

## **African Art and Architecture,**

The history of art in Africa goes back to prehistoric times. Among the most ancient African art forms are the rock paintings and engravings from Tassili and Ennedi in the Sahara (6000 BC-1st century AD). Other examples of early art include the terracotta sculptures modelled by Nok artists in central Nigeria between 500 BC and AD 200, the decorative bronze works of Igbo Ukwu (9th-10th century AD), and the extraordinary bronze and terracotta sculptures from Ife (12th-15th century AD). These latter show such technical expertise and are so naturalistically rendered that they were originally, and quite erroneously, assumed to have been of Classical Greek inspiration. The rich artistic traditions of Africa continue today, both along traditional lines and in completely new modes of expression. The African continent is home to a wide variety of African cultures, each of which is characterized by its own language, traditions, and artistic forms. Although the immense expanse of the Sahara Desert serves as a natural barrier dividing North Africa from the rest of the continent, there is evidence that considerable dissemination of influences took place along trade routes that traversed the continent from early times. Today, for example, many Islamic art and architectural forms of North African inspiration appear among cultures south of the Sahara. In addition, research has pointed to concurrent influences of sub-Saharan African arts and cultures on northern African areas closer to the Mediterranean. Egyptian art and architecture, one of the most resplendent of African traditions, can also be seen as having important ancient artistic and cultural connections with sub-Saharan African civilizations. The arts of Africa reflect the rich histories, philosophies, religions, and societies of the inhabitants of this vast continent. African art, in addition to its inherent significance to the peoples who produced it, has also inspired some of the most important modern art and architecture of Europe and America. Twentieth-century Western artists have admired the emphasis on abstraction in African art and found stimulation in its lack of concern for naturalism.

## **The African Artistic Heritage**

The African artistic tradition embraces sculpture (masks, figures, and such utilitarian items as wooden bowls), furniture (stools, thrones, and headrests), pottery (for example, decorated cooking and storage vessels), textiles, jewellery, and such personal items as combs and hairpins. Body decoration, comprising body-painting, elaborate hairdressing and headdresses, and cicatrization (decorative scarring), is also a peculiarly African art form. Painting on buildings, and carving of posts and lintels of houses also form a prominent part of the African artistic heritage.

The most commonly employed materials include wood, fibre, metal (especially bronze, iron, and gold), ivory, clay, earth, and stone. The forms of representation within each medium vary from relative naturalism to general abstraction, with art styles conforming to the aesthetic tradition established within a particular cultural area. In African art, considerable attention is given both to maintaining traditional artistic forms within a culture and to the encouragement of creativity and innovation within the parameters of each artistic tradition.

African artists generally work as specialists, receiving their training from established artists living in the community or wider area. In some old kingdoms, such as that of Benin in Nigeria, active guild systems controlled the training of young artists. Among the nearby Yoruba, important schools of artists were developed at local family compound centres. Often the artistic profession was seen as hereditary, with talent being passed from generation to generation, and with creativity and success often linked to a divine ancestral endowment. Among the Dogon and Bambara (or Bamana) of Mali, for this reason, sculptors were all selected from an ancient endogamous (intermarried by custom) group of blacksmiths. The place of work and the materials employed were also important to the artist during the creative process. Often these were controlled by religious proscriptions.

**American Art and Architecture**, the European tradition of painting, sculpture, and architecture as developed in North America (subsequently in the United States) by early colonists and their successors, from the early 17th century to the present day.

As a newly founded, and later as a developing nation, the United States was heavily influenced by the styles in art and architecture already developed to a high point in the mature societies of Europe. In the course of the 19th century, however, the country developed distinctively American variations on European models. Finally, at the end of the 19th century in architecture, and by the middle of the 20th century in painting and sculpture, US masters and schools of art were exerting a powerful worldwide influence over art and architecture. This period of artistic leadership coincided with the country's increasing degree of international political and financial leadership, and reflected the nation's prosperity. Because of the great size of the country, stylistic variations developed within this main line of artistic growth. Regions that had been settled by different European nations reflected their early colonial heritage in artistic forms, particularly in architecture, though to a decreasing degree from the mid-19th century. Climatic variations across the extent of the country also shaped distinctive regional architectural traditions. In addition, differences persisted between the art produced in cities and that produced in rural areas within the various regions; rural artists, trained or untrained, were isolated from current trends and competitive pressures and developed highly individual modes of expression that were imaginative and direct, independent of prevailing formal conventions. This type of American art falls within the tradition of folk art, or naive art.

The decorative arts, in particular metalwork and furniture, also represented an important form of artistic expression during the colonial period. Silver, in the 17th century, and furniture, in the 18th century, were perhaps the most significant American forms of artistic creation and represented the most sophisticated and lively traditions.