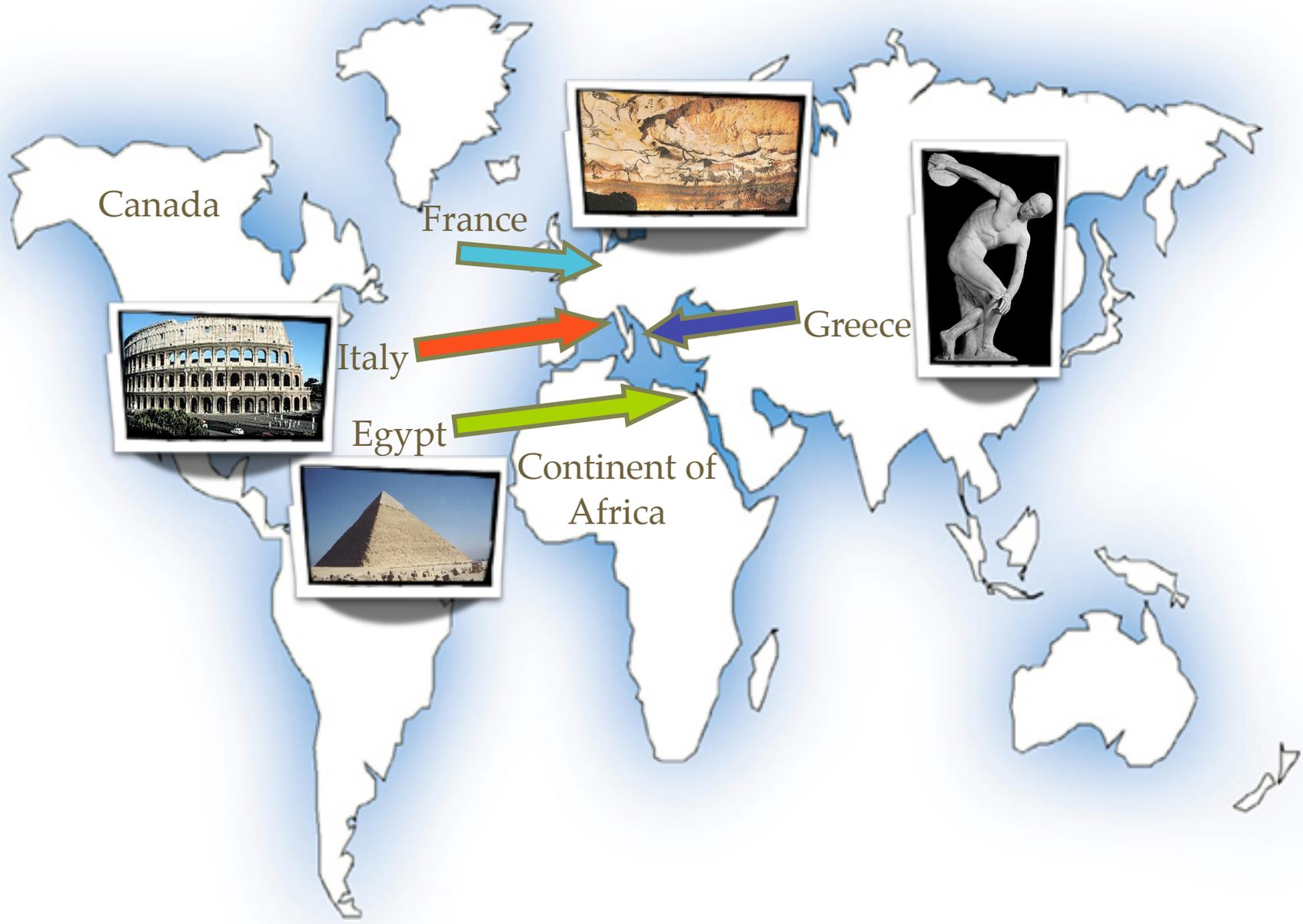


The Art of Ancient Africa

The arts of Africa constitutes one of the most **diverse** legacies on earth. Though many casual observers tend to generalize "traditional" African art, the continent is full of peoples, societies, and **civilizations**, each with a unique **visual culture**.



Canada

France



Italy



Egypt



Continent of Africa



Greece



Despite the diversity of African cultures, there are some unifying artistic traits when considering the art from the continent of Africa:

Emphasis on the human figure

- The human figure is the most **prominent subject** of African art.

Visual Abstraction:

- African artworks tend to favour visual abstraction over **naturalistic** representation.

Emphasis on Sculpture:

- African artists tend to favour **three-dimensional** artworks over two-dimensional works.

Emphasis on Performance Art:

- Masks are used in performances and are generally part of a full costume. They often have their own, songs, dance steps and sometimes even **personal names**.

Multiplicity of Meaning:

- Symbols and forms in African art are typically intended to represent different things to different members of society, depending on **age**, gender, education, or **social status**.

Title: Head from Jemaa

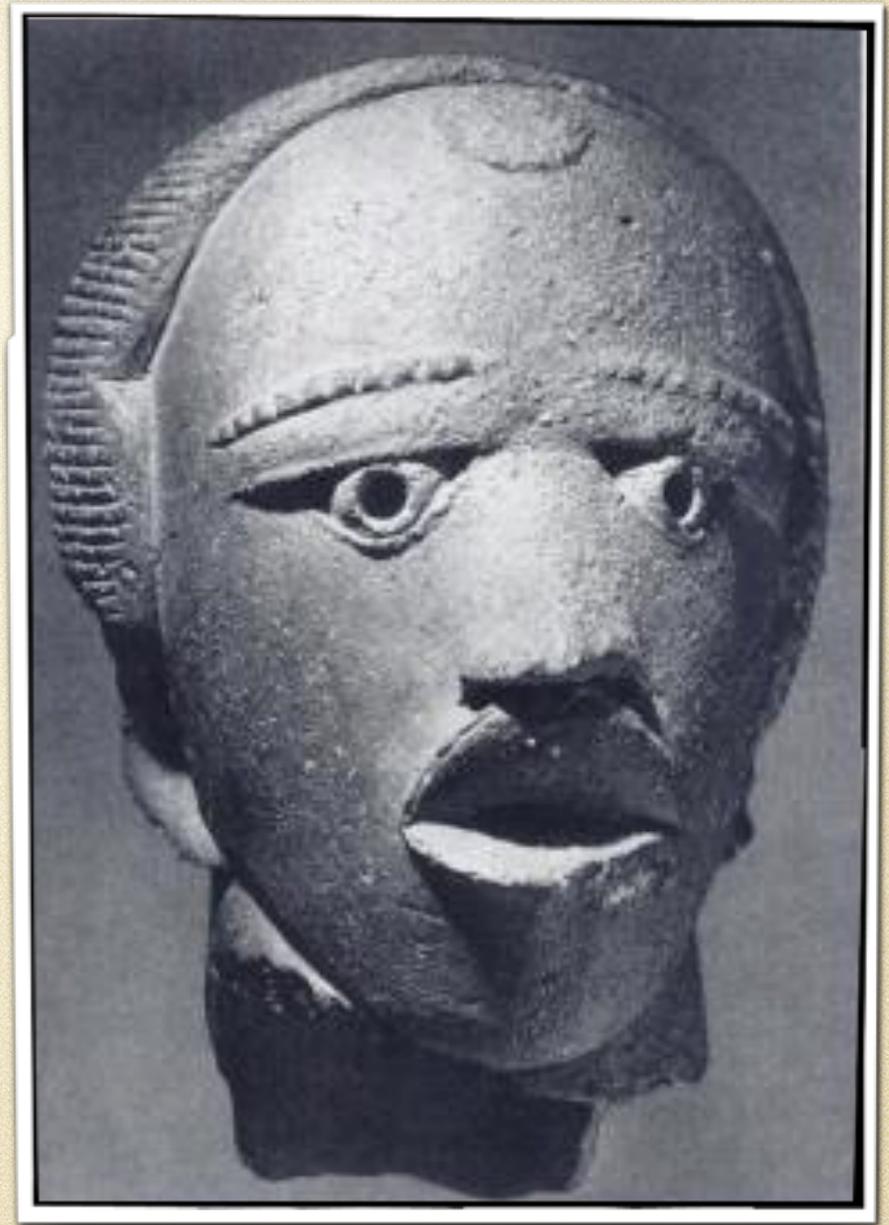
Period: Ancient African, c.400 BCE

Art form: Sculpture, mask

Medium: Terracotta

Interesting Points:

- The first artworks of Ancient African cultures were discovered near the village of Nok in **Northern Nigeria**
- The sculptures are boldly modeled life-size heads which seem to have been full size **sculptures** at one time
- Each has a different **personality** marked by facial expression and hairstyles



Title: "Couple", Dogon, Mali

Period: African, 14th Century

Art form: Sculpture

Medium: Wood

Interesting Points:

- Carved in an expressive style-Two **stylized, stretched** figures
- Their vertical forms derive from the cylindrical shape of **tree trunks**
- This type of sculpture would be believed to house powerful **spirits**



- The artist holds a **respected position** in African tribal society. It is the artist's job to provide the various masks and sculptures for use in ritual ceremonies. The work is valued for its **spiritual**, rather than its aesthetic qualities

In the 20th century, European artists became interested in the aesthetic quality of African art

- For members of Ancient African societies they were **sacred objects** harbouring the life force of an ancestor or nature spirit and had power to cure illnesses or harm enemies
- On special occasions the figures and masks were removed from their **shrines**, washed, anointed with palm oil and decorated with **beads and cloth**

African masks influenced Picasso to paint the faces in the same style!



Pablo Picasso. *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J.)*. 1907, oil on canvas.

Title: Bwa Plank Mask, Burkina Faso, Village of Pa

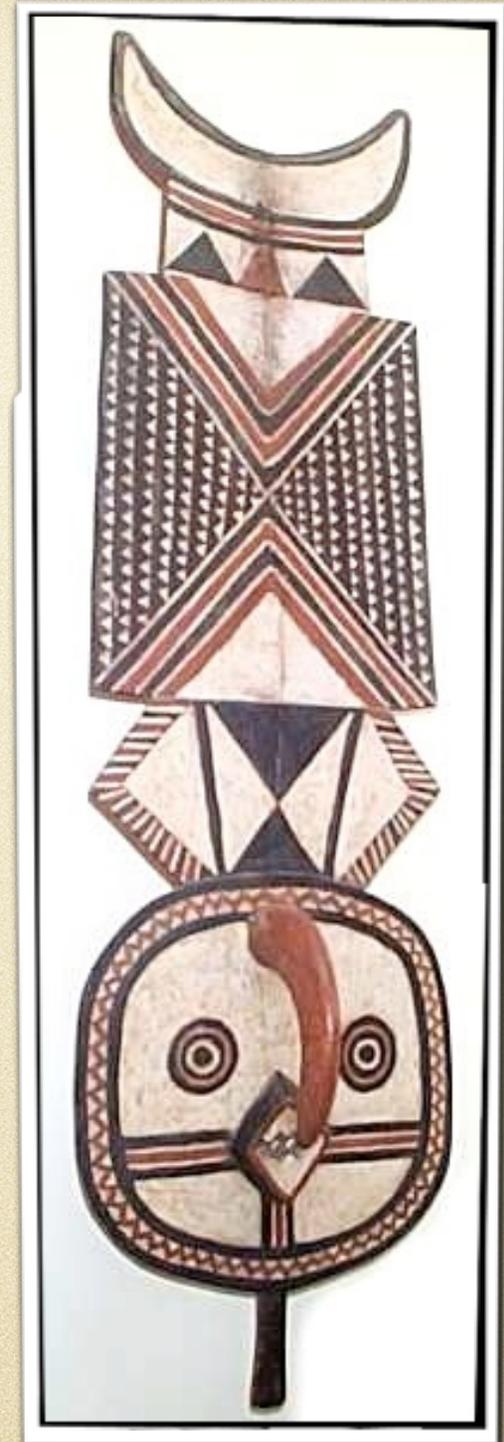
Period: African

Art form: Sculpture, plank mask

Medium: Wood and Pigment

Interesting Points:

- The Bwa come from Mali and Burkina Faso. Masks are only made by those who live in the **southern** parts of their territory
- Bwa masks are believed to possess **special powers** which are controlled by those who wear them
- These masks are plank shaped with a circular face at one end and a **crescent moon** at the other
- Their wearer looks through a hole in the **mouth**



Title: Vuvi, Gabon Mask

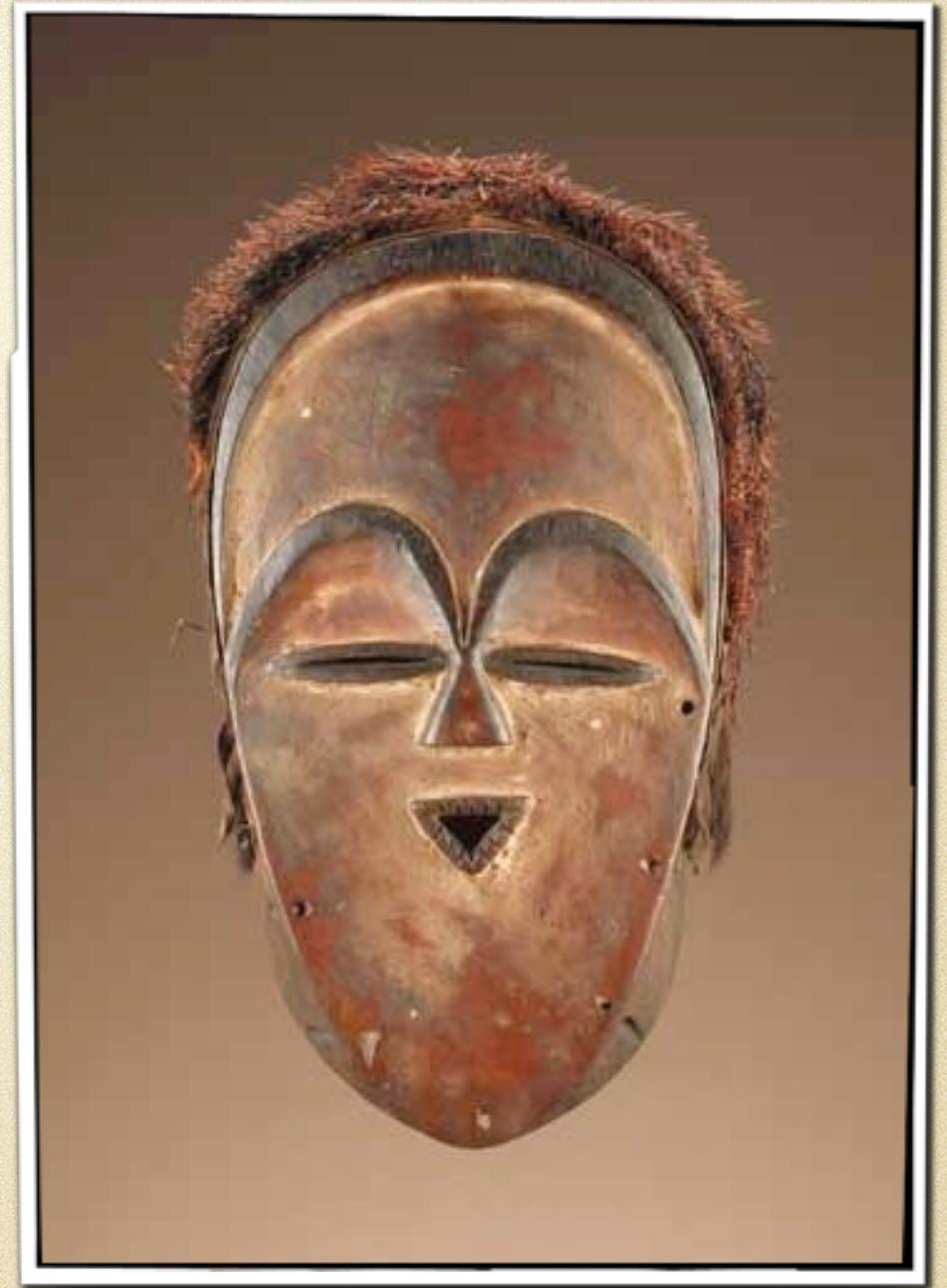
Period: African

Art form: Sculpture, mask

Medium: Wood and Pigment

Interesting Points:

- Carved from wood, with a long narrow face
- Vuvi (*an African tribe*) masks are characterized by the relative **flatness** of their design
- The blackened facial features represent the knowledge handed down from their **ancestors**
- Each mask had a **special name** according to the spirit it embodied



Title: Mende, Sierra Leone, Bundu (Sande)
Society Helmet Mask

Period: African

Art form: Sculpture, **Helmet mask**

Medium: Polished and blackened hard wood

Interesting Points:

- Bundu (Sande), a society run entirely by **women**, is unique in Africa in that it controls the use of these masks, which embody Sowu, their guardian spirit
- The masks usually include an elaborate **hairstyle** and represents **feminine beauty**, with high foreheads, small, compressed facial features, and neck-rings, depicting the desirable full-figured woman
- These masks are exclusively worn by **women**

