

# Elephants, Snakes & Crocs, Oh My!

## Animals in African Art

### Outreach Kit Teacher's Information

The text of the exhibit labels is included here with comments and suggestions to encourage student's exploration and learning about African people and why they portray animals in their art.

## INTRODUCTION

### ANIMALS IN ART

(General overview of how humans everywhere use animals in art)

Humans have been using animals as subjects from the very beginning of art. In early paintings, animals that were important to people as food appear on cave walls.

Often, people believe that the spirits of the animals they portray will offer some help or protection to their group.

Other times, the animals in the art have some characteristics that people consider an important trait for humans to have.

Still other times, the artist just enjoys creating an object in the form of an animal.

Animals in art can be very realistic or amazingly fantastic!

### ANIMALS IN AFRICAN ART

(This label gets specific about the animals valued and portrayed in Africa)

In Africa, animal images are important symbols for leadership, problem solving, healing, and religion.

The animals we usually think of when we talk about Africa are not always the animals that African people themselves consider important. (Students could discuss this from the

standpoint of the differences in environments of the USA and Africa as well as how different people value different things.)

An animal of importance in Africa is one that has characteristics like humans and can teach humans lessons on how best to live life successfully.

Most often, African artists portray antelopes, bats, buffalo, chameleons, crocodiles, sharks, snakes, spiders, and spotted cats. These animals help people solve life's problems. Just as African proverbs are about lessons we can learn from animal behavior, African art also shows animals that teach, help, or warn of danger. (See the African Proverb activity.)

### AFRICAN ART TODAY

This exhibit looks at three kinds of African art today.

#### TRADITIONAL ART:

This art has purpose. It was not made to sit around and be pretty. Traditional art is the visual expression of spiritual and social needs. It is still made and used today, though not as much as in the past.

#### SOUVENIR ART:

Souvenir art is important because it provides jobs and money for people and families. However, because it is often produced in large quantities and to fit the taste of tourists, it is not as valued as other kinds of art.

#### MODERN AFRICAN ART:

Modern African art is art that is produced today but is not part of African tradition. It has African subjects but shows the values of European and American art and cultural influences. It is usually made to hang on walls or sit on pedestals rather than help people with problems.

## OBJECT LABELS

The following labels explain the objects in the kit. They could be placed by the animals for older students to read or they could be explanations used by the teacher to discuss the objects with younger students.

### #1. CHI WARA MASK (antelope in the Bamana language)

For the Bamana (Baa-Maa'-Na) people of the Mali, the antelope spirit, or chi wara, taught them how to plow the earth so they could plant crops and feed their people.

The chi wara's curved horns resemble the shape of the plow that cuts and turns the soil. The zig zag design of its neck symbolizes lightening that comes before rain. Rain is essential for crops to grow.

Once, long ago, the people forgot the chi wara's great gift and failed to thank the chi wara spirit for it. Forgotten, the chi wara disappeared and the Bamana people's farms did not produce good crops. In sorrow, the people created this mask so they would not again forget. Now the mask is worn to honor the spirit at agricultural ceremonies and at rituals when boys become men.

### #2. KISI STONE LUNGFISH

Unlike most fish, the lungfish has gills but also very simple lungs. When there is a drought, it can bury itself in the mud and survive by breathing through its lungs. Once the rains come, lungfish go back to using their gills.

The lungfish symbolizes the persistence of the African people who survive despite hardships and misfortune.

This lungfish was carved in a stone found in Kisi province, Kenya, by artist Kennedy Kunda.

(Older students may know of some of the problems in Africa today. This would be a good opportunity to discuss some of these

environmental and political problems - for instance, drought, warfare, disease epidemics like AIDS, polio, & malaria.)

### **#3. PAINTINGS OF BIRDS IN A TREE, RHINOCEROS AND BIRDS**

Except for decorating the outside of houses, painting on a flat surface (two dimensional art) is not a tradition in Africa. However, in the 1950s, artist E.S. Tingatinga began to paint this way. Since that time, other artists have imitated Mr. Tingatinga's style and added ideas of their own. These two paintings are by artists in Tanzania named Rubuni and Anipela.

(Students could name what Western cultures consider to be "art" - sculpture, drawing, painting, collage, etc. and then discuss other culture's ideas about what art is. For instance, does it have to be beautiful? Does it have to be recognizable images? Does it have to hang on a wall or be in a gallery or museum? Does only one person have to produce the art or can several people work on it? Do artists have to be paid for their art?)

### **#4. BEADED PANEL**

Once, these panels were scabbards (coverings) for swords carried by Yoruba leaders. Priests used them. Today, the panels decorate the walls of rooms in important Yoruba houses.

The faces represent chiefs of earlier times. The animals represent spirits that bring power to important people. (Nigeria)

(Students should be able to explain why ancestor and animal spirits would be desirable on an important leader's possessions.)

## **#5. BRONZE LEOPARD**

The leopard is a symbol of kingly power in the kingdom of Benin, West Africa. There, the king sits on a throne shaped like a leopard. His sword is decorated with gold leopards. (Nigeria)

Among the Zulu people of southern Africa, only the king is allowed to wear the leopard skin as a sign of his importance.

(Ask students if there are animal skins in our culture that everyone can wear (leather) and if there are animal skins we associate with wealthy and powerful people (mink, ermine -on royal robes-, crocodile/alligator.)

## **#6. CARVED BIRD, ANTELOPE, AND CROCODILE**

These three carvings are examples of souvenir art from Kenya.

(They play no social role, but are important economically.)

However, among the Agbo cult of Nigeria, the water spirits are Igodo: the bird, Agira: the antelope, and Oni: the crocodile. Water spirits are mischievous creatures that come out of hiding in their water homes to play harmful tricks. The Agbo cult is devoted to using magical powers from ancestors and other life forces to prevent harm. They use animal images in their ritual objects.

## **#7. BRASS HORSE AND RIDER**

The rainforest environment of West Africa is not healthy for animals like horses. Therefore, anyone there who has a horse would have to be wealthy and powerful in order to care for it and keep it alive. (Nigeria)

## **#8. SAWFISH GOLD WEIGHT**

Among the Asante people of Ghana, gold dust was the main money in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Artists cast weights made of brass into many shapes and sizes. They knew how much each size brass weight was worth in gold. A sale was made when, on a balance scale, the amount of gold dust equaled the weight of the brass figure.

Storytellers use the brass weights like this sawfish as charms. Because of their beauty, people also use them as jewelry.

## **#9 and #10 FROG AND FISH BASKETS**

What are some reasons you might make a basket in the shape of an animal?

Do you think these would be fun to use?

## **#11. THREE MONKEYS**

Though we think of monkeys when Africa is mentioned, monkeys are not often included in African art. These three monkeys are posed as "see no evil," "hear no evil," and "speak no evil." This theme is not of African origin. Rather it has been copied all over the world from a Japanese temple carving.

What do you think the African artist was making this carving for?  
(tourists, non-Africans)

## #12. NECKLACE WITH BEADS, SEEDS, AND FISH VERTEBRAE

In Africa, jewelry is very important and often can indicate a special person. African people use many materials to make jewelry. This necklace has beads, seeds, and the vertebrae (backbones) of fish. Fish vertebrae are often used in African jewelry.

(Students could brainstorm special jewelry in our culture. These could include Olympic gold medals, diamond rings, necklaces, earrings, military medals, etc.)

## #13. GOURDS WITH ELEPHANTS INCISED ON THE SIDES

(Note that cutting into a material - incising, as well as etching - also cutting images onto a surface but then printing the images on to paper - are forms of art we recognize in our culture.)

Elephants are symbols of Kings and Royalty in many African cultures. Their ivory (from tusks) has been carved into beautiful objects for African kings to use and to decorate their palaces. What characteristics do elephants have that a king would like to have describe him and his rule?

Show the students the markings on the bottom of the gourds. Ask if they know what these are? These are artist's markings or "signatures." Many potters in the US as well as some contemporary artists from other cultures use marks or symbols instead of their name to identify their work.

## **ACTIVITIES**

(These activities can be used by both younger and older students. Younger students may better be able to work with these activities than some of the suggested discussions above.)

### OBSERVING ANIMALS IN ART

What materials have the African artists used to create their animal art? (List on a blackboard or large paper as many different materials in our objects as possible.)

Which objects use materials from nature? Which materials are manufactured or created by people?

What materials do we use to create art?

Collect bits and pieces (scraps) of wood, string, wire, grasses, fabric, buttons, bottle caps, etc. Using glue sticks, have students create animals from these found or scrap materials.

Have students search for photographs of the animals represented in the African animal art kit. Display the art objects beside the photo of the real animal. (Old National Geographic magazines would be excellent sources for photos for this project.)

### PHOTOGRAPH CARDS

Using the photographs provided and the questions posed on the back of each, have the students examine and explore the art objects depicted. This should follow the discussions of the objects in the kit. Information from these objects will help them with questions suggested on the back of the cards.

Why do you think this flag of the Fante people shows a cat holding a person in its mouth?

(The cat represents a strong and powerful person who can conquer enemies.)

Would you consider a flag "art?" Explain why.

This chief is wearing his war shirt. Why do you think animal carvings were put on this shirt?

(Animals are symbols of power and protection. People hope to gain some power or protection from the spirits of the animal images they wear.)

Do we wear animal images or parts for similar reasons? (Rabbits foot, etc.)

What is this animal? (antelope or chi wara)

How does it compare to the chi wara in the kit? (Students should notice the elements they have in common - curved horns, zig zag shapes in neck, and general antelope form. They also may note how the mask looks when the costume is with it.)

Can you recognize this animal? (This is a baboon mask)

Does art have to look exactly like real things?

## ANIMALS AS SYMBOLS

Have students discuss what a symbol is. Afterwards, brainstorm to create a list of animals we use as symbols in our culture. Have them note the meaning of these animal symbols to us. Examples: American Eagle, Thanksgiving turkey, Smokey the Bear, rabbit's foot, any sports image, the name of certain cars, trucks, and SUVs, etc.

Explore expressions in our culture that mention an animal and its characteristic that are used to describe people. Examples: sly as a fox, quick as a rabbit, timid as a mouse, strong as an ox, mean as a snake.

Using the list of proverbs provided, have students interpret the meaning for all humans that the African proverbs contain. Have students explore our proverbs for similar lessons of life.

## AFRICAN PROVERB ACTIVITY

See if students can explain the lesson for humans that are contained in each proverb. This is a long list, so select those that are suitable for your student age group.

Two small antelopes can beat a big one. (Ashanti people, Ghana)

When the cock is drunk, he forgets about the hawk. (Ashanti people, Ghana)

It is the fool's sheep that break loose twice. (Ashanti people, Ghana)

When the master is absent, the frogs hop into the house. (Buganda)

He who is bitten by a snake fears a lizard. (Buganda)

By trying often, the monkey learns to jump from the tree. (Cameroon)  
(If at first you don't succeed, try again.)

An elephant will reach to the roof of the house. (Cameroon)

Do not teach the paths of the forest to an old gorilla. (Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of Congo.)

Two birds disputed about a kernel, when a third swooped down and carried it off. (Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of Congo.)

The son shoots a leopard; the father is proud. (Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of Congo.)

Wood may remain ten years in the water, but it will never become a crocodile. (Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of Congo.)

When the bee comes to your house, let her have beer, you may want to visit the bee's house some day. (Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of Congo.)

Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.

A home without a woman is like a barn without cattle. (Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of Congo.)

One camel does not make fun of another camel's hump. (Guinea)

Because a man has injured your goat, do not go out and kill his bull. (Kenya)

Some birds avoid the water, ducks seek it. (Nigeria)

When the mouse laughs at the cat, there is hole nearby. (Nigeria)

A big fish is caught with big bait. (Sierra Leone)

An elephant's head is no load for a child. (Sierra Leone)

A roaring lion kills no game. (Uganda)

Copying everybody else all the time, the monkey one day cut his throat. (Zululand southern Africa)

A mouthy bird cannot build a nest. (Cameroon)

## ANIMALS AND LITERATURE

Read the folktale about a hare, a hippopotamus, and an elephant included in this kit. Have the students write their own animal story that illustrates animals teaching a lesson to people.

Read to the students or have them read some of Rudyard Kipling's "Just So Stories" to see his explanations of how some of Africa's animals came to be the way they are today. The Brer rabbit stories are versions of African folk tales brought to the US by enslaved Africans.

Discuss with students how both African cultures and our own (and others too) use animals and animal stories to help explain why the world is the way it is. Why do people use animals as models for human behavior, both good and bad? What is the value of using a story or a proverb to teach a lesson rather than a lecture? Ask students which way they would rather learn.

### A WEST AFRICAN TALE

The hare was not good at taking care of himself. He was always running out of things and he was always borrowing from his neighbors. He especially borrowed a lot from the elephant and the hippopotamus that lived near him.

Finally, he had borrowed so much from the elephant and hippopotamus without paying them back that they became very angry. So the hare tried to calm them down. He told them he would give them what he owed them and more. Then he hurried away and made a long rope from some vines and brought it back to the elephant. He gave the elephant one end of the rope and told him that if he pulled on the rope very hard he would pull in a

great treasure that was on the other end. Then, very quickly before the elephant started to pull, the hare went to the hippopotamus who was standing in the river. The hare gave the hippopotamus the other end of the rope and told him the same thing he had told the elephant - to pull hard and he would get a great treasure. The elephant and the hippopotamus started pulling as hard as they could, and the hare raced back and forth between them, telling them to pull harder. Because the elephant and the hippopotamus were so far away from each other, and because they could not see very well, they did not know that they were pulling against each other. After a while the hare ran away.

But finally the elephant got very tired and thirsty. He went to the river to drink some water and rest. When he got there and saw the hippopotamus, they both knew they had been fooled by the hare. They looked for the hare, but he was very far away by this time.

### STOP AND THINK

The hare is the star (hero) of many African stories. He always wins over the other animals even though he is small and defenseless. Why do you think the hare always wins?

Make up your own stories about animals or use animals to say something about people. Why do you think storytellers use animals instead of people in their stories?