

African Art through the Ages
Art Seminar Group of Baltimore
Lecture Notes | Ancient Africa | October 29, 2019

From Stone Age to Iron Age (6,000 – 4,000 BCE)

- ❖ Extant stone age art includes pottery and rock art. It was produced by mobile hunter-gatherers.
- ❖ The entrance into the Iron Age allows people to transition into a sedentary agricultural lifestyle. This allows you to start to see the rise of large, city-state and empires.
- ❖ Civilizations produce art on a more monumental scale because a) it no longer has to be lightweight and portable, and b) increased population size allows for a division of labor and the development of an artistic class that can produce objects of aesthetic value

Kingdom of Nri (?? - 900/1000 CE)

- ❖ Until the middle years of the 20th century, Euro-Americans had presumed that there was no such thing as antiquity in Sub-Saharan Africa.
- ❖ All this changed in 1939 when a farmer in eastern Nigeria dug up a cistern in his backyard. It took until 1959 for a full archaeological investigation to take place. It was at that time that they found evidence of a lost civilization, one that dates to between the 9th and 10th centuries. The vast majority of the 721 objects recovered came from a single grave.
- ❖ These were made in metal and came from a single source: metal ores found on the banks of the Benue River (about 100km from the site known as Igbo-Ukwu).
- ❖ Objects are all made using the incredibly complicated Lost Wax Technique. These are luxury objects. Surface detail is incredibly fine. They incorporate representations of things as small as insects that seem to have just alighted on the surface. None of these were made separately and then riveted or welded onto the discs. They come from a singular casting.

Ancient Nigerian Civilizations: Nok, Sokoto, Katsina (500 BCE – 200 CE)

- ❖ These are some of the oldest known civilizations in sub-Saharan Africa and they produced a remarkable array of figurative terracotta works
- ❖ The most famous of these sculptures come from the town of Nok, which sits on the Jos Plateau in central Nigeria, and they were discovered from around 1920
- ❖ In addition to these Nok terracottas, there were other types of terracottas found in Northern Nigeria, in both Sokoto and Katsina
- ❖ Scholars have long assumed these to be part of the same extended Nok kingdom, but some scholars (myself included) posit that they represent other more distinctive kingdoms or city-states

Aksumite Empire (~100 CE – 940 CE)

- ❖ Aksum emerges in northeastern Africa around the turn of the first millennium. Aksum were the descendants of native northeastern Africans and the Arabs from the Saba'a Empire, who had crossed the red sea around 1000 BCE to expand their empire.
- ❖ Structurally, we know that the kingdom was ruled similar to that of feudal Europe, which means that there was a king—known as the *negusa negast* (king of kings)—and vassal kings. This suggests a high degree of social and political complexity.
- ❖ Surviving artwork includes monumental architecture, funerary monuments, and coins.
- ❖ In 330 CE King Ezana converted to Christianity, which dramatically alters the art of the empire.