

Introduction

The ten African objects selected for this teaching kit are relatively recent, dating from the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The histories and the traditions they embody, however, resonate with the echoes of past eras. Several of the objects summon up the glory of ancient empires such as Ghana, “the land of gold” (c. 500), and powerful rulers like Sundiata, the Lion King of Mali (who ruled in the 1230s) and Alfonso I, King of the Kongo (c. 1456–1543). Other objects are vital components of time-honored rituals and performances used to resolve conflicts or to hold individuals accountable for their actions. Some are key ingredients in traditional rites of passage such as school graduations, weddings, and funerals. A few contemporary pieces reflect the unique ways in which African artists today combine a modern technology like photography, or knowledge of ceramic traditions from around the world, with their particular indigenous and individual sensibilities.

In Africa, art is a multisensory experience. The various materials used in the objects gathered here include cloth, gold, animal skins, bird feathers, bee venom, baobab flowers, wood, raffia, nails, mirrors, glass beads, and clay. In Africa, the objects made of these materials are used and therefore seen in many different ways depending on a variety of light conditions—in the dusky corners of small houses or outside in bright sunlight or moonlight, for instance. Because they are worn or used during rituals and performances they are seen in motion and in stillness. The sounds they make, how they feel when held or worn, and their odors and tastes are all part of how African art is known and experienced.

Keep in mind that museum exhibitions and photographs strip African art objects of these vital sensory qualities, and we can and must try to understand and imagine them as they exist and are used in their African contexts. The ten objects presented here provide precious clues to some of the complexities and achievements of the many peoples of the vast, diverse continent of Africa. The information and related learning activities also provided here will, we hope, help our minds and our imaginations expand with a deeper appreciation of the objects’ many meanings and purposes.

