Non-Western Art History

African Art: Southern, Eastern & Northern

Historical Approach to African Art
- Viewed as "craft" rather than "fine art"
- It was in the interests of colonial powers to brand African art as "primitive" to justify slave trade and exploitation of African resources.
- Originally analyzed without any references to the cultural context. "Experts" viewed it through Western assumptions.
- Research into African art remains under-funded and scholarship is in its infancy, but the genius of African artists and the richness of their creations is now more widely recognized.

Broad Common Characteristics of African Art:
- Innovation of Form: prompted by local arts patrons and cultural institutions.
- Visual Abstraction: emphasis on visual boldness across all media, rather than a natural representation
- Parallel Asymmetry: breaks in patterns or varied pattern elements add energy and movement.
- Sculptural Primacy: while there are two-dimensional traditions, most cultures favor three-dimensional artworks.
- Performance: many artworks are integral to performances with music and dance; well-planned events for a large community.
- Humanism: the major artistic subject is the human form, stressing the human spirit and society.

Source: A History of Art in Africa, By Visona, Pyonor, Cole, Harris, Pearson/Prentice Hall, Inc. 2001
### Broad Common Characteristics of African Art:
- **Ensemble and Assemblage:** artworks usually part of a group in a shrine or performance. Images hold more power if they are combined with other figures and other materials.
- **Multiplicity of Meaning:** an artwork is intended to mean different things to different members of society, depending on their age, level of knowledge and level of initiation.


### Cultural Context:
- Africans believe in an invisible world of ancestor spirits and deities. Rituals can communicate with them, connecting the past to the present, this world and the other.
- Many African groups have their own distinct ideas about beauty and a special vocabulary for art criticism of artworks and performances.
- Much information about art, artists and aesthetics is imbedded in oral tradition that is only recently being collected.

Source: *Art Beyond the West*, By Michael K. O’Riley, Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 2001

---

**Game Pass Rock, Unknown Date, Unknown San Artists, Natal/South Africa, Metropolitan Museum of Art**

**Linton Rock Painting, 18th or 19th century AD, Unknown San (Bushman) Artist, South Africa, South African Museum, Cape Town**
African Art: South, East and North

Lioness Rock Painting, 18th-19th century AD, Unknown San (Bushman) Artist, South Africa, South African Museum, Cape Town


Great Zimbabwe Complex, 13th - 15th centuries, Aerial View/No name or date, Africa, Wikimedia

Great Zimbabwe Complex, 13th - 15th centuries, Interior View/No name or date, Africa, Wikimedia

Great Zimbabwe Soapstone Sculpture (above) Tower (right), 13th - 15th centuries, Photos/no name or date, Africa, Wikimedia & Met

Helmet Mask, 19th - 20th century, Unknown Makonde Artist, Mozambique, Minneapolis Institute of Art
**Zulu Woman**, 1975, Photo by Mischa Scorer, Hutchinson Library, London

**Maasai Bride**, 1999, Twenty Artists of the Msemwari Community, Kenya, Seattle Art Museum

**Married Woman’s Hat (isicholo)**, Late 20th century, Unknown Zulu Artist, South Africa, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian

African Art: South, East and North

Maasai Bride’s Necklaces, 1999, Twenty Artists of the Meru Arts Community, Kenya, Seattle Art Museum

Five Miniature Baskets, early 20th century, Unknown Tutsi Artist, Rwanda, Scan: Art Beyond The West

Icon Polyptych and Leather Case, 18th - 19th century, Unknown Artist, Ethiopia, Minneapolis Institute of Art

Page from an Illuminated Gospel, late 14th century, Unknown Artist, Ethiopia, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Menkaura and Ahmeneretfet, c. 2490-2472 BC, Unknown Artist, Giza, Egypt, Museum of Fine Arts Boston
Menkaure and Khmerernebty, c. 2490-2472 BC, Unknown Artist, Giza, Egypt, Museum of Fine Arts Boston

Fragment of Hunting Scene from the tomb of Nebamun, c. 1380, Unknown Artist, Thebes, Egypt, The British Museum

Funeral Mask of King Tutankhamun, r. 1334-1325 BC, Unknown Artist, Egypt, The Cairo Museum

Oasis on the Sahara, Antique Etching

Tea Glass Box, Early 20th century, Unknown Artist, Morocco, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian

Box, Date, Unknown Tuareg or Moor Artist, Morocco, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian

Pitcher, Early 20th century, Unknown Kabyle Artist, Algeria, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian


This concludes our presentation about artworks from Southern, Eastern and Northern Africa.