

PART IV THE WESTERN AFRICAN CULTURAL ROOT

Chapter 13 Visual and Musical Arts of West Africa

1. Each African society has its own artistic and musical styles.
2. Because of the great impact African art and music have had on Western styles, it does not seem as strange and exotic as it did a hundred years ago.
3. African artistic forms do have qualities that make them significantly different from their Western counterparts.
4. Despite the great diversity within African arts, they do share some common elements.

I. Visual Arts

A. Art and Communal Life

1. African art and Western art are classified differently.
2. All African art is in some sense utilitarian.

B. Problems of Dating African Art

1. African society does not concern itself with the identity of the individual artist or with when a work is created.
2. The social function of a work is preeminent.
3. Once a work has outlived its usefulness, it is usually discarded.

C. Meaning in African Art

1. The museum or art gallery does not exist in traditional Africa.
2. African art typically has multiple layers of meaning.
3. African art is sometimes classified by region (style area).
4. Another classification system, "basic style," classifies art by the way the subject matter, the human form for example, is depicted.

D. Masks and Headpieces

1. Masks are usually worn by men for social or religious rituals.
2. These rituals usually involve associations that are sometimes called "secret societies."
3. These rituals are especially important within ethnic groups that do not have strong centralized leadership.
4. The masks and headpieces often have animal themes and exaggerate what are considered the most important physical traits of the creature depicted.
5. White-faced masks of the northern Ibo may signify ancestor spirits or a young maiden.
6. The masks display principles of abstraction that would intrigue and inspire modern twentieth century artists.

E. Figurines

1. Picasso used a Bakota reliquary figure for a series of studies.
2. These figures were made to drive away evil from the remains of the dead.
3. Equestrian figures are a symbol of power in many African cultures and are a popular subject for traditional artists.
4. The snake motif was popular in western Sudan where it is associated with the creation myth and with the founding of the Soninke Empire of Ghana.
5. The Bakongo *nkisi nkondi* figures from Central and West Africa include cavities in the head or stomach for magical substances.

F. Divination Trays

1. The Yoruba tray is used in the process of divination.
2. A priest uses the tray on behalf of a petitioner.
3. Palm nut kernels are tossed in the air and their number and arrangement are used to determine the petitioner's fate.

G. Stools

1. The utilitarian principle of African art objects is exemplified in Ashanti carved stools.
2. Special stools are carved for important occasions in a person's life.
3. There are also special ceremonials for official and state occasions.

H. Kente Cloth

1. Kente cloth is another example of artist accomplishment and political authority manifest in a utilitarian object.
2. Kente is a large cloth draped for ceremonial dress with distinctive geometric patterns inlaid with silk.
3. The patterns and color of Kente cloth often have special meanings.

II. African Music

1. Even after excluding all of the music of nonnative origin, there remains a tremendous variety and complexity of sound emanating from this gigantic continent.
2. The music of West Africa represents an indigenous form that has had international significance.

A. Characteristics of West African Music: Similarities with Jazz

1. West Africans brought to the New World as slaves as well as their descendants strongly influenced the development of jazz.
2. Black slaves were able to maintain their own musical heritage while being influenced by the surrounding communities.
3. Like West African music, jazz is a shared creative experience.

B. Elements of African Music

1. African music does not concern itself with harmony but is compatible with European harmonies.
2. The leading elements of African music are melody, rhythm, and timbre.
3. Verbal elements are frequently intertwined with the music.
4. At times, West African music can be more explicitly communicative than European music through variations in rhythm and pitch.

C. Rhythm

1. Rhythm and percussion are preeminent in African music.
2. A rhythm section is typically included in every instrumental ensemble.
3. West African music is closely associated with jazz and the emphasis on rhythm reflects that connection.

D. Vocal Music: Call and Response

1. Great stress is placed on vocal music in addition to rhythm and percussion.
2. Like American blues, a wide variety of themes are represented in the vocals, such as war, hunting, play, work, religion, and social commentary.
3. The call and response mode of the vocals is similar to that of American jazz and blues instrumentals.

E. Music from the Festival of the *Tohossou*

1. The festival of the *Tohossou* (Princes of Dahomey) includes ceremonies and rituals, the reasons for which are not entirely known.
2. The festival includes songs, dances, and ritual acts dealing with the enemy, fallen comrades, and sacred deities.
3. Careful listening to this festival music as well as other West African music reveals a relationship to American jazz.

III. African Arts in Festival: The Efe/Gelede of the Western Yoruba

1. Festivals have a long tradition in Western culture, from the festival of Dionysus in ancient Greece to the Mardi Gras festival in New Orleans today.
2. The electronic mass media and individualism have eroded the festival tradition in the West.
3. In traditional African societies and in countries where African influence is strong, festivals are still an important means of aesthetic expression.

A. Significance of the Festival

1. The Efe/Gelede festival is observed by many of the Yoruba in western Nigeria and the republic of Benin.
2. The festival takes place before the beginning of the Spring rains.
3. The Yoruba society is patriarchal; this festival honors women, especially mothers.
4. The first day of the festival is devoted primarily to songs, the second and last to costumes and dancing.

B. First Day: Efe

1. The Efe ceremony takes place in the market area and lasts nearly until dawn.
2. A Yoruba man portrays Oro Efe, the principal performer of the ceremony.

C. Efe Poetry

1. The poetry recited by Oro Efe is based on the belief that *aes*—power, authority, and potential energy—can be embodied in words.
2. The types of poetry recited include invocation, social commentary, history, and eulogies.

D. Invocation

1. The invocation asks the deities to bless the population as a whole.
2. The invocation includes a plea for a bountiful harvest and protection from disease.
3. The singer expresses his respect for the mother and acknowledges her power.

E. Social Comment

1. The Oro Efe praises, cajoles, and condemns events that have occurred in the community.
2. The tone is ribald and the style satirical.
3. Individuals may be targets of the Oro Efe's ridicule.

F. The Gelede Celebration

1. The Gelede, performed on the second day, attempts to please and honor the mothers.

2. The main performers are masqueraders, all men, but some portraying females.
3. The costumes exaggerate the sex characteristics of the male or female.
4. The elaborate art of the Gelede masks touch on all aspects of Yoruba life.

G. Dance

1. The visual imagery of the masks is enhanced by that of the dance performed by those who wear them.
2. The dance dramatizes some of the tension between males and females within the Yoruba society.
3. The festival is an interplay of many facets of African aesthetic expression that evokes an essentially African mode of expression – the integration and wholeness of life.