

The African Collection

What do you think of when you think about Africa? Maybe you consider its size. Africa is three times bigger than the United States. Perhaps you ponder its cultural diversity. The African people speak over a thousand different languages. Maybe what springs to mind are Africa's incredible geographic features like the Sahara Desert, Mount Kilimanjaro, or the vast savannah in Tanzania.



Board Game, Ethiopia

World history owes much to the history of Africa. Known as the *Cradle of Humankind*, it is the birthplace of human biological and cultural development. Parts of Africa also had important roles in early world trade. In the first millennium CE, East Africa was an important part of Indian Ocean trading systems that included Arabia, India, Persia, and China. At the same time, the Middle East, Europe, and Africa exchanged scholars across the Sahara desert, and West Africa exported precious commodities to Europe. These contacts took place long before the *Age of Exploration*, when fifteenth century Europeans *rediscovered* Africa.

The majority of objects in this gallery come from the colonial period of Africa's history. During this period, European powers divided the continent into nation states. Because African cultural groups can overlap in multiple nations, objects in the gallery are identified by region as well as by country. Also, the objects in the Africa Gallery represent only a tiny portion of the complexity and diversity of the continent.

Status

In the Status section of the gallery, you will see objects that proclaimed the taste and social position of the people who used them. These objects were made to be seen and admired by all members of the community. Some items indicate membership in a particular group or signify leadership. Many objects use expensive materials to show an individual's wealth and status.



Ade – Eastern Guinea Coast,
Nigeria (Yoruba)

This ade, or beaded crown is an example of an object that bestowed status on the wearer. Yoruba kings, diviners, and herbalists were the only members of the community that were allowed to wear and use objects made of beads.

This crown has been used since the middle of the 17th century. Yoruba men who can claim descent from Oduduwa, the mythical founder of the Yoruba, still wear this crown on ceremonial occasions.

The faces on the front and back of the crown represent various gods in the Yoruba pantheon. Beneath the body of the crown is a fringe of beads that covers the wearer's face, merging the wearer's individual identity with the divine power of the dynasty. The ade is always topped by a representation of the royal bird, okin. The representations of the okin and part of the beaded veil are missing from this crown.

Spiritual Practices

Many African systems of thought are contrasts between the natural and social worlds. For example, the wilderness can represent the unknown, chaotic, dangerous and the powerful, while towns are associated with civilization, social order, and safety.

Even though nature and society can sometimes be in bitter opposition, they can also complement each other. Hunting, fishing, or farming in the wilderness provides food. Medicines often derive their efficacy from being associated with nature. Spirits, deities, or ancestors can provide the keys to controlling the chaotic and dangerous side of nature, and channeling nature's power for the good of human beings. Even though supernatural beings can bestow significant benefits when they are appeased, they can also be unpredictable and take great delight in making mischief!

In addition to traditional religious practices, many Africans practice both Christianity and Islam, which reached African shores from its first generation onwards. In some places, one religion predominates over the others. In others, all three work together in varying combinations.

In the Yoruba cosmos, older women possess powers equal to or greater than that of the gods or the ancestors. If angered by men's selfish ways, these women can turn their reserves of strength against men and destroy them. In yearly performances that are both entertaining and dramatic, masked male dancers use Gelede masks to acknowledge the importance of women.

Wooden, nail-studded figures represented ancestral and natural spirits. People used them to seek justice, solutions to difficult problems, or protection against malevolent forces.

After a person asked for help, they pounded a nail or small blade into the figure to represent the agreement. Healing herbs with magical powers were lodged behind the mirrors in the abdomens or on the heads. Special practitioners were responsible for interpreting the decisions of the images or directing their magic to achieve the desired ends. Once the problem was solved or the question answered, the nail would be removed.

Divination

Divination is a particular kind of influence and communication in which specially trained individuals are responsible for interpreting messages or prescribing actions that are dictated by spiritual forces.

Bolom diviners used the ring ordeal to determine the guilt or innocence of a suspected criminal. A diviner put the rings and leaves into two separate pots of hot palm oil. Then, the diviner rubbed the leaf mixture over his hand and put it in the hot oil to retrieve a ring. The suspect performed the same ordeal. If the suspect's hand burned, it meant the individual was guilty of the crime.



Gelede Mask, Eastern Guinea Coast, Nigeria (Yoruba)



Nkisi N'Kondi Nail Figures
Lower Zaire River Region (Kongo)



Iron Rings with Leaves, Western Guinea Coast
Sierra Leone, (Bolom)

Subsistence in the Household

In this section, you will see some of the tools used to wrest a living from the environment. These tools show the influence of the particular aesthetic as well as environmental considerations of a given society. Examining these everyday objects can reveal much about the societies that use them.

These ostrich eggs were used for water storage and the arrows, not pictured here, for hunting.

As is true of most hunter-gatherers, the women located tubers and other vegetal foods, which provided the bulk of subsistence needs, while the men hunted and provided meat which accounted for a small portion of the diet.



Ostrich Egg Water Containers
Kalahari Desert, (San)

Traditionally, the San, a diverse group of foragers living in southern Africa, moved in small groups in search of food. If you visited the area today, you would see that most of the San no longer roam freely, but live on densely populated reserves. Their hunting and gathering lifestyle has given way to a diet of limited foods. The San grow some of their own food, but because agriculture is very difficult in the region, the government supplies the bulk of it.

Objects from the Bolom of Sierra Leone, a group of coastal agriculturalists, are displayed in the large case in the middle of the gallery. These objects were collected in 1936 to 1937, so they reflect life as it was lived during that period of time. If you visited the area today, you would see many changes.

- > **Blacksmithing:** Locals smelted ores to produce iron before the introduction of imported metal. Here you see a bellows and other smithing tools that were used to shape agricultural implements. The bellows is made from gun-barrels and cat skin. Today blacksmiths still make and repair tools.

- > **Woodworking:** Bolom woodworkers use axes, chisels, and adzes to rough shape the logs or billets for tool handles, utensils, musical instruments, or figures. The Bolom also used tools like these in the construction of small dugout canoes for fishing and transportation.
- > **Agriculture:** The Bolom are swidden agriculturalists. Every year they clear land with cutlasses and other tools for their crops of rice and cassava. Plots of land lie fallow for about five years to replenish natural nutrients and rebuild the soil.
- > **Fishing:** In order to catch fish, the Bolom place fishing nets across the mouths of small coves in shallow water. Fishermen also throw nets with floats from canoes. Men use harpoons to catch larger fish, while women use the oval framed nets to scoop up fish in shallow waters. Women collect bait in the small baskets.
- > **Hunting:** Traps and snares were used by the Bolom to capture the abundant game in their coastal region. In addition, animals were driven through the forest and into hunter's nets, sometimes with the help of dogs.
- > **Weaving:** Bolom women grew, picked, ginned, and spun their own cotton into thread. Sometimes women used indigo or other natural dyes to color the thread. Men wove the thread into cloth.