KWAME NKRUMAH

Ghana’s first president, Kwame Nkrumah (KWA-may nnh-KROO-mah), wore a kente cloth with this Mmeeda design on February 12, 1951, the day he was released from prison. Nkrumah had been jailed for his opposition to the British government, which had made Ghana its colony in 1908. His political party won in the elections held four days before his release. On the day he was freed, Nkrumah wore this design to emphasize that this historic event was “something that had not happened before.” In 1957, Ghana became an independent country under Nkrumah’s leadership, and he became the country’s first president in 1960. While in office, Nkrumah continued to wear kente cloths with strategic messages to communicate with the Ghanaian people. For instance, when he waved from a balcony following the announcement of Ghana’s independence from Britain, Nkrumah wore a cloth called Adwini asa, or “I have done my best.”

In the United States, kente cloth has become an important symbol of identification with Africa. Kente is often used at African American graduations and other ceremonies honoring people for their accomplishments. Some Ghanaians feel that American uses of kente cloth have become more commercial than celebratory, reducing the cloth to a generic symbol for anything African. It is important, then, to remember the complicated message in each cloth’s design and that kente comes from a specific country (Ghana) with its own particular history.

KENTE CLOTH
(Mmeeda, “something that has not happened before”)

20th century
Cotton and silk
Length 92 1/2 in. (235 cm.)
Asante kingdom, Ghana
Seattle Art Museum: Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company, 81.17.434

The Asante (ah-SHAHN-tee) and Ewe (AY-vay) peoples of Ghana in West Africa make kente (KEN-tay) cloth, the best known of all African textiles. Asante kente, such as the cloth shown here, has beautiful, brightly colored geometric patterns. Kente cloth expresses different proverbs or ideas through different designs. More than three hundred different kente designs have been recorded, and each one has its own particular message. For example, this cloth is called Mmeeda (MEE-dah), which translates to “something that has not happened before.”

Kente cloth is woven primarily by men and is made up of many strips, each four to eight inches wide. These strips are cut into pieces and sewn together side by side to make a large cloth. The weaver must have the colors and design of the cloth in mind before he begins to weave. He may add variations of his own into a well-known, traditional pattern to make the design a unique one.

Historically, kente was royal cloth, and the king controlled the use and fabrication of it. With time, however, the use of kente became more widespread, and non-royal Ghanaians came to wear it on special occasions. When worn, kente is wrapped around the body and draped over the shoulder. The strips of the cloth must be straight, both horizontally and vertically, and the bottom of the cloth should hang at the same length all the way around the wearer’s ankles.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

ART
Make your own patterned cloth using strips of colored paper, pipe cleaners, or colored wire. To weave, you must have two sets of strips: vertical and horizontal, called the warp and the weft. The horizontal strips go over and under the vertical strips at right angles. What could your design mean?

Try draping a cloth of the same size as the Mmeeda design (approximately 90 x 60 inches) on a classmate.

Remember, kente is wrapped around the body and draped over the left shoulder. The bottom of the cloth should hang at the same length all the way around the wearer’s ankles.

ENGLISH/LANGUAGE ARTS
One design of kente cloth is called “wise old lady.” Another is called “liar’s cloth.” Write a story in which you imagine how one of these messages came about.

SCIENCE
Find out how the dyes for the threads used in kente cloth are made. What elements from nature are used to make different colors?
Gold is an important part of Asante culture and history. Because it is considered to be the sun’s earthly counterpart, it represents the force of life, or “soul” (kra). As early as the 1400s, European explorers and traders wrote about the richness of West African gold objects. By 1800, Asante was a powerful empire and enjoyed much wealth through military conquest and control of the gold routes to the north and south. The gold trade grew until the slave trade overtook it around 1750. When the British prohibition of the slave trade began to be enforced around 1825, however, the gold trade flourished again for several generations, ending around 1900.

The Asante region still holds some of the richest goldfields in Africa, second only to those in South Africa. As a result, gold is one of contemporary Ghana’s main exports, along with cocoa. The areas of Ghana that contain gold overlap with farming regions and natural forests, so mining operations can disrupt other economic activities as well as the natural environment. Farmers who have had their land taken away for mining purposes are often given money as compensation for their crops and loss of livelihood, instead of replacement land and the opportunity to keep farming. These issues have caused protests in major mining areas, and continue to pose a challenge to modern-day Ghana.

**CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS**

**ART**

Design a ring for yourself as the leader of a country. Read today’s newspaper and decide which leader you will be and what message you need to communicate to the people you serve. Write a proverb to accompany your ring.

**ENGLISH/LANGUAGE ARTS**

Find proverbs in English that are similar to Asante proverbs.

**Recommended books:**


**SCIENCE**


**SOCIAL STUDIES**

Research how leaders in the United States and Africa communicate messages to the public through what they wear. How do American leaders’ styles compare to Ghanaian leaders’ styles?
Certain Mande (MAN-day) men—hunters, warriors, leaders, people believed to have special abilities—wear shirts like this. The ideal Mande hunter hero is Sundiata, the legendary Lion King, who founded the empire of Mali in 1235. Tales of his amazing life evolved as spoken stories before they were written down in the eighteenth century. Today, a popular singer from Mali named Salif Keita (saH-LEEF KAY-tah), a possible descendent of Sundiata, wears hunter’s shirts that shake and shudder in the spotlight as he dances and sings stories in places around the world.

Long ago, Mande territory was filled with animals: anteaters, baboons, bushback antelope, buffalo, elephants, giant eland, giraffes, hartebeest, hippopotamuses, and roan antelope. Hunters developed the special knowledge and skills required to track each of them. Their shirts were colored with light and dark brown dyes made from tree bark to blend in with the vegetation during different seasons, like camouflage. Because the hunters’ shirts were never washed, they absorbed the odors of smoke, sweat, and dirt, and this disguised the hunters’ scent.

Hunters spent most of their time in the forest, studying the habits and ways of plants and animals. They learned special uses for roots, leaves, and barks and for the bones, claws, skins, and organs of animals. Combining these ingredients in special recipes, they created amulets to attach to their shirts. Hunters wore their shirts on occasions like weddings, baptisms, festivals, and funerals.

Hunters’ shirts show the hunter’s mastery of jiridon (jee-ee-don), or the “science of trees,” gained from journeys and apprenticeships with other hunters. Hunters create new amulets after a long, private period of time spent learning new information. This shirt is covered with amulets made from the tips of the horns of bushback antelope, encased in leather. The mixture of ingredients placed inside each horn is a closely guarded secret, and the steps for gathering and combining the ingredients are complicated. For example, venom from bees or snakes, plants from seven different paths, a flower from a baobab tree, and the washcloth of a woman might be collected and mixed together, then boiled, pounded, and burned. One type of amulet is intended to make an animal’s eyes fill with tears so that it cannot see to run away or defend itself.

Today, young Malian men, like young people everywhere, leave home to pursue the challenges of finding jobs and educational opportunities. They travel to large African cities and to countries on other continents. In Bamako, the capital of Mali, hunters’ associations focus on preserving their traditions and knowledge to share with future generations.

Because Salif Keita’s parents were from the noble class, he was not supposed to become a singer. Consequently, he left home to seek his fortune in Bamako, where he sang in the Super Rail Band and Les Ambassadeurs. Recently, Keita has begun singing internationally about Sundiata and the Mande tradition of hunters.

“TO BE A MAN IS TO HAVE MANY SECRETS.”
—Bamana proverb

**LOOKING QUESTIONS**

Describe the kind of person you think might wear this shirt. (Each student contributes one word to a list of adjectives.) Explain why you chose your word.

What is attached to the shirt? Where do you think these things were found?

What colors do you see? How would wearing a shirt like this help you blend into a forest?

Mande (MAN-day) hunters wear shirts like this one on special occasions. Can you imagine what the occasions might be? Think of a special occasion in your life. What kind of clothing did you wear? What did you do?

**CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS**

**ART**

Compare the amulets found on Mande hunter shirts to types of jewelry that we wear. Can amulets and jewelry increase our sense of power or safety? Why? How are amulets and some jewelry related to various belief systems (Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, etc.) or cultures (Egyptian, Native American, Indian, etc.)? Create a personal amulet using natural materials, such as bones, stones, leather, shells, and plant materials that symbolize special qualities to you.

**ENGLISH/LANGUAGE ARTS**

Brainstorm a list of people who have had a strong connection to nature and living outdoors. For example: Henry David Thoreau, the explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, or even fictional characters like Mowgli in Rudyard Kipling’s The Jungle Book. Imagine or recall a time when you went camping, or took a long hike. Describe what clothes you wore and the special gear you carried for the time you spent away from civilization.

**SCIENCE**

Research the animals and habitats native to Mande territory. Make a chart showing what the animals look like and how they blend in with their environments. Are any of these animals endangered?

**SOCIAL STUDIES**

The Mande people live in regions of many different West African countries: Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, The Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Senegal, and Sierra Leone. Can you find all ten on a map?
TRADITIONAL BELIEFS

In the early twentieth century, German colonizers forced the Ejagham people to resettle in larger villages. Soon after, the British brought in their system of government, courts of law, schools, and clinics. In order to reinforce their own traditional methods of resolving conflicts, transmitting knowledge, and restoring communal life, Ejagham groups increased their practice of Basinjom.

Ejagham culture places a great emphasis on closeness with one’s extended family group. Too much personal achievement for any one individual is questioned. Basinjom deals with this tension between the group and individuals. When a person is believed to misuse the strength they gain from an animal such as a leopard or a force of nature like lightning by using it to make themselves more important than others, Basinjom must discover the problem and resolve it.

Although Christianity and other Western influences, as well as ideas from neighboring groups and the modern world, have affected Ejagham traditional beliefs, their belief in Basinjom has not lessened, and Basinjom still appears in the modern era. In 1982, for example, he was observed performing in Nigeria at the coronation of a new ruler. Today, the Ejagham people rely both on traditional beliefs, such as Basinjom, and on Nigerian and Cameroonian courts of law.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

ART
Design a costume or a disguise that features at least two materials that represent or resemble elements from animals. What do these animals symbolize to you?

ENGLISH/LANGUAGE ARTS
In pairs, imagine a conflict between an individual person and a group. Write a short dialogue in which the conflict is resolved with the help of a teacher, parent, friend, counselor, policeman, or judge.

SOCIAL STUDIES
The Ejagham people live in Nigeria and Cameroon. Find these two countries on a map of Africa. (Note that African ethnic groups are not necessarily confined to one country.)

SCIENCE
A material from the forest, called raffia, is used for Basinjom’s hair and the hem of his gown. Find out what raffia is and where it comes from. Recommended reference: The Raffia Palm, http://www.dipbot.unict.it/Palms/Descr04.html

Guglielmo, Anna, Pietro Pavone, Cristina Salmeri, and Maria Grazia Nicolosi (translator). Botanical Department, University of Catania, Catania, Italy

When worn, this mask and gown, along with the dancer inside, create the spirit of Basinjom (bah-sin-jom), or “God’s medicine.” Basinjom is used and performed by the Ejagham (eh-jah-GAHM) people of Nigeria and Cameroon in West Africa. His role is to identify people who have done harm to the community. In a public ritual, those accused and found guilty must admit to bad behavior, apologize, and offer gifts. They are then rewarded with forgiveness and a chance to start over.

Many elements of the costume are taken from animals or represent animals. The blue feathers on this headdress are from a bird called a touraco. The snout of the mask is made to look like a crocodile’s mouth. The materials that make up Basinjom’s mask and gown have particular meanings. The crocodile mouth is able to speak for the community about controversial subjects. The spotted skin on the gown calls upon the spirit of a catlike animal who protects Basinjom from harm. The knife that Basinjom holds has two eyes that allow him to see those who want to cause harm. The rattle is made of wicker and allows Basinjom to hear the sound of evil.

The Ejagham people are one ethnic group among 250 in Nigeria, which has a population of 110.5 million. Nigeria is the fifth largest producer of oil in the world. Many famous athletes and writers are Nigerian, including Hakeem Olajuwon (hah-KEEM oh-LIE-joo-wahn) of the Houston Rockets and writers Chinua Achebe (CHIN-wah ah-cheb-ay) and Wole Soyinka (whoa-lay soy-ink-ah).
funeral processions; and when newly initiated girls come out, which is the ceremonial highlight of the year. These events usually take place at night, when the shiny black surfaces of the masks’ faces both catch the light and blend into the darkness.

SOWEI MASK FEATURES

- The wood of this mask has been rubbed with palm oil or shoe polish to make it look both black and wet. These qualities connect it with the source of Sande knowledge—nature spirits that live in rivers.

- The tightly braided hair in crisp rows signifies control and sanity. The mask forehead is high and broad because the forehead is the place where prosperity enters into one’s life. The eyes are small and narrow to conceal the eyes of the person wearing the mask and to protect the spirit who lives in the mask. In addition, for females, direct eye contact is considered disrespectful.

- The mouths of Sowei masks are tightly closed because the masks embody spirits who never gossip or giggle the way people do, reinforcing the belief that much human suffering is caused by inconsiderate remarks, mean-spirited criticism, and angry cursing.

- The necks of Sowei masks are wide because they must fit over the heads of the people wearing them, like helmets. The rings on the necks have several possible meanings. They may represent rings of fat, signs of a well-fed person. They may refer to a water spirit rising up from the depths of the river, creating concentric circles on the surface of the water. Or they may signify divinity, much as haloes do in Christian art.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

ART
Use light cardboard or stiff paper to create masks or headdresses that celebrate a rite of passage and completely disguise the wearer. Include animal, human, and other natural elements in the design. How could exaggeration of one or several features communicate the purpose of the mask symbolically?

MATH
Discuss the patterns, geometry, and symmetry in this object. Explain that carving is a subtractive process and working with clay is an additive process. Have students measure their heads and calculate the inside and outside dimensions of a mask/headdress.

SCIENCE
Research medicines used today that are based on traditional, herbal remedies from the rainforests and bush areas of Africa and other parts of the world. To learn how some traditional remedies can be integrated with modern medicine, visit this site by Andrew Weil, M.D.: DrWeil.com, http://www.drweil.com Weil Lifestyle, LLC, Phoenix, Ariz.

SOCIAL STUDIES
Compare rites of passage for girls and boys in different cultures, for example quinceañeras, school graduations, obtaining a driver’s license, registering to vote.

SOWEI MASK

20th century
Wood, metal, raffia, leather, fiber
Width 22 in. (55.9 cm)
Mende culture, Sierra Leone
Seattle Art Museum: Purchased with funds from the Mary Arrington Small Estate Acquisitions Fund, 89.68

The Mende (MEN-day) people in Sierra Leone made this mask for a secret women’s society called Sande (SAHN-day). Because Sande practices are secret, information about them was limited until the 1970s, when women researchers did fieldwork in Sierra Leone, Côte d’Ivoire, and Guinea.

Traditionally, Sande societies provide special schools, separate from the community, where girls are initiated into adulthood. Girls learn practical skills such as farming, spinning, child care, diagnosing illnesses, and treating illnesses with herbs. They are also introduced to the myths, history, and customs of their culture. This helps them become adult community leaders who can resolve conflicts through storytelling and debates. Singing and dancing and knowledge of ideal feminine beauty are also important parts of the curriculum.

This mask is made of carved wood, metal, raffia, leather, and plant fibers. The top of the head is crowned with swooping bush cow horns, a pattern of cowry shells is carved into the hair border, and remnants of a star appear on the forehead. Certain features are exaggerated for symbolic or practical purposes: the tiny, slit eyes; the small, tightly closed mouth; the large forehead; and the wide, ringed neck.

Small groups of performers wear Sowei masks as they dance for special occasions: when a Sande school opens or a new chief is installed; at
KONGO CONCEPTS

pakalala: Ready to attack and defend

This nkondi stands with his hands on his hips, his head held slightly forward, and his white eyes wide open—the stance of a powerful being in a heightened state of alert, poised to attack or defend. The Kongo word paaka means to cut meat into pieces, symbolizing the nkondi’s role of analyzing and resolving complicated situations by making them smaller and more manageable.

mooyoo: the belly/life

Only a rolled up scrap of cloth remains in this nkondi’s belly. When it was used in rituals, however, a packet of medicines concocted by the nganga would have been placed in the cavity, then sealed and covered with a mirror. The medicine packet gave the nkondi its energy.

kalunga: ocean, door, and wall between two worlds

The eyes of this nkondi reflect light because they are made of mirrors. Mirrors evoke the shimmering quality of kalunga, the thin, shiny barrier between the living and the dead. Kalunga allows souls to move into another world where they are washed clean and made ready to be born again.

The Kongo approach to life included principles of moral conduct, powerful medicines derived from nature, and sensitivity to the relations between living persons and the deceased. Far-reaching Kongo influences can be heard in samba music in Brazil and observed in drawings in Cuba. The work of contemporary African American artists David Hammonds and Renée Stout reflect Kongo ideas and beliefs.

STANDING FIGURE (NKONDI)

Late 19th–early 20th century
Wood, iron, imported nails, fiber, beads, glass, feathers, chalk
Height 31 3/4 in. (80.5 cm)
Kongo culture, Democratic Republic of the Congo
Seattle Art Museum: Gift of Katherine White and the Boeing Company, 81.17.836

This figure, bristling with nails, is called an nkondi, (nnh-KON-dee). It was made sometime in the late 1800s or early 1900s by the Kongo people of the region in Central Africa now called the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Nkondi were used to promote healing and cooperation. The figures were carved from large, single pieces of wood cut from trees the Kongo people considered sacred. Once carved, nkondi were given special powers by a healer called an nganga (nnh-GON-ga). The nganga mixed plants and other elements to form healing ingredients, which were typically placed in the stomach of the figure, near the navel.

Nkondi were kept in their own small houses where they were approached, with the aid of an nganga, when people needed a solution for a conflict, a remedy for an illness, or wanted to seal a contract for an important event. Each nail or blade was chosen according to what kind of agreement was being made. People identified their particular nail by adding their saliva, or by attaching a small piece of cloth or string to it. Round and square nails sealed solemn decisions like a verdict in a murder trial. Different types of blades were used for weddings, divorces, land sales, or to cure illness. It was the nganga’s job to keep track of the exact history of each one. The nganga served as a policeman, a priest, or a healer, depending on his talents and what the situation required.

LOOKING QUESTIONS

What adjectives would you use to describe the feeling of this object?
Try standing like this figure. How would you describe the body language?
What material is the figure made of? What has been added?
What questions would you like to ask the maker and the users of this object?

KONGO CONCEPTS

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Curriculum Connections

ART
Draw, model, or construct a standing figure whose body language communicates a specific attitude or mood.

ENGLISH/LANGUAGE ARTS
Write several paragraphs describing your first impressions of the nkondi. Read and discuss the information provided. Write several new paragraphs describing what you learned. Can you think of aspects of your own life that relate to the nkondi and his role in Kongo society?

SOCIAL STUDIES
What kinds of contracts do people in the United States negotiate? Think about contracts between individuals, between groups, and between individuals and groups. Who and what make a contract official or valid? How are contracts enforced?

KONGO CONCEPTS

pakalala: Ready to attack and defend

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The Kongo approach to life included principles of moral conduct, powerful medicines derived from nature, and sensitivity to the relations between living persons and the deceased. Far-reaching Kongo influences can be heard in samba music in Brazil and observed in drawings in Cuba. The work of contemporary African American artists David Hammonds and Renée Stout reflect Kongo ideas and beliefs.

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SOCIAL STUDIES
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ASSEMBLY OF NECKLACES

20th century
Wire, glass beads, and plastic
Diameter (largest) 13 1/2 in.
(34.3 cm)

Kaputiei section, Merrueshi community, Maasai culture,
Kenya
Seattle Art Museum: General Acquisition Fund, 2000.12–7

A community of Maasai (MAH-sigh) women in Kenya created this collection of necklaces for a young bride. On the morning of her wedding, the bride’s female relatives dress her in an ensemble of necklaces, bracelets, earrings, a headdress, and a belt. Then, wearing her full bridal ensemble, she walks to her new home, accompanied by her new husband and his best man. After her new relatives rush out to welcome her, there is a feast.

Before 1900, bridal ornaments were made mainly of iron, copper, and brass wire worked by men who were blacksmiths. Additional ornaments were woven of fresh leaves and grasses. Beginning in the early 1900s, Maasai women were able to buy large quantities of small, hard, brightly colored beads sold along the east coast of Africa. Soon only Maasai women made ornaments.

Maasai territory is divided into sixteen regions and each region is known for its beadwork patterns. New generations of Maasai women are expected to invent distinctive new patterns and ornaments. They work together to create a collection of beadwork ornaments whose patterns and colors will display their skills and show at a glance where a bride is from.

A bride’s ornaments are very expensive. In fact, one of these necklaces (shown at bottom in the photograph) is called the “bull necklace” because the bride’s parents had to sell a bull in order to raise enough money to purchase the beads for it.

RESEARCH AND CONSERVATION

In 1999, a young Maasai man named Kakuta Ole Maimai Hamisi (kah-koo-tah o-lay my-my hah-mee-see) went to college in the United States and did research at the Seattle Art Museum on its Maasai collections. Hamisi was disturbed because he found many photographs of his people but no information about them, their lives, or their culture. In response, Hamisi organized a project for the Seattle Art Museum in which people from his community created and collected objects that are important to their identity, like these necklaces. He carefully documented the owners’ and creators’ names and their actual words. The funds they received from the Museum made it possible for the people in Hamisi’s village to build their first school.

The Maasai people live in Kenya and Tanzania on savannas, or dry grasslands, which are particularly suited to herding cattle. The arid climate and daily requirements for wood to burn as fuel have led to ecological and economic problems. In 1977, a Kenyan woman named Wangari Muta Maathai (wahn-GAH-ree MOO-tah MAH-thy) founded the Green Belt Movement (GBM), one of the most successful environmental conservation and development programs in the world. GBM promotes tree planting by local community groups, a process that improves the quality of the environment and empowers women by generating income, providing leadership roles, and giving them a positive image. Many women’s groups have sold millions of seedlings and used the profits to feed and educate their children. Today, GBM methods have spread to Tanzania, Uganda, Malawi, Lesotho, Ethiopia, and Zimbabwe.

LOOKING QUESTIONS

How many necklaces can you see? (There are six necklaces in this photo.)

What are they made of?

The top necklace has red and white beads on the inside edge and orange beads on the outside edge. What color is between them? (Blue)

These necklaces are worn for a very special occasion. What could it be? Who do you think wears them?

Use your imagination as you look closely at the color combinations and patterns. What could these necklaces mean or signify?

ART, ENGLISH/LANGUAGE ARTS, AND SOCIAL STUDIES

What special objects from your life would you like people from another culture to have in order to understand your accomplishments and know who you are? Brainstorm and make lists in small groups. Draw, paint, or videotape your special objects. Be sure to include written or oral documentation that explains who they belong to and why they are important to you.

Learn about Kakuta Ole Maimai Hamisi and the Maasai culture at:


Maasai Association, Olympia, Wash.

 Compare Maasai bridal necklaces and customs with American bridal gowns and customs.

ART AND MATH

Calculate the dimensions of a series of four to six necklaces in the shape of flat, concentric circles. The smallest necklace will encircle the base of a person’s neck; the largest will sit on the shoulders.

Design a different symmetrical, geometric pattern for each necklace, using symbolic colors. Use paint, colored pencils or markers, or glue colored paper, colored beads, or dyed macaroni to the cardboard necklaces to make your designs.

SOCIAL STUDIES

Learn more about the Green Belt Movement at these websites:

The Greenbelt Movement, Nairobi, Kenya


Right Livelihood Award Foundation, Stockholm, Sweden


WomenAid International, London, England

SCIENCE

Learn more about the Green Belt Movement at these websites:

The Greenbelt Movement, Nairobi, Kenya


Right Livelihood Award Foundation, Stockholm, Sweden


WomenAid International, London, England

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS
UNTITLED (THREE GIRLS AND A BABY)

1986
Gelatin silver print, mounted with cardboard, tape, and glass
5 1/8 x 3 1/2 in. (13 x 8.9 cm)
Malick Sidibé
Mali
Born 1935
Philadelphia Museum of Art: Purchased with the Lynne and Harold Honickman Fund for Photography, 2003-24-1

Malick Sidibé (mah-LEEK see-DEE-bay), a photographer in Bamako, the capital of Mali, made this small, postcard-size, black-and-white portrait in 1986. The photograph is arranged symmetrically with two girls standing on either side of a seated girl holding a baby in her lap. The bold horizontal stripes of the skirts and blouses contrast strongly with the backdrop of vertical stripes. Sidibé used striped backdrops to create striking combinations of patterns in many of his photographs.

When he was seventeen years old, Sidibé moved to Bamako and attended art school, studying jewelry making. After graduation, he learned photography by watching French photographers as they worked. Sidibé then began making formal portraits like this one, as well as candid snapshots of young people at parties, clubs, and Sunday outings by the Niger River. The candid shots have become especially well known in Europe and America, yet Sidibé prefers making portraits. He finds portrait-making more artistic and likes having control over the final image: “For me, setting up a photo shoot isn’t so different from drawing a scene: I decide what goes where, I decide how to pose the person. . .”

After Sidibé opened Studio Malick in 1960, his popularity grew quickly. On Saturdays and around Muslim holidays, people wearing new hairstyles and clothes would be seen waiting in line in front of his studio. Sidibé’s black-and-white portrait business declined with the arrival of color photography in Mali in the 1980s. Today, however, he enjoys an international reputation and teaches young people in his neighborhood how to make inexpensive pinhole cameras and create beautiful black-and-white photographs.

I KA NYÈ TAN (YOU LOOK BEAUTIFUL LIKE THAT)
—Bambara expression

Sidibé’s photographs are primarily keepsakes for his clients, but they are also symbols of wealth, social importance, and modernity. Signs of his clients’ affluence, like stylish shoes, jewelry, or clothing, are often visible in their portraits. Can you spot different pieces of jewelry worn by the girls in Untitled (Three Girls and a Baby)? Sometimes these objects are noticeably European or American to emphasize the sitter’s wealth and familiarity with foreign goods and contemporary taste.

While Sidibé enjoyed having control over his portraits, his clients also like to assert their individuality in their images. One man had himself photographed with his sheep, another with a sombrero. Even the ways people choose to stand or place their arms express their personalities. How do you think the girls in Three Girls and a Baby show what they like and who they are?

Sidibé’s role as a Malian photographer was groundbreaking because in French colonies like Mali, the French government prohibited Africans from working as photographers. After Mali gained its independence from France in 1960, Sidibé became one of the first West African photographers to create images of African people for an African audience. Although he felt his work was beautiful and artistic, Sidibé did not consider himself an artist at the time he was making a large number of portraits. As a commercial photographer, his job was to please his customers by showing them at their best. Paradoxically, Sidibé’s photographs are now collected by museums and admired the world over as art.


CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

ART

Work in pairs to draw, paint, or photograph portraits with patterned backdrops. One person will be the artist or photographer and the other will be the client. Discuss which aspects the artist and the client will decide (backdrop, pose, lighting, clothing, jewelry, etc.) When one portrait is completed, switch roles.

ENGLISH/LANGUAGE ARTS

Write a story or dialogue about the people you see in Three Girls and a Baby based on what you think they are doing. What is happening just before the photograph was taken? What will happen next?

MATH

Malick Sidibé made small photographs so that his clients could put them in envelopes and mail them to family and friends. Collect different sizes of envelopes and figure out the dimensions photographs would need to be to fit inside, in inches and centimeters.

SCIENCE

Make pinhole cameras, and then create black-and-white photographs. For simple directions on how to make pinhole cameras, see: http://www.kodak.com/global/en/consumer/education/lessonPlans/pinholeCamera/

How to Make and Use a Pinhole Camera.

1. How to Make and Use a Pinhole Camera.

2. How to Make and Use a Pinhole Camera.
A MERCEDES-BENZ IS FOR WEALTHY MOTORISTS."
—Kane Quaye

In Ghana, when members of wealthy families are close to death, custom-made coffins are ordered. In 1995, a former apprentice to Kane Quaye named Paa Joe estimated that his workshop, called Six-Foot Enterprises, produced approximately ten coffins each month. The professions and interests of the deceased inspire the types of coffins produced:

• A shoe for a man who owned a shoe shop
• A chicken and chicks for a woman with many children
• An oil can for a garage owner
• A parrot with a pen in its beak for a university teacher
• An airplane for a Ghana Airways employee

In Ghana, coffins like this one are not viewed as art, or as objects that are displayed for decoration or enjoyment. They are made to hold the remains of deceased persons throughout elaborate funeral ceremonies attended by hundreds of friends and relations. There is food and dancing, then the deceased is carried around town in the coffin to say goodbye to everyone before being buried. Typically, families spend as much money as they can on relatives’ funerals. After Ghana gained independence in 1957, a surge of industrial growth and new jobs made expensive funerals available to many more people.

In the 1970s, an American art dealer commissioned seven coffins for her gallery, calling them “fantasy coffins.” Since then, similar coffins have been exhibited in several important exhibitions of contemporary African art. In fact, this coffin was specially constructed for an exhibition at the Seattle Art Museum.


CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

ART
Using colored pencils, design a “fantasy coffin” for a dear relative or friend, a world leader, a personal hero or heroine, or a beloved pet. How can the coffin reflect what you know about this person and his or her contribution to the world, the neighborhood, or your family?

Design a box that resembles an object, plant, or animal that is important to you. Start with a cardboard shoebox or a cigar box and add found objects, colored paper, papier-mâché, etc. Make sure that your box can open and close. Don’t forget to transform the inside as well as the outside of the box.

ENGLISH/LANGUAGE ARTS
Write a poem, prayer, eulogy, or obituary for someone who might be buried in the Mercedes-Benz coffin created by Kane Quaye.

MATH
Learn how to make scale models. Create a scale model of a “fantasy coffin.” For a grade 6-8 lesson plan that can be adapted for lower and higher grades, see: Architects in Action, http://school.discovery.com/lessonplans/programs/architectsinaction/

Hempel, Jessi. Discovery Communications, Inc., Silver Spring, Md.
Perfect Symmetry and Perfect Balance

“I still make vessels, this has not changed, and this is strictly a deliberate choice. It helps me avoid being distracted from my quest to one day make the piece that achieves perfect harmony—having perfect symmetry and perfect balance.”

—Magdalene Odundo

A ceramic vessel created by Magdalene Odundo is intriguing because it can remind us of many different things while being completely unique. Odundo says she might get an idea from watching the growth of plants, seeing how the sleeves of a Victorian dress hang, or observing the silhouette of a Kenyan woman wearing layers of cloth. The ways in which various standards of beauty in different time periods and places have dictated the shapes of women’s bodies is a topic she studies avidly. These standards include elongated foreheads in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, tiny wasp waists held in by corsets in nineteenth-century Europe and America, and the unnaturally slender fashion models of today.

Odundo also draws inspiration from the traditions of female potters in Kenya and Nigeria and from San Ildefonso in New Mexico. Women potters who live in rural African villages make pots that meet their practical needs and their community’s standards. Odundo, on the other hand, like other African artists who work in cities and travel throughout the world, is free to develop her own individual sense of beauty. The simple shapes of Odundo’s vessels span centuries and continents, recalling sculpture both ancient and modern.

Although they are in the form of containers, she does not intend them to be used. Odundo also says, “I still make vessels, this has not changed, and this is strictly a deliberate choice. It helps me avoid being distracted from my quest to one day make the piece that achieves perfect harmony—having perfect symmetry and perfect balance.”

Curriculum Connections

**Art and Social Studies**

Research standards of feminine beauty and pottery traditions found in different periods of history and cultures. Draw or create a ceramic vessel that incorporates one or more of the design elements you discover.

**Science**

Find out why clay vessels are fired in hot ovens. What happens to the clay when it reaches certain temperatures? Research various methods of reduction firing for pottery. Design a simple kiln, or adapt an existing one, for a reduction firing. If possible, try it out.