

# What Teachers Need to Know

## A. Geography of Africa

### Background

*Africa is the second-largest continent. Its shores are the Mediterranean Sea on the north, the Atlantic Ocean to the west, the Red Sea and Indian Ocean to the east, and the Indian Ocean to the south. The area south of the Sahara is often called sub-Saharan Africa and is the focus of Section C, “Medieval Kingdoms of the Sudan,” (see pp. 149–152).*

### Mediterranean Sea and Red Sea

The Red Sea separates Africa from the Arabian Peninsula. Except for the small piece of land north of the Red Sea, Africa does not touch any other landmass. Beginning in 1859, a French company dug the Suez Canal through this narrow strip of Egypt between the Mediterranean and the Red Seas. The new route, completed in 1869, cut 4,000 miles off the trip from western Europe to India.

### Atlantic and Indian Oceans

The Atlantic Ocean borders the African continent on the west. The first explorations by Europeans trying to find a sea route to Asia were along the Atlantic coast of Africa. In the early 1400s, Prince Henry of Portugal, known as Prince Henry the Navigator, sent ships south along the African coast looking for a way around the continent. During his lifetime, his captains explored the coastline as far south as modern-day Sierra Leone, about halfway down the continent. (Students will learn about these and other voyages of exploration in Grade 5.)

The Indian Ocean is the third-largest ocean in the world and borders both east and south Africa and the south Asian continent. Beginning as early as 3000 to 1000 BCE, people used its monsoon winds for sailing and set up a profitable trade between Africa and the Arabian Peninsula and beyond to India.

### Cape of Good Hope

“Cape of Storms” may have been the name the Portuguese navigator Bartolomeu Dias gave this rocky tip of southern Africa when he saw it in 1488. The weather and the seas off the cape are very rough. Some historians say the Portuguese king changed the name to “Cape of Good Hope” because its discovery offered hope of finding a water route from Europe to India.

On his historic journey to India in 1497, Vasco da Gama became the first European to round the cape and sail into the Indian Ocean. Eventually many other Europeans would follow in da Gama’s footsteps.

### Madagascar

The island of Madagascar lies off the East African coast in the Indian Ocean. It is the largest of Africa’s islands. Its first inhabitants arrived around the 1st century CE from the African continent and from what is now Indonesia. Arab traders

settled on Madagascar in the 900s CE, bringing Islam with them. In 1500, the Portuguese were the first Europeans to visit the island. One hundred years later, the French established trading stations on the island.

## Major Rivers: Nile, Niger, Congo

The Nile has two sources: the White Nile, which begins in Lake Victoria (Victoria Nyanza) and the Blue Nile, which begins above Lake Tana in Ethiopia. At Khartoum in The Sudan, the two branches, the White Nile and the Blue Nile, join to become the Nile proper. The Nile flows north and empties through a huge delta into the Mediterranean Sea. The Nile is the world's longest river. Its northern lower valley was the site of the ancient Egyptian civilization. (Students may find it strange that the Nile flows north, as they may think of this as flowing “up.” Remind them that rivers flow from high ground to lower ground, and that this has nothing to do with north and south.)

The Niger River rises in southwest Guinea and empties through a delta into the Gulf of Guinea on the Atlantic Ocean. The Niger is a long, winding river that forms part of Niger's southwest border with Benin. The Benue River is the chief tributary of the Niger. The Niger, though interrupted by a series of rapids, has long navigable stretches that traders have used to transport goods for many centuries.

The Congo River rises in the Chambezi River in Zambia and empties into the Atlantic Ocean. It is named after the early African kingdom of Kongo. The Congo is the world's second-largest river in volume of water. (The Amazon is the largest.) Both the Congo and Niger Rivers are long and winding and serve as important transportation routes.

## Atlas Mountains

The Atlas Mountains rise in North Africa and extend for 1,500 miles (2,414 km), through Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. There are seven ranges within the Atlas Mountains and they run generally southwest to northeast and along the Mediterranean coast. The highest peak in the Atlas Mountains is Mount Toubkal in Morocco. It rises to 13,661 feet (4,164 m).

On the northern side of the Atlas Mountains near the Mediterranean, people raise citrus fruits and olives—crops similar to those raised in the Mediterranean regions of Europe. Sheep herding is a major economic activity on the drier Saharan slopes. The mountains are also rich in iron, oil, and coal deposits.

## Mt. Kilimanjaro

Mt. Kilimanjaro, at a height of 19,340 feet (5,895 m), is the tallest mountain in Africa. Located in the modern nation of Tanzania, Mt. Kilimanjaro is an extinct volcano. The mountain actually has two peaks, Kibo and Mawenzi; Kibo is the taller of the two.

## Contrasting Climate in Different Regions

### Deserts: Sahara and Kalahari

The Sahara, which spreads across North Africa, is the largest desert in the world. The Kalahari desert lies in south central Africa in the modern countries of Botswana, Namibia, and South Africa.

The climate in the deserts is arid, dry, and varies from hot to cold. Rainfall varies from very little to as much as 10 inches annually. Temperatures may top 120° during the day and fall to freezing at night. The Sahara is a mix of sand, rocks, gravel, and oases. The latter are fed by underground springs. The Kalahari desert has some seasonal grasslands where the San people (formerly called bush-people), the only inhabitants skilled enough to live in the region, are nomadic hunters and gatherers.

### **Tropical Rainforest: Central Africa**

The tropical rainforest lies in central Africa along the West African coast and inland in the Congo River basin. The Equator runs through the tropical rainforest. There are also pockets of similar vegetation and climate along the Atlantic coast in the more northerly nations of Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Cote d'Ivoire. The climate in the rainforest is hot and very wet.

### **Savanna or Grasslands**

The savanna lies north, south, and east of the tropical rainforests in the Congo River basin. The predominant form of vegetation is tall grasses, although there are also stands of trees scattered in places. The temperature in the grasslands is normally warm, and rainfall is less than in the forest but still averages to 30 to 60 inches a year. The winters are dry but not cold. The northern savanna is called the Sudan, from the Arabic name *bilad as-sudan*, meaning “land of blacks.” This area stretches from the southernmost part of the Sahara to the northernmost part of the rainforest. The Sudan area should not be confused with the country, the Republic of The Sudan, most commonly known as The Sudan.

### **The Sahel**

A fourth type of climate can be found in the semiarid grassland called the Sahel, which lies between the savanna of tall grasses and the arid Sahara. The Sahel is the northernmost part of the Sudan region. The Sahel experiences a drier climate than the savanna and as a result, the vegetation is limited to short grasses, rather than the tall grasses of the wetter savanna in the rest of the Sudan. The Sahel includes parts of the countries of Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Chad, and the country of The Sudan. The Sahel area was the site of the great trading kingdoms of West Africa, which arose and prospered from the 800s to the 1500s CE.

## **B. Early African Kingdoms**

### **Kush**

Students in Core Knowledge schools should have learned about ancient Egypt in Grade 1. In Grade 4, they will learn about the kingdom of Kush, a neighboring kingdom that flourished in Nubia about the same time as ancient Egypt.

Nubia was the valley along the banks of the Nile, south of the ancient kingdom of Egypt. Much of Nubia lay in what is modern-day The Sudan. Originally an independent kingdom, northern Nubia became a province of the Egyptian pharaohs sometime between 1580 and 1150 BCE. During this period, the kingdom of Kush arose among the southern Nubians, and between 750 and 721 BCE, the Kushite forces seized power in Egypt. But their rule lasted only until about 667 BCE, when the Assyrians from Mesopotamia swept in and took over Egypt.

During their contact with the Egyptians—both as the ruled and the rulers—the Kushites adopted many ideas and styles of the Egyptians. Among them were the construction of temples and pyramids and burying the dead with goods for the afterlife. However, the Kushites also developed their own art styles and invented their own system of writing, which used an alphabet rather than the hieroglyphs that the Egyptians used.

After being driven from Egypt, the Kushites established a new capital far to the south at Meroë [mare-uh-WAY], located on the Nile in what is modern-day The Sudan. This location afforded them access to the lucrative northerly trade routes along the Nile, as well as to the eastern routes that crisscrossed the continent from the Red Sea north into North Africa and west into the Sudan region. Among the goods that the Kushites traded were objects made from iron. Meroë was near rich deposits of iron ore and good woodlands for charcoal, and the kingdom became known for its ironwork. Other trade goods were gold, ivory, and slaves.

## Axum

Meroë was conquered around 350 CE by forces from the kingdom of Axum (also spelled Aksum), which was east of Kush in what is today Ethiopia. The power of Axum was built on trade. Through its port city of Adulis on the Red Sea, it maintained trading contacts with the Mediterranean region and areas around the Indian Ocean. The people were a mix of Cushitic-speaking people and immigrant traders from Arabia, including Arabian merchants. The trade goods that came from the interior of Africa included ivory, gold, and animal skins. Trade goods from the Indian Ocean region included iron, cotton cloth, and spices. From the Mediterranean came linen cloth, wine, olives, and brass- and copperwares. All these goods were traded in the ports and markets of Axum.

In the 300s CE, the king of Axum converted to Christianity, which meant that the people did, too. Whatever a head of state did, his or her subjects were expected to do as well—even if in name only. This was also true in Europe in the Middle Ages. When Muslim Arabs began to sweep across North Africa, Axum found itself isolated and saw its trading empire decline. However, the high plateaus that became the nation of Ethiopia remained strongly Christian.

## C. Medieval Kingdoms of the Sudan

### Trans-Saharan Trade

Between the 300s and the late 1500s CE, in the grasslands regions of West Africa rose at least three successive empires built on trade—Ghana, Mali, and Songhai. These three empires built their wealth on the north-south trans-Saharan trade. Camel caravans carried such goods as salt, cloth, and metalware south from North Africa, and gold, ivory, and slaves north from the tropical rainforest kingdoms. Along with the trade goods from North Africa came Arab merchants and finally Muslim warriors.

Camels were the ideal beast of burden for crossing the great Sahara. Camels can travel at speeds of 8–10 miles per hour (13–16 km per hour) for up to 18 hours without resting. The hump of the camel stores fat that can be used for sustenance when food is scarce. Camels are also known for being able to go long periods of time, even up to a week in the summer, without drinking water. This

unique ability is due to the way camels regulate their body temperature. Humans, for example, need to perspire in order to keep variations in their body temperature to within 2°F. Perspiration leads to a loss of water through evaporation. Camels, however, store water in their tissues and cells and are able to withstand variations in body temperature up to 11°F without perspiring. At night, camels release their body heat so that their temperature is low again in the morning.

## Ghana

The first large empire in West Africa was Ghana, which may have begun as early as 300 CE and most likely became a powerful kingdom by about 800 CE. The Soninke people, who built the Ghana empire, were quick to take advantage of their position astride a major trans-Saharan trade route and spread their control through parts of what are today Mauritania, Mali, and Senegal. A ruler taxed all the goods coming into the kingdom from the north and all the gold flowing up from the south. Initially, the Soninke did not mine the gold but bought it from people to the south until they later gained control of some gold mines. The king limited the amount of gold that could leave the kingdom, thus driving up its value. Soon Ghana was known as the “land of gold.”

Islam followed the trade routes south. Muslim North African merchants came to Ghana to trade, and many stayed. The name *Ghana* is actually an Arabic word meaning “ruler.” Along with their religion, these merchant Muslims introduced Islamic artistic and architectural styles to Ghana. Over time, the kings of Ghana employed Muslims as advisors and government officials.

In the mid-1000s CE, Almoravids, Muslim Berbers from the desert, overran the kingdom but were unable to hold it. Beset by ecological problems and internal revolts by conquered peoples, Ghana’s trading network collapsed and its capital was destroyed in the mid-1200s.

The modern nation of Ghana is named in honor of the famous empire of Ghana, but its boundaries are not the same. The modern nation is farther south and slightly east of the old empire. The empire was landlocked, but the modern nation has the benefit of a coastline on the Atlantic Ocean.

## Mali

The remains of the Ghana empire were replaced by the empire of Mali, which at its peak controlled the area of the Sudan from the Atlantic Ocean east to what is now Nigeria. *Mali* is also an Arabic word. It means “where the king lives.” Its rulers succeeded one another from 1235 to the 1450s. The origins of Mali are relayed in the story of Sundiata, the Lion King, which is the heart of the oral tradition of this part of West Africa.

### Sundiata Keita

The epic begins:

Listen then sons of Mali, children of the black people, listen to my word, for I am going to tell you of Sundiata. . . . He was great among kings; he was peerless among men; he was beloved of God because he was the last of the great conquerors.

According to the epic, Mali was founded by Sundiata Keita [sun-JA-ta KAY-ta] of the Mandinka people. Sundiata was the only surviving son of a royal

family that had been slain by the ruler of the Susu, a rival group. The chief of the Susu had invaded Sundiata's homeland when he was a child. The Susu had killed Sundiata's 11 brothers, but let Sundiata live because he was only a sickly child. When Sundiata grew to manhood, he sought revenge, and, by 1235, he had vanquished the Susu and founded Mali.

## **Mansa Musa**

The greatest of Mali's emperors was Mansa Musa, who reigned from 1312 to 1332. *Mansa* means "emperor." Mansa Musa was a nephew of Sundiata and a devout Muslim convert. In addition to controlling gold mines, Mansa Musa expanded the empire to control the salt mines in the desert to the north. He established an efficient system of government for his huge empire.

In 1324, Mansa Musa undertook a 4,800-mile (7,725 km) pilgrimage to Mecca. As students should know from the section on Islam, one of the Five Pillars of Islam is to make a pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca at least once in one's life. Mansa Musa's pilgrimage was noteworthy for the wealth that he displayed on his journey. His party is said to have included 60,000 people. Of these, 12,000 were his personal slaves. Five hundred of them carried gold staffs weighing six pounds each. Eighty of the hundreds of camels carried 300 pounds (136 kg) of gold dust each. Mansa Musa was so generous in giving away his gold that he caused a devaluation of gold in Egypt, where he stopped on his way to Mecca. In addition to fulfilling his religious duty, Mansa Musa used the pilgrimage for diplomatic and economic purposes. He created bonds with other Muslim rulers and publicized the riches and splendor of Mali.

Word of Mansa Musa's trip even reached across the Mediterranean. A map of Africa drawn in Spain in 1375, long after Mansa Musa's death, for the first time showed Mali—represented by an emperor on a throne with a golden scepter.

## **Timbuktu**

One of the beneficiaries of Mansa Musa's efforts to advertise Mali was the trading city of Timbuktu on the Niger River. Mansa Musa brought back the Muslim architect es-Saheli from Granada, in Spain, to design mosques and palaces in Timbuktu. Es-Saheli's most lasting accomplishment, however, was the use of burnt-brick in construction. This became standard building material in West Africa.

Muslim scholars followed the trade routes to Timbuktu, and the city became a leading center of Muslim intellectual development, attracting students and scholars of law and Islam from across North Africa and the Middle East. A great university grew up in the Sankore district of the city, training scholars, doctors, judges, and clerics who took their knowledge to other cities. By the 1500s, when the writer Leo Africanus (Hassan ibn Muhammad) visited Timbuktu, the city had 150 schools teaching the Qur'an. Although the empire of Mali disappeared, Timbuktu continued to thrive as part of the empire of Songhai.

## **Ibn Batuta**

Ibn Batuta [IHB-uhn bat-TOO-tah] (also spelled Ibn Batutta or Ibn Battutah) was an Arab born in what is today Morocco. One day he left home to see the world. In 30 years Ibn Batuta visited every Muslim land as well as many parts of the world beyond. In addition to Africa and the kingdoms of the Middle East, he

traveled to Ceylon, China, southern Russia, and central Asia. It is estimated he traveled more than 75,000 miles in his journeys, probably a mark unsurpassed until the age of steam travel. Ibn Batuta returned to Morocco and wrote a book about his travels. About Mali, which he visited 15 years after Mansa Musa's death, he had the following observations:

“Of all peoples, the Blacks are those who most hate injustice, and their emperor pardons none who are guilty of it.”

He also noted their piety, saying:

“These people are Muslims, strict in observing the hour of prayer, studying the books of law, and memorizing the Qur'an.”

## Songhai

The third great empire in West Africa was Songhai [SAWNG-hy], which rose in the east as Mali declined. Like Ghana before it, Mali was an amalgam of conquered peoples. When they rebelled, the central government did not have the forces to reconquer them. Over time, Mali slowly disintegrated, and the empire of Songhai became the single most powerful political entity in West Africa.

### Askia Muhammad

The first great leader of Songhai was Sonni Ali, who ruled from 1461 to 1492. He pulled together various regions and groups of people along the Middle Niger to create an empire even larger than Mali. In 1493, Askia Muhammad, one of Ali's generals, ousted Ali's son and seized power.

Askia Muhammad ruled until 1528. He enlarged the empire even more. His armies roamed all the way to the Atlantic Ocean in the west and moved east into what are today Niger and Nigeria. A devout Muslim, Askia Muhammad introduced reforms that incorporated Islamic policies. For example, he instituted a legal system based on Islamic principles and appointed Islamic judges to administer the laws. He set out to convert his subjects to Islam and encouraged the building of mosques and the teaching of the Qur'an. Timbuktu once again became a center of Islamic learning and cultural development. Askia Muhammad's pilgrimage to Mecca rivaled the splendor of Mansa Musa's.

In the 36th year of his reign, Askia Muhammad was deposed by one of his sons, who in turn was ousted within three years. Continuing rivalry over the throne weakened the empire. The final blow was a 28-year invasion and occupation by Moroccans. Although the Moroccans never succeeded in subduing the empire, little was left of it when the Moroccans finally withdrew.

# What Teachers Need to Know

## Background

Note: The descriptions and activities in the main text below are intended to help you become familiar with the artworks before presenting them to students; however, some of the activities might be adapted for classroom use. Activities intended specifically for students can be found in the Teaching Idea sidebars. The Looking Questions are also printed on the reverse side of the *Art Resources* and have been written with students in mind so that they might be used as a rough plan for class discussion. You should feel free to use these questions or develop questions of your own. Be sure students have time to look at the reproductions carefully before asking the Looking Questions.

*It is essential that students understand that the African art in this section comes from the past. Today, many people in African countries live in large, populated cities, working as lawyers, bankers, teachers, and so forth. Children attend school, wear modern clothing, play sports, and go to the movies. There are stores, restaurants, and businesses. In rural areas, people often participate in agricultural lifestyles. While living in contemporary society, some African peoples simultaneously link to their past through the continuation of traditions and beliefs, many of which are associated with the types of objects discussed in this section.*

*Africa is a patchwork of societies, each with its own distinct religions, belief systems, culture, and history. African art varies depending upon the intentions of the creator and the community from which it came, each of which generally has its own aesthetic and artistic models.*

*Traditionally, Africans didn't make a definitive distinction between art and life. In most of the 1,000 or so languages still spoken in Africa, there is no historic word for art, at least in the western European sense of an object to be admired solely for aesthetic purposes.*

## Not Just Decoration: Context and Function

Where do we see art on a daily basis? In Western societies, art is primarily relegated to museums, galleries, or public spaces. By and large, artworks are isolated from the events of our daily lives. They inhabit separate, rarified places that we visit when we wish to contemplate their beauty.

African art was admired for its beauty. But African artworks also had many practical and traditional purposes: honoring the dead, royalty, or other important individuals; appeasing the spirits in the hopes of ensuring fertility, health, or successful endeavors; conquering one's enemies; and signifying authority, power, and prestige. Art in other cultures (Rome, Greece, and Native American cultures) had similar purposes.

Art was an intimate part of communal life. It was used in ceremonies, rituals, festivals, and celebrations. Often, only certain people had access to particular objects. For instance, only royal personages, chiefs, or esteemed individuals within



the community could commission and use carved staffs, thrones, or elaborately beaded crowns. Masks and other items related to secret societies were typically limited to initiates, who cared for the items and stored them in special places out of the public eye when not in use.

Art also communicated social information about particular individuals. For example, in the South African Ndebele [un-deh-BELL-ay] tribe, females wore certain beaded garments as young girls; different ones at puberty; and still another set of garments after marriage, giving birth, and a son's initiation. (See the included reproduction, discussion, and Looking Questions for the Apron [*jocolo*] on pp. 274–275.) Anyone within the community would have immediately “read” this information from the woman's splendid garments, which she wore on special occasions. Items such as engagement and wedding rings serve similar purposes in mainstream Western society today.

## Artworks, Materials, and Artists

Possibly you are already familiar with African masks (and headdresses), but artists also fashioned thrones, staffs, buildings, granary doors, interiors, furnishings, palace compounds, grave markers, pottery, weavings, ancestral and reliquary figures, oracle and divination items, fetishes (natural objects believed to have supernatural powers), textiles, musical instruments, and objects of adornment. As noted above, art and life were intimately interwoven.

Wood and metal are some of the most common materials used to create African art. (See the carved wooden face mask and the cast bronze head of a queen mother.) Artists also used clay, cloth, pigments (painted on mud walls and human bodies), shells, skin, ivory, horns, feathers, and bone as additional materials.

Artists in some African societies learned through apprenticeship. Often they learned the artistic skills as well as the associated prayers and/or rituals required to create pieces that held special powers. In other instances, people believed artists might receive instruction and/or guidance through dreams and visions. Many artists planned and designed their objects. Making something beautiful was important not just for the eye, but because people believed that the “better” the object, the more successful the results of the event associated with the object. A better artwork would be more effective at influencing the gods or the weather, for example.

## Evolving Traditions

Starting in the early 20th century, traditional African art had an enormous impact on modern European art. For instance, Pablo Picasso admired and collected African art and incorporated some formal elements of it into his work.

Artists in Africa today may continue age-old traditions, while others may work in contemporary media and styles—making little or no reference at all to historical works. From the earliest of times, African cultures borrowed from one another. Later European contact had an impact on African art as well. For instance, bright, colorful Portuguese glass beads brought by traders replaced indigenous shell, ivory, wood, and bone beads. The included reproduction of the Apron (*jocolo*) demonstrates how European goods were integrated to create a uniquely African expression.

Whether historical or modern, African art serves a variety of purposes and reflects the many aesthetics of the vastly different cultures from which it comes.

art resource

## 10 Head of a Queen Mother (16th century)

Artists in Benin, West Africa, typically made cast bronze or brass heads of royal personages. These were generally lifelike but also somewhat idealized. Whether representing *obas* (kings) or others in the royal family, the portraits were meant to convey the glory and power of the court. The artists who made them worked for the king and were highly esteemed. Before casting the heads, the artists said prayers and made special sacrifices to the gods.

This bronze sculpture demonstrates the importance of the queen mother as the official “head” of the government. Women past childbearing age were thought to be at the height of their power. The queen mother’s face here is perfectly smooth and her gaze is slightly abstracted. The pointed cone on her head recalls a rooster’s comb, which compares her power to that of a strong male. The netted design represents woven reddish-pink coral beads, exchanged with Portuguese traders, which symbolize wealth. The bronze itself denoted wealth, and was owned by the *oba*.

The rings around the woman’s neck represent both status and beauty. Long necks were highly regarded in West Africa, and women often wore rings around their neck in order to enhance their beauty. These rings were also viewed as a symbol of wealth and status.

### Looking questions

**Note:** Cover up the title on the front of the print before showing to students.

- Look carefully at this face. Where do you think it comes from, and who might this person be? *It is a sculpture from Africa of an unknown queen.*
- How can you tell from the reproduction that this head is made from a hard material? *The reflection of light on the surface of the head and its hard edges show that it is made from a hard material.*
- Can you tell what the sculpture is made from? *Answers will vary. It’s made of bronze.*
- Bronze is a metal that can be cast in a mold. Does anyone know how this process works? *Bronze casting is the process of making a form by pouring molten bronze into a mold made of hardened sand or clay.*
- Do you think this is exactly what the woman looked like in real life? Why or why not? *Answers will vary.*
- What details help you understand that this was an important woman in her society? *The decorative headpiece, forehead markings (scarification), and neck ornament show that the subject of this work was an important woman in her society.*

art resource

## 11 Face Mask (19th–20th century)

For the Songye [SONG-ee-yay] people, Kifwebe [KEY-fweb-ay] masks hold special supernatural powers, linked to the spirit world. The wearer becomes one with the spirit by donning the mask (and costume) and performing in a prescribed ceremony. The mask helps transform the human wearer into a bridge

between his or her community and the powers in the invisible realm. The ceremonies were passed down from generation to generation.

The abstract features of the Kifwebe mask make it seem even further from the human realm. The strong linear pattern is made by the fur, skin, or quills of antelopes, snakes, and porcupines. The mask's protruding mouth and large, curved eyebrows increase its supernatural look. Long raffia fibers, which hung down from the holes along the edge of the mask, created the costume that covered the wearer's body.

The mask belongs to the Kifwebe society. Members of this society are the ruling elite, who call upon the spirit world to help guide the community, and maintain economic and political power.

### Looking questions

**Note: Cover up the title on the front of the print before showing to students.**

- **What is this? *It is a face mask.***
- **What specifically about this mask gives you a feeling about its function and power? *Answers will vary.***
- **In what ways do you feel different when you wear a mask? *Answers will vary.***
- **How is the mask similar to the Head of a Queen Mother? *They both face front. A geometric design is etched on both of them.***
- **How are they different? *The head of the queen can be seen from all sides, whereas the mask is flatter and only meant to be seen from the front.***

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### Apron (*jocolo*) (mid-20th century)

In the Ndebele society in South Africa, women welcomed newborns with a single strand of beads. At different stages in life, different aprons were worn. Young girls wore simply beaded soft aprons. Those in puberty had stiff beaded aprons that drew attention to their hips and buttocks, and signaled that they were ready for marriage.

The five scallop-panels on the marriage apron included in the Art Resources symbolize a woman's ability to bear children. The husband's relatives would give the bride the apron without beads, which were only added after the marriage.

Ndebele women beaded for centuries, using natural materials from the environment. In the mid-19th century, they began working with glass beads from Czechoslovakia, which they acquired from European traders. Women designed patterns directly on the garments without preliminary drawings. They used the world around them as inspiration for their abstract, geometric designs. Beading skills were passed down from mother to daughter. Women mostly wore the garments during rituals and celebrations—visually identifying their status at important community events.

### Looking questions

**Note: Cover up the title on the front of the print before showing to students.**

- **What do you see? *This is an apron.***

- What two elements of art did the artist use most in the design? *The artist used mostly color and shape in the design.*
- Is the design symmetrical or asymmetrical? *It is symmetrical, exactly even on both sides. Encourage students to identify repeated shapes.*
- What material did the artist use to create the colored design? *The artist used glass beads to create the colored design.*
- What does the image across the top of the apron resemble? *Answers will vary. Experts say the image across the top resembles buildings. Do you agree or disagree?*

## African Bamana Headdress

The Bamana [BAH-mah-nah] people of west central Mali live on dry savanna land with poor soil. It is a struggle to produce prosperous crops. The Bamana believe that in the distant past they were taught how to become strong, skilled farmers by a mythical creature called Chi-Wara, sometimes also spelled Tyi Wara (“work animal”). Specifically, he taught them how to grow corn from millet.

The antelope headdress evolved from the Bamana belief that the antelope best embodied the grace and strength needed by farmers. The headdresses were worn on top of the head during planting ceremonies. There were male and female versions, representing the important role that both men and women play in a successful harvest. The male headdress included the rays of the sun, and the female headdress represented Earth. Raffia on the masks served as a reminder of the importance of rain. The headdress ceremony represented the need for cooperation and balance.

The young men and women who wore the headdresses would have danced to drums and bent low to the ground in imitation of the action of hoeing the soil. Their bodies were covered with strands of dried grass to recall the falling rain. Frequently, a hoeing contest would be a part of the ceremony, and the actions of the headdress wearers would serve as encouragement to the contestants.

### Looking questions

**Note:** Cover up the title on the front of the print before showing to students.

- What animal is depicted here? *Answers will vary. Explain that it is an antelope with horns.*
- What kind of artwork would you say this is? *Students may say it is a sculpture (which it is). Tell them that this is a headdress, a decorative item to be worn on the head during ceremonies and dances. The basket at the bottom sits on the top of the head.*
- How would you feel if you had to dance while wearing this headdress? *Students may say proud, embarrassed, or afraid it might tip over and fall off.*
- Why do you think the Bamana people wore these headdresses? *Answers will vary. The headdress seems to have been a part of ceremonies connected with farming and planting.*
- Which features of the antelope are especially prominent in the headdress? *The horns are especially prominent.*

## Portrait Head of an Ife King (12th–14th century)

The ancient city of Ife [EE-fay] was located in present-day southwestern Nigeria. It was (and still is) the sacred city of the Yoruba [your-OO-ba] people. A remarkable sculpting tradition flourished there from the 12th to the 14th century. A number of examples of Ife portrait heads survive. Some are made of terra-cotta; others are made of metal.

The delicacy of the detail and the great naturalism found in the heads lead scholars to believe that the ancient Ife artists were among the greatest of their time. Some scholars suggest that perhaps the sculptors of the terra-cotta pieces were female because in Yoruba society, women are traditionally the ones who work with clay.

The elaborate headdress, or crown, found on this head makes it unique. It consists of an intricate network of beads and appears to have a cloth beneath it. It is thought to be a portrait of an *oni* (king), or a god in the guise of an *oni*. The striations on the face represent scarification, or ornamental marks, scars, or scratches made on the human body.

### Looking questions

- **What clues does the artist provide to help you know that this was an important person in Yoruba culture?** *The elaborate headdress; strong, dignified face; and classic beauty show that the subject was an important person in Yoruba culture.*
- **It is believed that the head was once attached to a body. What do you imagine the body may have looked like?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Heads and figures such as this one may have been buried in the ground near large trees and dug up when needed for a ceremony. Why might the Yoruba have buried these heads until they were needed?** *Answers will vary. Some comments should touch on how their rare appearance would lend to their power and importance.*
- **If you were to bury one of your most valued objects and look at it only once a year, how would your view of it change?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Point out to students the sweep of the lines down the face. What, if anything, do they add?** *Answers will vary. Some students may say that the lines add to the gracefulness of the face and make it more lifelike. By contrast, the eyes and lips are smooth.*

## Belt mask of Queen Idia (c. 1517–1550)

Benin was an important city-state established in what is now modern-day southwestern Nigeria. Benin was ruled by an *oba*, or king, and flourished from the late 12th century through the 19th century.

The ceremonies of the royal court of Benin must have been beautiful spectacles. Royalty would appear bedecked with ornaments such as this ivory belt mask. It was one of several items that might be worn around the neck or at the hip by an *oba*. The belt mask would have been made by a highly skilled artist of the royal court. In this case, the artist used ivory from the tusk of an elephant, an important African trade good.

Although the features are idealized, one has the sense that this is a portrait of a royal Benin woman. The two longer scarification marks and the pupils would have had iron inlays. The carver relied on line to bring a complexity to the design. From the intertwined decoration of the head and neckwear, to the loops, to the various facial features, line plays a crucial role in defining and detailing the form.

### **Looking questions**

**Note: Cover up the title on the front of the print before showing to students.**

- **What do you see? Where do you think this piece of artwork comes from?** *It is a mask. It is an African mask.*
- **How did the artist vary the texture of the ivory?** *The smooth surface of the face, the etched lines of the loops, and the pattern of the head and neckwear are examples of the way that the artist varied the texture of the ivory.*
- **From what animal does ivory come? Why, centuries ago, would ivory have been considered a rare material?** *Ivory comes from elephants. Because elephants are dangerous and difficult animals to hunt, ivory would have been considered a rare material.*
- **If you had to guess what sort of person the mask shows, what would you say?** *Answers will vary.*
- **Compare the Head of a Queen Mother with the mask. What similarities do you see? How are they different?** *Answers will vary.*