Early West African Art, *pp. 533-540*

**Statuary:**

**Nok** terra-cotta sculptures

*additive and subtractive* sculpture

**Ife** naturalism and idealization

*perceptual and conceptual naturalism*

**Benin** masks and iconography

ivory and the Portuguese

**Architecture:**

**Djenne Great Mosque**
As we saw Egypt was home of one of the world’s earliest great civilizations, then we discussed Islamic art in Northern Africa (Tunisia). Today we’ll focus on Sub-saharan West-African art. Egypt’s relations with that area is documented since the 3rd millennium BC and continued through the Hellenistic era.
Phoenicians and Greeks founded settlements on the northern coast of Africa (1000-300 BC) and had trade and cultural exchanges with people of the area of the Niger River.

The Romans took control of North Africa (2nd cent. BC-1st cent. CE) and continued the trans-Saharan trade.

Between 7th and 8th cent. Islam expanded through North Africa and had strong relations with the sub-Saharan area.

From the 15th century on Europeans regularly traveled along the African Atlantic coast.
Outside Egypt, the earliest African sculptures in the round have been found in the Central Sudan area. Nok culture is documented since 500 BC and dates until 200 CE. A farming culture, it produced terracotta figures of human and animal subjects. The name Nok is actually wrong: floods from centuries past removed the sculptures from their original contexts and deposited them scratched and broken.
Archaeologists gave the name of the village, Nok where these sculptures were first discovered (1928) to the culture that produced them.

Nok-style artifacts continue to be unearthed in numerous sites over a wide area without documentation of the context in which they were buried,

a lack of documents has limited our understanding of Nok terracottas.

In general, the Nok culture remains an enigma.
Nok sculpture
It has been suggested that Nok terracottas have some sort of relationship to later portrait arts, such as those of Ife, but this is currently unproven.

The City-state Ife, situated in the southwest of what is now Nigeria, is regarded by the Yoruba as the place where the universe originated and Yoruba kings descended from.

(now, more than 15 million Yoruba-speaking people live in Nigeria and the Popular Republic of Benin and consider themselves the descendants of this early civilization)
Ife sculpture
Although every Nok head is unique, certain **stylistic traits** are found throughout the corpus of known works:

- **D-shaped eyes** (common to human and animal figures)
- **holes** in the pupils, nostrils, and mouth allowed air to pass freely in order to **balance the heating** of the hollow head during the firing process
- many **details are carved** (incised grooves, raised eyebrows, D-eyes)
Sculpture has 2 basic techniques:

**Modelling (additive)** and **carving (subtractive)**

**Modelling** depends on **building up** clay or other malleable material

**Carving** consists of **reducing** a block of stone or a piece of wood

Michelangelo’s unfinished slave reveals the original block of stone:

He thought of sculpture as a process of **liberating** a figure that already existed within the block

his job was to **remove (subtract)** “excess material”
Michelangelo Buonarroti, Captive, 1527-28, Marble, 8 in. high

Although terracottas are usually formed using additive techniques (modeled), many Nok pieces were sculpted subtractively in a manner similar to carving.

This distinctive approach suggests that a wood-carving tradition may have influenced them.
One of the most striking aspects of Nok sculptures are the elaborately detailed hairstyles and jewelry that adorn many of the figures. The variety, inventiveness, and beauty of their design is a record of cultivated devotion to body ornamentation. Here, each of the buns of its coiffure is pierced with a hole that may have held ornamental feathers.
These statues may represent people dressed for **special occasions** or people of **high status**

The **function** of these objects is **unknown**, but a **ritual** use of them is more likely than a decorative one.

The **technical complexity** of Nok sculpture has led scholars to speculate that Nok culture was built on the achievements of an earlier culture still to be discovered.

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Nok head, from Rafin Kura, Nigeria, ca. 500 BCE - 200 CE, Terracotta, 1' 2 3/16" high
By the 11th-12th cent. a naturalistic style of sculpture appeared at Ile-Ife,

The main subject of Ife art is the human head,

This metal sculpture represents a ruler.

King, form Ita Yemoo, Nigeria, 11th to 12th cent. Zinc brass, 1’61/2 high. Museum of Ife antiquities, Ife
Main characteristics:

- **Naturalistic details** of the torso and facial features

- but **less lifelike proportions**, which correspond to the ideological and **symbolic value of body parts**

**Head** is the place of **wisdom** and the essence of being; the **costume**, jewels and crown were signs of **regal status** and power

- The **head** is **naturalistic yet idealized** (it approaches portraiture, but eliminates any sign of age)

King, form Ita Yemoo, Nigeria, 11th to 12th cent. Zinc brass, 1’61/2 high. Museum of Ife antiquities, Ife
-function: this kind of statues were used in ceremonies that reaffirmed the sacred role of the ruler such as the installation of the king, his funeral, and other recurrent festivals (many of these rituals have survived until now)

Ife-Ife sculpture is characterized by a “perceptual naturalism” that differs from the “conceptual naturalism” of most African statuary

**Conceptual naturalism:** reality and especially human figures are represented according local conventions passed down from one generation to another

**Perceptual naturalism:** Ife artists actually perceived bodies and faces they portrayed
Most royal art forms of the kingdom of Benin were removed from their original context by the British after 1897 therefore, there is a dearth of documentation to situate individual works historically.

Waist pendant of a Queen Mother, from Benin, Nigeria, ca. 1520. Ivory and iron, 9 3/8” high. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Benin sculpture:
Commemorative heads were commissioned by each *oba* (king) to honor his immediate predecessor. This *mask* from the 16th century is believed to depict the *iyoba* (queen mother), Idia: the *iyoba* bore the oba's first son, had no other children, and devoted her life to raising the future ruler of the kingdom. She was in charge of the protection and well-being of the *oba*.
historical background:

The kingdom of Benin was plunged into a state of turmoil at the end of the 15th cent. when two brothers (Esigie and Arhuanan) disputed succession of the kingdom. The ensuing civil war compromised Benin's status as a regional power. With the help of the Portuguese, Esigie defeated his brother, and reestablished the unity of the kingdom.

Waist pendant of a Queen Mother, from Benin, Nigeria, ca. 1520. Ivory and iron, 9 3/8” high. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
His mother Idia received much of the credit for this victory. This is traditionally believed to be her portrait.
Function: Obas wore carved ivory hip masks representing the iyoba during ceremonies designed to rid the kingdom of malevolent spiritual forces. The hollowed back of this work suggests that it was both a pendant and a receptacle (possibly containing medicines to protect the king).
Medium: Ivory was Benin's main commercial commodity and it helped attract Portuguese traders who also brought wealth to Benin in Benin, the white color of ivory is also associated with Olokun, deity of the sea (main source of wealth). The king (oba) was viewed as a semidivine mediator between the human world and the superhuman world of Olokun.
Portuguese heads decorate both the crown and the lower part of the carving with reference to the diplomatic and commercial relationship with the Portuguese.

On the crown are also mudfish, symbol of the oba: because they live both on land and in the water, mudfish represents the king's dual nature as human and divine.