

The Art of Africa  
Art 244 Fall 2012

Common Characteristics of Traditional African Art:

1. Innovation of form prompted by local arts patrons and cultural institutions
2. Visual abstraction: emphasis on visual boldness across all media, rather than a natural representation
3. Parallel asymmetry: breaks in patterns or varied pattern elements add energy and movement.
4. Sculptural primacy: while there are two-dimensional traditions, most cultures favor three-dimensional artworks.
5. Performance: many artworks are integral to performances with music and dance; well-planned events for a large community.
6. Humanism: the major artistic subject is the human form, stressing the human spirit and society.
7. Many African groups have their own distinct ideas about beauty and a special vocabulary for art criticism of artworks and performances.
8. Much information about art, artists and aesthetics is imbedded in oral tradition that is only recently being collected.

Common Spiritual Beliefs of African Cultures:

1. Africans believe in an invisible world of ancestor spirits and deities. Rituals can communicate with them, connecting the past to the present, this world and the other.
2. Ensemble and assemblage: artworks are usually part of a group in a shrine or sacred performance. Images hold more power if they are combined - with other figures and other materials.
3. Multiplicity of meaning: an artwork is intended to mean different things to different members of society, depending on their age, level of knowledge and level of initiation.

Sources: *Art Beyond The West*, By Michael O'Riley, Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 2002