

# Viewing Sub-Saharan African Art With A Question of Aesthetics in the Context of Another

Gillian J. Furniss



Figure 1. Phyllis Galembo, *Bwa Plank Masks*, 2006. Yenou Village, Burkina Faso. Color photograph. Used with permission of the artist.

# Western Eyes: Culture and Time

In this article I explore the aesthetic value of sub-Saharan African ritual masks in the context of modern African art as part of the global fine art world (Desai, 2005; Kasfir, 1992). This discussion of sub-Saharan African ritual masks examines the role of carver and the dichotomy of past “traditional” art and contemporary “modern” art of sub-Saharan Africa (Hassan, 1999). The challenges of responding to ritual objects of aesthetic merit that are outside of the Western cultural framework are discussed. The dynamic roles of museums that exhibit African art are explored as well. Elizabeth Garber (1995) cautions art educators who are outside of the culture discussed need to be aware of the temptations to “exoticize” these original artifacts when designing curriculum. All these issues of postmodern multicultural art education (Ballengee Morris & Stuhr, 2001; Chin, 2011) are important considerations when designing an art lesson using African ritual masks as a source of inspiration for students’ artwork.

## Background Information

Years ago, I was an art teacher of an after-school program at an urban community center in a New York City low-income neighborhood. I taught an art lesson about traditional sub-Saharan African ritual masks. I introduced to my multicultural students the history of sub-Saharan Africa by showing old photographs of ritual masks worn by performers during religious ceremonies (Segy, 1976). I organized a field trip to The Museum for African Art in New York City, located conveniently nearby. A museum educator gave my students a tour of the permanent collection. Next, my students made masks out of papier-mâché, recycling materials, and art materials (Bawden, 1990). My students were encouraged to use their imaginations to make masks that represented their own artistic tastes, cultural values, and beliefs—and therefore expressed a particular sense of aesthetics (Greene, 1995; hooks, 1995; Lippard, 1990).

I chose this particular art lesson to stretch the imaginations of my students in order for them (1) to understand that there were people of cultures beyond those expressed in the United States who made art, and also (2) to realize they had the opportunity, through their own art process, to have creative experiences that were influenced by foreigners (Garber, 1995; Greene, 1995). Previously, I studied ancient sub-Saharan African history with Eugenia W. Herbert and so I was familiar with how diverse and rich the histories of African cultural groups were before the colonial period. As a White American woman whose maternal great-great-grandfather was John Kirk, the Scottish physician and botanist expert on David Livingstone’s 19th-century expedition in Africa, I have a personal connection to sub-Saharan Africa due to family experience and knowledge.

## Aesthetics of Traditional African Art

Culture is intricately linked to aesthetics and therefore judgment of art. Aesthetics does not represent an appreciation of art based on personal taste, but rather based on a group that shares a common value system (Bell, 1958). When art educators refer to aesthetics as a formal sense of judging a work of art based on a certain standard of criteria, they are in fact referring to their own cultural preference and the value system it espouses (Chalmers, 1984; Hart, 1991). Aesthetics is not only subjective, but it is also dynamic—because culture is an ever changing and developing process (Lopez, 2009). Hassan (1999) argued that “modern” and “traditional” (p. 223) are terms that refer to sensibility and style. Nelson Goodman (1976) argued a work of art referred to as “beautiful” is limiting because it does not include those works of art that are obviously “ugly” (p. 247). He argued, “The pleasantness or unpleasantness of a symbol does not determine its general cognitive efficacy or its specifically aesthetic merit” (p. 249).

If this concept is translated to traditional African art, the ability to accept African art as legitimate art using Western standards increases. It is precisely the “ugly” in some ancient pre-colonial African art that puzzles us at first until we understand that this serves an important purpose in regard to form and function. Images in African art portray the “ugly” such as figures of sorcerers, foreigners, and spirits of the forest, as well as the “beautiful” such as figures of healers, fertility, and the harvest. For example, the *N’Tomo* mask from Bambara, Mali, is used during initiation ceremonies in which boys become men. The concept of the mask as threatening, intimidating, and terrifying is appropriate in regard to the function of this aesthetic object. It is meant to scare boys into obedience, to confront their fear in a controlled environment, to display a sense of power over a group (Forna, 1995).

Figure 2. Phyllis Galembó, *Akata Masquerade*, 2004. Eshinjok Village, Nigeria. Color photograph. Used with permission of the artist.



Ceremonial masks play important roles in many societies around the world including those of Africa, Asia, and the Americas (Mack, 1994). Today, in countries of Africa and its diaspora, such as Haiti, masks are worn in various ceremonies to act as agents of transformation from human to spiritual being as documented in the contemporary fine art color photographs of Phyllis Galembó (Galembó, 2010; Newman, 2012) (see Figures 1 and 2). Ladislav Segy (1976) explained masks in African ceremonies are an “indispensable instrument” of rituals and “the carrier of spiritual reality” (p. 9). The ritual of the masked dance was rooted in a communal need, and as the audience and the performers shared in the experience, the mask became a powerful implement for achieving a homogenous mass consciousness (p. 12). The sacredness of the performance was such that often the male performer who wore the mask would offer sacrifices to the spirit he was about to incorporate. The audience believed that in the dance the spirit itself appeared—not one of their fellow members who acted out a role (p. 11).

African carvers are members of a particular *caste*, or a collective group of artists, who cherish a common tradition. However, the aesthetic styles of ritual masks have border crossings among

tribes so there is no one static form that is acceptable and identifiable from a single cultural source (Kasfir, 1992; Hassan, 1999). Therefore, style may be altered by cross-cultural influences (Hassan, 1999). All too often in the West, an African carver is not identified by name as an individual and therefore he is not recognized for his unique contribution to a larger “carvers’ cooperative” (Kasfir, 1992, p. 48), a concept that is contrary to the case in some African cultures.

African people embrace whole-heartedly the fact that their cultures are continually re-evolving to relate to contemporary beliefs, values, and practices—and that their ceremonial objects would naturally reflect this. Today’s international tourist industry has altered not only what kind of African art is made, but by whom and for whom, and for what purpose in our global society. Scholars have urged art educators to discuss with their students the impact of today’s transnational economic forces that influence local art production in emerging economies. Desai (2005) pointed out “there is a tendency to render invisible the transformation of indigenous art in a global economy in multicultural art education and thus inadvertently mythologizes the power of the local as independent of international power structures” (p. 303).

## Recent Art Exhibitions of Modern African Art

Over many years, the aesthetics of African art has transformed due to external socio-cultural influences. In the past, European artists of the early 20th century viewed African ceremonial masks as new sources of inspiration such as Pablo Picasso did in the Museum of Ethnography in Paris. This fascination resulted in the birth of the art movement called Modernism. These European artists were not interested in African cultures, only in traditional African art as a new visual material for them to use and interpret as they pleased as inspiration for their own artwork (Richardson, 1991).

Contemporary African artists have a complex relationship with the West (Hassan, 1999). Scholars such as Dipti Desai (2005) explained that it is important to realize the country of origin as a “way of describing artistic practices” (p. 300) is of no primary significance within the global economy of the modern art world. Referring to art selected to be exhibited in art museums, curator and African art expert Susan Vogel argued that “African assimilation of Western techniques, materials, ideas and forms has been creative, selective, meaningful, and highly original” (in Hassan, 1999, p. 216). Contemporary African art “is recognized as individualistically oriented rather than communally centered” and African artists “produce work according to the norms of Western modern art” (p. 218) to exhibit in galleries and museums.

Hassan (1999) argued the investigation of African art remains largely a Western preoccupation, “the product of Western sensibility and an expression of Western aesthetic responses to African visual culture” (p. 215). Artists, regardless of their origins, who exhibit and sell their art in the West are one aspect of sophisticated subcultures. Other aspects include museum and gallery curators, dealers at auctions, and the buyers of art that drive the global

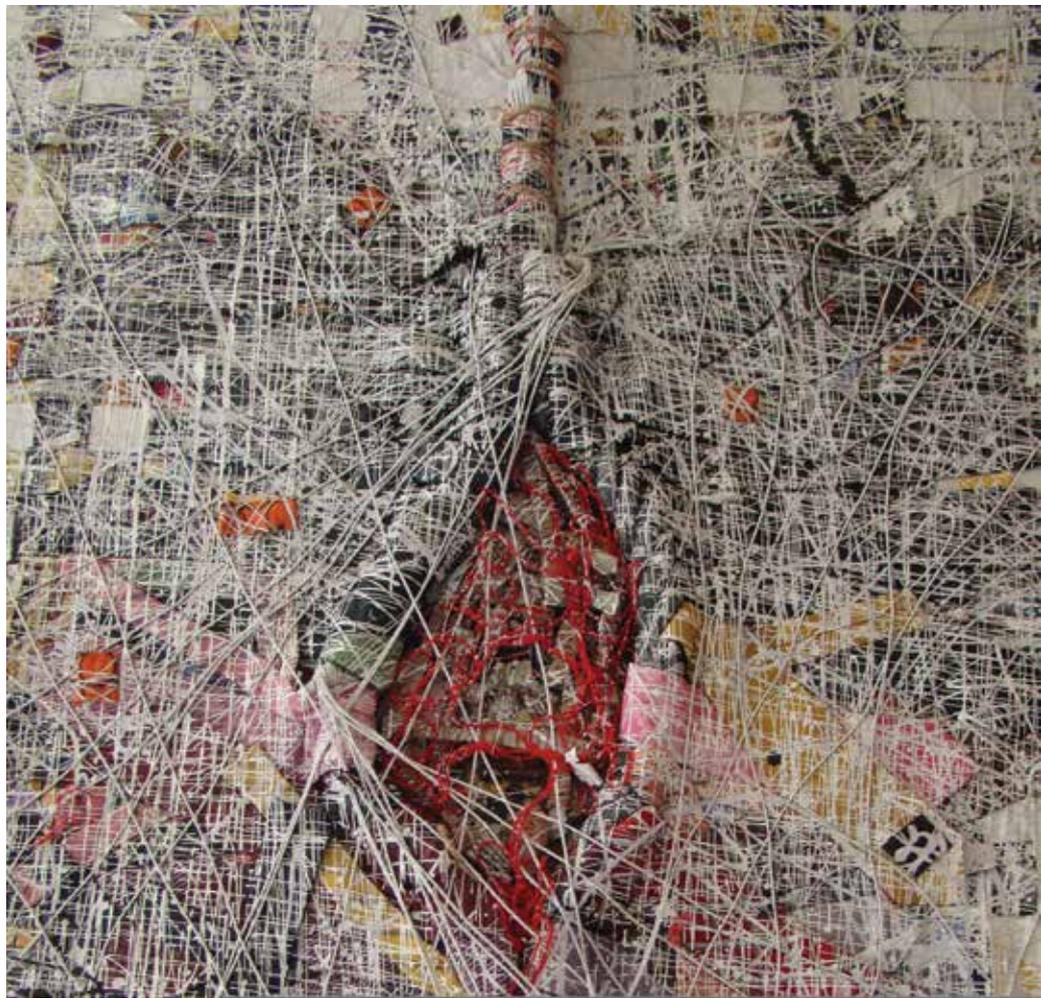
market in terms of creativity, taste, status, and the exchange of money (Thornton, 2009).

In 2013, the internationally recognized artist El Anatsui had a solo show—Gravity and Grace: Monumental Works by El Anatsui—at the Brooklyn Museum<sup>1</sup> in New York City. Most of the artworks displayed were large-scale and made of recycling material such as metal, but there were also smaller pieces of burned wood. Born in Ghana and now based in Nigeria, El Anatsui metaphorically explores, through his art, the many historical connections between Africa, Europe, and the Americas. Created with bottle caps from a distillery, these wall hangings have been pieced together by a team of studio assistants to produce a large and multi-colored wall sculpture. Hassan (1999) argued that this artist’s use of wood burning—a traditionally known technique in African art to make symbolic, political, and social statements—provides evidence of this “Modernist urge” (p. 225) to reach an art museum audience. A documentary film, *The Nomadic Aesthetic: Freedom to Move* is one of a series of *Anatsui at work: Eight short films* (Vogel, 2011), chronicles his life and artwork. He explained, “If you leave your country, you develop a kind of nomadic mentality” (in Vogel, 2012, p. 33).

The younger visual and performance artist Olaniyi R. Akindiya (a.k.a. “AKIRASH”)—originally from Nigeria and now based in Austin, Texas—combines natural and art materials to create artwork. AKIRASH’s interdisciplinary work often addresses contemporary issues such as international politics and economics. During his residency in Upstate New York at Vytlacil Campus of the Art Students League of New York, visitors (myself included) were able to watch his live performance and view his unfolding art process in his studio. In his work called *ASH TRAY “1,”* (Figure 3) a mixed

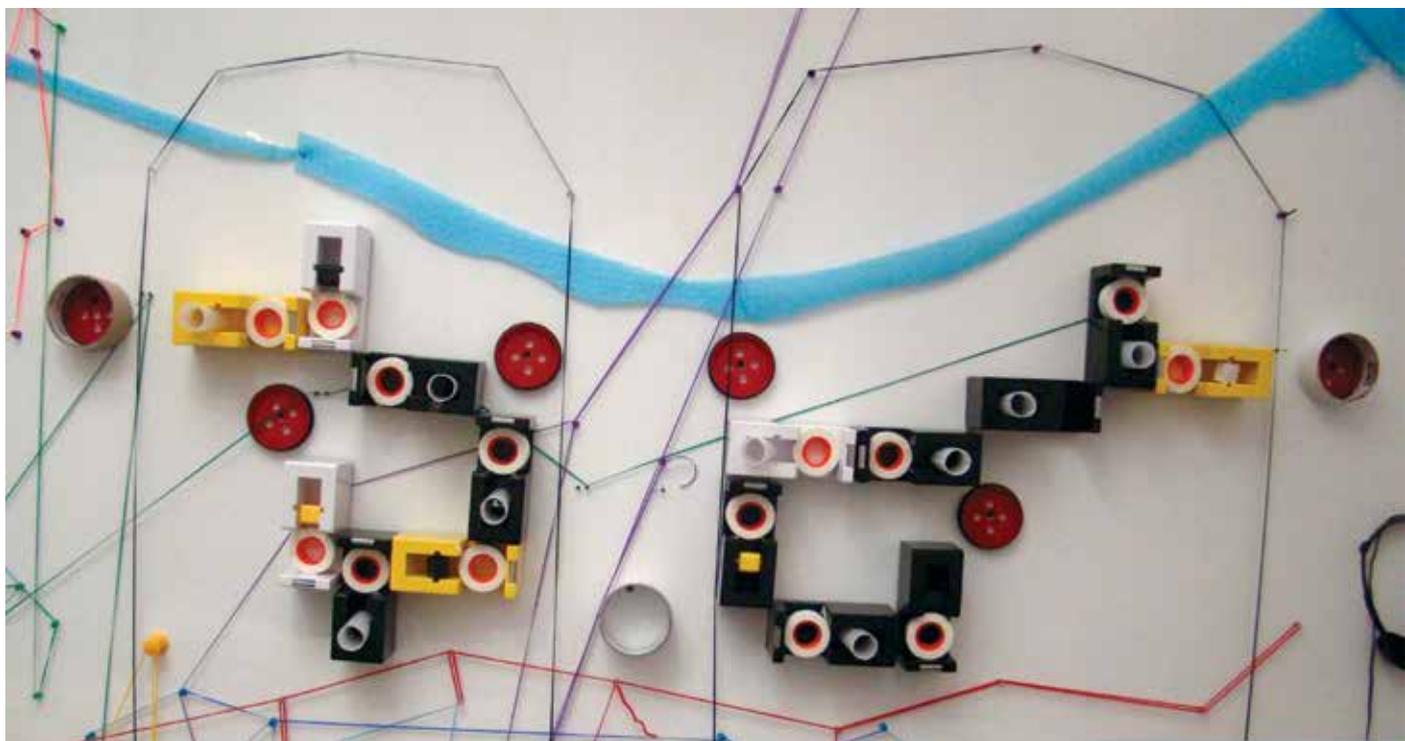


Figure 3. Olaniyi R. Akindiya AKIRASH, *ASH TRAY “1,”* 2012 (detail). Mixed media painting/sculpture, 28” x 18”. Used with permission of the artist.



**right:** Figure 4. Olaniyi R. Akindiya AKIRASH, *Enikan Lomo/He who wears it feels it*, 2012 (detail). Mixed media painting/sculpture, 120" x 120" x 2". Used with permission of the artist.

**below:** Figure 5. Olaniyi R. Akindiya AKIRASH, *Fakafiki faka/NY Subway*, 2012 (detail). Mixed media sculpture installation, 96" x 96" x 3". Used with permission of the artist.



media painting/sculpture, he looks at health insurance and the saying that “health is wealth.” In this work he used old cigarette filters, threads, glue and acrylic paint on canvas. During an earlier residency at Triangle Art Association in Brooklyn, New York, with 30 other international artists, he created a few works. The first artwork he created is called *Enikan Lomo* (Figure 4), which in the Yoruba language from south Nigeria means, “He who wears it feels it.”

Reflecting on the role of recently re-elected President Barack Obama and the United States of America as a political and economic force on a global scale, the artist explained that this work examines the economy of America and the world. The artist asks “what are the most important things people demand from their leaders?” and also “who are the people who make decisions on trade, marketing, value of currency, price of natural resource?” (personal correspondence, 2013). He used a necktie because as he explained, “it’s what all these kind of people wear.” He found this old tie on his way to the studio in Brooklyn. He arranged it with other materials, sewed them together with thread, and then not satisfied, he later decided to cut them into strips and to start weaving, incorporating threads, ropes, keys, and a rat trap. Then he applied acrylic paint. His second work is called *Fakafiki faka/NY Subway* (Figure 5). *Fakafiki faka* means “train sound” in the Yoruba language and this work is about the New York City subway. It expresses the sound of train passengers and activities that happen (personal correspondence, 2013).

### Recent Art Exhibitions of Traditional African Art

Today, traditional African objects are referred to as works of art and placed in museums that are far removed from the cultures that produced them. John Dewey (1934) wrote art housed in museums is removed from the everyday customs, beliefs, and rituals that define culture—resulting in works of art losing their significance. In contrast, the visual and performing arts of the past, Dewey argued, were “part of the significant life of an organized community” (p. 7). Desai (2005) argued art exhibitions that display art by African artists require the “active engagement with the complex social, economic, political and ideological positions, including a critique of corporate structures that support the field of art” (p. 300). Ways of revealing the museum socio-cultural context include African masks and helmets worn over the face or on top of the head to conceal the identity of the performer exhibited behind glass encasements. The rest of the costume that covers the entire body of the performer is absent. Other essential aesthetic components of the ceremony such as the rhythm of music and dance

are also often absent (Copland, 1960; Paladino, 2008), although recently some museums provide documentary films to view.

Curators of recent exhibitions at art museums are redefining traditional ritual objects as embodying multiple roles in Western society and asking viewers complex, in-depth questions when responding to the objects on view. There was a recent series of art exhibitions at Williams College Museum of Art in Massachusetts<sup>2</sup> called *Reflections on a Museum*. The goal was “to ask new questions of the objects in our collection” (Stomberg, 2012). I viewed the exhibition, *The Object of Art*. There was a panel that presented to viewers the introductory question, “Where is the sacred in art?” in a gallery of religious objects from Africa, India, Europe, and the Middle East. In a glass case was a black mask with white hair, a map of Liberia in West Africa where the mask originated, and an old photograph that created a complex explanation of the original ceremony. The black-and-white photograph was of a Kono *Noyon Nea* masquerade in southwestern Guinea in the 1950s. The viewer can see in this photograph the entire costume, such as the mask worn on the head of a man in a black-and-white striped bodysuit in a full-length grass skirt (Visona, 2001).

In Karl and Helen Burger Gallery at Kean University in New Jersey,<sup>3</sup> the art exhibition—*Embodying the Sacred in Yoruba Art*—displayed African ritual objects from the permanent collection of the Newark Museum. Neil Tetkowski (2012) stated, “The pieces in the show... highlight the relationship between art and the spiritual world.... Clearly, the makers of the objects never intended to show them in the static environment of a Western art gallery; art in the Yoruba culture is created for ceremony and ritual, a means of engaging the daily yet sacred relationship to the Earth and the spirits of the greater universe” (p. 5). An example is a 20th-century mask from Nigeria made of wood, wool, metal, and pigment (see Figure 6) in which a pattern on the mask face is intended to “command attention” (p. 21). Thoughtful auxiliary information such as the exhibition catalogue supports the overall current understanding of the art on view.

### Class Discussion Questions

Planning a class trip to an art museum that has a permanent collection or a temporary exhibition of traditional sub-Saharan ritual masks takes time and effort but is rewarding for both students and teachers. Another possibility is for art teachers to search websites of art museums that have highly regarded art collections of African art—such as Newark Museum in New Jersey,<sup>4</sup> The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York,<sup>5</sup> and National Museum of African Art Smithsonian Institution<sup>6</sup>—to view online images that can act as sources for class dialogue.

*It is important to understand that when one views a work of art that is created by a culture and during a time period other than one’s own, one is appreciating it from a different perspective.*

Figure 6. *Egungun Headdress*, 20th century, Nigeria, Yoruba. Wood, wool, metal and pigment, 12" x 8" x 6 1/2." Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Paul E. Schneck, 1979, Collection of The Newark Museum. Used with permission of The Newark Museum.



Ask students to explore the evolving roles in Western and African societies of a few specific African masks. The following questions may be asked to frame and stimulate a class discussion:

- **What are the historical contexts** and cultural traditions of African ritual masks? Discuss a few specific masks.
- **What was the role of performers** wearing the masks in the past? And today?
- **What was the role of the “audience”** or community participants in the past? And today?
- **Describe the physical aspects** of a few African masks. What is the significance of the materials and the subject matter used? Why do you think the carvers represent these images to convey certain beliefs and values?
- **How can you interpret the role** of African ritual masks to find meaning and understanding in today’s Western societies?
- **What materials would you use** to create your own mask and why? What images would you use for inspiration and why?

This class discussion can be followed by a mask-making project using natural, recycled, and art materials—allowing students to interpret the role of masks from their own socio-cultural understanding and life experiences to encourage the practical implementation of issues concerning aesthetics.

## Conclusion

There are many ways of communicating and the primary function of African ritual objects in many cultures with a strong tradition of oral history is to visually communicate critical information to other members of that society. A single object of aesthetic merit can have multiple functions over time because dynamic cultural groups define these objects differently. For example, in an ancient

pre-colonial sub-Saharan African culture an object is a ritual mask, and in contemporary American society that same object is acknowledged as a work of art. These two social functions initially oppose one another in the most basic way, but they can also challenge the viewer to adopt a more dualistic approach when considering the life span of the art within a trans-cultural context. It is important to understand that when one views a work of art that is created by a culture and during a time period other than one’s own, one is appreciating it from a different perspective. Maxine Greene (1993) stated, “It is because I believe that encounters with the arts can awaken us to alternative possibilities of existing, of being human, of relating to others, of being other, that I argue for their centrality in curriculum” (p. 214). As art educators continue to learn to respect and validate diverse cultures of the past and present and the many functions of objects with aesthetic merit, the sense of aesthetic judgment of art will change and grow to become a richer experience. ■

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## Author Note

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> *What's happening*. [www.brooklynmuseum.org](http://www.brooklynmuseum.org)
- <sup>2</sup> <http://wcma.williams.edu>
- <sup>3</sup> [www.kean.edu/~gallery](http://www.kean.edu/~gallery)
- <sup>4</sup> [www.newarkmuseum.org](http://www.newarkmuseum.org)
- <sup>5</sup> [www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org)
- <sup>6</sup> [www.africa.si.edu](http://www.africa.si.edu)

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