# African Art and Architecture

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**Origins and Sources**

Art in Africa has found expression in a range of media from architecture, sculpture, and pottery, to dress, body adornment, and epic poetry. Each of these has its own complex and in many cases unresearched local history of stylistic development.

Tracing the history of African art and architecture is made problematic by the fragmentary state of the evidence. Archaeology in Africa has made great strides in recent decades but remains under-financed and often hindered by unauthorized digging at key sites.

**Europe and the Art of Africa**

Western engagement with the rich variety of African artistic creativity has inevitably been selective, and conditioned by troubled episodes in African history, notably slavery and colonialism. Scholarship dealing with art and artefacts in Africa has often struggled to move beyond the legacy of outdated stereotypes that position Africa as a region of unchanging traditionality in contrast to the dynamic modernity of Europe or America.

**Interpreting African Art**

A contrast is often drawn between the functional nature of African artefacts and the more purely aesthetic nature of Western art. While it is true that relatively little of the output of African artists until recently was intended to be primarily the focus of aesthetic contemplation an appreciation of aspects of form and design in objects, buildings, poetry, and performance is widespread. A growing number of studies have demonstrated the sophisticated and discriminating vocabulary of aesthetic discourse that exists in many African languages, and concepts of art and creativity are present in virtually all African cultures.

**Rock Art**

The Sahara and large areas of southern Africa are two major regions in Africa where substantial amounts of rock art are found. Although dating rock paintings and engravings is extremely difficult, it is clear that they are the oldest African art form to have survived, with some Saharan examples thought to date from at least 4000 BC, and dates as early as 24,000 BC proposed for one site in Namibia.

Much of the area now covered by the Sahara was significantly more fertile in the past and supported wildlife such as elephants, lions, buffalo, ostriches, and antelopes, as well as a human population who depicted aspects of their lifestyle in rock art.

**West Africa**

West Africa is the home of many of the sculptural traditions for which African art has become internationally known: the most prominent are the carvings of the Baga of Guinea, the Baule and Senufo of Côte d’Ivoire, the Mende of Sierra Leone, the Dogon and Bamana of Mali, the Fon of the Benin Republic, and the Yoruba and Igbo of Nigeria. It is also an area notable for an extensive range of other art forms, from architecture to weaving.

*Nok*

Among the oldest surviving art of West Africa are a number of distinct traditions of sculpture in terracotta. Sculptures that have been uncovered, mostly accidentally in the course of mining or farming, across a wide expanse of central Nigeria, are grouped together under the name “Nok”. However, since there are regional stylistic variations and a date range that stretches from the 9th century BC to the 10th century AD, it is likely that more than one culture was involved in their production.

*Mali and Niger*

Other equally spectacular terracotta sculptures have been uncovered on a large burial site at Bura in the Niger Republic (dated to between the 3rd and the 11th centuries AD), and at ancient Jenne (c. 13th century AD) in Mali. At Bura a large burial site has yielded hundreds of heads and full-length figures attached to funerary jars, as well as the fragmentary remains of a large horse and rider.

The sculptures from Jenne include equestrian images, and standing and seated figures of both men and women, many with elaborate jewellery and scarification marks. Since most of these were unearthed in the course of unauthorized digging, little is known about their context or original use..

*Akan*

The Akan peoples of Ghana also made terracotta sculpture, using small clay human images to represent the deceased and his or her retainers in the funeral rites of important men and women. The system of organizing the production of court regalia for the Asante king, the Asantehene, through a series of villages of specialist craftsmen around the capital, was replicated on a smaller scale by lesser chiefs throughout the Asante Empire in the 19th century. Certain regalia, however, could only be obtained with royal approval at the capital, Kumasi, and the distribution of court art was an important element in the maintenance of central power. The key symbol of royal and chiefly authority at all levels was the stool, of which there was an extensive range of forms.

*Benin*

The kingdom of Benin is located in the tropical rainforest belt of southern Nigeria, to the west of the River Niger. When Europeans first reached the area in the late 15th century, they found a complex and expanding warrior kingdom with which they were able to establish trade and diplomatic links on an equal basis.

**East Africa**

East Africa, the area from Sudan and Eritrea southward to Zambia, Malawi, and the island of Madagascar, is a vast region encompassing a diverse range of peoples, environments, and historical experiences. It includes semi-nomadic pastoralists, ancient kingdoms, coastal trading ports, and even a few isolated communities of hunter-gatherers. Aspects of this diversity are apparent in the extremely wide range of art and architecture that has developed in the region.

*Nubia*

The art history of the succession of Nubian cultures that evolved along the Nile valley in the northern area of the modern state of Sudan is closely intertwined with developments in Egypt, but despite these mutual influences it retained distinctive characteristics. Archaeologists have uncovered artefacts including fine pottery and gold jewellery from royal graves designated as A-Group and dated to between 3100 and 2800 BC. Alongside smaller-scale cultures, known as C-Group (2000-1500 BC) and Pan-Grave (2200-1700 BC), the powerful kingdom of Kush developed around 2000 BC. Its capital was at Kerma, and it is characterized by rich and elaborate royal tombs in huge circular burial mounds.

*Ethiopia.*

There were close ties between the culture of the south of the Arabian Peninsula and communities on the coast of northern Ethiopia from which the kingdom of Aksum arose during the 1st century AD. Disc-and-crescent symbols thought to be related to the Moon goddess are found on the crests of monumental stone stelae from the pre-Christian period. These stelae, some of which stand 21 m (almost 70 ft) high, reproduce in stone the form of Aksumite wood- and stone-framed buildings. The Axumite king Ezana was converted to Christianity in the 4th century AD, while the religion and its tradition of monasticism were spread among the people over the next two centuries following the missionary activity associated with the Nine Saints from Syria.

*The Arab Influence*

Since ancient times East Africa has been linked to the maritime trade of the Indian Ocean. By around 800 AD a series of interconnected coastal communities had been established at centres such as Mogadishu, Lamu, Mombasa, and the islands of Zanzibar and the Comoros. From Lamu southward the interaction of settled Arab traders with the local Bantu-speaking populations resulted in the development of a distinctive Swahili language and culture.

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**Central Africa**

Central Africa may be defined as the area from Cameroon and the Central African Republic southward to the borders with Namibia and Zambia, taking in Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Republic of the Congo, Angola, and Democratic Republic of the Congo. The Bantu family of languages, spoken by the vast majority of the inhabitants of this region, has been traced back by linguistic historians to an area in the vicinity of the present Nigeria/Cameroon border in c. 3000 BC. From around 2000 BC a gradual expansion of Bantu-speaking peoples southward and eastward began, prompted in part by population increases made possible by the development of agricultural techniques

*Cameroon Grassfields*

The area known as the Cameroon Grassfields is a densely populated region of open savannah in the west of the state of Cameroon. The rich variety of art that developed in the Grassfields was primarily associated with aspects of social and political hierarchy in which the king, or Fon, was at the head of a ranked system of male lineage elders in each of the numerous small independent kingdoms. Secret societies that incorporated all senior men were also important patrons for the arts. The royal palace was the focus of artistic activity and itself an elaborate and extensive structure decorated with carved pillars, and in some cases patterned stone floors.

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**Southern Africa**

Southern Africa is the region encompassing the countries of Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Swaziland, Lesotho, and South Africa. The rock art produced by the southern San and other hunter-gatherer communities is the oldest surviving record of artistic activity on the African continent, while associated forms such as the decoration of ostrich eggshells and leather bags also seem to be of considerable antiquity. Apart from their distinctive pottery style, little is known of the art of the Khoikhoi, nomadic pastoralists who have lived in areas of the southern High Veld for some 2,000 years.

*The Lydenberg Heads*

Seven terracotta heads, known as the Lydenberg heads, were uncovered from the site of an early mixed farming village in the Lydenberg valley, eastern Transvaal. Radiocarbon dating indicated that the area was occupied in the 6th century AD. Pits contained animal bones, pottery shards, beads, and metal ornaments, while slag indicated that iron was produced in the village. No similar heads have been found elsewhere but large numbers of smaller modelled figures from other sites indicate a tradition of pottery sculpture. The heads themselves are hollow, with bands of incised decoration around the wide necks, and modelled features