



African Art



UIMA K-12 School Programs Collections | African Art

Africa is a continent of immense diversity, encompassing hundreds of ethnic groups, belief systems, and ways of life. People live in large cities where skyscrapers line busy streets, in towns where satellite television coexists with social structures that have shaped lives for centuries, and in small villages or nomadic groups. Hundreds of different languages are spoken, often several by a single person; thousands of different types of traditional, hand-crafted objects are made, each with its own purpose. The objects, like the ones in the UIMA K-12 School Programs Collections, play crucial roles in the lives of African people. They were used to heal sickness, to honor leaders and heroes, to preserve histories, assert power, bring prosperity, and to ease the many difficulties all people face over the course of a lifetime. Their visual power contributes to their effectiveness, making art an essential element of life.

The African objects in the UIMA K-12 School Programs Collections embody ideals and beliefs expressed in visual form by artists whose work emerges out of long standing traditions. Some contain nature spirits, deities, and ancestors, honoring these beings and bringing them into the lives of humans to provide inspiration and assistance. Others are representations of power, depictions of gods and spirits, documents of historical events, or simply beautiful objects. All resonate with religious faith, social aspirations, political might, and creative energy.

The label information given identifies each object by its ethnic group or culture of origin, and by the contemporary name of the country where it was made. Only rarely is the artist identified, and few specific dates are provided; when these objects were acquired by non-Africans, names and dates were not recorded. This lack of detailed information reflects more about the history of collecting African art in the West than about African attitudes toward such details. The history of the power imbalance between Western and African nations, which culminated with the nineteenth-century division of the continent into colonial possessions, had an important impact on attitudes toward the art of Africa. Unlike Western art, which has been heralded as the product of individual genius, African art was classified by collectors according to ethnic group. Scholars today are working to document the histories of these African cultures that were long believed to be traditional and static, leaving no room for individual artistic expression or stylistic change over time. Deeper understanding of African cultures reveals great artistic innovations, creative experiments, and the absorption of new influences.

The following pages show examples of objects in the collection.





Ghana
Kente Cloth
155 x 121 in.
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Ewe
Kente Cloth
51 x 72 ¼ in.
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Democratic Republic of Congo; Kongo peoples
Nkisi figure, nail figure
Wood, nails, 35 x 14 in.
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Côte d'Ivoire; Senufo peoples

Poro mask

31 x 10 in.

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Nigeria; Yoruba peoples

Ere Ibeji (twin figures)

Wood, cloth, beads, 11 x 9 in.

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African Art

American Indian & First Peoples Art

Art of India: Folk Art

Art of India: Hindu Icons

Gee's Bend Quilts

Graphic Novel & Comic Art

