

Google Arts & Culture
Learn Together: The Art of Africa

["Women of Dignity," by Moyo Ogundipe, 2009.](#)
[Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, Pan-Atlantic University](#)



Using the lesson plan and Google Arts & Culture resources

This lesson plan is designed to support you as you explore Google Arts & Culture stories and exhibits related to the lesson topic. The images you will see here are just a sample of the media—texts, images, audio, and video—available to you on the Google Arts & Culture website and app. As the lesson uses only resources found on GA&C, it cannot present every aspect of a given topic. A parent or teacher might be guiding you through the lesson, or you might choose to complete it on your own.

All you need to access the lesson is an internet connection and a web browser or the Google Arts & Culture app. You may want to take notes, whether you do that digitally or with paper and pen.

The lesson plan has an **introduction**, which will describe the topic and provide some background information that will help you understand what you are seeing, hearing, and reading. Then the lesson will take you on a journey from one **Story** to another, fill in some details along the way, and pose **questions** that will help you focus on important ideas. A **quiz** and a link for **exploring the topic further** are followed by **ideas for projects** related to the lesson topic that you can do at home or in the classroom.

As noted, the lesson plan includes **questions** about the main stories, and there is also a **quiz**. You will want to write answers to the questions in a notebook or on a piece of paper. Then you can check all your answers when you've finished the lesson.

Resources on the Google Arts & Culture website include Themes, Stories, Museum Views, items, and images.

- ❖ **Themes** bring together stories, exhibits, collections, images, audio, and video files that relate to a topic.
- ❖ In a **Story**, clicking on the arrows on the right and left sides of a slide will move you forward and backward. Just keep clicking to keep moving forward. (Note that in some stories, you scroll up and down.) Audio and videos on slides will play automatically. Clicking on an image title will take you to a page with more information about it.
- ❖ In **Museum Views**, you move through a 3D space. Click to move forward. Click, hold, and move the cursor left or right to turn.
- ❖ An **item** will take you to an individual **image**, where you can zoom in and sometimes read more about the artefact.



In this lesson, you will learn about:

- ❖ Why Africa is considered the cradle of humanity and of art.
- ❖ The early art and culture of ancient Nigeria.
- ❖ The art and culture of ancient peoples of southern Africa.
- ❖ How contemporary African artists draw on history and creativity to make art today.

You will:

- ❖ Explore artworks and stories of art from western and southern Africa.
- ❖ Answer some questions about what you have seen and read.

This lesson will take **30–45 minutes** to complete.



Learn Together: The Art of Africa

Africa is a vast and diverse continent. Today, it is made up of over 50 countries, but those nations include thousands of different ethnic groups, each with a long and unique history.

Africa is also the birthplace of humanity. Human beings, the species *Homo sapiens*, first evolved on this continent, and later spread out across the globe. Africa is where the very first humans developed language, culture, and art. Ancient African rock art dates back tens or even hundreds of thousands of years. It gives us a glimpse into the minds of our earliest ancestors.

This lesson draws from two museums. The [Origins Centre](#) in Johannesburg, South Africa, displays art from the many groups of people who live in the southern part of the continent.

[The Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, Pan-Atlantic University](#) in Lagos, Nigeria, holds art from the rich cultures of Africa's west coast. Both museums display art from early human cultures to today.

As you view the exhibits and stories in this lesson, think about these questions:

- ❖ How did the earliest human art influence the art that came later?
- ❖ How did African artists communicate their beliefs and ideas in art?
- ❖ How are today's African artists inspired by the past?
- ❖ How does ancient and modern African art relate to art around the world?

The Birthplace of Humanity

Archaeologists agree that human beings, the species *Homo sapiens*, first appeared in Africa. Fossil skeletons show how human bodies evolved. Traces of ancient art show that our modern minds, cultures, and technologies first appeared here as well.

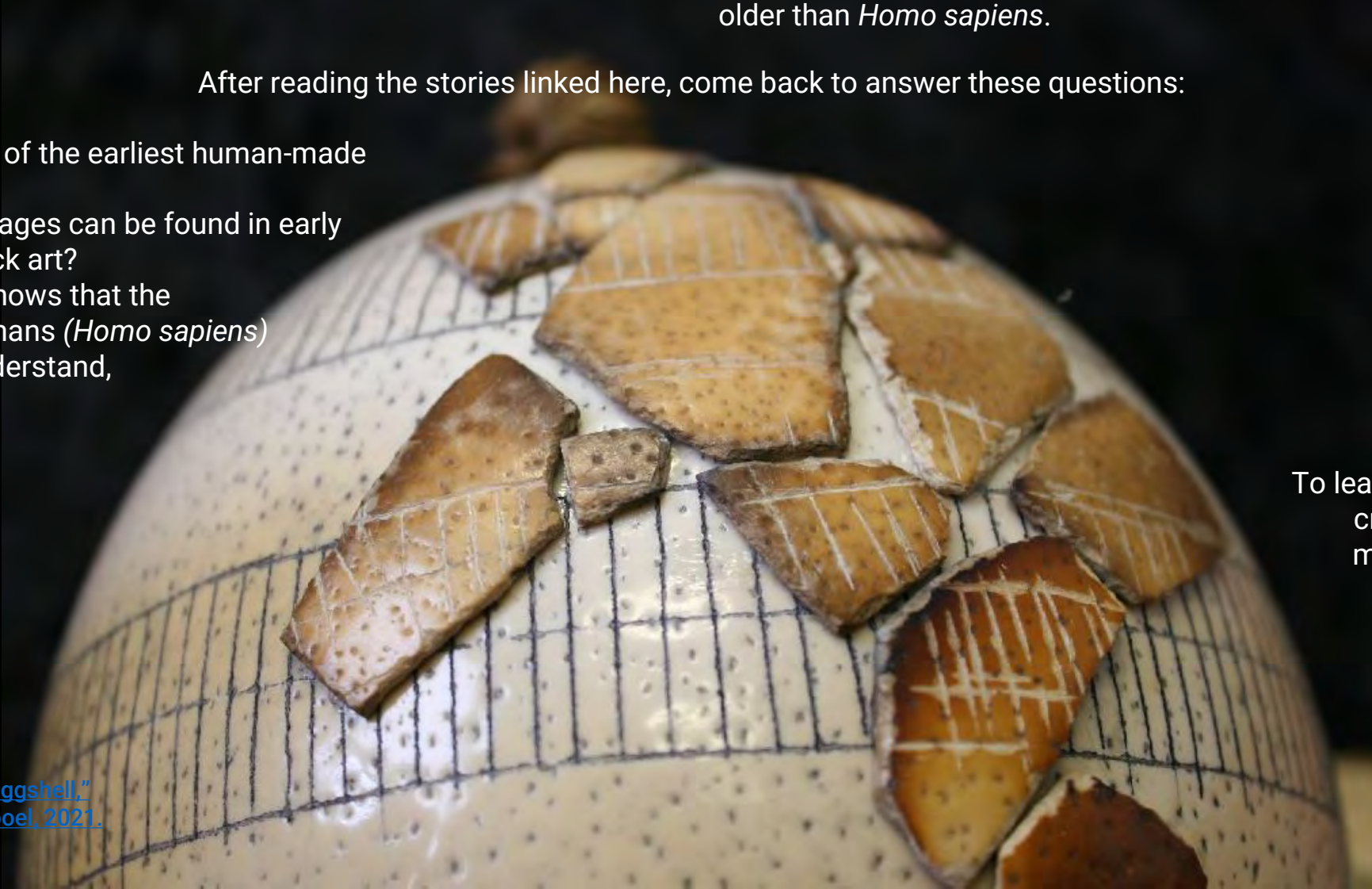
The Origins Centre displays evidence of the [earliest human art](#), including a priceless collection of [rock art](#)—some of the oldest human art that survives to the present day. The museum also displays some of the earliest human-made [tools and technology](#), some of which are even older than *Homo sapiens*.

After reading the stories linked here, come back to answer these questions:

1. What were some of the earliest human-made tools ever found?
2. What kinds of images can be found in early southern African rock art?
3. What evidence shows that the earliest modern humans (*Homo sapiens*) could think, feel, understand, and communicate like we do?

To learn the history of African creativity from ancient to modern times, click [here](#).

["replica engraved ostrich eggshell,"](#)
[Replica by Cedric Poggenpoel, 2021.](#)
[Origins Centre](#)



Ancient Art of Nigeria

Africa is home to some of the earliest civilizations, or large, sophisticated cultures. The fertile areas in what is now Nigeria were home to many ancient civilizations, including the kingdoms of Ife, Nok, and Benin. Many of their artifacts are displayed at the Yemisi Shyllon Museum.

[“Commemorative Altar Head,” Unknown. Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, Pan-Atlantic University](#)



[“NOK Head \(Female\),” Unknown. Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, Pan-Atlantic University](#)

Around 1500 B.C., the [Nok civilization](#) made sculptures of terra cotta, or fired clay. The [Benin Kingdom](#) is famous for its complex bronze sculptures depicting its royalty and religion. At around the same time, in the 11th century, the city of [Ife](#) produced hauntingly lifelike metal sculptures.

After reading about these ancient civilizations of Nigeria, come back to answer these questions:



1. What was the “lost wax” method of creating bronze sculptures?
2. What are some characteristics of the Nok style of sculpture?
3. What may have been the purpose and meaning of the bronze art of Benin and Ife?

[“Ife Royal Head,” Unknown. Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, Pan-Atlantic University](#)



Ancient Art of Southern Africa

The San and Khoe are indigenous to South Africa. Because their culture has been passed down through many centuries, San and Khoe descendants feel a deep connection to the ancient art of their ancestors.

Learn about the history of the San and Khoe in South Africa [here](#).

Read details about the role of [magic and transformation](#) in San beliefs, and how they practice their spirituality through trance [dance](#).

After reading about traditional San and Khoe art and beliefs, come back to answer these questions:

1. What lifestyle did most San live before the 17th century?
2. What is a Therianthrope, and what role does it play in San beliefs?
3. How is the San Great Dance shown in San art?

To learn about the role of the eland in San life, click [here](#).



African Art Today

Africa is a vibrant hub for artistic expression. Today, African artists draw on the continent's diverse history, culture, and wildlife. Their artworks often make use of local materials and ancient techniques.

In the late 1800s, the Hanawa of South Africa used the ancient form of rock art to tell the story of their successful [rebellion against European colonialism](#). Southern African craftswomen tell the full history of the San—including colonialism and modern life—through [embroidery](#).

In 20th century Nigeria, Ben Enwonwu and the [Zaria Art Society](#) rejected the influence of European art and looked to African traditions and materials. Learn how Nigerian artists express [political and social protest](#) through their art.

After learning about contemporary African art, come back to answer these questions:

1. What object did the Hanawa paint as a symbol of colonial oppression?
2. What African artistic traditions did the Zaria Art Society use in their art?
3. How do contemporary African artists depict modern life in Africa?

To learn about some of the most prominent women artists in Nigeria, click [here](#).

Quiz

Read the questions and write your answers in your notebook or on a piece of paper.

1. What materials did the earliest African artists use to make art?
2. How does the Origins Centre work with partners to conserve, protect, and display ancient rock art?
3. What do the art of Ife and Benin have in common?
4. What can archaeologists learn about Nigerian civilizations from their sculptures?
5. What spiritual beliefs do the San show in their art?
6. How has the San lifestyle changed since the 17th century, and how has it stayed the same?
7. How did European colonialism affect African art?
8. How do modern African artists draw on the history of African art?

Explore Further

You have learned a bit about art from two regions of Africa, but there is much more to discover. To learn more about the history, ancient art, and modern art of western and southern Africa, click [here](#).



It's Your Turn!

In this lesson, you learned about a selection of ancient and modern African art. Here are some ideas for projects that you can do at home or in the classroom.

- ❖ View the Origins Centre story about the earliest [pigments](#), or colors used in paint. Try using natural materials such as charcoal, white chalk, colorful juice, or rust mixed with vegetable oil to make your own paint.
- ❖ Choose one modern African artwork and respond to it using words, poetry, a video, or an artwork of your own.
- ❖ Use black construction paper and craft materials or bright paints to tell a story in a style similar to the San history [embroidery](#).

["Colourful powders ground from stones," Tania Olsson, 2020. Origins Centre](#)

Answers

The Birthplace of Humanity

1. The earliest human tools were chipped stone cores, such as cleavers and hand axes, which were used to chop plants or meat.
2. Many of the earliest paintings are of animals. There are also geometric patterns.
3. Answers will vary; researchers continue to debate the dates and evidence for early human culture. Early human tool technology and hunting methods required skill, teamwork, and sophisticated communication, and their art was decorative and practical and probably had complex symbolic meaning.

Ancient Art of Nigeria

1. The “lost wax” method was making a shape out of beeswax, covering it with clay to make a mold, and then firing the wax and the mold. The clay hardened and the wax melted away, leaving a hollow shape that would be filled with melted bronze.
2. Nok sculptures have triangular eyes, circles to show the pupils and the mouth, and hair in bunches or mounds.
3. The art of Benin and Ife might have been portraits of royalty or symbols of royal power.

Ancient Art of Southern Africa

1. The San were hunter-gatherers.
2. A Therianthrope is a mythical being that is part human and part animal. They may be a shape that healers take as they travel to the spirit realm.
3. San art shows people participating in the Great Dance. It also shows healers transforming and entering the spirit world. Contemporary San art shows animals and people moving freely between worlds.

African Art Today

1. The Hanawa painted a train as a symbol of colonialism.
2. The Zaria Art Society used figures from traditional mythology and folktales, and ancient traditions such as bronze sculptures.
3. Answers will vary. Artists depict modern life such as the “Lagos lady” and environmental disasters in sculpture and paintings.

Quiz

1. The earliest African artists used soft, iron-rich stone (ochre), bone, ostrich-egg shells, charcoal, plant resin, or blood to make paint.
2. The Rock Art Research Institute relocated the engravings indoors, where they were protected, and the Origins Centre displays them in controlled temperatures and conditions to prevent damage, and lighting that reproduces their original natural surroundings.
3. The art of Ife and Benin both made portraits in bronze. They may have both made portraits of royalty.
4. Archaeologists can learn how the peoples of Nigeria were ruled and their religious beliefs about royal power.
5. The San show how their healers transform themselves and travel to the spirit world to bring back powers such as healing or rain.
6. Many San are no longer hunters and gatherers, instead living on farms or in modern cities or towns. The San still pass down their traditions through the generations.
7. European colonists oppressed African peoples and often tried to stamp out their artistic traditions and cultures. Colonists often viewed European art as superior.
8. Modern African artists draw on traditional African folklore, religion, images, materials, and techniques in their art.