

African Masks



Songye mask from the Congo

1. What is African art? This is a difficult question to answer. The African continent is vast. It has over 750 million people and many diverse societies. In addition, the continent has experienced centuries of European and Arab migrations, bringing with them their own culture and traditions. However, when we talk about African art, we usually mean art from the people of the Sub-Sahara. These people (such as the bushmen of the Kalahari Desert and Pygmies of the equatorial forests) are amongst the oldest populations of Africa with ancestral roots dating back to the Stone Age.



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Sub-Saharan Art

2. Sub-Saharan societies descend from hunters, forced to migrate far in search of food. They travelled light and had very few possessions to carry. What possessions they had were often decorated (such as ostrich egg shells used as water containers and spears for hunting) but their art forms were functional too and not just decorative. Paintings were not widespread in these communities, as they would have relied on permanent settlements or regular meeting points.



Pygmy royal mask

3. The preferred African art forms, and the most well-known, were three dimensional, such as sculptures and masks.

Role of Masks

4. Masks played a key role in a community's daily life. In some African societies, this continues to be the case to this day. They serve as tools in ceremonies and rituals, such as the initiation of young men and marriages between bands. These ceremonies play a crucial role in expressing unity within these migratory communities. With their bright colours and abstract forms, masks have a strong visual impact. They are used to discipline, educate, inform and entertain people. Masks come in thousands of shapes and sizes and represent ancestors or spirits.

Creation of Masks

5. Craftsmen carve intricate wooden masks out of ebony, mahogany or teak. They stain or colour the masks with vegetable dyes. Each colour has meaning. The craftsman might use beads to decorate the mask or other materials such as metal, fabric, leather and grasses. The mask making skill and knowledge of the spiritual meanings held by the masks are passed down from father to son.

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Masks and Ceremonies

6. A ceremonial mask holds a place of great respect in African communities. Ceremonies and masquerades are performed for seasonal changes or major life events. These dances are usually noisy and exciting with lots of drumming and shaking of leg rattles. People believe masquerades summon spirits to help crops grow, transform young people into adults, and lead the dead to the afterlife.

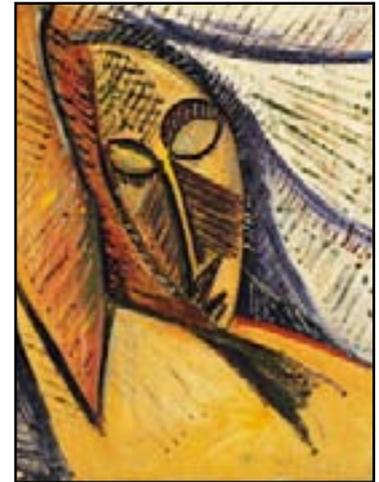


African and European Art

8. In the early 20th century, artists like Pablo Picasso and Andre Derain were inspired by the bold abstract designs that they discovered in African tribal masks. They collected and used these works of art to influence their own style. In effect, they used African culture to refresh the tired tradition of figure painting in Western art. As a result, we now tend to admire the bold design and abstract masks through European eyes.

Dogon Masks

7. Many African ethnic groups, like the Dogon, perform rituals and ceremonies to ensure a successful harvest. For the Dogon, the antelope is a symbol of a hardworking farmer. Antelope masks are often a rectangular shape with horns at the top. Dancers wearing the masks use sticks to hit the ground to represent both the antelope's pawing and the hoeing of farmers. Different ceremonies demand different masks. A Dogon Dama funeral features over 65 different masks.



Picasso, 1907
Head of a Sleeping Woman



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Dogon ceremonial mask

9. We appreciate the African masks as exhibits on museum walls, or as souvenirs on tourist markets. However, they were not designed to be viewed like this, cut off from their original meaning and magical power. Unfortunately, as masks become commercialised and mass-produced, the traditional art of mask making is gradually disappearing, together with the links between their geographical origins and cultural meanings.