

African Art through the Ages
Art Seminar Group
Lecture Notes

January 21, 2020 | EARLY MODERN AFRICA (1500 CE – 1900 CE)

Key Points:

- ❖ The early modern period is defined by an era of sustained contact between Europe and Africa.
- ❖ This relationship initially developed around trade.
- ❖ Initially this power in this trading relationship was found in Africa, not in Europe.
- ❖ European demand for African products spurred the development of great, wealthy empires and societies with luxurious royal and religious art, primarily sculpture.
- ❖ However, as European demand for enclaves persons increases with the growth of colonies in the Americas, European interest in Africa starts to take a decidedly more militaristic and exploitative turn.
- ❖ As the slave trade increases, African states and societies begin to fragment.
- ❖ Although some states grow increasingly wealthy due to their participation in the slave trade, the continental-wide instability brought about by the slave trade threatens the stability of these empires as well.
- ❖ Communities become more fragmented and frightened and the art starts to move away from depictions of royal splendor and religious devotion and become more abstract and more focused on personal protection

Key Dates in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade

- ❖ **1450-1600:** Three percent of all slaves traded were captured during this time.
- ❖ **1640-1680:** Beginning of large-scale introduction of African slave labor in the British Caribbean. Slaves were used primarily for sugar production.
- ❖ **1600-1700:** Sixteen percent of all slaves traded were captured during this time.
- ❖ **1794:** France emancipates all slaves in their overseas colonies.
- ❖ **1803:** Denmark becomes the first nation to ban slavery
- ❖ **1700-1808:** Fifty three percent (over 5 million) of all slaves traded were captured during this time.
- ❖ **1807:** Britain and the United States ban the slave trade. Legislation takes effect in 1808.
- ❖ **1887:** Brazil becomes the last nation in the Atlantic World to ban the slave trade
- ❖ **Post-1808:** Slavery, though, illegal still continues. Twenty seven percent of all slaves traded were captured and sold during this time.

Art in an Age of Terror: Kongolesse Sculpture in the 19th century

- ❖ The Atlantic region of west Central Africa that is currently occupied by the states of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Angola was the part of the continent most affected by the trans-Atlantic slave trade.
- ❖ From c.1300 to the 1800s, this area was ruled by a large, complex, and highly-advanced state known as the Kingdom of Kongo. In 1483, the Kingdom of the Kongo established relationship with the Portuguese Empire, a decision that would prove fateful.
- ❖ From the fifteenth century onwards, Portugal began enslaving Kongolesse citizens at a greater and greater rate. By the latter part of the nineteenth century, what was once a vast and wealthy

empire had largely been reduced to a largely powerless figurehead ruling over a collection of isolated, fragmented, and depopulated communities.

- ❖ Artists responded to the rapid depopulation of the land in a variety of ways. The nineteenth century, is when we see a particularly intense explosion of artistic works which can be linked to the effects of the slave trade. This was a time in which the depopulation of the region had reached epic proportions. Key artworks are:

Minkisi Minkondi:

- Kongo society had long created and used a class of ritual objects called *minkisi* (singular: *nkisi*). At their core, *minkisi* are nothing more than containers for ritual substances known as *bilongo*. Historically, a priest (*nganga*) would gather a special blend of these organic substances from the forest and then insert it within a sculpted container. These were then activated by the *nganga*.
- Up until the nineteenth century, *minkisi* were largely used for personal protection. They were thought to ward off evil, prevent harm, and even heal illness. Other times, they were used to seal contracts (e.g. both parties would go to an *nganga*, There are very few of these *minkisi* still in existence, largely because their containers were probably made of organic materials.
- However, in the nineteenth century, there emerges a new type of *minkisi* known as *minkondi* (singular: *nkondi*). These are what is known as an attack, or blood, *minkisi*. The first recorded record of this type of sculpture comes in 1816.
- *Minkisi minkondi* are wooden containers for *bilongo* that take the shape of aggressive men and animals.
- Unlike the earlier *minkisi*, which would be used for personal protection, these *minkisi* were bring harm to those who had wronged people and communities.

Phemba:

- *Phemba* figures are mother-and-child sculptures that emerge and flourish between 1860 and 1920. This period coincides with the end of the slave trade and the beginning of colonial exploitation.
- These figures are divinatory objects that were used by Kongolese societies as a way to stimulate fertility and prompt conception. Like *minkisi*, many of them were filled with ritual *bilongo* substances.
- At their core, these are objects that speak to the need of a society to replenish itself, to repopulate the land. In a time in which the effects of depopulation were reaching its peak, fertility was never more important. Indeed, these sculptures perfectly represent the Kongolese idea of *mbongo bantu*, or “wealth in people.”
- Equally as important, they also refer to the increasing authority and power of women in this area, which increased substantially as the the
- The form of these objects bear. Although *phemba* all depict mothers with young children, the women depicted are not just mothers. They are also leaders and warriors. Many have weapons strapped to their arms. Almost all are wearing an *mpu*, a woven hat worn by people in Kongolese society who wield power and have authority. They sit ramrod straight and are alert and focused. They are depicted in the multiple roles they played, as mothers, but also as societal leaders.

Art of the Slavers: The Royal Art of the Dahomey Empire

- ❖ Unlike the Kingdom of Kongo, which was largely a victim of trans-Atlantic slave trade and collapsed due to its effects, there were states and societies that emerged during the period of the trans-Atlantic slave trade

- ❖ Perhaps the greatest of these was the Kingdom of Dahomey, which emerged on the Abomey Plateau (in today's Benin) in 1645. From that point until the defeat of the kingdom by French colonial forces in 1894, the kingdom rapidly expanded and grew increasingly wealthy through participation in the slave trade.
- ❖ The kingdom's successful expansion strategy boils down to this simple formula: Use aggressive military tactics to conquer surrounding groups + Sell the victims into slavery
- ❖ As a result, during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, the kingdom grows wealthier and wealthier. Much of this wealth is converted into material goods that aid in expansions (e.g. guns). However, a large percentage is also retained by the royal court, which uses it for its own promotion.
- ❖ Almost every King of Dahomey commissions a new form of royal art. The art history of the Dahomey Empire can thus largely be tracked through the royal succession:
 - 1645: King Houegbadja (1645-85) unites various Fon groups and becomes the first king of Dahomey. He establishes the palace complex at Abomey
 - 1718: King Agaja (1718-1740), grandson of Houegbadja, assumes the throne. Between 1724-1727 he conquers Alladah and Ouidah, establishing Dahomey's coastal presence. As a result, slaving increases tremendously. Builds new palaces; Initiates use of appliqués; Institute *heutanu* ceremonies
 - 1789-1797: Reign of King Agonglo. He initiates new artistic program in weaving, throne design, royal scepters, and other art forms
 - 1818-1858: Reign of King Guezo: Commissions European artwork and initiates new figural emphasis in palace bas reliefs
 - 1840: Dahomey comes under tremendous pressure from the British to stop the sale of slaves. Guezo resists.
 - 1858: Guezo's son, King Glele (1858-1889) assumes the throne and establishes a reputation for opulence. He styles himself after the late King Louis XIV of France and decorates the royal palace complex accordingly. Additionally, he commissions war sculptures in brass and iron, initiates the use of silver nose mask, and invests resources to support a generation of artists (e.g. Sosa Adede, Akati Akpele Kendo, Ganhu Huntondji)
 - 1889: King Gbenhanzin (1889-1894) assumes the throne and attempts to fend off French colonial advances. He, in large measure fails, and is exiled in 1894.
- ❖ There are, of course, other arts created during this time period that fall beyond the realm of the royal palace. The most common of these is called *bocio* (rough translation: power of the cadaver). These are ritual objects that, when activated by a priest or diviner, draw misfortune away from the owner. Outside the palace, *bocio* would be placed outside a person's home or outside a community's boundary and were thought to draw misfortune away
- ❖ Although both royals and commoners created *bocio*, the two could not be more different. Whereas royal *bocio* contain ritual materials within the cavity of the figures and are lustrous, naturalistic, and made of expensive materials, *bocio* created and used by commoners are ugly, rough. Their ritual substances coat the pieces and they frequently feature bound figures and skeletal remains, of both animals and humans. Art historian Suzanne Preston Blier defines these commoner *bocio* as having an "anti-aesthetic. They were made to look ugly and the forms of that ugliness, I argue, are directly linked to the slave trade.