

The Art of
AFRICA

A Resource for Educators

Christa Clarke

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

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Map by Anandaroop Roy

Binder, front: image 5, Male and Female Antelope Headdresses (*Ci wara kun*).
Back: image 38, Textile Mantle (detail).

Box, front: image 21, Pendant Mask. *Back:* image 38, Textile Mantle (detail).
Spine: image 9, Lidded Saltcellar

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Foreword

The Metropolitan Museum of Art celebrates artistic creativity from across the globe and from all times. Thus, our distinguished collection of African Art has special significance both because of its aesthetic excellence and because our strong collections in all artistic traditions complement one another so profoundly. We therefore take the greatest pleasure in putting forward this publication, *The Art of Africa: A Resource for Educators*. Christa Clark, Curator of Africa, the Americas, and the Pacific at the Newark Museum, Alisa LaGamma, Curator of African Art at the Metropolitan Museum, and the Museum's Education staff have worked together to select and shape the content to be especially useful to teachers and students.

We also thank with special gratitude Mr. and Mrs. Marvin H. Schein for making this effort possible. We know that the educational value of this material will be realized in classrooms throughout New York and across the world for many years to come.

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Overview of the Collection

The African art collection at The Metropolitan Museum of Art is celebrated as one of the most important housed in an art museum. Its history begins in the 1940s when Nelson Rockefeller undertook the project of amassing an extensive collection of African, Oceanic, and Precolumbian art. At the time, Rockefeller was president of the Museum of Modern Art and his interest in these fields derived from their historic influence on the Western avant-garde. MoMA's sponsorship of a series of landmark exhibitions of non-Western art beginning in 1935 and Rockefeller's close friendship with its director, René d'Harnoncourt, ultimately led to Rockefeller's founding in 1954 of the Museum of Primitive Art, a pioneering private institution located across the street from MoMA. Art historian Robert Goldwater served as the MPA's director, advising Rockefeller on acquisitions and developing an influential exhibition program. In 1969 Rockefeller signed an agreement transferring the MPA to The Metropolitan Museum of Art to be housed within a new wing. Included in this gift were 3,300 works of art, a specialized library, and a photographic archive. Named for Nelson Rockefeller's son, who collected many of the Asmat works from Irian Jaya, western New Guinea, The Michael C. Rockefeller Wing was opened to the public in 1978. This addition made an essential contribution to the encyclopedic nature of the Metropolitan's collections. Since that time, the collection has continued to grow through acquisitions and gifts to include more than 11,000 works from Africa, the Pacific Islands, and North, Central, and South America. Two major additions to the African component of the Metropolitan's collection, each comprising more than 100 works, are a series of Dogon objects from Mali given by Lester Wunderman between 1978 and 1987 and a collection of artworks from the court of Benin in Nigeria given by Klaus Perls in 1991. From its beginnings, the Metropolitan's African collection was conceived as a fine arts collection focused on artistic traditions from Africa south of the Sahara. While it originally emphasized sculptural traditions from western and central Africa, over the last several decades the collection has come to embrace expressive traditions in other media such as textiles as well as those of eastern and southern Africa.

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The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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Goals and Design of this Resource

Works of art communicate vital and important aspects of the cultures in which they were created. By studying art from Africa, students come to understand the central role it plays in the customs, belief systems, social organizations, and political systems of African societies. This publication presents African art and culture through a focus on primarily traditional sculpture, textiles, metalwork, and ceramics in the African art collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Educators and their students can study these works of art solely in the classroom or, ideally, in preparation for a visit to the Metropolitan or to their local museum.

In these pages, we provide background information for educators about African culture and history as well as detailed information about selected works of art. Teachers may adapt the content to the interests, skills, and abilities of their students and may use suggested interdisciplinary connections to social studies, language arts, and studio arts curricula.

This resource is organized so that a teacher can incorporate study of the artworks into a single lesson, a series of lessons, or an entire unit of study. It begins with a **map** and an **introduction to Africa**: the continent's geography, peoples and cultures, and history. The next section discusses **the role of visual expression in Africa**, covering important topics such as aesthetics and styles, the roles of artists and patrons, and materials and techniques. **Forty works of art** in the Museum's collection are described in detail, accompanied by suggested discussion questions to encourage students to look closely at, analyze, and interpret the art.

The **classroom applications section** includes lesson plans based on thematic groupings of the artworks and activities that will help the teacher create a focused unit of study around some of the key concepts associated with African art.

Comparisons for classroom discussion present selected pairs of artworks with questions, offering an opportunity for further discussion that will help students discern the distinctive features of each work. (These pairs are also available on the enclosed CD for projection in the classroom.)

A **glossary** provides definitions of words that are bolded on first mention in the text. A **pronunciation guide** offers approximate pronunciations for selected African words and names mentioned in this resource. An **introduction to the video** provides background information that will be useful prior to viewing footage of performers dancing headdresses similar to some of those included in this publication. The **selected resources section** contains bibliographies, online resources (the Museum's *Timeline of Art History* is particularly useful), and a videography. These will be helpful in gathering the additional information teachers may need to make an exploration of African art stimulating and relevant to their curriculum.

Goals for Students

To become familiar with the variety of visual expression in the traditional art of sub-Saharan Africa.

To understand how African artists use abstraction, idealization, and expressive exaggeration.

To understand that African art plays a central role in:

- Mediating between the world of the living and the spirit world
- Expressing community ideals
- Defining power and leadership
- Protecting and healing
- Celebrating and commemorating cycles of life, both human and agricultural

To become comfortable talking about art. As students describe what they see and share interpretations about the meanings of works of art, they will develop language and critical thinking skills.