

African Art, Women, History:

The Luba People of Central Africa

Time: 15 minutes

Study Guide

INTRODUCTION

African Art, Women, History: The Luba People of Central Africa is a film about the Luba people and the relationship they have made between memory, art and history. In the absence of writing, they have developed the Lukasa, a memory board that preserves the oral tradition and provides a way to "remember" their history.

In the film we are transported between an exhibit on Luba art at the Museum for African Art in New York, and scenes of Luba society videotaped by Dr. Mary Nooter Roberts from 1998 - 90, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, formerly Zaire. Dr. Roberts, curator of the exhibit, gives an articulate explanation of both the artifacts and the life of the people. This juxtaposition reinforces the functional role of Luba art as a historical record, a symbol of authority, and spiritual expression.

Dr. Roberts, now chief curator of the U.C.L.A. Fowler Museum of Africa Art, focuses on the Lukasa, the way it is made, the placement and color of beads and the significance of the object. The hourglass shape refers to the layout of the royal court itself and the form of a woman. She explains the importance of women to the Luba as a spiritual embodiment because "only the body of a woman is strong enough to hold the spirit of a king."

Seeing how the Lukasa is "read," and how the other art objects are used - not just admired - give a fascinating and meaningful insight into the integral role that Luba art plays in the life of the people.

TO THE TEACHER:

This video is appropriate for students from upper elementary (Grade 3) to adult learners. However, the student guide is targeted for Grades 3 - 8. The objectives of the guide are to:

- stimulate active viewing that engages students' minds;
- provide questions for reflection;
- suggest experiential activities that involve many areas of the curriculum.

The intent is to give students an opportunity to interpret the artists' work, understand the social and historical context of the artists' lives and to make connections to their own lives and learning.

SHARE INFORMATION ABOUT THE ARTISTS

You may want to begin by sharing some information about the Luba people, the artists and their role in Luba society. Adapt the language to the appropriate age level of the class.

INFORMATION ABOUT LUBA SOCIETY AND ART

The Luba people live in the Democratic Republic of Congo, formerly Zaire. According to britannica.com, Luba are also called Baluba, a Bantu-speaking cluster of peoples numbering about 5,594,000 in the late 20th century. The name Luba applies to a variety of tribes that, though of different origins, speak closely related languages, share common cultural traits and a common political history from the beginning of the Luba empire in the 16th century to its breakdown dating from the 17th century until the three main subdivisions that exist now.

The Luba are savanna and forest dwellers who practice hunting, fishing, food gathering and agriculture, (cassava, corn) keep small livestock and live in villages of a single street with rectangular thatched-roof huts along either side. The central authority is vested in a king.

In contrast to art in the Western world, which is made for aesthetic purposes and signed by the artists, African art is made for a purpose and is not signed by an individual. In African cultures, art is not separated from everyday life; it is an important part of it. The representation of women in Luba sculpture is widespread and correlates to the important role of women in Luba society. The Luba are best known for their memory boards, stools, divination bowls and beautifully carved bow stands. Each one of these objects has a specific role. For example, the miniature anvils seen in the film express the metaphor of a blacksmith transforming a person into a king. The iron pin is another important object for the Luba and is seen protruding from the Lukasas, to "hold in the spirit."

Although African art is often referred to as "primitive," this is a misnomer. These art objects are the result of highly evolved civilizations and practices. The production of exceptional art forms is not limited to the West. Throughout history other cultures have made important contributions to art. Often their artworks differ in intent and appearance from those produced in the West, but this in no way diminishes their appeal or their importance.

It is hoped that this encounter with Luba art will arouse students' curiosity about other cultures and their art.

TIPS FOR MULTICULTURAL TEACHING

Dr. Ellen Dissanayake, author of *What Is Art for?*, (University of Washington Press, ISBN.0295970170) offers guidance for multicultural teaching:

1. Despite varying ways of life, humans of any culture are more alike than different;

2. In addition to universal physical needs for warmth, shelter, protection from harm, etc., there are psychological needs that developed during our ancestors' lives as hunter-gathers and that all humans still share;
3. What we call cultural differences can be thought of as different ways that societies address and satisfy these same fundamental needs;
4. The arts are some ways that different cultures address and satisfy common human abilities, needs and predispositions;
5. All cultures have forms of the arts and participate in them for very similar reasons; we can talk about these contexts and concerns for the arts in pre-modern cultures under three categories:
 - a. Heart - the arts portray and give opportunities for developing emotional relationship with others, for becoming a part of one's social group.
 - b. Mind - the arts are products of human intelligence and reflect human needs to create order and make sense of the world.
 - c. Hand - the arts reflect human participation in a "hands-on life," close to nature and within the natural world; humans in pre-modern societies use their own abilities and energy to make things happen.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

Help students actively view the video by giving them things to watch for and questions to think about, as appropriate for their age and grade level.

- Watch for a map of the Central African Republic, the home of the Luba people.
- Watch for dancing and drumming by the Luba people.
- Watch for the display of the Lukasa and the explanation of what it means.
- Watch and listen for a high pitch vocal sound characteristic of the culture.
- Watch for people viewing the performance in traditional and western-style dress.
- Watch for a man explaining the memories on a Lukasa.
- Watch for the hourglass shape of the Lukasa and the protruding iron pin and listen to what they represent.
- Watch for something funny that happens when the dancers sit down.
- Watch for the blacksmith forge and tools and how they compare to Luba royalty.
- Watch for the procession of the King and how miniature anvils are used in the ceremony.
- Watch for other artistic objects made by the Luba, including the Abze, worn over a person's shoulder.

- Watch for how the famous artist Picasso borrowed from African art.

QUESTION FOR STUDENTS

Begin by reviewing selected items from What to Watch For as preparation for interpretative questions about the Luba people and their artwork.

- ? Where do the Luba people live?
- ? What is a Lukasa? Why is it important to the Luba people?
- ? What is the oral tradition? What is the difference between reading a story and telling or re-telling a story?
- ? Why isn't the Lukasa understood by all of the Luba people?
- ? Is the performance of the memories on the Lukasa board always the same? Why or why not?
- ? Why are the different colored beads and the way they are arranged important?
- ? What is the significance of the iron pin?
- ? What does the hourglass shape of the Lukasa refer to? (royal palace) The shape also refers to the female figure and the special position women hold in Luba society.
- ? How is the transformation of a man into a king like the way the blacksmith transforms iron?
- ? What do you see in Picasso's artwork that looks like African art?
- ? What can you learn from Luba art?

EXPERIENCES FOR STUDENTS

The following suggestions are designed to help students express ideas and interpretations about the meaning of Luba art and work to their own lives. Feel free to select from the curriculum applications that follow or adapt to meet the needs of your students and learning goals.

1. What is a culture? Do all cultures have some things in common? If so, what? What makes one culture different from another? Ask students to share customs and traditions from their own culture and list them on the board. Create a graphic web organizer to record the responses and come to a definition of culture.
2. Find out more about the Luba people, their art, culture, environment and history on the Internet or in an encyclopedia. Divide up the different topics among the class and ask each person to present a report to get a more complete view about this society.
3. In the film you hear a comparison between reading a book and telling a story. When a book is read, it is always the same. But, when you tell a story, it usually changes. Sit in circles of 8 -10 people and play the game Telephone to illustrate this point. The first person tells a story aloud; the second person whispers the story to the next person and so on until the last person hears the story. The last person tells the story aloud. Talk about how it has changed and the reasons why. What does this say about memory?
4. A Lukasa or memory board is a way for the Luba people to remember their history and tradition. The different colored beads and the way they are arranged are pneumatic devices to help people remember. Can you think of pneumatic devices we use in our life today?

For example, remembering the notes on the piano by using initials like Every Good Boy Deserves Fun. Use pneumonics to remember something you are trying to learn.

5. Experiment with the different ways you can interpret a brief story. Choose an existing story or make up one of your own. Practice telling the story three different ways. Here are some ideas: move from being a narrator to creating voices for the characters; change the inflection of your voice; vary the rate, pitch and volume; use movement and gesture; add descriptive words; use pauses and silences; start at the end of the story and go backwards; create a different mood or feeling. Does this activity help you understand why the performance of the memories on the Lukasa boards were never the same?
6. How do we recall our memories? Think about a special memory that you have: it can be happy or sad. Use markers or crayons to draw a picture showing you at that time. Write a title and short paragraph to explain the picture.

7. Imagine you are a newspaper reporter and someone has just called the newsroom to report that a rare object has been stolen from the museum. When you start investigating, you find out the object is a Lukasa. For several days you follow the story by going to the museum and interviewing the curators about the object and talking to the police about their progress. After a week the police find the Lukasa in the home of a lady, who took it because she thought it would make a nice decoration. Your job is to write a story about the theft and its outcome, including a complete description of the Lukasa, what it means and why it is valuable. Include a quote from the lady who took it and from the museum curator who explains how he/she feels about what happened and particularly, the lady's reason for stealing the Lukasa.

8. Compare Picasso's art and African art. Describe the similarities and differences. Find out when Picasso first saw African art and how he started using elements of it in his own work. Imagine you are Picasso telling his fellow artists and admirers how African art was one of the influences that led him to Cubism

9. Look at the video for examples of other artworks made by the Luba people. In addition to the Lukasa, they are most famous for their stools, bowls and carved bow stands. Pause the video at an example you especially like and reproduce it using crayons or paint. Try to find out more about it and the particular function it served.

10. Ask someone in your family to tell you a story about your family's history. Then think about how you can create a work of art to re-tell the story. Here are some suggestions: Use symbols to capture the highlights of the story, for example, a boat to show how the family emigrated from a certain place; a plow to show that they were farmers. Or, create a storyboard that shows different scenes that tell the story (this could even grow into a small book.) Another idea is to create a family timeline on long rolls of paper labeled in ten-year increments, with photos, drawings and writing as a record. Key in events from local, national and international history to bring context to your history.

11. What are the ways that we capture our memories today? Photographs, video and audio recorders, diaries, artwork, scrapbooks. Pick one or more of these media to record things that are happening at school, at home, in the community and the world. Create an exhibition, book, video, or web site to share your record of memories.

12. Divide the class in half. Ask each student to draw a head like those on the memory board with the iron pin protruding. Half of the class will sign their work; the other will not. Discuss how members of each group feel: does signing make a difference in how hard you worked? Do you think it makes a difference to people who see the works? Why or why not? What if this experiment happened in a Luba village? What would be the reaction to those artists who signed their work?

VIDEO SERIES

African Art, Women, History: The Luba People of Central Africa, created and produced by Linda Freeman, is one of a series of videos that provide an intimate look at both the lives and work of famous African American artists. Art history is being made on film, as the artists create right before our eyes. These documentaries profile the personal relationships, joys and struggles of these extraordinary human beings - and give them the recognition they richly deserve. The goal of the series is to teach students about the art-making process and to inspire them to reach their own life goals.

For more information about African Art, Women, History: The Luba people of Central Africa and the other videos, contact Linda Freeman at L & S Video, Inc. Tel: 914-238-9366; fax: 914-238-6324.

This video study guide is by Nancy Roucher, an arts education consultant, who specializes in interdisciplinary curriculum. She lives in Sarasota, Florida, and can be reached at nancyhr@home.com or at 941-349-3439.