

The traditional art of Africa consists basically of masks and figures of magico-religious significance, decorative objects used for personal decoration, and symbol of rank or importance. Most of these objects are in some way associated to ceremonial and other structured activities (such as singing, dancing, drumming, and storytelling), without which the visual arts could not work in traditional African culture.

The forms and functions of traditional African art are very mixed. Sculpture is usually considered Africa's greatest triumph in art, although sculpture is found in many parts of Africa, this means of expression occurs with the highest amount in western and central Africa. Most of the sculptures are made of wood, but objects are also made of metal, stone, terra-cotta, mud, beadwork, ivory, and other materials.

In southern and eastern Africa there are ancient rock paintings dedicated to the SAN (Bushman) people. The only other main rock art tradition in Africa is that of Algeria, Libya, and Chad, the work of the prehistoric people of the Sahara. Islamic influence is seen all over the west African grassland and the east African coast. Some groups like the YORUBA of Nigeria carve a great variety of objects.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

At least three basic themes occur again and again in traditional African art: 1 the distinction between bush and village, 2 the problematic relationships between the sexes, and 3 the struggle to control various forces, natural as well as supernatural, to achieve the favored end.

The dualism of bush and village is everywhere in Africa, although the forms by which it is expressed vary from place to place. The basic idea is that the world consists of two complementary spheres: one a wild, chaotic, uncontrolled, high-spirited region (or nature); the other an ordered, controlled, measured, predictable domain (or culture), the human world of the village. The IBO of Nigeria show this dualism by means of masks and headdresses: the male symbolizes the elephant, the most powerful of all bush creatures; the female symbolizes culture and is carefully covered to express manners and civilization.

Various African societies employ art as a therapeutic device. The Baule of Ivory Coast, for example, carve images supposed to represent one's spirit lover because it is believed that these beings, if jealous, can cause the living constant problems with their partner.

The principal function of art in traditional African society has been to help manage the forces that affect people's lives

Deliberately horrible masks intended to get rid of witches, such as the firespitter of the Ivory Coast and many associated savanna forms, create a violent attack on witchcraft that fights fire with fire.

Western Sudanic Region

This area includes Burkina Faso, western Mali, and northern Ivory Coast. Among its most famous art-producing peoples are the Dogon, Bambara, Bwa, and Senufo. Basic importance is the connection of the ancestors and the education of the young in the ancient traditions of each society. masks and figures representing legendary ancestors dance or receive sacrifices. Forms in the western Sudan tend to be somewhat fancy, plain, and angular.

Central Sudanic Region

Centered in northern Nigeria, the central Sudan is dominated by the Muslim HAUSA and FULANI peoples, who have developed numerous city-states. Central Sudanic art is mostly nonrepresentational and includes mud architecture, sometimes with molded, low-relief decoration; embroidered textiles; elaborate coiffure; metal and beadwork jewelry; and leatherwork decorated with geometric applique. Some peoples in the central Sudanic carve masks or figures; these objects show a remarkable similarity to the art of the western Sudanic peoples. This suggests ancient connections across the savanna belt.

West Guinea Coast Region

This region consists of Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and the densely forested coastal portion of Guinea and southwestern Ivory Coast. Tribes make characteristic masks and figures from the area. Forms in the west Guinea Coast are generally softer, shinier, and more rounded than in the close western Sudanic region. Carved wood masks are the important art form in the region, where they perform a massive variety of jobs. Masks are used to police ceremonies, punish wrongdoers, settle land disputes, and start and end wars.

Central Guinea Coast Region

The Central Guinea Coast extends from southeastern Ivory Coast, southern Ghana, Togo, Benin, and southern Nigeria to the lower Niger River with a branch in Cameroons grasslands. Central Guinea Coast art is the richest and the most mixed of any area in Africa. Traditionally, groups were cultured in character with almighty kingship and other unifying organizations; their art takes cultured materials including gold, silver, bronze, brass, beadwork, silk, and ivory. Guinea Coast art forms include stools, drums, complexly decorated cloth, pottery, terra-cotta figures, ornamental swords, miniature masks, combs, mirrors, staffs, pipes, containers, and carved musical instruments.

East Guinea Coast Region

The lower Niger marks the rough boundary between the civilized centralized societies of the central Guinea Coast and the more loosely organized peoples of southwestern Nigeria. Here, in the lack of kings and chiefs, you find elaborately developed masquerades and plays. Characteristic of the east Guinea Coast area is a brilliant array of masks, puppets, headdresses, and other theatrical devices.

Equatorial Forest Region

Among the best-known peoples of the equatorial forest, which extends across Gabon and northern Zaire, are the FANG, Kota, Kwele, Ngbaka, Mbole, and Lega, the art-producing agricultural people. Their art forms include lots of masks, figures, beautifully designed weapons, fortune telling objects and carved charms, wall paintings, musical instruments, and practical implements. One widespread visual motif is the so-called heart-shaped face, a method of reading the face as a hole from the eye sockets to the area of the mouth. Bantu migrants may well have brought this motif from Nigeria, where it is also used.

Southern Savanna Region

In the broad upland belt of central Africa are loads of Bantu peoples such as the CHOKWE, LUBA, Songye, Yaka, Pende, and Kuba and related groups such as the MBUNDU and Makonde. Perhaps the prime generators of art in these groups are the initiation rites that mark the passage of boys from adolescence to manhood. Masks, figures, costumes, and wonderful theatrical effects are part of these initiations, functioning often as academic devices to instruct the boys in their culture and in proper manly behavior. The Kuba of central Zaire, in addition to complicated initiation rites, have complex courtly art forms, including royal portrait statues, elegant cups, drums, containers, dolls, and numerous regalia for persons of high rank.

Eastern Sudanic Region

The artistic production of most of the peoples in this area is restricted to decorative art, but a few groups in the southern Republic of the Sudan and southwest Ethiopia, including the carve wood figures to celebrate ancestors. This tradition probably relates more to the ancient pagan art still discernible in a broad arc across southern Asia than to the majority of African styles.

East and Southern African Region and Madagascar

Apart from Bushman paintings and engravings, eastern and southern Africa have only a few distinctive pattern styles. The dominant arts in this region are architecture and architectural decorations. Madagascar, the only large island lying off Africa's coast. Certain raffia textiles made by the ikat process find their closest parallels in Indonesia.