

E D U C A T I O N

SCHOOL GROUP
SELF-GUIDE

THE ART OF
AFRICA

*Use this guide to prepare for your
self-guided visit to the Metropolitan
Museum with your students.*

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART



This guide will help you prepare for your self-guided visit to the Metropolitan Museum with your students. Use the links to the Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, curatorial departments, and other areas on the Museum's website to access descriptions of works of art and relevant thematic essays and resources.

Introduction

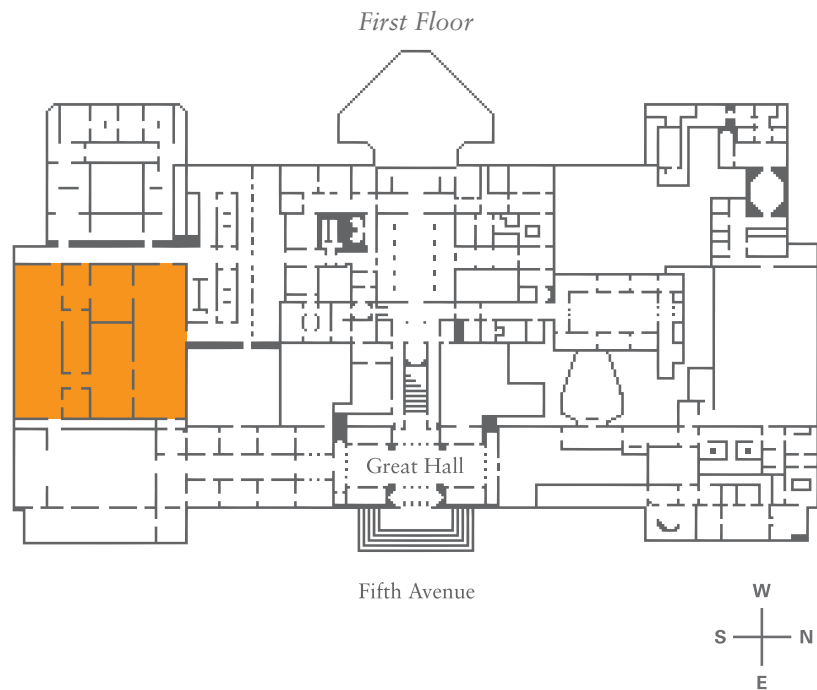
The Metropolitan Museum's collection of African art focuses on the heritage of cultures south of the Sahara. It includes figurative sculptures, architectural elements, masks, decorative arts, and textiles, created primarily by artists before the twentieth century from an array of regional traditions. While wood is the major medium, works made of stone, terracotta, gold, silver, brass, and ivory are also included, as are textiles and beadwork. Although few works composed of organic materials made before the nineteenth century have survived, art in more durable media, such as copper alloys, ivory, and terracotta, may date as far back as the thirteenth century.

Through oral traditions and visual forms of expression, African cultures passed down their religious beliefs, accumulated wisdom, and practical knowledge to succeeding generations. As in other parts of the world, African artists created (and continue to create) works that have social, religious, or political dimensions. Many of these works served to reinforce the rank and prestige of regional leaders, others indicate the collective status of initiates invested with specific social responsibilities, or pay tribute to ancestors. In many African cultures, the world of the living is thought to have an invisible otherworldly counterpart of ancestor spirits, deities, or nature spirits that may directly influence human experience. Masquerade performers and spirit mediums use art in rituals to mediate between these two realms in order to promote a community's well-being and fertility, as well as to educate and solve conflicts.

The Galleries

The African art galleries are located on the first floor in the Michael C. Rockefeller Wing, dedicated to the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. The art is presented in geographic sequence and is grouped according to distinct cultural traditions. A first introductory gallery is devoted to the art of Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa. The main adjacent gallery is primarily devoted to art in the western Sudan (the modern nations of Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Sierra Leone). These works were created by artists of many different cultures that live in the region, including the Bamana, Dogon, and Senufo peoples. A selection of textiles from the western Sudan can also be found in this gallery. In the third gallery are works of art from kingdoms such as Benin and the Yoruba in Nigeria and Dahomey in the Republic of Benin, as well as the kingdoms and chiefdoms in the Cameroon Grassfields and from the Democratic Republic of Congo. Other important traditions represented include a range of sculptural forms created by the Baule and Dan peoples of Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia, and the Fang of Gabon.

Note: You may find it helpful to start your visit with an examination of the large map of Africa located near the entrance to the galleries.



Planning a Tour

When visiting the Metropolitan Museum with your students, prepare your tour with the following in mind:

- Less is more. Select five or six works of art to discuss over the course of an hour in the galleries.
- Choose works that are located away from doorways and areas that are heavily traversed by visitors.
- Include works that are visible to all students in your group for purposes of discussion and viewing.
- Make sure that there are enough chaperones in your group to divide the students into smaller groups for gallery discussions.
- While touring the galleries, please give priority to lecturers wearing Museum IDs who are guiding groups. If they are discussing a work that you would like your students to see, please select another work to view and discuss in the interim.

Please Note: *Although most of the suggested works in this guide will be on view when you visit the Museum, some gallery installations may be subject to change. We recommend that you use [Search the Collections](#) online or come to the Museum to verify that the objects you want to discuss are on display prior to bringing your group.*

The Metropolitan Museum of Art's school tour program is made possible by the generosity of Lewis B. and Dorothy Cullman.

Background

Use the following links to relevant in-depth content on the Museum's website:

[The Art of Africa: A Resource for Educators](#)

This Metropolitan Museum publication for teachers provides useful background information about the Museum's collection as well as lesson plans.

[Portraits of African Leadership: Living Rulers](#)

[Portraits of African Leadership: Royal Ancestors](#)

More on The Metropolitan Museum of Art Website

[Curatorial Departments: Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas](#)

[Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History](#)

[The Essential Art of African Textiles: Design Without End](#)

[Eternal Ancestors: The Art of the Central African Reliquary](#)

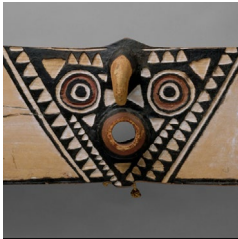
[Heroic Africans: Legendary Leaders, Iconic Sculptures](#)

Questions for Discussion in the Galleries

- Look at masks and human and animal figures. How do they function to:
 - Mediate between the living and the spiritual worlds?
 - Define power and leadership?
 - Heal, protect, and enforce?
 - Express ideals about male and female roles and social behavior?
- What symbols identify rulers and people of high rank (e.g., adornment, scarification, elaborate coiffure, or the fact that rulers are often seated)?
- What methods do African artists use to express ideas about supernatural power?
- Explain to your students that many of the human and animal forms in African art are altered and exaggerated to express ideas about social and moral behavior. In the human figures in the galleries, which parts are exaggerated? What ideas might these exaggerations indicate (e.g., nurturing, strength, intelligence)?
- How are masks worn? (Photographs showing masks worn in ritual may provide useful context.)
- Consider the variety and use of artists' materials.

Suggested Works of Art to Explore

Please note that titles, dates, and other object information on the website and on gallery signage may vary as the result of ongoing research.



Mask, 19th–20th century

Burkina Faso; Bwa peoples

Wood, pigment, fiber; H. 12 3/8 in. (31.4 cm)

The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979 (1979.206.196)



Mask, 19th–20th century

Côte d'Ivoire; Senufo peoples

Wood, horn, fiber, cotton, feather, metal, sacrificial material;

H. of mask 14 1/8 in. (35.9 cm)

The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Purchase, Nelson A. Rockefeller Gift, 1965 (1978.412.489)



Headdress, 19th–20th century

Mali; Bamana peoples

Wood, metal bands; H. 35 2/3 in. (male), 28 in. (female)

The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1964 (1978.412.435)



Seated Couple, 16th–19th century

Mali; Dogon peoples

Wood, metal; H. 28 3/4 in. (73 cm)

Gift of Lester Wunderman, 1977 (1977.394.15)



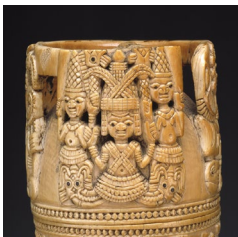
Pendant Mask: lyoba, 16th century
Nigeria; Edo peoples, Court of Benin
Ivory, iron, copper (?); H. 9 3/8 in. (23.8 cm)
The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1972 (1978.412.323)



Plaque: Warrior and Attendants, 16th–17th century
Nigeria; Edo peoples, Court of Benin
Brass; H. 18 3/4 in. (47.6 cm)
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1990 (1990.332)



Head of an Oba, 16th century (ca. 1550)
Nigeria; Edo peoples, Court of Benin
Brass; H. 9 1/4 in. (23.5 cm)
The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979 (1979.206.86)



Lidded Bowl, 17th–18th century
Nigeria; Yoruba, Owo subgroup
Ivory, wood or coconut shell inlay; H. 8 1/4 in. (20.96 cm)
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Klaus G. Perls, 1991 (1991.17.126a, b)



Caryatid Veranda Post, 20th century
Olowe of Ise (Yoruba, ca. 1873–1938)
Nigeria; Yoruba peoples
Wood, pigment; H. 71 in. (180.3 cm)
Purchase, Lila Acheson Wallace Gift, 1996 (1996.558)



Stool, 19th century

The Buli Master

Democratic Republic of Congo; Luba peoples

Wood, metal studs; H. 24 in. (61 cm)

Purchase, Buckeye Trust and Charles B. Benenson Gifts, Rogers Fund and funds from various donors, 1979 (1979.290)



Mangaaka Power Figure (Nkisi N'Kondi), second half of 19th century

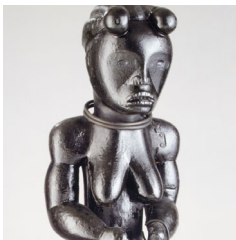
Democratic Republic of Congo or Angola, Chiloango River Region; Kongo

Wood, metal, resin, enamel; H. 46 7/16 in. (118 cm)

Purchase, Lila Acheson Wallace, Drs. Daniel and Marian Malcolm,

Laura G. and James J. Ross, Jeffrey B. Soref, The Robert T. Wall Family,

Dr. and Mrs. Sidney G. Clyman, and Steven Kossak Gifts, 2008 (2008.30)



Reliquary Figure, 19th–20th century

Gabon; Fang peoples

Wood, metal, oil patina; H. 25 1/5 in. (64.1 cm)

The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Gift of Nelson

A. Rockefeller, 1965 (1978.412.441)



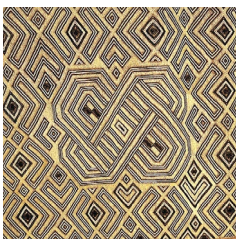
Helmet Mask, 19th century

Cameroon, Eastern Grassfields; Kingdom of Bamum

Wood, copper, glass beads, fiber, cowrie shells; H. 26 in. (66 cm)

The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Purchase, Nelson

A. Rockefeller Gift, 1967 (1978.412.560)



Prestige Panel, 19th–20th century

Democratic Republic of Congo; Kuba peoples

Raffia palm fiber; L. 45 3/4 in. (116.2 cm)

Gift of William Goldstein M.D., 1999 (1999.522.15)

Selected Resources

These and many more resources are available in Nolen Library in the Ruth and Harold D. Uris Center for Education.

Teachers

Blier, Suzanne Preston. *Royal Arts of Africa: The Majesty of Form*. London: Laurence King, 1998.

Clark, Christa. [The Art of Africa: A Resource for Educators](#). New York: MMA, 2007.

Ezra, Kate. *A Human Ideal in African Art: Bamana Figurative Sculpture*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1986.

_____. *Art of the Dogon: Selections from the Lester Wunderman Collection*. New York: MMA, 1988.

_____. *Royal Art of Benin: The Perls Collection*. New York: MMA, 1992.

LaGamma, Alisa. *Art and Oracle: African Art and Rituals of Divination*. New York: MMA, 2000.

_____. *Genesis: Ideas of Origin in African Sculpture*. New York: MMA, 2002.

_____. *Echoing Images: Couples in African Art*. New York: MMA, 2004.

_____. *Eternal Ancestors: The Art of the Central African Reliquary*. New York: MMA, 2007.

LaGamma, Alisa, and Christine Giuntini. *The Essential Art of African Textiles: Design Without End*. New York: MMA, 2008.

Roberts, Allen F. *Animals in African Art: From the Familiar to the Marvelous*. New York: Museum for African Art, 1995.

Sieber, Roy, and Roslyn Adele Walker. *African Art in the Cycle of Life*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987.

Visona, Monica Blackmun et al. *A History of Art in Africa*. 2nd ed. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2008.

Watts, Edith. *A Masterwork of African Art: The Dogon Couple*. A Closer Look. New York: MMA, 2002.

_____. *The Royal Art of Benin*. New York: MMA, 1994.

Students

Bond, George, ed. The Heritage Library of African Peoples series. New York: Rosen Publishing, 1996.

Mann, Kenny. *Oyo, Benin, Ashanti: The Guinea Coast*. Parsippany, N.J.: Dillon Press, 1996.

Murray, Jocelyn, ed. *Cultural Atlas of Africa*. Rev. ed. New York: Facts on File, 1998.

Tales from the African Plain. Retold by Anne Gatti. New York: Dutton, 1995.