

Module 6 Overview

African Art and Anthropology

The focus this week is on the concept of authenticity, which is not as cut and dry and obvious as it may seem at first. One of the foremost anthropologists of African art is Christopher Steiner, whose work you will be reading this week. He does a great job of reviewing the literature and laying out the theoretical framework from which he then does his fieldwork, otherwise called ethnography. It has become more common for contemporary anthropologists and not just art historians to research African art and to try to understand the cultural context of the art they are studying. Because Steiner understands that anthropology as a discipline has a complicated history that is implicated in the colonial enterprise, he expressly breaks down the differences between contemporary anthropology of today versus the anthropology of the early 1900s. For him, the difference is characterized by the abandonment of the idea that the anthropologist studies an isolated culture, independent from the rest of the world. We will see this last tribe or death of culture type of framework in places like National Geographic and the History Channel. But contemporary scholars and researchers are now much more in tune with the ideas of globalization and exchange between cultures. In fact, we will see that in this contemporary art today, it is precisely this transnational and transcultural exchange that is the most fruitful terrain for new art forms to develop. For his book, Christopher Steiner studied the anthropology of African art in transnational market in the 1990s. He explains the history of the markets of transnational art, but focuses on contemporary times. The 1960s and 70s were boom times in the West African art market, but by the end of the 1970s, it was thought that all of the authentic African art had already been pulled out of the continent. The 1980s saw the historical African art objects pull record prices at auction and the market became more about the recirculation of previously owned objects in the West than the production of art on the African continent. When talking about authenticity, there existed the idea that the object in question had to be used in some kind of ceremonious way in order to be considered truly authentically African art. Steiner talks about how art was fabricated to look authentic, buried in the dirt for many years or subjugated to many secret types of aging mechanisms. He talks about how the ancient Greeks and Romans had similar strategies to make artwork seem more historic. Steiner also makes an important analysis of the cultural differences regarding the copy in European versus African art. And he says that in his research he never heard the traders use the word authentic to describe a piece of art. In many cases, the African artists were producing to satisfy a market, both of high art and tourist art, and they were more intent on making the perfect copy of the African art reproduced in books and exhibitions than originating new forms. Steiner makes a piercing point when he says, "One aspect of the Western images of Africa, "which resonates throughout "the African art collecting world "is the notion that authentic Africans, "and by extension, authentic objects of African art, "no longer exist." Like the societies themselves, contemporary art objects produced in Africa are considered inauthentic approximations of traditional forms, sullied by Western influence's degenerative impact. Real African art, the argument goes, consists of old objects that were manufactured in the pre-contact or pre-colonial era for indigenous use. We will soon see how contemporary African artists have dealt with the echoes of these ideas in their artworks.



Learning Objectives

Course Learning Objectives Targeted





- Compare and contrast different styles and genres of African art by analyzing visual elements, techniques, materials, and cultural contexts, and discussing how they vary among regions, ethnic groups, and historical periods.
- Evaluate the historical and global significance of African art by examining its role in shaping cultural identities, resisting colonialism, and influencing international art movements, while considering its socio-political, economic, and cultural implications.


Module Learning Objectives

- Understand and define the cultural context of African Art through the importance of ethnography
- Analyze how contemporary African artists respond to historical perceptions of authenticity and Western influences.



Activities and Assignments

1. Read [“The anthropology of African art in a transnational market”](#) and [“The quest for authenticity and the invention of African Art”](#) by Christopher Steiner. Cambridge University Press, 1993.
(<https://fiu.instructure.com/courses/200285/files/31587159/download?wrap=1>)
2. Watch “In and Out of Africa” produced by Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Taylor, 1993.
 - [“In and Out of Africa” - Part 1](http://online.fiu.edu/videos?vivold=9dbbab81314f492db2bb48750fc5f967)  (<http://online.fiu.edu/videos?vivold=9dbbab81314f492db2bb48750fc5f967>)
 - [“In and Out of Africa” - Part 2](https://online.fiu.edu/videos?vpvid=34b26689-6437-48d7-a107-4ea8733c791e)  (<https://online.fiu.edu/videos?vpvid=34b26689-6437-48d7-a107-4ea8733c791e>)
 - [“In and Out of Africa” - Part 3](http://online.fiu.edu/videos?vivold=2923661d32d74eda8f4c7ec549c76ad9)  (<http://online.fiu.edu/videos?vivold=2923661d32d74eda8f4c7ec549c76ad9>)
 - [“In and Out of Africa” - Part 4](https://online.fiu.edu/videos?vpvid=926800e17caf42dea6f66ddd29c84253d)  (<https://online.fiu.edu/videos?vpvid=926800e17caf42dea6f66ddd29c84253d>)
3. Complete **Module 6 Discussion**
4. Complete **Module 6 Assignment**

The instructional material listed above will help you understand expectations related to this module's topics, achieve the learning objectives and complete the assignment(s).  (<https://online.fiu.edu/videos/?vivold=fc7c2bfd2fa04ce09c41bc6afa980c90>)