

Handout #21

Art In A Cultural Context

Non-Western Art

Artists are just like you and me. They are born into a family that lives in a community. They learn from their parents and their neighbors what is the proper way to act and dress. There are traditions for celebrations and sorrows. Religion shapes their beliefs about their place in the world. The community has rules that organize its life and provides services to its people.

The artist may learn from a master then serve an apprenticeship or they may attend a school. Sometimes the artist follows the traditions of their culture but sometimes they experiment and try new things. Artists who worked before them influence their work. In turn, they influence artists who follow them.

As you study a culture or an artist, look at the community around them for the traditions that influence them. You will have a better understanding of the artist's work and the many cultures around us. Our five areas for researching artists and their cultures are below.

I. Religion

- a. Is there one religion that dominates all parts of people's lives, from how they should act to what work that they can do?
- b. Does the community believe that higher beings determine when they will have good harvests or if individuals will be successful?
- c. Who is the head of the religion? Are their priests and assistants?
- d. Is religion a small part of people's lives?
- e. Are there are a number of different religions in the community?

II. Government

- a. Do people live in small communities that have contact only with other communities just a few miles away?
- b. Do people live in towns or city-states with a government and compete with other cities?

- c. Do people live in towns that are part of a country or empire with a well-organized government and do they deal with many other people?
- d. Do people live in large cities that are the center of the culture of the country. People come to that city from far away?

III. Relations With Other Cultures

- a. Is there peace? Do people feel safe? Is there more trade, travel and exchange of ideas – about religion, art, manufacturing?
- b. Is there war? Are people afraid? Is there less trade and exchange of ideas between different cultures?
- c. Do people trade with other villages and towns nearby? Do they trade with other areas of their own country?
- d. Do people trade internationally with other countries far away? Do they travel by land and/or by sea?

IV. Patronage

- a. Does the artist depend on the support of a patron (king, ruler, nobleman, religious leader or merchant) to pay for their materials and their salary?
- b. Do the artists create the art to satisfy themselves? Do they create their art then sell it to a buyer later?

V. Artistic Influences

- a. Does the artist work with others as a master or an assistant?
- b. Does the artist break with tradition and add new ideas, themes or a style to the arts in a culture?
- c. Is the artist a leader and do they teach others to experiment and try new forms, colors, symbols or styles?

A Selection of Cultures For Research Projects

You can begin your research on the Non-Western Art History website. In the Semester Two area is a section labeled “Where can I find websites for Semester Two assignments?” Below are listed some of those websites that concentrate on cultures you can use for your research for Unit Six assignments. You may need to do other research to find all the information that you need for all five research areas.

African Art

7. The Mali Empire
9. Tradition in Yoruba Art
11. African Rock Painting

Indian Art

3. Ancient Indus Valley
5. Art of Ajanta (Buddhism)
8. Power and Desire: south Asian Painting

Southeast Asian Art

2. Borobudur: World’s Largest Buddhist Temple
4. Ankor Wat, Cambodia
6. Kathmandu, Nepal

Chinese Art

3. Wu Family Reception Hall
9. Taoism and The Arts of China
12. The Yin Yu Tang: A Chinese Home

Central Asian Art

1. In the Footsteps of Marco Polo
3. Silk Road Encounters
5. The Legacy of Ghengis Khan

Japanese Art

9. More Than Meets The Eye
10. Masterpieces of Japanese Art
12. Kunisada and Kabuki

Art of Oceania

1. The Pacific: Gods and People
7. Early Maori Woodcarving

North American Native Art

1. Surrounded by Beauty
3. Tracking the Buffalo
6. Carving at Skidegate

South American Native Art

2. The Art of Being Kuna
4. Manchu Picchu: Lost City of the Incas
5. The Incas Art and Culture