

African Art through the Centuries
Art Seminar Group
Lecture Notes

November 5, 2019 | MEDIEVAL AFRICA (1000 CE – 1500 CE)

Malian Empire (c. 1235-1670)

- ❖ The Malian Empire emerged after Ghana (Wagadu) when Sundiata Keita (the Lion King) united disparate polities into one Empire. Keita was not a Muslim and the Mali Empire began as a non-Muslim nation. Its art reflected this:
 - While very little survives, there have been hundreds of terracotta and clay figures unearthed in and around a town known as Djenné-Jenno
 - The earlier of these figures depict traditional scenes found throughout African art history (e.g. maternity figures, embracing couples)
 - These are not particularly well developed figures and the fact that many of them have been found suggest that they were placed in the homes of ordinary individuals, perhaps for spiritual purposes. This is just speculation, though.
- ❖ As the Mali Empire expanded and stretched across 2,000 square miles of territory, these figures became more and more refined:
 - Some of these depict the military prowess and might of the empire. These are formally defined by elongated faces, an emphasis on weaponry, and elaborate geometric motifs. These sorts of figures are much rarer
 - Others of these show diseased individuals or individuals in pain.
 - These figures are more widespread than the martial figures, suggesting that they were found in the homes of non-royal and non-elites.
 - Some scholars, based on ethnographic evidence, have suggested that these represented deities to which individuals paid homage to through placing them in personal shrines. Other scholars have suggested that these depict diseases like The Black Plague. Both of these claims have been greeted with much skepticism and it is unlikely that we will ever know definitively.

Kingdom of Benin (c. 1180-1897)

- ❖ **Pre-15th century:**
 - Circa 900: The Ogiso dynasty, the first, establishes itself as the rulers of Benin City (called at that time Igodomigodo). This is a city-state.
 - 1180: Eweka I ascends to the throne (1180-1216) and organizes the state, which was in chaos after the downfall of Ogiso dynasty.
 - 1440: Ewaure I (1440-1473), the twelfth oba in the second dynasty, assumes the throne and, through commerce and military might, brings about rapid expansion. Benin from a city-state to an empire. This begins the golden age of the Benin Empire.
- ❖ **15th and 16th century:**
 - Oba Ewaure I is said to have brought about innovation in architecture and city planning and to have patronized wood and ivory carving. Ewaure is also credited with establishing the royal ceremonial calendar.
 - Oba Esigie (1504-1550), grandson of Ewaure I, is remembered for his encouragement of iron and brass casting. He also developed the institution of the Queen Mother
 - The Portuguese also probably reached Benin during the reign of Esigie
 - Iconography is dominated by themes of victorious warfare and courtly splendor

- ❖ **17th century:**
 - With the end of the civil war, art takes on a decidedly political function during the eighteenth century. It's main goal seems to be to re-establish dynastic legitimacy.
 - Iconographically, kings are marked less by symbols of military authority and more by symbols of supernatural authority.
 - Given the political instability, there is a distinctive lack of courtly artistic production.
- ❖ **18th century:**
 - The Benin monarchy destabilizes and weakens significantly in the mid-seventeenth century by a civil war caused by after a series of political moves that granted authority to local lords. It took until the last decade of the century to put the kingdom back together.
 - What distinguishes eighteenth century art from that of the preceding centuries is an overriding concern with themes of ancestral legitimacy and terrifying power.
- ❖ **19th century:**
 - The British sack the Kingdom of Benin in April 1897 and loot the royal palace, taking almost all art works out of the kingdom and destroying the contextual clues necessary for proper dating of the works

Sapi Communities from Sierra Leone (1200-1400)

- ❖ In the 13th-15th century, the region now known as the Guinea Coast (largely today's Sierra Leone) was filled with a group of people known as the Sapi.
- ❖ Although relatively little is known about the Sapi, we do know that the area was governed by local chiefs aided by councils of elders and officials from the local men's and women's associations. This means that instead of the court being the main patron of artwork, it was religious organizations and men's and women's associations.
- ❖ Although very little is known about the artworks, we know that they come in a diverse array of forms, which perhaps reflect the personalities of individual subjects. The extant corpus of works are sculpted from soft stone, although several wooden figures from the same time period have been excavated.
- ❖ It is possible that these figures were made to commemorate the dead. Thus, the differences in material likely have corresponded to an individual's wealth and status.
- ❖ Beginning in the 14th century, new art forms began to emerge because of Portugal's increasing patronage of art in the coastal areas of west and central Africa
- ❖ Indeed, in 1472, twenty years before Columbus's first voyage to the Americas, European navigators reached the West African coast of what is now Ghana
- ❖ When the famous Treaty of Tordesillas was signed 21 years later, guaranteeing the Castilian monopoly of the Americas, it simultaneously accorded sub-Saharan Africa to the throne of Portugal
- ❖ Upon their arrival, the Portuguese were quite taken with the ivory works produced by these societies and commissioned the most skilled artists to create works for export
- ❖ These were frequently salt-cellars and other symbols of power (a horn, for instance) and are covered with intricately carved figural scenes and decorative designs.
- ❖ Many of these designs merge African and European features together. Indeed, it is likely that the artists who made these works were commissioned to create these pieces had never actually seen a European in person and were merely translating their own aesthetic principles into a form requested by Europeans.
- ❖ With that said, it is likely that the European patrons who commissioned these works asked for specific design elements (e.g. crests, scenes of hunting, etc.)