

The Abstract Impulse in African Art

Art Seminar Group — Tuesday, September 11, 2018

Lecture Summary

Africa has long been associated with abstract artistic expression. Indeed, the story of African art's entrance into the art historical canon is so well known that it scarcely needs to be repeated. Yet, in spite of the voluminous scholarship on European interest in African abstraction, there is much we do not know about the history of abstract form on the continent itself. Most basically: What does abstraction mean in Africa? Why did it develop in some places and not others? Where it did emerge, what prompted its genesis? In what ways did abstract form play a role in the use and efficacy of an object?

This lecture seeks to answer these questions in order to better understand the origin, meaning, and function of abstraction on the African continent. During this investigation, we will look at case studies from Kenya, Mali, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo while highlighting objects in the collection of regional museums.

Lecture Notes

The Abstract Continuum—Beembe Art from eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo

Abstraction is always a choice—in Africa, in America, everywhere. As we know, the abstract turn in Western art occurred when artists intentionally decided to abstract the human body and the landscape as a way of rejecting traditional academicism and signaling an allegiance to materiality of their mediums. African artists of the past used abstraction as a way of signaling different information to a viewer—about power, divinity, etc.—and making the objects “work.” [Whenever one talks about aesthetics in historic African art, one must remember that African art was not meant to be decorative. It was supposed to live, to do things in the world. Form and function are always connected.]

Bimbi: Naturalistic human portrait figures that were commissioned by wealthy men as a means of commemorating their life and preserving their memory after they had passed on.

Eluba or *Emangungu*: Although very little is known about these plank masks (they ceased being used in the late 19th/early 20th century), it is believed they were worn by boys just prior to their circumcision and initiation into manhood.

Ibulu Lya 'Alunga: This mask is known as “the head of Alunga,” and represents *M'ma Mwit*, a powerful nature spirit. It could only be danced by one individual, the most powerful individual in the Alunga association and appeared only at the society's most important events.

Abstraction and Governance—Bamana Art from southern Mali

In the absence of a centralized political structure, Bamana villages and village groups rule themselves by means of organizations, each of which is associated with different art forms.

Gwandusu: Mother-child sculptures that would be displayed in twos or threes at annual celebrations hosted by the Jo and Gwan societies. By representing the maternal ideal, it was believed that these sculptures ensure fertility.

Jonyeleni: A representation of the youthful, feminine ideal, these sculptures were paraded around villages by young men after their initiation into manhood as a way of signaling their desire and eligibility to marry. They are cared for by the Jo Society.

Chi Wara: The god Chi Wara—a half man, half antelope being—was responsible for teaching the original Bamana men and women about agriculture. He is celebrated during agricultural festivities that re-enact Chi Wara's teachings. The headdress is meant to represent and instantiate this deity.

Ntomo: The Ntomo association is one of six organizations responsible for the initiation of boys into men. Ntomo teaches boys about the responsibilities of adult men in Bamana communities. This mask is danced every five or so years and reflects the hardship associated with the initiation process.

Komokun: This frightening mask—a composite of different animals—is worn by senior members of the men's Komo association, which is charged with protecting the community, both from human wrongdoing and spiritual malevolence.

Boli: These are the most powerful objects in the Bamana sculptural canon and resemble little more than amorphous blobs that sit on (generally) four legs. They are meant to accumulate and control *nyama*, or naturally occurring power/energy. They are controlled by the most senior members of the senior men's association.

Abstraction and Divinity—Pende art in south-central Democratic Republic of the Congo

Mbuya: Wooden masks are known as *mbuya*. These masks are generally associated with living humans. The more naturalistic the representation, the more profane the masquerade associated with that mask was.

Miganji: Fibrous masks made of raffia are associated with divine spirits that dance at the most important of village events. Because of their divinity, these masks are more abstract.

Abstraction and Mobility: Art from central and northern Kenya

Up until now, we have largely focused on sedentary societies, that is agricultural societies that are rooted to a place. In nomadic and semi-nomadic societies, abstraction is associated with movement. The more you move, the more abstract the work you produce.

A Coda:

The Fang *ngontang* mask that served as the initial inspiration for Vlaminck, Derain, Picasso, and other Parisian modernists shows little signs of use (e.g. it has no holes for costume attachments). By 1905—the date that it arrived in Vlaminck's studio—French interest in Fang art had reached such a fever pitch that Fang artists were producing large numbers of masks and objects for the European market. This mask appears to one of them.

Are you interested in learning more about African art? Let me know! I can be reached by e-mail at ktervala@artbma.org or on my office line: (443) 573-1746. [Kevin Tervala, Associate Curator of African Art & Department Head, Art of Africa, the Americas, Asia, and the Pacific Islands, Baltimore Museum of Art]