Distance Learning at the Cleveland Museum of Art
African Art: The Secular and the Supernatural
Grades 7-12

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Teacher note:
Please copies of the Study Guides and pens or pencils to take notes and aid discussion during the videoconference.
CMA Program Objectives:

1. Students will learn the similarities as well as differences among the Yoruba and Benin peoples—particularly in regards to attaining political power—which are reflected in their works of art.

2. Students will understand that secular power in both the Yoruba and Benin cultures is acquired and maintained through access to supernatural power.

3. Students will create a chart during the program which illustrates how Yoruba and Benin art relate in terms of politics and religion, as well as representations of ancestry.

National Education Standards:

For Fine Arts - Visual Arts (grades 5-8, 9-12):

- Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures.
- Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines.
- Choosing and evaluating a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas

For Language Arts - English (grades K-12):

- Evaluation Strategies
- Communication Skills
- Applying Knowledge
- Multicultural Understanding

For Social Sciences - Geography (grades K-12):

- The World in Spatial Terms
- Places and Regions
- Human Systems
- Environment and Society
**Description:**
This program compares ritual and royal objects from the Yoruba and Edo peoples of Nigeria to learn how their rulers maintain worldly authority with the assistance of supernatural forces. Students will delight in examining a colorful beaded crown which empowers a Yoruba ruler and a three hundred year old bronze sculpture which establishes legitimacy for an Edo king. These and other stunning objects introduce divination, mythology, and communication with ancestors to your class.

**Prior to the Program:**
1. Students should be familiar with the geographical locations of the Yoruba and Benin peoples.
2. Each student should have a copy of the Study Guide and a pen or pencil to take notes.
3. Read about the rituals of Divination. Write down all of the activities associated with the ritual. (i.e. objects, tools, materials, chants)

**Selected Vocabulary:**

**Supernatural:** Powers or experiences that are beyond our knowledge of human beings and nature.

**Secular:** People, objects, institutions, or actions encountered in common daily experiences that are not connected to religious, spiritual, or sacred associations.

**Yoruba:** An African ethnic group with a population of 20-25 million, composed of more than sixteen kingdoms.

**Benin:** An African kingdom whose population is approximately 1-2 million. They’re also called the Edo.

**Oba:** The title of an African king.

**Divination:** A sacred ritual in which priests try to help people solve their problems through prayer, sacrifice and the interpretation of divine messages.

**Eben:** A ceremonial sword that has no cutting edge and is given to all Benin chiefs. Ebens are used in all ceremonies and carried and tossed into the air by chiefs during the processional dance. At home, ebens are often kept on an altar.

**Casting:** A method of creating and molding objects made of metal, such as bronze or gold.

**Medicine:** This term has two meanings for the Yoruba and Benin cultures. The first meaning is related to physical healing, a definition with which we are familiar. The second meaning relates
to supernatural powers, acquired and wielded primarily by kings and priests, and others who use them to protect themselves or act aggressively toward enemies.

Teaching Extensions (Language Arts/Social Studies/Visual Arts):

1. In this lesson we briefly mention the impact of the British invasion on the art of the Benins (mismatched ancestor heads and tusks). Students could research and write an essay on the consequences of Western invasion on the social, political, and/or cultural traditions of the Yoruba and/or Benin cultures and how these consequences affect our understanding of their history.

2. The DL lesson presented the meanings and functions of works of art within Yoruba and Benin cultures. Follow up the lesson with a discussion of the impact of trade materials on artistic production and/or economic progress (i.e. bronze, beads, ivory, etc.) How does the material chosen for a work of art affect its longevity, form, heritage and meaning?

3. Talk about masks in 20th century Western society – both figuratively and literally – where do you see them? Who wears them? Why are they worn? How do they function? Compare the answers to the use of masks by the Yoruba culture.

4. Design a crown, mask, or plaque including objects, symbols, and colors relevant to your life, the life of a famous person, or an important event.

5. The deities of the Yoruba and Benin peoples are often personified by kings. In turn, the events and accomplishments of these deities and/or kings are memorialized in public celebrations. Research the history of the Benin king named Asigye. What was his relationship to deities? Compare how events from his life relate to public ceremonies. Discuss: What events from U.S. history have been turned into celebrations? How are they enacted?

6. Students can devise and organize their own procession by choosing an event or legend and determining which costumes, actions, etc. would best physically recreate it.

Additional Resources:

Websites:

- Cultural Expressions - website covering the history of the Yoruba, and overview of ifaism. Includes audio and video. [www.cultural-expressions.com/ifadef.htm](http://www.cultural-expressions.com/ifadef.htm)
- African Art Museum - [http://africanart.org](http://africanart.org)
- Art and Life in Africa Online - includes lesson plans, overviews of African countries and peoples. Go to —People of Africa” then –Yoruba.”[www.uiowa.edu/~africart](http://www.uiowa.edu/~africart)
- Looking at African Art and Culture - [http://gallery.sjsu.edu/exhibits/african/africaexhibit/AfricanArtandCulture.html](http://gallery.sjsu.edu/exhibits/african/africaexhibit/AfricanArtandCulture.html)
- Smithsonian National Museum of African Art - http://www.nmafa.si.edu/

- AFRICA: One Continent. Many Worlds. A collaborative web project between The Field Museum, the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, the California African American Museum and the Armory Center for the Arts.
  
  http://www.calacademy.org/exhibits/africa/

Print material:


Audio/Visual material:

Writing About Art

Learning to write about art is a helpful tool in understanding it. Once the observer knows what to look for in a piece of artwork, it becomes easier to both write about and understand the work. Listed below is a guideline that will help you.

Questions to ask yourself as you write:
1. What do you see? What is this picture about?
   - People
   - Objects
   - Scene – time and place
   - Action – what is going on?

2. How is the work made --what materials, tools, or processes are used? What elements has the artist manipulated? The following list may be helpful.
   - Oil, watercolor, pastel, ink, clay
   - Palette knife, brush, pen, chalk, etching, screen printing
   - Color, light, line, shape, space

3. How does the work make you feel?
   - Happy, sad, anxious, angry, nostalgic, adventurous
   - Are the brushstrokes rough or smooth, or are they evident at all? Are the colors hot or cool?
   - Is the subject matter active or quiet? Are the lines flowing, irregular, or discontinuous?

In addition to analyzing the work, it is also important to do a little research about the artist such as when and where the artist lived. What were some of the things the artist was concerned about and how is this apparent in his or her work? Were there things in the artist’s life that inspired him or her? In short:

4. What can you learn about the artist?
   - What country is the artist from?
   - What can you find out about his or her experiences?
   - What ideas or feelings is the artist suggesting?

Finally, play the role of the art critic. Art criticism is based on a number of things. Think, for example, about the style the artist is using. You may want to consider the following approaches the artist may have taken:

   **Realism:** The artist accurately describes the subject matter – the art looks real.
   **Formalism:** The artist has experimented with shape, color, space in an unusual way.

Now put it all together! You decide - has the artist succeeded in doing what you think he or she tried to do?
Distance Learning Study Guide  
The Cleveland Museum of Art  
African Art: The Secular and the Supernatural

Summary of the Yoruba and Benin People

Secular power is acquired and maintained through access to supernatural power in both the Yoruba and Benin cultures. The two cultures share some beliefs, but their royal power structures are different in inheritance and execution, as are their artistic styles.

**Yoruba**
- large population: 20-25 million people
- several kingdoms
- kingship is not inherited
- kings must be trained about the power of medicine
- works of art often relate to the power of deities because the king is strongly associated with them
- women are commonly represented in works of art

**Benin**
- smaller population: 1-2 million people
- one king
- kingship is inherited from father to son
- kings must be trained in the power of medicine
- works of art emphasize the power of the king
- women are rarely represented in works of art

Using the information provided on this page and from your study guides, write short essays that compare and contrast some of the images from the Distance Learning lesson.

1) Compare and contrast the Benin *Ancestor Head and Tusk* to the Yoruba *Crown*. How are they made differently? How do they relate to the way each group of people believes in the concept of the head? How do they relate to the attainment of kingship and beliefs about secular and supernatural power?

2) Compare and contrast the Yoruba *Divination Cup* to the Benin *Plaque with Warrior Chief*. How were they made? What are their functions? How do they relate to beliefs about secular and supernatural power?
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<th>Epa Mask</th>
<th>Sacred Crown</th>
<th>Divination Cup</th>
<th>Warrior Plaque</th>
<th>Ancestor Head &amp; Tusk</th>
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Content Comprehension Questionnaire - ANSWER KEY
Distance Learning at the Cleveland Museum of Art
African Art: The Secular and the Supernatural

True or False
1)  T  F  Benin kings inherit the throne from their fathers; the Yoruba throne is not inherited.

2)  T  F  Women are never represented in Yoruba and Benin images.

3)  T  F  All works of art made in Africa are created in the same style, so they look the same.

4)  T  F  The carvings on tusks of ancestor heads relate to the history of the oba for whom the tusk was created.

Multiple Choice
5)  What does the word “medicine” refer to in the Yoruba and Benin cultures?
   a.  physical healing
   b.  supernatural powers
   c.  both a and b
   d.  neither a or b

6)  What is the significance of the sacred crown and its veil for Yoruba kings?
   a.  The crown contains medicine which enhances the supernatural powers of the king.
   b.  Yoruba kings are never supposed to appear in public with their heads uncovered.
   c.  The king’s subjects are never supposed to look him in the eye because his power could hurt them.
   d.  all of the above

7)  Which culture has celebrations to the head and strong beliefs in supernatural powers?
   a.  Yoruba
   b.  Benin
   c.  both
   d.  neither

8)  What is the purpose of the divination process?
   a.  to help people become gods
   b.  to find solutions to earthly problems through supernatural means
   c.  to divide family possessions
   d.  to anoint holy objects

9)  What did the Epa Mask represent?
   a.  an African community
   b.  a king and his entourage
   c.  a fun costume
   d.  a free standing sculpture
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Name: _____________________

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Selected Images

*Head*, Africa, Nigeria, Benin Kingdom, Edo people, mid 1500s or early 1600s, 1938.6

*Plaque*, Africa, Nigeria, Benin Kingdom, Edo people, possibly 1600s, 1953.425
Mother and Child Caryatid Vessel (agere ifa)
Africa, Nigeria, Yoruba people, mid-late 1800s, 1994.200

Orangun Epa Headdress, Bamgboye of Odo-Owa