

HOW TO LOOK AT AFRICAN ART

Africa's visual arts can easily be appreciated for their visual power and the skill with which they are made. The messages embedded in an object's materials, form and style speak to aesthetic systems that are significant to African cultures and reveal the importance behind their works of art. A deeper understanding of some of the continent's most compelling art forms may be gained by considering the following points.

Innovation and experimentation

African artists work in diverse media and continually incorporate new subjects and motifs into their work. Some artists work within a visual vocabulary of forms that are repeated over time yet allow for innovation and creativity.

Proportions

In much of African art, proportions are scaled according to conceptual significance rather than physical size. The head in figure carvings, for example, is often rendered as one-fourth the size of the body because in many African societies it is considered to be the seat of one's destiny. It also provides a larger surface for culturally significant details that are conveyed through facial expression, hairstyles, jewelry or scarification. In figural groups, the larger figures are clearly the most important.

Gestures and expressions

The stance or facial expression of a sculpted figure often conveys clues into its meaning and significance. Hands resting on the abdomen may suggest the capacity to bear children. Downcast eyes may express dignity and poise, introspection and attention to a world beyond our own, while glaring eyes and a gaping mouth can signal power, aggression or a call to action.

Materials

Ivory, gold, silver, copper alloys (like brass and bronze), coral, amber and glass beads are internationally valued trade items. Their presence suggests wealth, and they frequently appear on royal or prestige items. Materials, such as iron ore and clay, that can be transformed through processes like smelting and firing are found in practical tools and household items, as well as in sacred and ritual contexts that recognize the materials' transformational properties.

Surface

An artwork's surface can be smooth from frequent handling or textured from tool marks, paint or added materials. A sticky-looking object may have received offerings at a shrine, its surface suggesting ritual use. Objects that are densely covered with horns, porcupine quills, mud and other materials may represent powers from the wilderness. By contrast, a serene figure with a polished surface may portray someone who is stylish, civilized and cultivated.

Color and pattern

Colors are frequently symbolic of important messages—but never assume that a color means the same thing from one culture to the next. Patterns, which may also change their meaning from culture to culture, provide insight into personal style and culturally specific aesthetics.

Form and meaning

Through their format and composition, works of art relay information regarding faith, politics, everyday lifestyles, gender roles, fashion and a myriad of other topics. Sometimes these messages take pictorial or narrative form, as in paintings, photographs and sculptures.

Spatial relations

How does an artwork relate to the space around it? Was it intended to stand on its own or was it once part of something else—like a palace or shrine? On their own, carved wooden windows and doorways are beautiful, but imagine how they might have once interacted with larger structures or with the people who used them. In addition, consider how artists have used two-dimensional compositions, like painting, to represent three-dimensional forms.