

MODULE 1: Early African Art

Module Overview

Humankind originated in Africa, and according to Kleiner, Africa is “as diverse as the continent is vast” (522). The vastness and diversity have led to trouble with scholarship as early African art is frequently difficult to date and interpret, a problem compounded by cultural differences in the ownership of art and the “Western” notion of art, the disruptions caused by treasure hunters and illegal excavators. Yet while the module should devote itself to illustrating the uniqueness of early African art, it is important for students to recognize the close equivalents in Western culture, including rock paintings, figural sculptures, sacred architecture, the worship of deities, and the honorary nature of important figures within the culture.

The primary goal of a Prehistoric and Early African Art module should be to showcase the enormously varied subjects, materials, and functions of African Art in a broader global context. Rather than relegate discussions of African art in an entire unit by itself, discussions of African art should be placed contemporaneously with other artistic movements and historical eras. Chronology, therefore, helps to provide a framework for discussing differences in geography, rather than vice versa.

Readings

Students should have completed the assigned reading in the textbook (“Africa Before 1800,” *Gardner’s Art Through the Ages: A Global History*, 14e, pp. 520-533). In order to get the most of the lecture, however, students should be well acquainted with earlier chapters, including “Art Before History” (pp. 14-29), “Mesopotamia and Persia” (pp. 31-53), “Egypt Under the Pharaohs” (pp. 54-83), and “The Prehistoric Aegean” (pp. 84-103).

Instructors might also make use of external reading materials, such as selections from *African Myths of Origin*, edited by Stephen Belcher (London: Penguin Classics, 2005; ISBN 9780140449457), and Whitney Davis’s article “Representation and Knowledge in the Prehistoric Rock Art of Africa” in *The African Archaeological Review* 2 (1984), 7-35.

Lecture Activities

— Provide an overview of the geography of Africa. Western students often have monolithic views of Africa as a continent, and they should be encouraged to see the continent as a collection of cultures with notable differences. Providing a brief introduction to the major geographical and cultural areas of pre-colonial Africa can serve as an initial conversation on the topic.

— Have students generate a list of expectations or previously acquired knowledge they have about Africa, African culture, and African art. Encourage metacognitive reflection that attempts to identify why these students may have these thoughts. Scholars and thinkers in the late 19th century and early 20th century were accused of having preconceived notions of a “primitive” nature of African art. Do people of the 21st century still possess these preconceived notions? What can be done to turn the tide?

— Showcase the Apollo 11 cave art, the rock paintings at Tassili n’Ajjjer, and the sculptures of Nok, Lyndenbergh, and Igbo Ukwu.

— Students may also benefit from understanding how the art of Africa served as a source of inspiration for early-20th-century modernists (*primitivism*), especially Matisse and Picasso. It could be a valuable conversation to debate briefly the controversy of whether these Western artists were respecting or infantilizing these artists, cultures, and their works.

Questions

Consider in-class discussions or written reflections that require students to think about these questions:

- What similarities exist between the cave paintings of France and the cave paintings from the Apollo 11 Cave in Namibia and Tassili n'Ajjer in Algeria?
- Analyze the aesthetic similarities and differences between the Nok and Lydenburg sculptures and Egyptian sculptures.
- Compare and contrast the art designed for leaders with the art made by commoners.
- Controlling art allows leaders to influence culture and change the lives of people through ritual, pageantry, mystery, and spectacle. How might these religious rituals have impacted the art and the culture?
- Compare and contrast symbols of power in early African art with Western and Eastern symbols of art.
- What similarities or differences exist in the way the early history Western, Eastern, and African artists incorporate symbols of gender?
- Discuss the role that scars play in early African art.
- Analyze the frequent use of expressive faces and disproportionately large heads compared to the bodies. What might have been the artistic motivation of this?
- What purposefully inserted elements help show titled status in early African art, and how do these compare to early Western and Eastern art?

MODULE 2: Islam, Christianity, and Africa: 1000 CE – 1400 CE

Module Overview

“Globalization” is not merely the notion of understanding different cultures around the world but it is also the understanding of the interdependent nature that cultures have with each other. The rise of Christianity and Islam not only affected the art and culture of Europe, Mesopotamia, and Northern Africa, but also affected the Sub-Saharan areas of the continent, which gained adherents from the 11th century through the 15th century.

After introducing the rise of Christian and Islamic art and architecture in the northern hemisphere, it is imperative to reflect on how those religions gave rise to new art in Africa as the continent was colonized and converted. By reviewing the ways that African art changed and evolved with the influence of Christianity and Islam, students will be able to draw connections and strengthen their understanding of religion’s effect on art. A proper showcasing of how Africa was influenced by the spread of these religions allows a simple crossover to the impact of Buddhism in Asia and the possibility of an essay assignment that asks students to synthesize and analyze the impact of religion across the three major geographical regions during a single timeframe.

Readings

Students should have completed the assigned reading in the textbook (“Africa Before 1800,” *Gardner’s Art Through the Ages: A Global History*, 14e, pp. 520-533). In order to get the most of the lecture, however, students should be well acquainted with earlier chapters, including “Byzantium” (pp. 254-281) and “The Islamic World” (pp. 282-305).

Instructors might also make use of external reading materials, including scholarly assessments of the influence of Islam in Africa:

- Bourgeois, Jean-Louis. “The History of the Great Mosques of Djenne.” *African Arts* 20.3 (1987): 54-63, 90-92.
- Insoll, Timothy. “The Archaeology of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Review.” *Journal of World Prehistory* 10.4 (1996): 439-504.
- Lawal, Babatunde. “The Present State of Art Historical Research in Nigeria: Problems and Possibilities.” *The Journal of African History* 18.2 (1977): 193-216.
- Prussin, Labelle. “The Architecture of Islam in West Africa.” *African Arts* 1.2 (1968): 32-35, 70-74.

Lecture Activities

- Have students analyze the sculpture of the Ile-Ife king with the sculpture of Tada Seated Man. Gear questions toward the difference in the two in terms of their proportional relationship between head and body.
- Explore multiple pictures of Great Mosque in Djenne, Mali, and Beta Giorghis in Lalibela, Ethiopia. Compare and contrast the Djenne mosque with those in the Middle East during the same period and the Beta Giorghis with Byzantine church models. Encourage students to explore how distinctly African materials (adobe and wood) influence a traditional structure.
- Explore the evolution of art from Ile-Ife to Benin and Sapi.
- Analyze the symbolic role of gender in the ruins and monoliths of Great Zimbabwe.

Questions

Consider in-class discussions or written reflections that require students to think about these questions:

- Have students practice their skills in advance of an analysis or research paper by selecting a Byzantine church and having them compare it with the Beta Giorghis church in Lalibela, Ethiopia. Encourage students to make direct reference to previous information in their text on Byzantine architecture.
- Compare and contrast the Djenné warrior (Kleiner 528) the Ile-Ife king (527) and Tada Seated man (528).
- Consider the symbolism of the Great Zimbabwe soapstone monoliths. What might be the relationship between animals and images of nature (crocodiles, birds, etc.) with people (men, women, kings, queens, etc.)? What about life/death, sky/earth? (Note: If students have been exposed to selections from *African Myths of Origin* from Module 1, this activity might be easier.)
- Respond to selected images by arguing an interpretation of the importance of enlarged, disproportionate heads in African art.

MODULE 3: Writing an Art History Paper

Module Overview

The inclusion of Africa in the course's objectives—along with the impossibly broad terms “Western” and “Eastern”—creates a compelling trifecta for analysis. The recommended final paper for the course asks students to select a work from each of the three major geographic areas and compare and contrast those works for the ways they speak to the same issues, incorporate the same themes, or reflect the same formal components.

This module comes on the heels of analyzing African art in light of Christianity and Islam. The previous lecture took students through the process of reflecting on similarities and differences in the incorporation of those two major religions into Africa, making connections with the Islamic world of Mesopotamia and the Christian world of the Byzantines. Materials from that lecture can be repurposed into this lecture and further connections make on how the observations of global interconnectedness could be framed in terms of a thesis statement and a sample outline for an art history essay.

The continuation of the global content from the content-specific lectures into a process-oriented discussion of writing in a discipline will help demonstrate to the students that the practical knowledge they are gaining from the class can be directly applied to the work they are doing.

Readings

Students respond well to examples. If you have ever created a sample art history paper, share that paper with the students and encourage them to make notes or observations. Students should be given the “How to Write an Art History Essay” handout before they come to the class, rather than at that class. Because this lecture will get them thinking about their papers and what they have studied up to this point, it is a good opportunity to give them impromptu class quizzes during the discussion to test their knowledge on key terminology or course concepts.

Lecture Activities

—Students often learn best when behavior is modeled for them. Students may also benefit from a detailed discussion of how to write an art history paper. While ARTH 101 is not a class designed to teach writing, it is important to devote at least one class day to the idea of how best to fulfill the academic writing objective in the class. Setting aside time in class when you might prefer to use that time to lecture on the art itself shows the students that the information is actually quite important and worthy of their attention and respect.

—Follow the prompt and provide an example of a potential paper. Show the students how they can create a thesis statement and an outline. Have the students work through the sample with you, keeping track of your steps and showing them how noted similarities or differences can lead to creating an insightful and interesting thesis statement.

Questions

Consider in-class discussions or written reflections that require students to think about these questions:

- Have students reflect on work they have written for other classes. What were the professors' expectations in those classes, and how do those expectations match or differ from the expectations outlined in ARTH 101?
- Why is writing well and clearly an important skill for ARTH 101? How is writing a fundamentally different college skill than merely taking a multiple-choice exam?

- What steps of the writing process do your students observe? How did they write their first papers, and what are they going to do differently in the process of writing this paper? This sort of metacognitive reflect has been shown in studies to produce stronger work from students who engage in it seriously.