.497.



The raffia palm tree whose sap was extracted and fermented to make wine provided the Kuba with many other useful products, including oil for cooking and raw materials for building and textiles. The Kuba word for the raffia palm, *shyaam*, derives from the name of the first mythical Kuba king, who exclaimed that just as the palm tree never stops producing wine, the king's knowledge is inexhaustible.

Europeans marveled at the softness of a raffia palm textile that they called "Kasai velvet." This textile actually differed in technique from velvet, as the raised pile surface was created by embroidering a woven mat and cutting the loops of the embroidery. Admired by Europeans and collected in quantity by museums, the cloths were extremely valued in Kuba society. Squares of this type of raffia cloth were once used as currency, figured in marriage contracts, were worn at court ceremonies, and were deposited with the deceased as grave gifts at funerals.

These raffia palm textiles feature geometric patterns, many of which are named and recorded for posterity (1915.490). The love of geometric patterning among the Kuba is evident in almost all of their works, a unique characteristic of their art. This textile features a pattern of alternating light and dark right-angle triangles called *lantshoong*. Most patterns are named for physical objects that the patterns represent in an extremely stylized fashion. The *lantshoong* is associated with a royal Kuba masquerade, with the design appearing on the costume of the *mwashambooy* character.

Raffia Palm Textile, early 20th century, Africa, Democratic Republic of the Congo. Grass cloth. The Educational Purchase Fund. 1915.490.



Conclusion

This selection of nine objects from three major West and Central African cultures is a small but choice group to form an introduction to the diversity of sub-Saharan African art. All the objects belong to the Education Art Collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art and were acquired as early as 1915 to be used at the discretion of the Department of Education. The Art to Go program enables participants to have a tactile connection to the art of a variety of cultures and thus appeals to a variety of learning styles. Ultimately it is the Department of Education's goal to entice Art to Go participants to visit the Cleveland Museum of Art and view its premier collection of sub-Saharan African art.

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List of Objects

Yoruba

Calabash, 20th century, Africa, Nigeria.
Gourd. Gift of W. A. Price. 1921.1603,
1921.1603.1.

Male Twin Figure (Ere-Ibeji), 20th century,
Africa, Nigeria. Wood, beads, metal, indigo.
The Harold T. Clark Educational Extension
Fund. 1969.506.1.

Joined Male-Female Figures (Edan), 20th
century, Africa, Nigeria. Brass. The Harold T.
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Dagger (ikul), early 20th century, Africa,
Democratic Republic of the Congo. Iron
and wood. The Educational Purchase Fund.
1915.497.

Raffia Palm Textile, early 20th century,
Africa, Democratic Republic of the Congo.
Grass cloth. The Educational Purchase Fund.
1915.490.

Raffia Palm Textile, early 20th century,
Africa, Democratic Republic of the Congo.
Grass cloth. The Educational Purchase Fund.
1915.493. *Not illustrated*

Africa

