

# Global Perspectives in Art Education

based on examples from West Africa



Secondary 2



# Impprint

This handout was commissioned by the Bavarian State Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs.



fig.: Coat of arms of the Free State of Bavaria

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This publication is funded by *Engagement Global* with funds from the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and was produced as part of the Länder initiatives to implement the Orientation Framework for Global Development Education. The State Institute for School Quality and Educational Research is solely responsible for the content. The content does not reflect the views of the BMZ.



Fig.: Engagement Global logo,  
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Mit Mitteln des



Fig.: Logo of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and  
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Layout: Werner Bloß, State Institute for School Quality and Educational Research (ISB), Munich  
December 2022

# Table of contents

Foreword	5
Introduction	6
Origin and structure of the manual	7
Selection of the proposed teaching objects	8
Global Perspectives in Art Education	11
Anchoring in the orientation framework	14
1. Representation, wisdom and resistance – Brass Queenmothers of Benin and Yaa Asantewaa	16
2. Homes for soul beings – the Akuaba-figures	22
3. te ken dy dye – a post from Cameroon – now in the Museum Fünf Kontinente	30
4. Between pop culture and statement – the Barbershop Panel	41
5. Between opening and self-assertion – Vincent Akwete Kofi’s Crucifix	47
6. Kente – A traditional fabric between indigenous cultural product and political statement	52
7. Christ or Emir? – Uche Okeke: untitled, 1961	60
8. Between local and global goals – National Theatre Building of Ghana	68
9. Look into the past and you will see the future! – Sankofa on the Burial Ground	74
10. Surreal reappraisal of colonialism – Yinka Shonibare’s Mrs Pinckney	82
11. Art and Death – Paa Joe: Nike Trainer (Size 42) and Selasi Awusi Sosu: untitled	90
12. Between art and admonition – El Anatsui’s Rising Sea	99
13. End of the line for departure – Ibrahim Mahama: Aeroplanes	106
14. Experimentation stage – Priscilla Kennedy’s studio	111
Biographies	118
Literature and sources	119
Web links	123
Recommended reading	124
Recommendations of the Bavarian State Agency for Civic Education	125
List of figures	126



# Foreword

**Dear colleagues,**

Ambiguity may appear as a striking phenomenon and sometimes as a troublesome problem in a complex plural world. Dealing with it constantly challenges our and our students' ability to empathise and tolerate as well as to critically distance and reflect on their own and others' views.

Ambiguity cannot be avoided or circumvented. According to Niklas Luhmann (2001), it can be easily and directly explained by the contingency of our communication, its possible randomness or accidental possibility. That is, ambiguity is immanent in human communication, including visual communication.

If one looks beyond the horizon of one's own experience, in the case of this manual beyond the boundaries of a European concept of the image and the canon of art, one can quickly be overcome by the feeling of being overwhelmed by this contingency, of a multiplication of ambiguity and thus of increased uncertainty. This manual does not even attempt to counter the uncertainty with monolithic truths or certainties. It makes a constructive virtue out of communicative necessity – also and especially for teaching.

Instead of relying on one – in the global focus possibly erroneous – interpretation offer, two and more interpretation approaches for one object each are exemplarily taken into focus. Art teachers and other experts in art and science from Ghana and Bavaria formulated diverse points of view, exchanged ideas and in this way together formed a differentiated, plural and multi-perspective picture.

It promises to do more justice to the examples of West African art and design shown here than even a well-researched study of works from the hand of one individual. In this way, it opens up valuable, hitherto difficult-to-handle objects for use in art lessons and provides comprehensive suggestions for dealing with diversity, with what is supposedly foreign and what is supposedly one's own. The uncertainty of ambiguity is made usable here for exchange in the classroom in the sense of Günter Küppers (1996), "... absolute security remains [...] unattainable and insecurity is permanently available as the driving force of a social dynamic" [own translation from: „... absolute Sicherheit bleibt [...] unerreichbar und Unsicherheit steht als treibende Kraft einer sozialen Dynamik dauerhaft zur Verfügung“].

We hope you enjoy the discussion and the implementation of the diverse suggestions and ideas developed in the transcontinental exchange!



Fig: Anselm Räde, Director of the State Institute for School Quality and Educational Research

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "A. - Räde".

Munich, December 2022



# Introduction

## What is this manual supposed to answer?

This manual is based on a fundamental human experience, the encounter with something unfamiliar that has been made by other people. Unfamiliar things that cannot be classified, not understood, that cannot (at first) be dealt with in a meaningful way because they elude familiar and traditional categories. This experience is irritating, but it can also arouse curiosity.

The frequency of this experience has been steadily increasing since the modern age; a tendency that has accelerated enormously with globalisation and continues to do so: Unfamiliar, foreign phenomena are coming closer and closer to people more and more often – e.g. when travelling, not only abroad, in museums and at art exhibitions, in intercultural encounters in the immigration society we live in, as well as in digital communities and transnational work contexts.

A future-oriented education system must reflect this life-world experience and it will try to develop strategies to do so. Ultimately, this involves the question of what skills the students who will take on responsibility tomorrow need to deal with this challenge in such a way that it contributes to mutual understanding and constructive dialogue. Art lessons can make an important contribution to this.

Art lessons are primarily concerned with visual-aesthetic forms of expression, i.e. something that (in the European tradition) can be called, e.g., art, design, architecture or arts and crafts – in English there is the collective term "visual cultures" for this. However, art - to name just one example – is often not only called something completely different in other regions of the world, most languages do not even have a meaningful equivalent for it (Wagner 2022).

Moreover, the phenomena that come close to what is understood by art from a European perspective are usually quite differently embedded socially, politically, culturally or religiously. Works, artefacts, objects, practices that are special in their respective contexts in a particular way are at the centre of the encounter there, which from the European perspective can often only be understood with difficulty at first. This is why art lessons can contribute in an exemplary way to the educational goal of "Global Learning" and this manual is intended as such a contribution. It focuses on the objects. Some of these are also examples of the ongoing debate about the restitution of these objects. Even though this debate is of great political relevance with regard to dealing with the colonial past of the countries of origin, it is only briefly addressed in the articles on the relevant objects in order not to obscure the essential aim of the manual. However, the authors are of course fully aware of the problem.



# Origin and structure of the manual

## History of origins

In developing this manual, we were able to draw on the cooperation of artists, art educators and researchers at the University of Education, Winneba in Ghana, the largest teacher training institution in West Africa, the Academy of Fine Arts Munich and the ISB working group "Bilder - Bilderwelten - Weltbilder" [Images – Image Worlds – World Images], which has been in existence since the 2018 / 2019 school year and is funded by *Engagement Global* and the Bavarian State Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs. The contributors from Ghana are introduced in the **appendix**. Over the years, a relationship of trust has developed in this collaboration that has enabled us to walk the path we have chosen here together:

- First, we asked colleagues in Winneba to nominate objects to be included in this manuall. This selection was made completely independently. These are the objects we are primarily concerned with here. A larger collection comes from the Museum Fünf Kontinente in Munich. The Ghanaian team got to know the museum beforehand as part of the cooperation. The whole project team visited the museum, tried to put the objects back into their original context and to broaden the perspective on them. This focus offers an enormous advantage for the Bavarian students: they have a chance to see the selected objects in the original as well.
- In most cases, the Ghanaian colleagues provided written interpretations for the objects in the second step.
- In a third step, the Bavarian colleagues then formulated their questions about the objects and interpretations. In spring 2022, a joint workshop took place at the Iwalewahaus (University of Bayreuth). At this workshop, the different approaches and perspectives were intensively discussed.
- On this basis, the Bavarian colleagues then developed the materials for art lessons presented here. In the process, the texts were repeatedly coordinated with the experts from Ghana in ongoing contact.
- In a final phase, the texts were checked again for technical accuracy by Philipp Schramm from the University of Bayreuth and by Dr Stefan Eisenhofer, Head of the Africa Department at Museum Fünf Kontinente in Munich.

This genesis is quite unusual. The decision on the selection of almost all objects was made in Ghana. It is probably the first manual for art lessons in which the hierarchy in the South-North dialogue, which is often observed, has been reversed. In addition, in order to maintain multi-perspectivity, the voices from the global South are presented in the handout alongside the Bavarian perspectives.

### Engagement Global

*Engagement Global* promotes development cooperation and development education on behalf of the German Federal Government. *Engagement Global* is co-editor of the "Orientierungsrahmen für den Lernbereich Globale Entwicklung im Rahmen einer Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklung" [Orientation framework for the learning area Global Development in the context of Education for Sustainable Development]. This manual is committed to this framework.



# Selection of the proposed teaching objects

## Geographical distribution

This manual presents 16 objects in 14 chapters. 14 of them were made in West Africa. A work by Yinka Shonibare, who lives and works in London, represents the diaspora. An object with a strong connection to West Africa is a monument in New York.

This predominantly regional focus is mainly due to the fact that the people who selected it live and work in Winneba, Ghana. In our view, however, this regional focus is not a shortcoming, on the contrary. Beyond what has already been said, it underlines once again what this manual is about: the encounters with in the selected objects, which can trigger learning processes through the encounter or confrontation with the unfamiliar.

In other words, it is about learning with regard to a specific question, which in principle could just as well be practised with examples from another region of the world, another time, another socio-cultural context.

To put it bluntly once again: This manual is not about the question of how to teach "African art" or "West African culture" of certain epochs, but about exemplary encounters with unfamiliar objects that arouse curiosity, as also suggested by the "Orientation Framework for Global Development Education".

## Contextual and temporal distribution

With regard to the temporal distribution, historical epochs and political contexts can again be distinguished in the present case. Above all, the upheavals that occurred as a result of the colonisation of West Africa make three major sections necessary here, as the contexts that changed as a result of this each redefine the role of image production.

Pre-colonial visual cultures are addressed in the first three chapters. However, their visual languages also shape later forms of expression, e.g. in the course of the return to pre-colonial traditions (e.g. African Renaissance, nation building). In contrast, explicitly colonial objects were not named by the Ghanaian team. Instead, the focus is clearly on postcolonial contexts (five chapters), i.e. initially on the period after independence was achieved. Contemporary contexts are just as broadly represented (six chapters), linked to representatives of a Global Art in which artists from Africa play an increasingly important role.

## Content distribution - allocation according to functions

This classification also addresses the question of the role of the visual languages in the respective contexts. Looking at the selection made by the Ghanaian experts, three clear groups emerge. However, when assigning the individual objects, ambiguities arise – for methodological reasons, since several perspectives are to be addressed. One example, the Kente cloth, is historically based. Originally a sign of power, it became a sign of resistance in the course of history and was then used primarily in the context of decorative communication design. Therefore, the classification made here is a variable one that can nevertheless provide a useful initial orientation in the confusing field.



The proposed three groups are:

### **Pre-colonial image cultures, some of which are still effective today:**

- Objects (wooden or bronze sculptures or fabrics) with a cultic-religious function with regard to social rules in a group:

- Queenmother (chapter 1)
- Akuaba figures (chapter 2)
- Veranda post (chapter 3)
- Adinkras (chapter 9)

### **Postcolonial visual cultures:**

- Political function:

- Portrait of Yaa Asantewa (chapter 1)
- Kente textiles (chapter 6)
- Nationaltheatre Accra (chapter 8)

- Communication design:

- Barbershop Panel (chapter 4)
- Kente textiles (chapter 6)
- Sankofa (chapter 9)

- Religiously inspired works:

- Vincent Kofi: Crucifix (chapter 5)
- Uche Okeke: untitled (chapter 7)

### **Contemporary visual cultures:**

- Global Art and Global Visual Culture as part of the art system and market largely determined by the global North:

- Kente textiles (chapter 6)
- Yinka Shonibare: Mrs Pinckney (chapter 10)
- Paa Joe: Nike Trainer (chapter 11)
- Ibrahim Mahama: Aeroplanes (chapter 13)
- El Anatsui: Rising Sea (chapter 12)
- Priscilla Kennedy's Studio (chapter 14)



## The lesson suggestions

Each object presentation is followed by as many teaching suggestions as possible, which are often very short. These show that all the objects offer great potential for the most diverse implementations in art lessons. We have deliberately chosen not to provide any elaborate lesson models or lesson plans, nor any copy templates or instructions for specific grades. We are convinced that in this particular case, the most varied possible impulses (during the elaboration we always spoke of a firework of ideas) have a greater potential, above all to open up the richness of the respective objects and to give the students room to develop their own, individual ideas and approaches.

The teaching suggestions are structured according to the following pattern, which is specific to the subject of art: First, there are possibilities for the students to approach the objects pictorially, to explore them. In a second part, ideas for the linguistic discussion follow. The complexity of the content approach suggests cross-curricular approaches, which are presented before the last section, which has the objects as a starting point for further projects on the topic.

## Professional exchange and counselling

Such an ambitious project would not have been possible without help. We thank above all

- the colleagues in Winneba, Ghana, especially Dr. Ebenezer Kwabena Acquah, Dr. Patrique deGraft-Yankson, Dr. Osuanyi Quaicoor Essel, Prof. Dr. Bea Lundt, Dr. Gertrude Nkrumah and Selasi Awusi Sosu. Their short biographies can be found in the **corresponding chapter**,
- Dr. Stefan Eisenhofer and Dr. Karin Guggeis, Museum Fünf Kontinente, München,
- Dr. Katharina Fink and Philipp Schramm, Iwalewahaus, University of Bayreuth,
- and the conveyor *Engagement Global* / Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, Germany.



# Global Perspectives in Art Education

## based on examples of objects from West Africa – a didactic introduction

### Ways of dealing with the irritatingly unfamiliar

The educationalist Hans-Christoph Koller – following Bernhard Waldenfels – has developed three basic types of reaction to something that eludes our categories and which he calls, with Waldenfels, the "foreign". According to this, we can either ignore, exclude or destroy that which encounters us in an irritating way.

1. ignore, exclude, destroy or
2. assimilate it, classify it into the familiar or
3. leave the strangeness, but in responding creatively to it, develop ourselves further and thus create something third, something new. (Koller 2018, pp. 79-87)

This manual follows on from the third possibility. On the one hand, the development of creative responses to the unfamiliar is the best tradition of the subject of art, and on the other hand, it corresponds to ethical principles and educational policy goals that shape and guide Bavarian education:

"Within the framework of intercultural education, students acquire elementary knowledge about other cultures and religions, which enables culturally sensitive behaviour and peaceful coexistence in a pluralistic and globalised society. By comparing their own attitudes and behaviour with those of others, they develop interest and openness, mutual respect and tolerance towards other people with their culture-specific ideas and behaviour, e.g. with regard to lifestyle, language and religion. Intercultural competence is demonstrated by the fact that people and cultures learn from each other and thus enrich each other." (translated after the Bavarian Curriculum for the Subject Art: LehrplanPLUS, Übergreifende Ziele)

"Tolerance and openness towards unfamiliar and surprising visual worlds, also from unknown cultural and historical contexts, as well as appreciation of cultural diversity lead to intercultural competence. Talking about art, global art and design demands and promotes empathy and the ability to take other perspectives and deal with ambiguity. [...] In the analysis and interpretation of images from different, also transcultural contexts in the present and the past, the students develop an interest in intercultural questions. By changing their point of view, by understanding unknown visual languages and by looking at a topic from an unfamiliar perspective, they gain confidence in dealing with new and different things. In doing so, they learn to appreciate and value aspects of cultural diversity. (translated after the Bavarian Curriculum for the Subject Art: LehrplanPLUS, Fachprofil Kunst)

### Multi-perspectivity in the basic approach and in the elaboration

The curriculum explicitly demands the examination of perspectives, points of view. Therefore, a specific approach was chosen for this manual. It is important, indeed fundamental, for the goals of the curriculum.

From the very beginning, when working on the texts, the maxim was not to talk about "others" but with "others". Without this dialogue, we would miss the "comparison of one's own attitudes and attitudes with those of others" demanded by the curriculum. Therefore, the authors of this handout have chosen the path of direct cooperation with Ghanaian partners (see **chapter origin and structure of the manual**). They have selected the objects and continuously advised on the development of the various interpretative approaches. Their voices are also used as such.

The decision to rely on the Ghanaian colleagues in the selection of the objects is justified in this sense. If one takes seriously the everyday experience that the "foreign" (Waldenfels 1997) encounters one, comes surprisingly into one's life, i.e. that one does not (choose) the "foreign", then it is precisely here that the anchoring of the handout in the lifeworld becomes apparent. The objects were not chosen by the authors, but they were confronted with them.



In this sense, this manual is probably the first handout for art lessons in which the decision on the selection of objects and thus the topics was made solely by partners in the global South. And it is probably also the first handout for art lessons that is an expression of consistent and continuous cooperation between the global South and North. The questions, in turn, which are dealt with on the basis of the themes and objects, are posed from the point of view of art teaching. Ultimately, this book is intended to provide material and ideas for this very purpose.

## **Multi-perspectivity as a principle in the individual texts**

The everyday experience that images are seen and understood differently by different people is already impressively confirmed by art historical research in the field of reception history. The analysis activity in art lessons also builds on this: "The students [...] examine the dynamics of mutual influences of works of European and non-European art in the context of inspiration, transformation, appropriation and appropriation". (translated after LehrplanPLUS Kunst, grade 11, secondary 2) Different temporal, spatial and social contexts lead to different interpretations and attributions of meaning. This contextualisation of reception then necessarily leads to a multi-perspective approach with regard to the methods of image interpretation in art lessons.

Such a methodologically justified multi-perspectivity becomes all the more significant when – as in the present case – it is about objects from the global South. This offers a great opportunity for art lessons, both with regard to the individual objects and, in principle, for sensitising students to eurocentric distortions and projections.

In the individual chapters, multi-perspectivity is understood quite differently, e.g.:

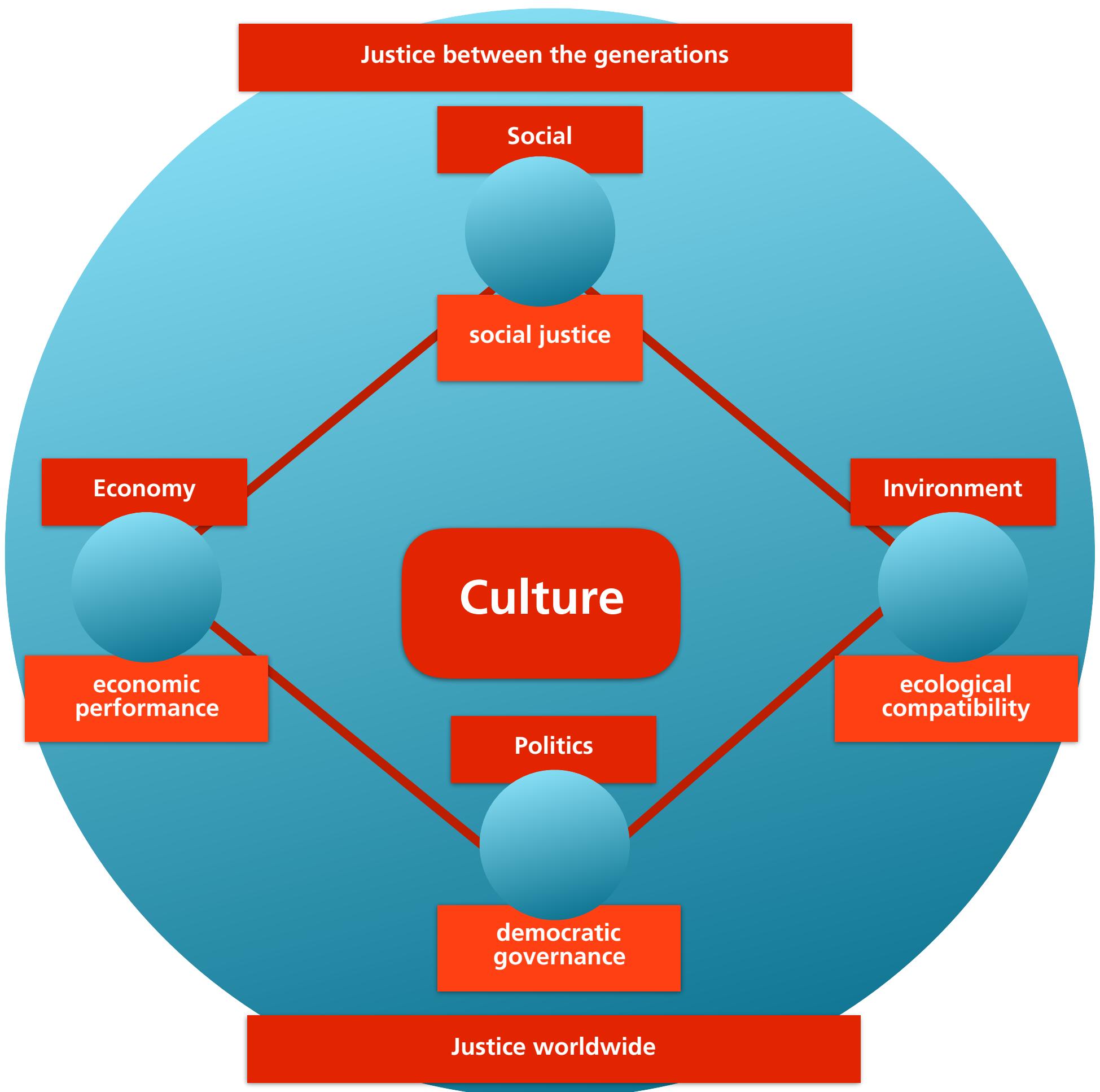
- in the course of **reception over time** and by **different groups**, e.g. in the case of the so-called veranda post (**chapter 3**): What image did artists have of the object before the World War I and what image do museum professionals have today?
- with regard to different cognitive interests and **mediation intentions**, e.g. in the case of the barbershop panel (**chapter 4**), the example of which an art teacher in Franconia sees primarily the advertising aspect, but an art didactician in Ghana sees the political context of African identity.
- with regard to **concepts of art** and (hidden in them) to different understandings of the **relationship between man and the world**, e.g. in the interpretations of El Anatsui's "Rising Sea" (**chapter 12**), in which the sea is the subject of the picture on one occasion and the picture itself on another.
- with regard to the **contextualisations** and thus the **setting of meanings**, e.g. in the approaches to Okeke's painting (**chapter 7**), in which the central figure is Christ on one occasion and a Muslim emir on the other.
- But it can also be about **determining functions** within different contexts, e.g. the object of Paa Joe (**chapter 11**), which is once actually considered a coffin and thus an ethnological object, then a work of art and then again an ethnological object.
- Finally, the perspective of an artist from Kumasi, Ghana, who comments on her own work and the perspective of a German art scholar on this same work (**chapter 14**).

The different interpretative approaches are always marked in blue in the margin.



## Objectives of this manual

This manual offers a collection of "objects" as teaching subjects. Such collections are stores of knowledge. With their help "we can answer questions about future ways of life, about the relationship between humans and the environment – important questions of the 21st century, in other words. [...] Perhaps such a collection opens up access to other worlds of perception" (cf. Schorch 2022, p. 67). We, the authors, hope that in this sense, this manual will show ways in which such "access to other worlds of perception" can be made possible in art lessons: global and sustainable learning in the subject of art.



# Anchoring in the orientation framework for Global Development Education in the field of Fine Arts (OR-BK)

The Orientation Framework for Global Development Education emphasises for the subject of art that image production and reception (as expression and formulation of world understanding) are based on a globally shared understanding of images, but at the same time always have a culturally specific character. They arise in specific contexts and for specific tasks (OR-BK, p. 17). This dual character of universality / globality on the one hand and culture-specificity / regionality / locality on the other is the basis of this handout. The objects presented here from the sub-Saharan African context are initially directly accessible to our perception and interpretation through their sensual appearance, but at the same time they elude us because we are not familiar with their contexts and because they are also "seen" differently by our colleagues in Winneba, Ghana. They are therefore ideally suited, exemplary objects for Global Learning topics in art lessons – especially since art and culture, and more concretely cultural diversity, are at the interface of the target dimensions of the guiding principle of sustainable development.

The interconnectedness of the target dimensions shown in the figure (including possible target conflicts) is taken up in this handout, especially in the interdisciplinary teaching suggestions. An object that exemplifies this is, for example, a conflict of goals between ecology and global mass consumption (economy) and the political framework, which becomes clear in **chapter 12** Between art and admonition – El Anatsui's "Rising Sea".

The current debates on ethnological collections and claims for restitution in Europe show that the objects discussed in this handout are of the highest social relevance, that they require our opinion, but also that they stimulate a change of perspective, promote the perception of socio-cultural diversity and give rise to the investigation of interactions between local, national, European as well as global factors and processes (OR-BK, p. 9).

The competences that the students acquire on these subjects are named by the framework as

- **Recognition** (cf. LehrplanPLUS: Perceive, Analyse, Interpret),

- **Evaluation** (cf. LehrplanPLUS: Werten) and

- **Action** (cf. LehrplanPLUS: Design, Create, Communicate) (OR-BK, p.12). The teaching suggestions given in the handout address all core competencies of the Orientation Framework for Global Development



The following sub-competences are particularly prominent in this context (OR-BK, pp.19):

In the field of **recognition**:

- Collect information about the role of "images" and introduce them into the debate about globalisation and the clash of cultures.
- explore images, objects and designs of other cultures in their respective contexts
- analyse the artistic positions and lifeworld expressions on global issues that have emerged under different conditions and recognise their contexts
- recognise and understand the significance of the unknown as a trigger for artistic innovation
- take up and productively process stimuli from other visual cultures in their own creative work
- deal with the opportunities and risks of a globalised art scene
- recognise the role of the visual in the construction of identity on different levels and understand their respective effectiveness for action.

The field of recognition is marked in red in the margins of the lesson suggestions.

In the field of **evaluation**:

- perceive foreign-looking works of art in their respective cultural context
- Appreciate and critically reflect on the diversity of expression of everyday aesthetic self-image and value orientations (e.g. through clothing, hairstyle, accessories, home furnishings).
- examine and evaluate the permeation of private and local living spaces by global aesthetic models (e.g. ideas of beauty)
- recognise and accept that there are no absolute standards of value for culturally determined aesthetic perceptions and preferences and that they can therefore be evaluated differently from other perspectives.

The field of evaluation is marked in yellow in the margins of the lesson suggestions.

In the field of **action**:

- Participate in the constructive cooperation of people from different cultures in international projects through joint creative design.
- explore, test and reflect on the possibilities of understanding and conflict resolution through pictorial design
- analyse and evaluate pictorial representations in terms of their functionality and effect in conflict situations
- to express artistically how to deal with complexity and uncertainty in global change
- justify and artistically communicate one's own position on issues of sustainable development.

The area of action is marked in green in the margins of the lesson suggestions.

**Suggestion:** In addition to the systematic development of the learning area, the OR-BK offers an elaborated teaching concept on the topic of world images and, above all, a wealth of very stimulating example topics that complement the lesson suggestions given here excellently.



# 1. Representation, wisdom and resistance

## – Brass Queenmothers of Benin and Yaa Asantewaa

### I. Facts and analyses on the "Queenmother"

The exact provenance of the work is not yet known. The only certainty is that it was sold in 1911 by Marie Maschmann from Hamburg to the Royal Ethnographic Collection in Munich (today Museum Fünf Kontinente). "Marie Maschmann was the divorced wife of Captain Albert Maschmann, who brought numerous Benin objects from West Africa to Europe in the period after the British "punitive expedition". After a group of ten British (political representatives and merchants), interpreters, servants and porters had been roughed up, this "punitive expedition" of about 1,500 soldiers was sent, reaching Benin City in February 1897. Looting, destruction and deaths were the result ([web link 1](#))

However, we do not know with certainty whether this work also reached Germany through Albert Maschmann, since the Maschmann couple divorced as early as 1907 and no Benin objects are mentioned in the lists of assets in the divorce papers." (Dr. Stefan Eisenhofer, Museum Fünf Kontinente, Munich) The figures were made as solid castings, the base as a hollow casting.



Figure 1: Queen Mother with entourage, Benin Empire, Nigeria, 17th or 18th century, brass sculpture, height 29 cm, purchased in 1911 by Marie Maschmann, Inv.-No. 11.2., Museum Fünf Kontinente, Munich.

On display are six human and two animal figures as well as feet indicating broken figures. They are arranged regularly on a frame-like base.



## Description and formal analysis

A group of six persons stands on a frame-like pedestal: At the back in the centre is the Queen Mother (iye oba), she is accompanied by high dignitaries and musicians (Catalogue Museum Fünf Kontinente, p. 71), possibly also warriors. Arranged at regular intervals, they all look straight ahead. On the front section of the frame, two small, tamed leopards face each other, gazing at each other. A strict symmetry of the arrangement is already apparent here, and presumably four people were originally lined up on the right-hand section as well, of which only the feet remain. At first the warriors appear to be lined up according to size, as if for a group photograph, until the smaller figure in the far right corner breaks with this order.

In variants of this representation, the stage-like arrangement of the figures from small to large is even clearer, for example in the "Altar Group" of the Art Institute of Chicago (Altar Group, Aseberia, with an iyoba and Attendants, 17th / 18th century) or the group of the Metropolitan Museum.

([web links 2 and 3](#)).

Common to all variants is the prominent, central placement of a female figure on the rear crossbar of the frame, the Queen Mother. She appears protected and bends resolutely forward, seeming to guide the group – consisting of men and women.

The detailed, ornamental design of the figures is striking. The bodies are clad in armour-like garments, on their heads they wear high helmets, in their hands they hold spears and musical instruments, the small men in front carry messenger staffs. Their feet, on the other hand, are bare. The braids and robes with different ornaments, e.g. woven patterns, refer to the extensive trade that took place in the Kingdom of Benin. Thus the cloths were made of sheep's wool imported from North Africa, jewellery and the ruffs were actually made of coral beads. In addition, a fine ring pattern stands out, which is repeated on parts of the robes as well as on the two leopard bodies.

The strict alignment and the stage-like structure make her preferred view from the front probable. Dr. Stefan Eisenhofer (Museum Fünf Kontinente) suspects that the work was placed on an ancestral altar in Benin City, presumably for a deceased queen mother. However, a spatially fixed placement would not be completely certain. The woven pattern of the robes is repeated on the frame, which itself indicates the foundation of a strong and clear order, and is an unmistakable sign of unity. The organic forms on the front of the plinth, arranged in a regular row and difficult to recognise at first, refer to skulls of rams and leopards. Offerings, such as kola nuts, were placed in the hollow form inside the base.

In contrast to the varied design of the armour, robes, insignia, weapons and helmets, the faces are designed according to a fixed scheme and show only minimal differences, giving them a rather serial appearance.

## Historical context of the Queen Mother

Dr Gertrude Nkrumah explains the sculpture as a representation of a group of dignitaries around the Queen Mother, which bears witness to a 15th century civil war in Benin. The role of the queen mother was to choose the successor among the king's sons after his death. However, as there were competing power aspirations among the candidates, open warfare broke out among the brothers and their respective supporters. It was part of the role of the queen mother - who is not, however, the biological mother - to protect the chosen successor against aggressors, thereby stabilising the kingdom and maintaining security and prosperity. Nkrumah describes the significant responsibilities of queen mothers: appointing the next leader, advising, assembling women, and keeping an "eye on social conditions within society" (Nkrumah 2022). In doing so, Nkrumah emphasises their femininity and the existence of institutionalised female power within village communities, such as their seat in the ôdekuro, the village council, established over centuries. The fact that from the 16th century onwards the queen mother had her own residence outside the city also shows her prominent social position.

In this depiction, the queen mother commands her retinue to enforce her decision for the right successor to the king.



## **II. Interpretations on the Queenmother**

The grouping on the frame underlines the unity of the troops. The frame itself, with its weave pattern, can be interpreted as a solid and clear foundation of a state and military order that assigns each member his or her place. Closeness internally and demarcation externally can be identified as characteristics that can possibly also be regarded as an understanding of the state. Of overriding importance is certainly the role of the queen mother, which still radiates today. She raises questions about the political power and representation of women today.

### **Interpretative approach 1: Identification**

Dr Gertrude Nkrumah, for example, sees her as an important identification figure for the struggle for equitable participation in power in African societies.

### **Interpretative approach 1: Representation**

Osuanyi Quaicoor Essel and Isaac Opoku-Mensah also highlight the paramount importance of the queen mother: "In Ghana, queen mothers are considered the highest representatives of all women in society; they are important advisors to the king/chief and form indispensable pillars in their installation and removal from power. Before a king or chief is enthroned, their consent is required. According to Essel, their importance is underlined by the statement that the most enigmatic figure in the court of the traditional ruler is the queen mother.

Women are seen as guardians of social welfare and good advisors. Among the Akan (the Akan make up the largest ethnic majority within Ghana's multi-ethnic population, according to the 2010 population and housing census), it is common to ask older women for advice on basic matters that affect the youth or the whole community. When people feel burdened by serious decisions with consequences for their position in the community, they often say "Yereke bisa abrewa", which means "we would seek the advice of an old woman" (Essel, 2022).



### III. Facts and interpretation on Yaa Asantewaa

At the height of British colonial rule on the "Gold Coast", the Ashanti people rebelled in 1896. "In retaliation, the British captured Asantehene Prempeh I, the Ashanti king, and Asantewaa's grandson Kofi Tene, and exiled them to the Seychelles to take possession of the Golden Stool, the symbol of power in the Ashanti kingdom. While the remaining community leaders debated how best to respond to the British threat, Asantewaa held the fort and rallied the troops. Her leadership qualities and passion predestined her for the role as commander-in-chief of the Ashanti army." (Nkrumah 2022)

When the British governor of the Gold Coast, Sir Frederick Mitchell Hodgson, claimed his right to the Golden Stool, the symbol of the Ashanti kingdom, before the assembled Ashanti leaders in Kumasi on 28 March 1900, it triggered the War of Independence. Yaa Asantewaa led the Ashanti forces; during the fighting, 1000 British and allied African soldiers and 2000 Ashanti soldiers were killed. Yaa Asantewaa was captured and sent into exile in the Seychelles, where she died in 1921. The connection between the two sculptures, between the "Queenmother of Benin" and Yaa Asantewaa is the strong role of the woman.

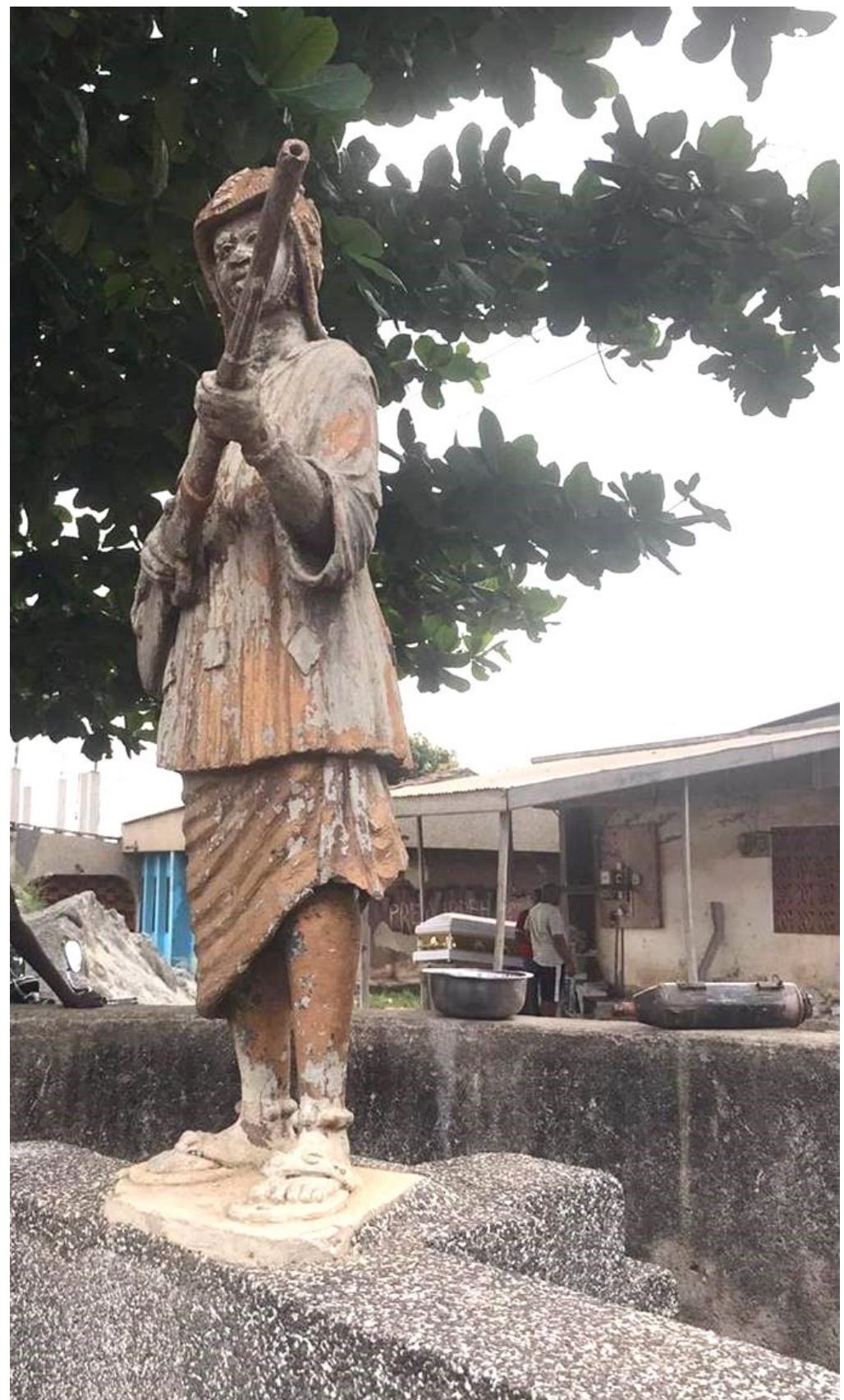


Figure 2 shows a statue of Yaa Asantewaa, monument to the Queen Mother of Ejisu, leader of the Ashanti people in the 1900 uprising against British colonial rule. Age, size and material unknown.



## **Interpretative approach 1: Active co-designer**

Here, Gertrude Nkrumah emphasises her view of the position of women in African societies:

"In these pre-colonial times, African women were never, as some scholars claim, subject to patriarchal forces that subordinated them to men. African women were not passive but actively involved in shaping their own history. They played important roles in the religious, political, social and economic processes of their societies and had control over important aspects of these processes. Some of these roles required collective efforts, others were positions taken by individuals."

## **Interpretative approach 2: Intellectual, politician, human rights activist**

Africanist and anthropologist Niara Sudarkasa explains that women in pre-colonial African societies stood out in "high positions: Women served as queen-mothers, queen-sisters, princesses, chiefs and holders of other offices in towns and villages, and occasionally as warriors." (Nkrumah, 2022). Nkrumah sees Asantewaa as an intellectual, a politician, indeed a human rights activist.



Figure 3 shows the reverse side of the brass sculpture  
(Queen Mother with entourage).



## IV. Ideas for the lessons

### Visual approach / The work as a trigger for own design and reflection

The students approach a selected object in drawing or sculptural variations. Based on this, they design a concept for an artistic **commentary on their object** and visualise the **context**, i.e. the aspects:

- Looted art, loss
- Restitution, identity

In the elaboration they collage different image and text material.



### Interdisciplinary approaches

**History:** Students explore the visibility of female power in public spaces: they seek out monuments and statues open to the public in the nearest town and compare the representation of power and domination with the bronze "Queenmother".



**Political education:** They evaluate the visibility of power in public space under the aspects of diversity and form of domination.

The students research the historical circumstances of the theft of cultural goods from colonial contexts. In doing so, they record significant demands for restitution. They collect the political and organisational issues arising from restitution efforts.

## V. Material

Contact point for collections from colonial contexts in Germany: <https://www.cp3c.de/>

### More links on the topic:

<https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/benin-bronzen-museum-am-rothenbaum-markt-hamburg-nigeria-1.5490813>

<https://www.nzz.ch/international/benin-bronzen-eine-stadt-in-nigeria-traeumt-von-der-renaissance-ld.1624048>

<https://britishmuseum.withgoogle.com/object/brass-commemorative-head-of-a-queen-mother>

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/310282>

<https://www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/ethnologisches-museum/collection-research/benin-collection/>



## 2. Homes for soul beings – the Akuaba-figures

### I. Facts and analyses

#### Function

Akuaba are wooden statuettes traditionally in use in rural areas in Ghana and in similar form in other countries south of the Sahara. Young women who hope for pregnancy or – if they are already pregnant – for the health and beauty of their child wear these figures on their bodies and care for them in the protected domestic environment. The result is an identity-forming function within the immediate family circle.



Figure 1: Fante version of an Akuaba figure, probably 19th century, approx. 27.5 cm high, softwood, Museum Fünf Kontinente Munich;

On display is a figure with a flattened, very high head and cylindrical body. The arms are missing, the legs are joined to a low round base.



## **Approach**

According to Gertrude Nkrumah, the Akuaba figures were and are not meant for display in public spaces, even if they are exhibited in the museums of the Global North, for example. In the interview (2022), she explains that one would only get to see an Akuaba if, as a European, one was welcomed by, for example, a Ghanaian family and allowed to move around the private area of their home and witness the handling of an Akuaba there.

From a Ghanaian perspective, the phenomenon and the rite of the Akuaba is always seen as much more important than a singular specimen. It is important here to always extend the view to other, similar objects. The individual statuette has a very personal significance only for its concrete use. It is not actually designed to be interpreted in another framework - such as here in this text. However, these reservations due to respect for the work should not prevent an approach and investigation from a European perspective.

For example, the specimen in Munich's Museum Fünf Kontinente appears unspectacular at first glance and largely closed in its form. Only the open view and a slight tendency to move break up this closedness somewhat. Beginning with the stable and static-looking plinth, this tendency increases to the figure's upward, dynamic forehead. Due to the restrained painting, the predominant natural tone of the wood and the traces of wear known from other wooden objects of daily use, a modest, reserved expression remains overall. Earrings and protruding forms in the chest area suggest a female figure.

In addition to its reduced figurativeness, the entire object is also reminiscent of a handy implement of unknown function. The neck looks like a handle, the rest of the cylindrical torso follows this first impression. Together with the traces of use, these impressions add up quite coherently, even if further examination shows that they are misleading.

## **Description**

The very slender figure shows head, neck, torso and base. Eyes, eyebrows and a nose are indicated. There are no figural extremities on this specimen. Both leg stumps appear to have been combined into one form and terminate in the truncated cone-shaped base immediately after emerging from the cylindrical torso. Appliquéd earrings indicate that the ears are not visible. At the top of the figure there is a small, rectangular but slightly rounded formation with an eyelet. To the right and left of the eyebrows are similar geometric mouldings. The head, which is strongly flattened at the front and back, is largely rectangular in shape, with the long sides next to the face swinging slightly inwards, as does the upper edge. This makes the four corners slightly more acute than a right angle.

## **Data and terms**

The Akuaba in the Museum Fünf Kontinente is quite small and handy with its 27.5 cm height. A carver and a more detailed material description are not given. It is dated to the beginning of the 20th century and is assigned to the area of the Fante, a group with its own language whose cultural characteristics can be found in southern Ghana and which is assigned to the Akan population group. Akuaba or better Akua-Bà literally means child of Akua and refers to the myth of a formerly childless woman named Akua.

## **Material and technique**

The Akuaba in the Munich museum is made of one piece of softwood. There are also specimens made of hardwood, mostly the more delicate, darker variants from other West African regions. The neck appears to be turned. On closer inspection, one can see that it too was in all likelihood carved. The precision of the rounded shapes on the neck and trunk comes from the completion of woodworking with sanding material rather than from the lathe. In addition, there are conspicuous diagonal nicks on the front torso, here each as a triple, which indicate deliberate workmanship. The entire carving is covered with a protective varnish, here already somewhat worn. Individual areas of the face are covered with different coloured glaze, the depressions between these areas are coloured white.



If one draws a grid over this specimen, a fairly clear division emerges: the base and face correspond to approximately one unit, the torso with the narrower connecting piece to four units. The neck is about one and a half units long and the entire head seven. Thus the head, which is slightly tilted backwards, dominates the rest of the figurine not only by its angular shape, which is slightly concave in silhouette, but also by its relationship to the somewhat smaller, predominantly convex and also much thinner body, which occupies only half the width of the head. Rings of similar design divide the neck into five sections arranged one above the other.

In the facial design, the earrings and the neck, the shapes are more similar to the full roundness of the torso and the base. The face painting consists of arch segments in the area of the brows, which converge at the root of the nose, but continue to follow their shape to the lower end of the nose. The base at the bottom is fully round, so that together with the flattened, paddle-shaped head, the shape of a crossed-out circle results when the figure is viewed from above.

### **Colour and light**

As with any full-round figure, the light depends heavily on the external conditions. But the shadowing of the eye sockets, the neck limbs as well as the shadow gap above the base contribute significantly to the clarification of the structure. The flattened face, which is somewhat turned towards the light due to the tilt of the head and thus somewhat brighter, stands out against the rest of the figure's body shadow. As colours, only the natural tone resulting from the combination of wood and glaze can be discerned, then the somewhat darker, also natural brown glazed form in the face as well as the pigment white of the recesses.

### **Production**

Akuabas are made by woodcarvers. In the relevant sources, only male craftsmen are mentioned, if the gender is mentioned at all. It is said that the craftsman would ask permission and forgiveness from the spirits of the trees he uses for his craft or cuts down entirely - a circumstance that may also have much to do with the religious purpose of the figurines. At the same time, there seem to be specialisations. Akuaba carvers do not produce other traditional sculptures at the same time. Sculptors who produce other figurines are in turn not involved in the production of akuabas.

### **Reception**

By handling the statuette in a domestic environment, more precisely within the house and courtyard of a family, the wearer sends a message with the help of the figure only to a limited circle of people. Thus, her message is only received among relatives or close acquaintances, and possibly commented on or discussed. An akuaba can be worn by a girl from the phase of puberty onwards; an engagement or marriage is not necessarily a prerequisite for the revelation of a desire to have children or the message of wanting to meet social expectations by wearing it. Outside the family, akuabas can still be found in a shrine under the care of a priest, where they can be borrowed for their purpose. The sources indicate that the priest makes the selection, so there is no choice by the young woman. If no - suitable - akuabas are available, the priest gives instructions to commission a new akuaba from the woodcarver. In addition, production for tourism and presentation in suitable places has become established in recent decades. However, these outwardly very similar figures are not akuabas in the sense of their traditional purpose and religious function (see below), but only their formal quotations without spiritual content.



## II. Interpretations

The attempt to interpret the figure involves several perspectives, which are sometimes more and sometimes less connected to previous studies. In most cases, contexts have to be taken into account that cannot be deduced from the formal inventory.

### Interpretative approach based on the utility function

First of all, a clear function of use is demonstrable. The already depicted use in the domestic environment, the clear and explicit attribution of meaning to the ritual bringing about fertility and beauty might make further interpretations seem unnecessary for the time being, but may in turn require interpretation. What is important here is the size of the figure, which allows it to be carried and cared for like a baby.

### Interpretative approach on the basis of gender and sex

The fact that it is a female figure because of the sexual characteristics (e.g. the breasts) does not necessarily have to do with a corresponding desire for sex in one's own child. In the case of this and similar figures, it is a reminder of the myth of the Akua, who is said to have successfully given birth to a daughter with the help of a statuette. There are also other Akuabas with the characteristics of both sexes and probably also clearly male specimens. The akuaba should not be equated with the hoped-for child, because there are also breastfeeding specimens and some who in turn carry other akuabas on their bodies.

### Interpretative approach based on the shape of the head

With the conspicuous and disproportionately large head, this most important part of the body is emphasised as the seat of intellect and wisdom, as can also be observed in many other West African pictorial works. Likewise, the high forehead and the flattening of the face go back to an ideal of beauty that is also used elsewhere in Africa and is even meant to be promoted by shaping the bodies of adolescents through simple, arguably painless measures (e.g. putting cloths on and stroking the foreheads of infants).

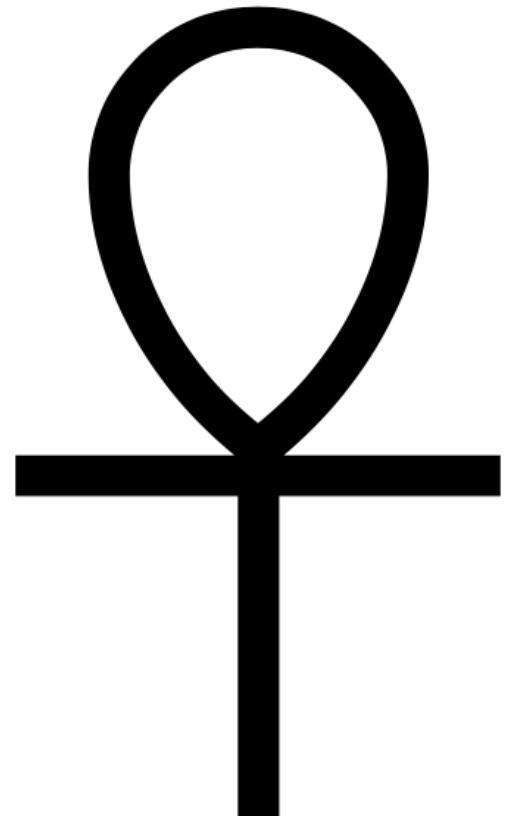


Figure 2 shows an Akan version of an Akuaba made of hardwood.

Figure 3 shows the hieroglyph "Anch", also called the "Egyptian cross".



## **Interpretative approach based on the shape of the body**

There are other Akuabas, e.g. in the cultural environment of the Akan group, which show clearly more feminine forms. Here, for example, the beauty ideal of wide hips is reinforced by the application of beaded strings. These figures also show high, but now round foreheads and similar necks divided into luxuriant bulges, which suggest a well-nourished existence and thus happiness and prosperity. In her description of one of these figures, historian Gertrude Nkrumah resists the narrowing of the representation of the female body in the Akuabas as a sexual object and thus as an instrument of patriarchal oppression by limiting the image of women to sexuality and fertility. Nevertheless, she sees in the Akan example a "ideal of womanhood" and as "a depiction of woman as the giver of life" (Nkrumah 2020).

Even more than the Fante variant, the Akan version shows formal similarities with ancient symbols. Thus, the Akuaba figures are associated by some authors, both in form and meaning, with the ancient Egyptian hieroglyph "Anch", the "key of life" (Figure 3). This often and transculturally used sign stands for life, also for the continuation of life in the hereafter, and thus also represents a symbol of luck.

## **Interpretative approach based on numbers and proportions**

In both examples shown here, the number 5 is the same in connection with the neck bulges. There are also specimens with 3, 8 or 9 bulges. The number 5 is probably no coincidence, it represents the sacred number of "Odumankoma", the creator deity of the Akan. The other proportions mentioned above also show variations from specimen to specimen and from region to region. But the assumption is that they are always intended to reflect a certain idea of mathematical and thus of aesthetic and religious relationships, each with a different intensity and consistency. The connection drawn by the anch symbol to forms of design in ancient Egypt would also fit the division into a strict grid. The constant repetition of proportions and a transfer of the concept from one carver to the next would thus be facilitated. However, apart from the production for tourism, identical figures are hardly to be found.

## **Interpretative approach in the social context of Ghana**

"According to a very popular Akan oral tradition, the Akuaba doll is deeply rooted in one's woman's quest to overcome her inability in meeting societal ideas and expectation of womanhood" (Nkrumah 2020). Wearing the statuette goes hand in hand with a young woman's signal to conform to traditional societal expectations. Where these traditions have merged with other worldviews in more recent times, the ritual use of the akuabas also decreases.

## **Interpretative approach in a religious context**

An Akuaba statuette initially represents a soul being that is in a transitional area between the earthly world and the afterlife. In addition to this depictive function, the sculpture can and should also serve as a dwelling for such a being. In this respect, carrying and caring for the figure increases the attractiveness of the sculptural form for the arrival of such a soul being, which sets out to appear on earth as a living being, i.e. to enter the family of the young woman through birth, if necessary. If successful, the figure is returned to the priest.

The religious function goes even further: "In most of these Akan societies, when a woman gives birth to twins but in an unlikely situation where one of them dies, she is expected to make a replica of an Akuaba doll in replacing the dead child. Some would also bury the dead child with the Akuaba doll as a way of warding off evil spirit from killing the living child." (Nkrumah 2020) These contexts of meaning illustrate why the selection and rite of the akuaba is always not only the concern of the young woman, but why ritual specialists, for example, also participate in the selection, consecration, recommendation and subsequent ritual regulations. On the whole, what is at stake here is the linking of a complex spiritual imagination to the social needs and expectations of young women in the context of a traditional Ghanaian society.



## **Interpretative approach in a transcultural context**

As familiar as the image of an Akuaba statuette may seem in Europe as a typical example of traditional African art, what is largely unknown here is the meaning it carries in the places where it is found. The very act of assigning it to an art context is an external process that has little to do with its religious and spiritual use. Neither do the woodcarvers of the Akuabas see themselves as artists in the European sense, nor does the external form of an Akuaba, e.g. in the display case of a museum, represent the same object it was in the Ghanaian context. This is not changed by the fact that there is now mass production of Akuaba-like sculptures for sale as souvenirs. On the other hand, the influence of Akuabas, among others, on European art of the early 20th century is unmistakable. It was not only African masks that inspired European artists, but also such other sculptural products of African provenance.

At this point, with an outside perspective, one may be tempted to scientifically question the beliefs, social structures and spiritual convictions surrounding the traditional use of Akuaba statuettes. It is very helpful for understanding and reflecting on one's own cultural conditionality here to be aware of the ways in which the use of Akuaba figures is explicated in the Ghanaian context and embedded in traditional narratives such as the history of the Akua. In comparison with this explication of expectations, hopes and religious ideas, the passing on and use of a baby doll in the European or Western tradition seems like a frighteningly implicit process, obscured by non-reflective habits and clichés. It is true that giving a doll to a little girl naturally puts her in the role of the "little mother". However, hardly anyone in Europe would want to use this as an explicit sign of expectations for her future fertility or the wish for healthy, clever and beautiful (grand)children, let alone express it to the child or other people on the basis of the doll.

Thus, in a transcultural context, the Akuabas can also serve as a mirror that can shed a sharp light on related habits and traditions elsewhere. The supposedly "own" could change in this light and possibly become more adaptable to distant convictions, strange attitudes and habits perceived as peculiar. However, it is not enough to look at the external form or style of the statuettes. From the Ghanaian point of view, Akuabas are not even urgent candidates for a restitution process, because the possibly stolen, misappropriated, exchanged, bought or donated external form takes a back seat to the spiritual function. In the European museum showcase, there is only an empty vessel whose valuable contents cannot be stolen and thus cannot be returned. The soul being has probably long since sought another refuge elsewhere.



### III. Ideas for the lessons

#### Pictorial approach

The students reflect and discuss in which objects their personal wishes and desires can be expressed. They also consider how public, private or even intimate it would be to visibly reveal such a desire.

Once some such links have been found, discussed and selected, those students equip themselves with the appropriate items who want to engage in a social experiment with these items. Examples would be a (proxy) key to a particular place or vehicle, an attribute of an aspired profession or a longed-for destination. With this object they move within the school public (e.g. in a break situation) and together with their working group observe the reactions of fellow students, teachers and other recipients and passers-by.

Afterwards, the observations, the sensations and the collected reactions are discussed and put into a context with the Akuabas now presented. The students reflect and compare the function and the messages of the respective objects, the effects on the wearers as well as the reactions during reception and record them e.g. as a mind map around a photographic portrait of the courageous wearers

#### Linguistic debate

The students develop proposals for an appropriate display case and catalogue text of an Akuaba statuette in a European museum.

As a follow-up to the social experiment (see above), the recipients are interviewed and their statements are written down, ordered and mounted in posters that document the social experiment as well as the starting point, the investigation of the Akuaba.

Things that are worn at home or in the school environment and that are used to send visual messages (jewellery, fashion, accessories, slogans, pictures, logos and signs on items of clothing) are documented photographically in the group and then reflected on linguistically. The students discuss which functions and messages can be linked to these things. They differentiate into at least two categories: Messages that the senders associate with this form of communication and messages that are understood by the recipients. In this field of tension, they look for differences, possibly misunderstandings and misinterpretations, and for communicative expectations that the receivers have concluded from the messages of the senders.

Akuabas are sometimes referred to as "dolls" in relevant, often older literature. The students discuss the fact that on the one hand this designation can often seem apt and on the other hand Ghanaian scholars speak out against this designation.

#### Interdisciplinary approaches

**German, foreign languages:** Students make up stories about Akuaba statuettes and their soul beings as they travel around the world and into the museum display cases.

**German, music:** Objects that are highlighted in poems (e.g. Schiller's „Die Glocke“, Ringelnatz' „Der Bumerang“) or sung about in songs (e.g. „Blue Suede Shoes“, „Ich und mein Holz“) and thus charged with meaning are to be collected and documented. The students compare the effect of the objects with and without this linguistic and musical framing.

**German, history:** In an art book from 1974, the author Charles Wentinck interprets the Akuabas:

*"Mythical symbols like the Akua'bas are the primitive language of the unconscious."*

The students examine each word of this sentence and form a judgement as to whether and to what extent the statement would still be connectable today.

In the same book, Paul Klee's work "Senecio" (see figure below) is juxtaposed with an Akuaba statuette:

*"It remains unclear whether Klee consciously adopted the form or whether both pictures are expressions of a universal experience." (Wentinck 1974)*



The students examine Klee's work and, on the basis of this observation, try to find out which world view and, above all, which image of a European about African objects and European art appears in this statement. They collect theses on the way in which both forms of design are made related to each other.

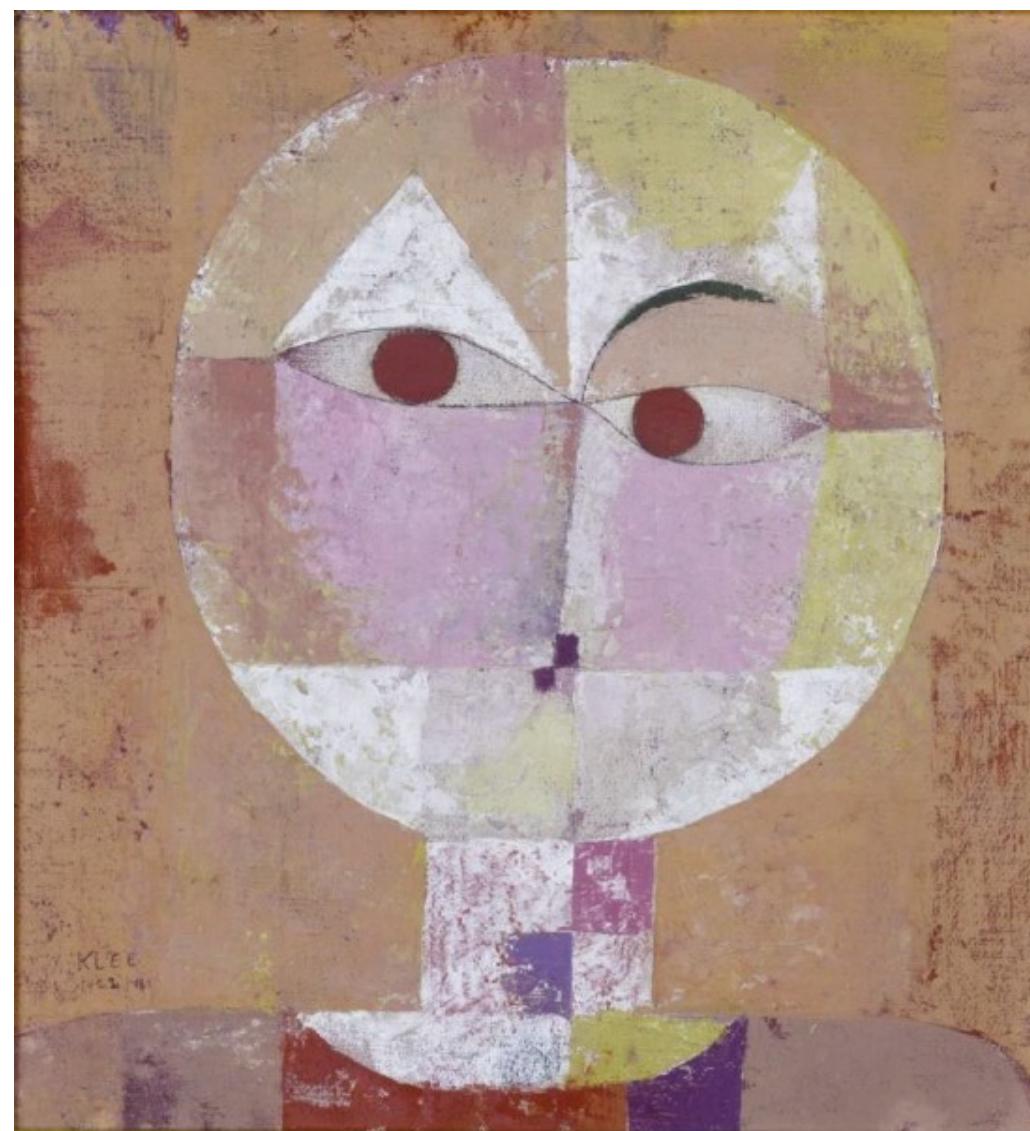


Figure 4 shows the painting "Senecio" by Paul Klee (1922, oil and chalk on gauze and cardboard, 40.3 x 37.4 cm, Kunstmuseum Basel)  
A circular, abstracted face is composed of geometric details.

### **The work as a trigger for one's own creation and reflection**

The students develop anthropomorphic vessels for attracting and harbouring muses and other good spirits, which will henceforth be at their side in art lessons.

Vessels and figures that have a special, even existential meaning in everyday life (e.g. a cradle, a cuddly toy, a doll, a mascot, a crucifix, a coffin or an urn - cf. the chapters on Paa Joe's "Nike Trainer (Size 42)", **chapter 11**, and Vincent Kofi's "Crucifix", **chapter 5**) are analysed in terms of their form and function.

The students then further develop the form of such an object of their choice in the sense of an even clearer explication of its function as a design object or exaggerate it by artistic means.

The students interview those people in their family or acquaintance who once gave them a doll or cuddly toy about their former motivation. They compile the results and try to categorise them. Then they work out the differences in the use of an Akuaba to their own and personal experiences.



### 3. te ken dy dye – a post from Cameroon – now in the Museum Fünf Kontinente

#### I. Facts and analyses

##### Object biography

The object is variously referred to, mostly in relation to its architectural-functional context: lintel or "te ken dy dye" (in the local Bandjoun language – Paul-Henri Souvenir Assako Assako), porch post, house front pillar, post, cult house post (Museum Five Continents, p. 17), Cameroon post / family crest (Macke at M5K, 13, 24). Post, but in the sense of sign (post-it) is suggested by Patricke deGraft-Yankson to address the communicative function. Other designations do not address the function, but limit themselves to the given, perhaps to avoid any pre-interpretation: 'Sculptured wooden block' (Kecskési, 1999 no. 108) or 'large carved square wooden block' (Kecskési 1976, p. 22). The work was taken by Max von Stetten before 1893 during expeditions to the Bamileke Plateau (southwestern Cameroon), where it was presumably part of a covenant meeting house. Stetten (1860-1925) was German commander of the Kaiserliche Schutztruppe for Cameroon until 1896. Cameroon was a German colony at that time.



Figures 1, 2 and 3: Unknown artist, 'te ken dy dye' (often called 'porch post' in the museum context), probably late 19th century, hardwood carved from a block, 175 cm x 33 cm wide x 30 cm deep; painted with natural colours (black, white, red); Western Cameroon (grassland or woodland); Museum Fünf Kontinente, Munich. The "stele" has two faces. The three illustrations each show a view diagonally from the side, from the front and from behind.



The exact circumstances of how the object came into Stetten's possession are as unknown as its original location and context.

The first German trading posts were established in Cameroon as early as 1868, and from 1891 there were German military "expeditions" in Cameroon. In 1884, the German Consul General concluded protection treaties with regional rulers, proclaiming the protectorate of Cameroon as a German colony. The seizure of the hinterland, which included the grasslands, took place over the course of the following 30 years. Even if the provenance is still not clear today, one can certainly share the Humboldt Forum's assessment of such objects that - even if they were not looted through acts of war - they are nevertheless "an expression of unequal power relations and structural, colonial violence". ([Weblink 4](#)). In 1893, the Royal Ethnographic Collection acquired the pillar as a gift from Stetten. In the entry book it is noted:

„Gr. vierkantiger Block, 1,80 cm hoch aus schwerem Holz, doppelseitig beschnitten mit Menschen und Eidechsen, durch Termiten stark beschädigt“

"Gr. square block, 1.80 cm high made of heavy wood, carved on both sides with humans and lizards, heavily damaged by termites". ([Weblink 5](#)). 1895 Stetten publishes detailed „Reiseberichte“ – „travel reports“ in the „Deutsches Kolonialblatt“. In 1912, a photo of the post was published in the Blaue Reiter almanac. It is currently displayed in a niche in the permanent exhibition at Museum Fünf Kontinente, Munich - a mirror allows a view of the second side (Figures 4 and 9). Along with other objects from the collection, it is currently the subject of a transnational project on their provenance. (Glahn / Krus).



Figure 4 shows the situation in the Museum Fünf Kontinente.

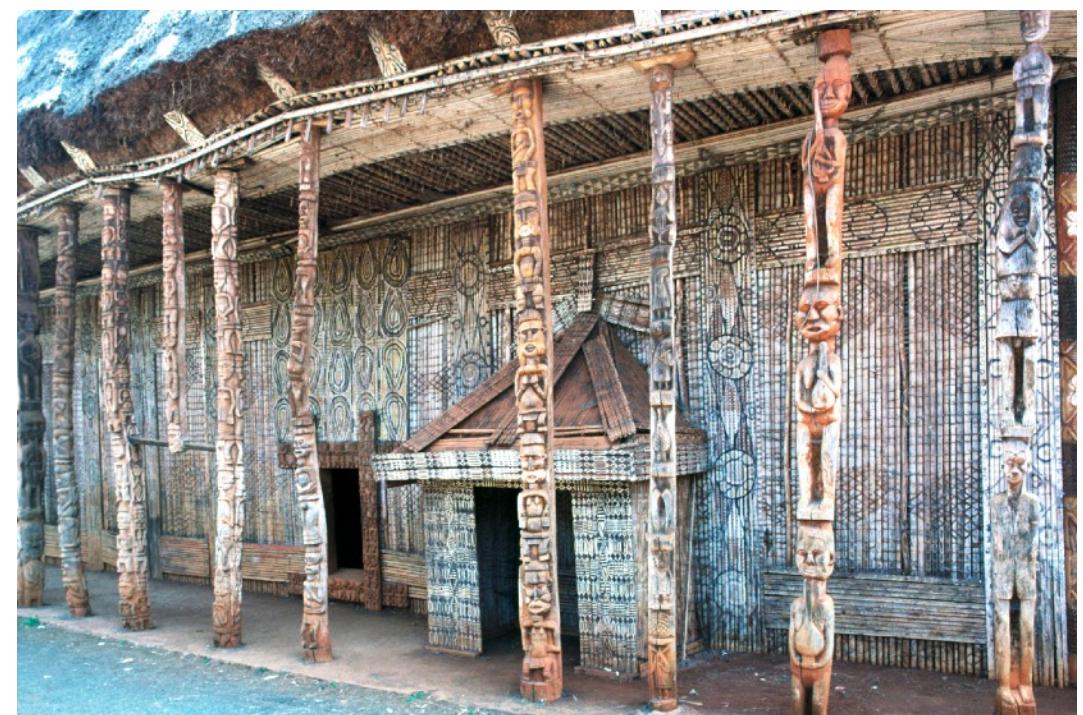


Figure 5 shows carved beams in front of a royal residence in the Cameroon grasslands.



## Status

In comparison with carved beams on façades of royal residences in the Cameroon grasslands (Figure 5 and [weblink 6](#)) other mullions or door frames in the Museum Fünf Kontinente (Museum Fünf Kontinente, p. 17, Kecskési 1999, nos. 11, 70, 75) or in the Humboldt Forum Berlin show a partial similarity of motifs, but a strikingly "archaic" formal language. Other examples are clearly more "elaborate". The multitude suggests that this type of pillar is quite typical of works from this period in this region of West Africa.

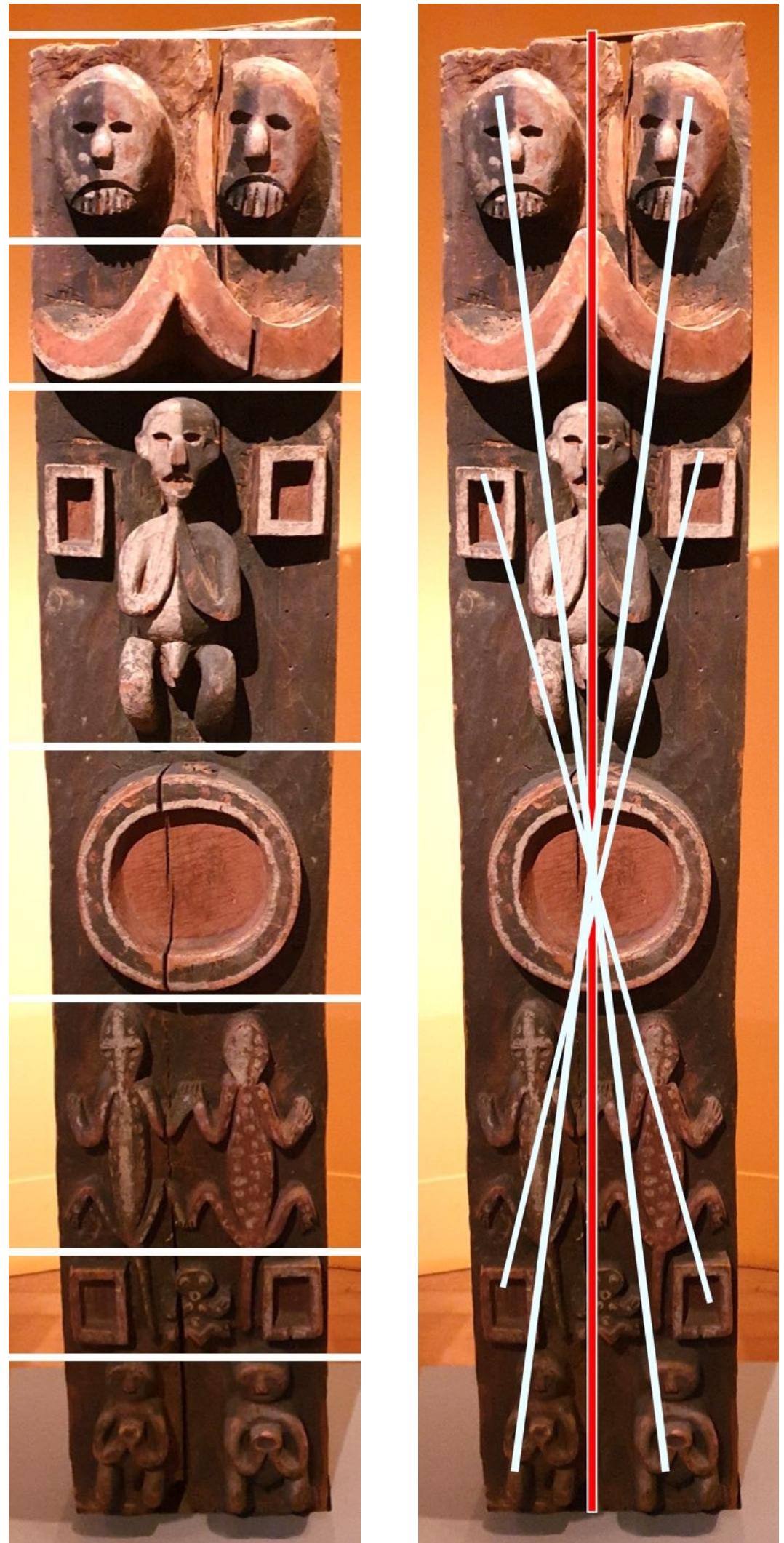


Figure 6 shows the horizontal composition of the front.

Figure 7 shows the centring composition.



**Ancestors / Enemies**

**Boundary between spiritual and physical world**

**King / Priest**

**Circle: Sun, Life Power, Moon, God, fertility**

**warning lizards or souls of the ancestors**

**Ancestors / guardians / Praying**



**Circle / Heart**

**anthropomorphic figures**

**enigmatic form with pair of horns and hand**

**male figure with chin beard as emblem of sovereignty**

**Kauris as sign of trade or sacred python as guardian of the dynasty**

Figure 8 shows the interpretations of the predominantly figurative details of the front and back of the "veranda post".



Figure 9 shows the exhibition situation in Museum Fünf Kontinente; the back is visible with the help of a mirror.



## II. Interpretations

### First perspective: The current view of the work

For the interpretation, the following questions are suitable for art lessons: Form, iconography (meaning of the motifs), function, theme (or core idea) of the object, i.e. an interpretation.

With regard to the guiding idea of multi-perspectivity, two positions should be addressed: On the one hand, the contemporary view on the basis of ascertainable contexts, which seeks to understand the object from its time of origin and its context of origin. The second is the view of the object from the perspective of the artists of the Blaue Reiter. The comparison of these perspectives seems particularly relevant from an art didactic point of view, even though other perspectives would be conceivable, e.g. from the point of view of museology, provenance research, from the context of current debates on restitution, etc. These are, however, not discussed in the teaching suggestions. However, these are addressed in the teaching suggestions.

#### Shape

At first, the pillar develops an immediate physical presence for visitors: through its sheer size (larger than life, almost square in plan), the materiality of the massive, cracked block of wood (the outline is irregular and probably corresponds to the tree) and the clear, concise, reduced language of form, whose meaning seems inaccessible. The surface treatment is archaic, the wood is more hewn than carved. It is very likely that the block has been worked with an axe. Thus it appears powerful and at the same time mysterious, which is supported by its presentation in the exhibition on a plinth and without glazing.

A closer look reveals how the sculptor compositionally interweaves different modes of representation between complete abstraction (circle, rectangle) and figuration (human figures, animals), monumentalising the individual motifs through internal symmetry, geometrisation, frontality and statics. Patrique deGraft-Yankson speaks of "geometric, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic forms". This is supported by the painting (see figure 9). In this reduction, everything narrative is missing. The representation becomes emblematic, it becomes a symbol.

This is also supported by the overall composition, which obviously follows a calculated geometric order. It is strictly horizontally divided into individual zones, only once do lizard tails protrude into another zone. However, the separation into individual layers is ingeniously overcome compositionally by the strict axial symmetry in the vertical, but also by the point-symmetrical arrangement around the respective centres. This results in a tension between the contradictory compositional principles, which is one of the decisive factors for the effect of the pillar.

The lack of any narrative on the one hand and the high creative effort on the other underline once again that a symbolic level is at stake. This can perhaps be deciphered, even if its immediate complex order makes it primarily direct, sensual.

The secure decoding of the **iconography** (what the individual motifs as well as the arrangement meant in the context of origin) is not possible with today's state of knowledge. Oral culture has left no written sources that could be consulted. Moreover, the oral tradition has been torn down - not least due to colonial destruction. However, since the work obviously has a symbolic language with clear iconography, this level cannot be left out in art lessons. German-language literature and oral experts from West Africa were consulted here. The results contradict each other, but nevertheless yield a court of meaning (see Figure 8) in which the individual attributions of meaning are named, giving a certain direction. All interpreters make suggestions for individual motifs and avoid a complete decoding.

In addition, the block is painted in three colours. These also carry meanings: Black could symbolise suffering, white could be the colour of the dead and symbolise mystery, red, the colour of blood, symbolises life (deGraft-Yankson). The light-dark contrasts themselves could stand for life and death (Kecskési 1999).



## Function

Patrique deGraft-Yankson suspects that the pillar - as part of the architecture of the house - stood at the spatial interface with the public (on a path) to communicate the significance of the house, presumably a cult house, to the outside world. The object could therefore have been part of the façade of a particularly distinguished house, also with a supporting function for the roof. It communicates what happens in the house or who lives or resides there. According to Patrique deGraft-Yankson, it could have been the house of a "priest" whom one could consult there in order to pray to God through him or the ancestors.

Kecskési, on the other hand, considers a free positioning in space (Kecskési, 1976, p. 22) and suspects an ancestral tablet. This in turn would fit the following determination by Gouaffo: "The 'Blue Rider Post' is a spiritual object. According to oral traditions, the object was placed in the sacred house like a statue. Caps, chains, bags or skeletons could hang from the object. Secret societies like the 'Losango' used the statue to perform certain rites, for example to cleanse the village of evil spirits." (Albert Gouaffo in Glahn / Krus) The author also suspects the context of a meeting house of such a secret society. Common to all conjectures is that the pillar stood in the context of a house with a sacred or cultic function.

## "Theme" of the object"

Basically, three different levels can be delimited, some of which complement each other and some of which contradict each other. First, the communication function at the façade or entrance to the outside. Then the figurative formulation of a certain understanding of human being-in-the-world is asserted; man is ultimately cosmologically embedded. Paul-Henri Souvenir Assako Assako says: "Expression of the cosmogony of the universe of the peoples of the Bamileke plateau; expression of the belief system". At the Humboldt Forum Berlin, on the other hand, such pillars from Western Cameroon are also seen as "architecture of power", power exercised by rulers or secret societies through impressing and deterring. Paul-Henri Souvenir Assako Assako also supports this thesis.

## Second Perspective: The Reception of the „Blaue Reiter“

The interpretation provided above can be contrasted with a second perception of the pillar, as expressed in the almanac "Der Blaue Reiter". This almanac, an artist's book, was published in 1912 by Franz Marc and Wassily Kandinsky. The reception is therefore already over a hundred years old, but it is significant for the development of European art, as it is a good example of how artists of the time created a new frame of reference by referring to non-European art. In this respect, the Blaue Reiter differs clearly from Cubism, Expressionism or Dadaism, which were produced at the same time.

In the Almanac, on pages 21 to 27, there is an essay by the painter August Macke entitled "The Masks", in which a relatively small illustration of the pillar in question is embedded. Macke's contribution, like all the other texts in the almanac, was probably written at a joint meeting of Macke, Marc, Münter and Kandinsky in Murnau (Güse, p. 164).

Visits to ethnographic museums are documented above all for Wassily Kandinsky, who was a trained ethnologist, and Franz Marc. During his visit to the Berlin Ethnographic Museum in 1911, Marc had also admired sculptures from Cameroon in particular. And it was he who was ultimately responsible for inserting the photograph of the post in Macke's article. In doing so, he simply titled the picture "Cameroon", i.e. the name of the country of origin - the country whose sculptures he admired. In his letters to Macke, Marc writes about this. On 14.01.1911 about the objects from Cameroon in the Berlin Ethnological Museum: "I remained amazed and shaken by the carvings of the Cameroonians"; and later that he would furnish Macke's article in the Almanac with "ethnographic wonders" (Macke 1964, p. 11). There are other illustrations in the text: A bird's head from Brazil, a figure from Easter Island, one from Mexico, a bird mask from New Caledonia, a cape from Alaska and a child's drawing entitled "Arabs". Except for the child's drawing, all objects are from the then Royal Ethnographic Collection in Munich (Museum Fünf Kontinente, p. 11). They are only titled with the respective country of origin, e.g. Cameroon. Macke was obviously involved in the selection as well as the layout, as his layout sketch shows (ibid., p. 24). In the text itself there is a single, very brief reference to "carved and painted pillars", which presumably meant the post.



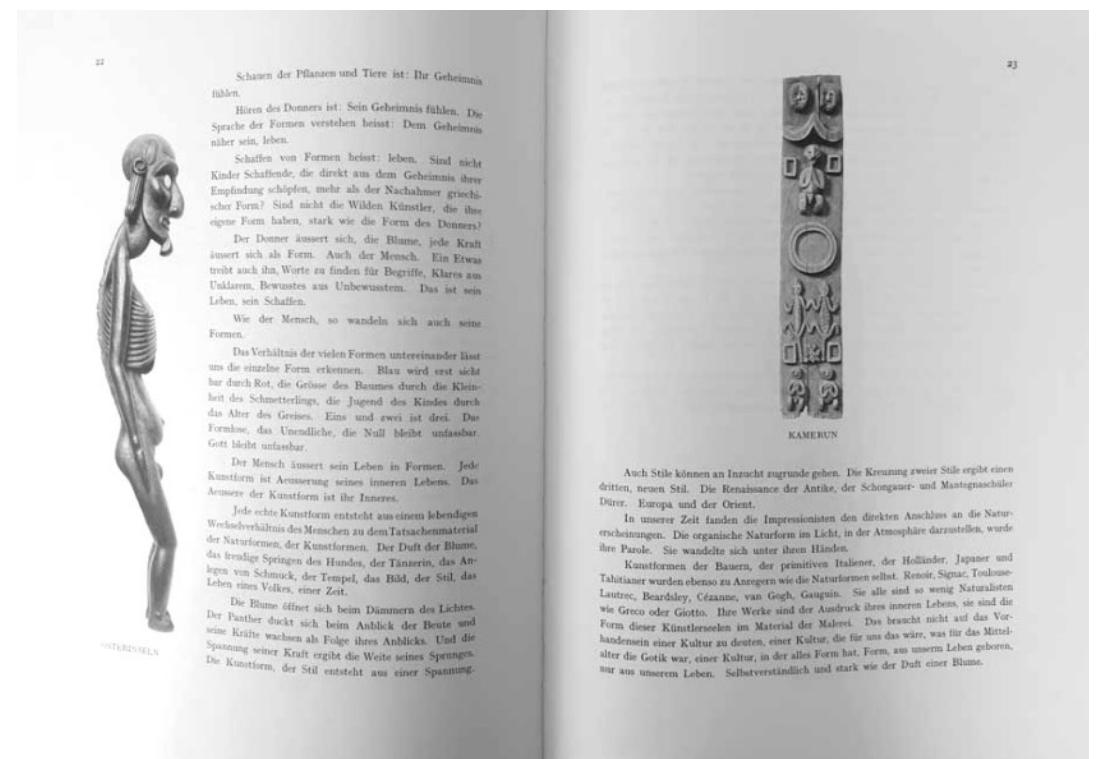


Figure 10 shows two book pages 22 and 23 from the almanac „Der Blaue Reiter“ from 1912.

The text presents Macke's conception of art. In it, "intangible ideas", "mysterious forces", an "invisible God" express themselves in the world of appearances and "cultic expressions". The invisible materialises in the visible. This realm of the visible includes not only art, such as that of Giotto or van Gogh, who are classified as "primitive", but also nature. Children's drawings, the folk art of the "primitives" and "savages" or non-European cultural forms are also expressions of the mysteriously invisible. These themselves are - and this is decisive - equal to each other. There is no hierarchy, no distinction between "high" and "low", between high art and popular culture. All forms speak - as Macke characterises it - in "strong language". The pillar in the museum is then for Macke an example of "the tangible form for an intangible idea, the personification of an abstract concept" (Macke 1924, pp. 21-27). He also calls this the figure of an "idol".

The approach underlying this thinking sounds familiar; we have known it since the Platonic doctrine of ideas. However, this approach does not justify the selection of this particular post, since other posts from the museum's collection would also have been available. It is not certain what was on display in the presentation at the time in the Royal Ethnographic Collection in Munich on 400 square metres in six rooms in the north wing of the Hofgarten arcades in Munich. The only thing that is certain is that photos of the ten objects depicted, which came from various parts of the world, were lent to the artists for the publication of the Almanac. There are no photos of the presentation.

"Whether Marc and Macke [actually] saw the work in the exhibition at that time can be assumed with a high degree of probability, since it is very large and therefore impressive." (Information from Dr. Karin Guggeis, 26.7.2022) Here one can only assume. It can be assumed that there are various factors that led to the selection: the archaic power of the forms; the initially wild and carefree-looking, additive combination (or montage) of the various principles of representation in the individual motifs (concrete - abstracted, geometric – organic, symbolising - depicting), which on closer inspection, however, then reveals itself to be consciously composed; or the coarse, physically perceptible materiality of the cracked, thick block of wood in impressive dimensions. Patrique deGraft-Yankson also speaks of "wonderfully composed".

In the work, everything is represented with great sensual power that is the opposite of an "empty" image in European "cultures that have already passed through a thousand-year course, like [...] Italian Renaissance" (Macke 1964, p. 24) and from which Macke renounces: „Wir müssen tapfer fast auf alles verzichten, was uns als guten Mitteleuropäern bisher teuer und unentbehrlich war [...], um aus der Müdigkeit unseres europäischen Uneschmacks herauszukommen.“ – "We must bravely renounce almost everything that has hitherto been dear and indispensable to us as good Central Europeans [...] in order to get out of the fatigue of our European lack of taste." (Macke, ibid.)



In art lessons, the question arises to what extent the image that Marc or Macke create of the pillar (as representative of the idea of an idol) goes together with what the object presumably was and is in its original context. Or to put it another way: are they designing a certain, exotic image that does not correspond to the object itself? In the search for answers, it seems of interest that neither Marc nor Macke take up in their own pictorial language the aesthetics of the non-European works they "celebrate" here.

### III. Ideas for the lessons

#### Pictural Approach

Students try their hand at carving hard wood to gain an appreciation of the unknown artist's craftsmanship.

The students try out different wood tools, such as Dechsel (badger's axe, the traditional tool of the carvers in West Africa), Stechbeitel und Fäustl, carving knives, and consider how the pillar might have been made based on their experiences.

Without knowing the work, the students receive the individual motifs of the pillar (one side or both) cut out from a photo. Their task is to put them in an arrangement. For this task, they still receive the list of central ideas derived from the different interpretation perspectives, e.g. ancestral tablet, means of communication in the façade, materialisation of mysterious forces, cosmogony of a secret society, etc. The students are to arrange these in an order. Their (different) designs should give voice to these guiding ideas of interpretation. If necessary, they will work out the central ideas themselves from the materials presented here. In a final reflection, their own results are compared with the pillar, which is only shown here, i.e. at the end, for the first time.

The artists of the Blaue Reiter had discovered the post in the Munich Ethnology Museum in 1911. The students reconstruct fictitiously in a drawing or digital montage - also with the help of the two photos of the exhibition situation in the Asia department from 1910 (see IV. Material, pp. 35 and 36, Figure 10-12) - how the post might have been presented in the Africa department at that time.

The students design a presentation for the post, e.g. before they have information about the object and afterwards. They analyse how the information they have developed has changed their ideas about an adequate presentation.

#### Linguistic discussion

##### Perspective 1

The students compare the different proposals to determine the functions of the pillar and discuss justifiably which one seems most plausible to them. They discuss whether several "truths" are possible.

The students work on questions about the present-day presentation context, such as: How does Museum Five Continents stage the object and what story does it tell (labelling, placement, context to other objects, lighting)? Does this narrative coincide with the inner image the students have after their own engagement with the object?

Patrique deGraft-Yankson writes of a "wonderful composition" of the work. The students approach - without prior knowledge of the object - the immediate aesthetic effect of the post and write an art critique. Or they write a justification why they would show this particular post (and not another) in an exhibition.

The students look for analogies regarding the different possible functions of the post to familiar things from their own context. They name differences and analogies in terms of function and basic principles of design. Possible example: Comparison with an entrance of a Romanesque or Gothic church decorated with figures.



The students develop a biography of meanings or interpretations of the pillar, which also change through the changes in time and space:

- at the time of its creation in Cameroon,
- on the way to Germany,
- in the museum (depot or exhibition) at different times
  - before the First World War,
  - during the Nazi regime,
  - today,
- as an object in art lessons today,
- after the (possible) restitution.

In doing so, they work out the perspective of the respective actors involved on the object.

## Perspective 2

The students work out the central ideas in Macke's text and relate them to the work.

The students compare Macke's attributions of meaning with the first interpretation text in the handout. In which points do they coincide, in which do they differ?

There is a second, similarly designed wooden block from Cameroon in the Museum Fünf Kontinente (Reliefierter Holzblock, Kecskési 1999, no. 109) and other works with a similar function (door frame, palace post, porch post - see Kecskési 1999, nos. 11, 70, 75). The students discuss possible reasons why the artists of the Blaue Reiter might have chosen this work when considering the question of illustration.

Neither Marc nor Macke directly address in their own visual language the aesthetics of the non-European works they show in the Almanac. The students compare the role of the works on the artists of the Blaue Reiter with the role of African art for Picasso a few years earlier (e.g. in "Demoiselle d'Avignon", P. Picasso 1907).

## Interdisciplinary approaches

**German:** The students develop short stories that the pillar could tell and formulate them. They think about which of the available voices (of students or other people) would have to tell the stories and how, and then record them in an improvised sound studio. They continue to think about their experiences in the direction of an audio guide.

**Ethics, Religious education:** Based on the possible religious-cultic functions of the pillar, the students look for forms that other religions have developed for these functions and compare them. The results can be illustrated in a mapping..

**Religious education, history:** The Basel Mission played a significant role in the missionisation of Cameroon. The students research the way Christian missionaries (differentiated according to Catholic and Protestant, if necessary) dealt with local religious ideas and practices.

**Geography, history:** The students inform themselves about German colonial history in Cameroon and then situate the appropriation of the porch post by Max von Stetten in time (especially the last decade of the 19th century) and space (forest or grassland in Cameroon)..

**Political education, history:** The students simulate a negotiation for the restitution of the object in a role play: Which roles and positions have to be filled? Who will use which argumentation? They document the discussion on video and cut a short clip with the most important arguments.



## **The work as a trigger for one's own creation and reflection**

The students "transfer" the pillar to public places in their home town through digital montage. In short statements, they describe the new tension structures that have been created.

The students think up the story of the pillar on the basis of the information given here. The following questions can be helpful: Who created it and for what purpose? What did it experience after it was erected? How did von Stetten take it? How did it get to Munich? When was it exhibited there and how? What will happen to the pillar after restitution? They develop - analogue or digital - comics, storyboards, animated films, picture series to tell this story pictorially.

Because both the front and the back are designed, its completeness eludes the static eye, something the museum presentation tries to overcome with the mirror in the niche. The students develop alternatives to this solution. They also consider design options such as placement in the room, staging (e.g. by a pedestal), lighting, materials (floor, walls ...), colours, proximity to other exhibition objects.

The students remember their own aesthetic experiences in their past in which they were confronted with something unfamiliar to them, which was strange and at the same time fascinating. They relate this experience to their own visual production, e.g. in a short essay or as a reflection in their own sketchbook.

The students examine contemporary examples of artist groups or art exhibitions from the global North that incorporate aesthetic practices or products from other contexts in order to be able to show their own interest more clearly in these (documenta fifteen, Les magicien de la terre, contemporary artistic interventions in ethnological collections, e.g. Leipzig, etc.).

In the perspective of the Blaue Reiter on African art, one can see - from today's point of view - a projection of one's own ideal ideas, which obviously has little to do with the actual function of the object in the context in which it was created. The students select terms from the field of possible cultural contacts which, from their point of view, meet the reception of the Blaue Reiter, and possibly other artists, particularly well and justify their decision (see under IV. Material).

In catalogues, books or on the net, the students look for works of German Expressionism that show at least a certain creative proximity to the Veranda post. In order to obtain a differentiation of various forms of contact and appropriation, they examine the differences with regard to the use of materials, composition (colour, surface, space) and formal language.



## IV. Material

Students are provided with possible terms for qualitatively determining the nature of cultural contact. These include:

### Asymmetric contacts

- Exclusion:** Separation, demarcation, exclusion, clash, destruction
- Global culture:** Process: diffusion (spread by adoption and migration), result: copies, global brands (may not exist), also includes: cosmopolitanism, universalism, UNESCO - cultural agenda, ars una - species mille
- Assimilation:** Process: imitation, learning, mirroring, adoption, integration, superimposition
- Coincidence:** Historical superimpositions result (accidentally and unintentionally) in something new: palimpsest, superimpositions ...

### Negotiation processes between two powerful actors

- Multiculture:** Process: import, quote ...; result: parallel society, guiding culture, cultural diversity, simultaneity of the non-simultaneous
- Interculture:** Process: mimicry, masquerade - bricolage (tinkering), collage, combinations, exchange, touch, encounter, elective affinities ... Result:
- Transculture:** Process: interweaving, assimilation, creolisation, hybridity, métissage, fusion, syncretism, mergers, intertwining, resonance, collaboration, interaction ...; result: transmigration, "translation", new formation, third space, transformations



Figures 12, 13 and 14 show historical photographs of the exhibitions of the Africa, Japan and China departments in the Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde Berlin around the year 1910.

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## 4. Between pop culture and statement – the Barbershop Panel

### I. Facts and description

The object can now be seen in the Museum Fünf Kontinente in Munich and is part of their collection. The sign was acquired in Togo, presumably in the capital Lomé. According to Dr Stefan Eisenhofer, head of the Sub-Saharan Africa and North America departments at Museum Fünf Kontinente (Munich), where the object is in storage, it was purchased from a collector in the 1990s.



Figure 1 shows a painted advertisement for a hairdressing salon by an unknown artist (Togo, second half of the 20th century, plywood, oil paint, height: 60.8 cm, width: 30.2 cm, Museum Fünf Kontinente, Munich).

The picture shows 15 women's heads with elaborate braided hairstyles. One head in the centre is depicted frontally, diagonally from it four profiles each and the rest as a view from behind.





Figure 2 shows a hairdresser's sign with associated stand on a busy street.

### Object description

The object, an advertising sign for a hairdresser's salon or stand, belongs to the so-called sign painting and is most probably a commissioned work that a hairdresser had made by a sign painter to advertise his business. The painter of the work is no longer known. At the moment, it can be seen in the museum printed on large sheets of fabric. However, a presentation of the original is planned with several other works of sign painting.

The peeling paint, especially at the top and bottom of the picture, is most likely due to the object's everyday use. Those signs were placed in front of barbershops or in larger busy places and on the one hand served the customers as a decision-making aid for the desired hairstyle, on the other hand they were a testimony and advertisement for the artistry of the respective, often mobile barber without a fixed salon (cf. Figure 2). The sign painters, who produced these same commercial graphics, "had set up their studios on the side of the road; very few could afford to rent a shop. [...] If someone wanted to become a sign painter, he became an apprentice to an established master. [...] [The] most important clients [of the sign painters] were the hairdressers, because when a new haircut came into fashion, they needed a new sign. [...] On the basis of the pictures, the customer could pretty well imagine what he would look like afterwards" (own translation after Beier 2002, p. 43 f.).



## II. Interpretations

### Perspective 1: Foreign? As if! – Global pop culture

At the time the sign was created, the type of hairstyles shown were still very rare in Germany. In the meantime, the braids and other set pieces of hairstyles developed in Africa have long since found their way into everyday culture worldwide. Role models such as NBA basketball star Allen Iverson or musician Burna Boy have popularised cornrows, which are usually found in women's hairstyles, in men's hairstyles as well. Time and again, there is criticism that the imitation of such hairstyles, which often have political and postcolonial connotations, by people from the global North is a problematic form of cultural appropriation. How elaborate, costly and sometimes painful the production of these elaborate hairstyles is is vividly described, for example, by Chimamanda Adichie in her novel *Americanah*, which uses a visit to the hairdresser as a frame story.

The advertising sign shows a total of 15 female heads with artistically braided hair in portrait format. Four of the female depictions are shown in profile, one frontally, and the remaining ten as a back view, creating a pictorial rhythm in which the frontal depiction is arranged in the centre of the picture and the profile depiction crosses out from it. Each of the 15 individual representations forms a row with two other images on the horizontal plane, giving each of the hairstyles the same amount of space, which leads to a row-like, symmetrically constructed composition and thus an organised structure of the advertising sign. At the same time, diagonal connections are created between the motifs - especially in the back of the head views. These run through the picture as a row of three, both horizontally and diagonally, and form a formal as well as thematic network that gives special significance to the back view of the hairstyles. The colours of the clothing alternate between blue, red and green in the same sequence in the upper and lower half of the picture. Further on, the same colour combinations occur in diagonal alignment, whereby the colour also has a rhythmic and structuring effect, but without following a strict scheme. The facial features of the women depicted in profile seem very similar at first, but differ in the lines around the eyes and mouth. The ear jewellery also varies. The ring-shaped stylised decorations on the neck in the front and side views are striking and could indicate Ghanaian neck jewellery (cf. Essel 2021). The overall reduced and simplified facial features put the focus on the hairstyles. This is supported by the light-dark contrast that these form in their grey-black lines with the beige background and the facial colour that is slightly tinted from it. A painterly conciseness and two-dimensionality as well as a „serieller Kompositionsmodus“ – "serial mode of composition" (Wendl 2002, p. 18) characterise the well thought-out and functional pictorial language and make this object appear particularly differentiated in terms of design in comparison with other sign paintings.

The hairdresser's sign depicted here is strongly oriented towards a visual-communicative function and completely dispenses with the use of writing - a characteristic of those objects that can be observed more frequently. Occasionally, lettering is used, but the motif per se is almost always in the foreground (cf. Längsfeld 1979, p. 107 ff.; Bender / Ströter-Bender 1993, p. 179 ff.). The form of sign painting described here is a widespread form of service in West Africa, in which the actual authorship is often dispensed with; the name and address of the painter or, currently, the mobile phone number of the performer(s) are sometimes left behind (cf. Wendl 2002, p. 19). Parallel to the sign paintings, photo collages and entire wall paintings currently serve as advertisements for a hairdresser's shop.

### Perspective 2: Hairstyle as a political statement

In conversation with Osuanyi Quaicoe Essel, a Ghanaian art scholar, it becomes clear that advertising signs like the object shown are now often replaced by advertising photos. The hairstyles and styles seen on both the sign and the posters are part of the cultural heritage: they tell of the present, but also of the country's past. Hair and style are symbolically charged in the African context - as in every context. How one's hair is worn, whether short, straightened, "natural" or twisted into elaborate hairstyles, is always political, Osuanyi Essel points out in his publications. The non-self-determined shaving of hair, for example, in the context of the transatlantic slave trade, can be understood as a taking away of identity, as he explains: (Essel 2017, 2021): "When the enslaved people arrived in the Americas, their stylistic hairdos were shaved to rob them of their identities" (Essel 2017, p. 16 f.) How hair is worn can also be an act of resistance. The "Black is beautiful" movement bears witness to this with its demand "(to) wear their natural hair to show pride of their African identity".



The advertising sign pictured here shows hairstyles that were and are mainly formed from natural hair. No hair extensions or wigs are used for this, but the natural, strongly curled hair is tied around longer strands. These can then be intertwined in a variety of ways. In some cases, hairstyles are given specific designations, for example from the field of musical culture (cf. Längsfeld 1979, p. 107 ff.; Bender / Ströter-Bender 1993, p. 179 ff.), and are charged with different attributions of meaning in that they can indicate social and family status, age and role within a group (cf. Essel 2017, p. 17). J. D. 'Okhai Ojeikere, who participated in documenta 12 with his documentary photographs of West African hairstyles, comments:

"Hairstyling is a practice to increase beauty. [...] The hairstyles are never exactly the same; each one has its own beauty. [...] The artistic hairstylist can take a lot of time for different models, as a function of their complexity and motifs. [...] Some styles sometimes need more than one week of work. [...] The styles are determined by the type of ceremony, the social position of the family or of the woman and the artistic talent of the hairstylist. Some have lost their original meaning to new meanings assigned to them." (Magnin 2000, S. 52 f.)

The elaborate and voluminous hairstyles depicted on the advertising sign, for example, are mostly worn by young, mostly unmarried women, whereas those of married women are often less voluptuous and closer to the head. Today, wearing one's own real hair, without hiding or straightening it, is increasingly a statement of one's own location, one's own conception of beauty and, as in this case, of an emancipated, often feminine self-confidence.

Thus, in addition to its former function as a hairdressing salon sign, the object is at the same time a transcultural interface and a testimony to an increasingly self-confident approach to one's own traditions and ideals of beauty that has been shaped by colonial history. Its didactic potential lies in the visualisation of a culturally shaped everyday phenomenon, with the help of which diverse human experiences in the context of ideas about beauty, the constructions of identity and group affiliations as well as one's own cultural position can be made conscious and stimulated in a visual way.

### III. Ideas for the lessons

#### Pictorial approach

The students approach the work and its theme by collecting advertising photos, their own photographs, art postcards or pictures from magazines and journals over a longer period of time, which first visually outline the theme of "hair" and provide insights into the diverse cultural aspects that this theme offers (hairstyles, hairstyles of footballers and other athletes, trend hairstyles).

The students structure and arrange the selection of images in the group according to thematic areas that are meaningful to them and develop an awareness of the symbolic charge of hair and hairstyles and their cultural connotations.

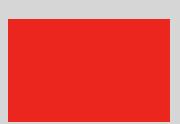
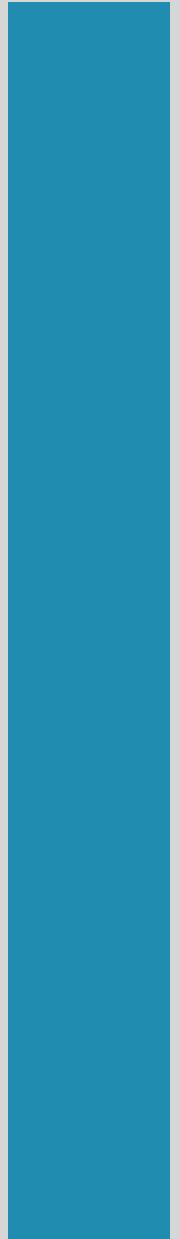
Optionally and complementarily, the students gain an insight into the different areas of sign painting and become increasingly aware of their function in comparison to contemporary advertising strategies.

#### Linguistic discussion

The students describe the work in writing or orally and then analyse the composition and the accompanying structure of the advertising sign. The analysis of the composition, colourfulness, spatiality and pictorial tension lead to the question of use and actual function.

The students develop an awareness of the problems of a western concept of art and deal with its criteria in depth. They recognise the separation between free art and design as a construction of a western art system.

The students point out parallels to contemporary hairdressing shops with mostly large advertising posters that correspond to a common and contemporary ideal of beauty. They recognise functional similarities and at the same time visual and cultural differences by comparing a West African sign painting with a contemporary hairdressing advertisement.



## Interdisciplinary approaches

**History:** Through the in-depth examination of the treatment of hair in West Africa, the students gain initial insights into the time of colonisation, connected with the multi-layered historical, economic and geographical effects on the colonised and the colonisers. By addressing the shaving off of hair as an act of anonymisation at the time of slavery, further connections can be drawn to pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial history as well as to the treatment of hair in concentration camps.

**Economy:** Students gain insights into a form of advertising strategy in the mid-20th century through sign painting and its connection to advertising graphics, and contrast this with contemporary forms of advertising.

**Biology:** The students deal with the chemical structure and biological function of hair in humans as well as its civilisational and cultural charge. An exchange on questions of intimacy and sexuality interwoven with the topic of "hair" could take place in this subject, as could references to DNA in the hair roots and related topics such as "genetic material" and "forensics".

**German, Foreign Languages:** Starting from and contrasting with sign painting, the students describe and analyse current advertising strategies and their slogans according to their linguistic form and conciseness within German and / or foreign language teaching. The design of an own advertising graphic with written language elements or an advertising clip including presentation could follow.

**Geography:** The students gain insights into Africa's resources as well as the diverse and extremely heterogeneous geographical, economic and social conditions of the entire continent or a West African country. They conduct independent research on selected topics (mineral resources, climate, infrastructure, economic power, education system, etc.) and thus deal with individual regions in depth.

**Mathematics:** Using the example of the hairdresser's sign and its symmetrical pictorial structure, students make connections to the subject of mathematics, which can be developed through further compositional (sequence, pyramidal structure, etc.) or design principles (golden section) at the interface with mathematics and related to further works of visual culture.

## The work as a trigger for one's own creation and reflection

Starting from the barbershop panel, numerous connections can now be drawn to the students' lifeworld via the thematisation of this object or, starting from this, via the theme of "hair" per se, which relate to hair as the bearer of a cultural message, to the advertising-strategic function of sign painting, to hair in its materiality and materiality, and to its position in historical and contemporary fine art.

## Hair as an expression of identity, belonging and beauty

The theme of "hair" and its semantic charge in diverse cultural contexts enables numerous references to the students' lifeworld. Individual works, series, video sequences, sculptural works and performances are possible by documenting or staging photographs, drawing or constructing. Thematic fields for the visual-practical examination could be:

- Beauty and its construction
- Against the "hair current" - alternative hairstyles
- Celebrations, traditions, parties - hair styling of teenagers and young adults today
- Hair trends in football / sport
- Punks, emo, gothic, cosplay - hair as an expression of identity and group membership
- Picture archive - Documenting photographic series of students collected and archived at a school over the years; alternatively, an analysis of past annual reports under the aspect of hair and its changeability would be conceivable.



## Hair and advertising

The hairstyle sign is closely connected in its function to the question of how information can be passed on visually and how attention can be attracted. Here, the students discuss basic questions of design and layout on a formal level and then apply them on a practical level in the form of fictitious advertising and information material (flyers, advertising signs, internet presence, etc.). Topics could be:

- a) Hair trends of the future
- b) Journey into the past: from baroque wigs and hair art to the bob of the Golden Twenties
- c) The big makeover: type changes in class or in the course
- d) New hair trends for comic book heroines and heroes

## Haare als Material

Hair can be used by students to experiment with the possibilities of colour application. The tips of their own hair, animal hair in general or pure new wool in particular serve as the starting material for brushes and various other experimental utensils for applying paint. The pictorial representation, abstraction, alienation of human hair, structures and hairstyles, but also the thematisation of animal hair and skins opens up a pictorial space of experience between imagination ("skins of animal species not yet discovered") and nature study, between painterly experiment and drawing detail.

A microscopic examination of hair would be conceivable through a subject-linking lesson with biology, which in turn can be used as a drawing starting point for further visual processes by continuing hair structures, connecting and interweaving them with the drawings of other students. A collective drawing of the class on the topic of "intertwined and entangled" or similar could result from this.

## Hair in historical and art historical perspective

From an art-historical perspective, image analyses and comparisons under the aspect of hairstyles and their semantics seem obvious in order to gain insights into the respective cultural construction of hairstyles, their wearers and their associated meaning. Contemporary references arise, for example, with regard to J. D. 'Okhai Ojeikere and his documentary image series "Hairstyles", to the works of Mona Hatoum as well as to Meschac Gaba and his wig series "Perruques d'architecture".



## 5. Between opening and self-assertion – Vincent Akwete Kofi's Crucifix

### I. Facts and analyses

#### Function

In his sculpture "Crucifix", the artist Vincent Akwete Kofi combines traditional narratives of the Ghanaian myth about a man named Ahor who is ready to sacrifice with the New Testament story of the crucifixion of Jesus. Depending on the Ghanaian internal or world view, the result is functions that create identification as well as appeal.



Figure 1: Vincent Akwete Kofi: Crucifix, 20th century, 114 x 24 x 48 cm, wood, private collection; The wooden sculpture shows a lifeless-looking body with hat and beard hanging from his arms.

#### Approach

Due to the presumably quite clear location of the work in a globally largely connectable art context, the approach to the sculpture initially requires hardly any transcultural preliminary considerations or reservations. Although the figure is privately owned by the artist, it could, like other of his works, be found in galleries, museums or collections worldwide. At first glance, the sculpture is recognisable as a figurative design, although from a European perspective, only a closer look might reveal that it is a compassionate expression of suffering, pain and perhaps death.



The association of a Christian-motivated crucifixion scene is obvious, but is challenged by contradictory observations. The hat and the beard are unusual from a European point of view, the heavy, clumsy legs unexpected. Thus, the figure as a whole seems unfamiliar and enigmatic, an impression that is only alleviated when one realises that the design is strongly related to the shape of a branch and was thus probably inspired by a natural shaping – quite in the sense of Michelangelo: the figure was already in the wood, it only had to be uncovered.

## Description

We see a naked figure standing on slightly bent legs. The arms, pulled strongly backwards and upwards, end in the area of the forearm muscles. The feet are heavy and bloated, the toes chunky and hardly distinguishable. The disproportionately short and thick thighs butt together so luxuriantly at the front that no sexual characteristics are visible between them and below the torso. The torso is elongated, its upper part divides into the forward tilted, rather large head and the arm stumps, which are drawn together and up behind. The head shows a slackened face with slipped features. The corners of the mouth hang down, the pupil-less eyes show no look, no life. There is a little more tension in the slightly raised, bushy eyebrows, which radiate sadness. The high top of the head is adorned with a fez-like hat, tilted slightly forward. The chest is covered by a distinctly shaped full beard, which ends at eye level at the top. Set off from this is a woolly band of hair around the back of the head. In the hollow of the right shoulder, a dark irregularity can be seen in the wood material, which looks like a wound there.

## Facts

(1) About the work: At 114 cm high, the sculpture is smaller than life-size, approx. 25 cm wide and 48 cm deep. There is no information about the type of wood used. It appears to be softwood. However, as it is less common in Ghana than hardwood, this impression could be deceptive. The year of origin is also unknown, so we have to conclude from the artist's life data. It was probably created between 1945 and 1974.

(2) About the artist: Vincent Akwete Kofi (1923- 1974) studied in Accra, London and New York. A successful artist and university lecturer, he later taught in Winneba and Kumasi, Ghana. The Ghanaian art historian Atta Kwami summarises Kofi's position as follows: He "believed that only by immersing himself in his Ghanaian heritage could he 'creatively and objectively' apply the lessons of the history of modernism in art. His sculptures 'Awakening Africa' (1959-1960) and 'Blackman's Stoicism' (1964) emphasised Pan-Africanism and the decolonisation process that was spreading in Africa" (author's translation after Kwami 2016).

## Material, technique, light and colour

In addition to the clear traces of wood sculpting, the branch or trunk piece of the tree also shows the growth traces and colour differences of the zones in the wood, which vary in depth depending on their age. The deeper layers are also the darker ones in each case. The artist may have helped here with glazes. In this way, the darker skin colour of the figure is clearly contrasted with the lighter hair on the head, for example. The carving marks all over the body seem to be designed to remove any youthful tension from the surface. A little more glaze has been retained in their depths than in the raised areas, reinforcing this effect. A glossy varnish has been applied over these differences in detail. A more comprehensive light-dark distribution can be seen, with both the darkness of the feet and that of the arms merging smoothly into a somewhat lighter torso.

## Play of forms, alignment of the view and space activation

In addition to this play of colours, there is a similarly flowing play of forms that builds on the former tension of the grown wood. However, this tension supports the impression of hanging much more than that of standing. For while the arms and torso are still stretched out very straight, the legs are resting rather tensionlessly on their bent, bloated, soft and weak-looking partial limbs. This downward tendency within the figure leads to the equally soft-looking cushion shapes of the feet, which visually provide the greatest pull towards the ground due to their mass, volume and darkness at the lower end of the figure, but statically form a solid pedestal. In this way, the arc of tension and the direction of growth of the tree piece and the actually possible tendency to activate space upwards is also dynamically reversed and pulled towards the ground. Likewise, the figure's blind gaze is hardly able to trigger a forward directional tendency. The pull towards the ground and the impression of hanging is overpowering.



## **Physicality, figuration and abstraction**

The design of the figure is initially reminiscent of other sculptures in which, after the Second World War, a reduced, abstracted corporeality was continued and further developed worldwide, following the achievements of classical modernism. In this figure, the similarities lie above all in the stylised design of the face and the head. In the rest of the body, on the one hand, a higher degree of naturalistic design is expressed, especially in the arms and forced by the reference to the natural, strongly physical shaping of the wood. The supposedly stronger abstraction of the lower half of the body could rather stem from the swellings of the battered body and in this respect be motivated more naturalistically than by a striving for abstraction. In other words, the figure expresses the narrative it carries through different sculptural understandings of corporeality.

## **Messages and recipients**

Transcultural considerations can be brought into play at the end of the analysis, when the question of the message already mentioned at the beginning is to be examined with regard to its possible recipients. For here, in accordance with the artist's cosmopolitanism, it makes sense to distinguish between two groups of addressees: On the one hand, there is an imagined global audience, to whom Kofi presents a special, locally coloured interpretation of a martyrdom scene, as it occurs in many places in Africa, for example, with black Jesus figures. On the other hand, there would be those people in Ghana to whom the figure of Ahor is known and to whom it means something. For them, Kofi's sculpture, also titled "Crucifix", could open up a connection to another narrative whose origins lie outside Ghana and which came to the country in the course of colonisation. This crosses the border to the ...

## **II. Interpretations**

### **Interpretative approach with regard to production**

On the one hand, Vincent Akwete Kofi continued a tradition of West African woodcarving, but on the other hand, through his international training, he also adopted other Western-influenced positions. With the obviously special choice of wood and the proportions that emphasise the head of a figure, he stands in the tradition of traditional carvers, as can be found, for example, in the making of the Akuabas (see article p. 20). Moreover, he could have sought and found in the already existing natural form of this presumably Ghanaian tree an externally given, possibly divine legitimisation of his image work. But in contrast to the Akuabas and their ritual-oriented production, Kofi made a unique piece and thus expressed a very personal interpretation. As with the Akuabas, he drew on a West African narrative, in this case the story of the Ahor. But he supplemented it very individually by borrowing from the New Testament in the form of a torture scene that strongly recalls the crucifixion of Jesus. This second interpretation is underlined above all by the title of the work.

### **Interpretative approach with regard to attributes and physicality**

According to designer and lecturer Patrique deGraft-Yankson, the only two attributes in the work allow for a clear attribution in the Ghanaian context. "The image in Kofi's Crucifix was therefore needed to be presented as a man with royal personality, as depicted in the cylindrically shaped cap, which is symbolic of some of the Ghanaian royal millinery that depict kingship and authority. This is reinforced by a heavy beard to portray wisdom. Wisdom which is reserved for kings and aged people." (deGraft-Yankson 2020). In this kingship he also sees a connection to the story of the crucifixion of the "King of the Jews" (Gospel of Matthew 27, 37). In this, he draws on images of Levantine, Byzantine or European origin, where Christ on the cross is also depicted in a clearly majestic manner in early and high medieval works or in those of classical modernism, for example, in contrast to European late medieval or modern men of sorrow. Patrique deGraft-Yankson takes the view of the body even further and sees references as far as cinematic interpretations, e.g. Mel Gibson's "Passion of Christ". In Kofi's interpretation, the majesty of the person depicted is contrasted with a body that can hardly be surpassed in its wretchedness. Thus, the work is not only a link between two opposing narratives, but also between two traditions of representation that are deeply rooted in European art history, among other things.



## **Interpretative approach based on the narratives linked in the work**

Patrique deGraft-Yankson furthermore sees in the figure a connection of the passion story, which was spread through colonisation in Africa, to a traditional Ghanaian lore: "The Fante people (a section of the Akan ethnic group), for example have records on a man called Ahor, who offered himself as a sacrifice to the gods, when the life of a human being was demanded as an antidote to a calamity which befell the people. Up to today, Ahor is celebrated in a festival called Ahorbaa to commemorate his brave and sacrificial feat. Other ethnic groups in Ghana have similar stories which render the Passion of the Christ not just a familiar phenomenon, but a lived experience recorded in the history of the people." (deGraft-Yankson 2020) In this connection lies the message to the artist's fellow Ghanaians already touched upon above. Since there is no precise definition of the nature of Ahor's ordeal, and the figure in the work is clearly not nailed to a cross, only this West African narrative and a regional message can actually be established in the pictorial work alone. Only the title ties the work to a more global and trans-religious context.

## **Interpretative approach in the social context of Ghana**

"One of the reasons Christianity thrived in Ghana (and Africa) was largely because, the traditional Ghanaian observed so much conformity between their traditional religious practices and the introduced Euro-Christian religion. Commonalities included the belief in reaching the Almighty God through the Saints which the traditional Ghanaian perceived as the Christian's version of reaching the Supreme Being through the Ancestors." In this depiction, Patrique deGraft-Yankson prepares the ground for an interpretation of the figure as a sign of a fusion of religious ideas and the forced dissolution of differences. This view, which is very much oriented towards understanding and reconciliation, contrasts with social movements and upheavals in Ghana during the artist's creative period. The titles of Kofi's works mentioned above also allow for another interpretation, in which the African self-image is not designed for an inclusive connectivity, but rather for the creation of identification, even if the cited "Stoicism" may again seek a connection to an ancient European tradition. This view would also be supported by Atta Kwami's interpretation of the other two works (see above).

## **Interpretative approach in a transcultural context**

In the end, the impression remains that the artist, as so often in the field of art and decidedly also in the sense of a Western concept of art, was aiming for ambiguity, e.g. both an "inward" message and a second message "to the world". In addition to one interpretation, that it is a cultural melange, perhaps an attempt at reconciliation, another interpretation can be put forward, that Ghanaian traditions, stories and designs in Kofi's sculpture, for all their global and historical similarity to many other objects, also retain their very own attitude, their own value, their own expression. Although the title carries a transcultural message, the figure and its creation quite clearly tell of a West African myth, not of the crucifixion of Christ, even if a similarity, a possibility of confusion, was obviously intended. There seems to be a striving for emancipation and self-assertion of Ghanaian stories and design in Kofi's work that could be obscured by an over-emphasised interpretation of global connectivity.

## **III. Ideas for the lessons**

### **Pictorial approach**

The students try to recreate the postures of Vincent Kofi's sculpture as well as the figure of Christ in various crucifix representations with their own bodies and - carefully - probe the limits of their anatomical possibilities in order to develop a feeling for and an understanding of the expression of such figures.

The students collect pieces of fallen deadwood in the forest or park and look for figurative forms in them. They expose these forms through drawing or sculpture.

The students investigate theatrical expressions of pain, suffering and death and document their results photographically so that they can exchange impressions and effects.



To help them imagine the size of Kofi's sculpture, the students provisionally assemble a figure from crumpled wrapping paper and painter's tape. By crumpling and bending the paper, they explore the possibilities of giving this unstable figure a firm footing and a tendency to move.

Drawing from the photographic stock of Kofi's sculpture, the students infer the views from other sides, especially the rear view of the figure.

## Linguistic discussion

The students explore the literary specifications of the Bible with regard to similarities and differences of the crucifixion scene in the various gospels. To be able to work effectively here, they rely on a digital edition with an automated search function. Thus, hits of suitable search words can also be compared, for example, in the Old Testament or in apocryphal texts.

The students collect and sift through various attempts of their own to "tag" the pictorial work of Vincent Kofi or other pictorial works studied in this context. That is, like the artist, they place the sculpture in a different context by connecting it to words. They also apply this strategy to their own found figure (see above: figure discovered in found wood) and give it a title that runs counter to what is depicted in each case, counteracts it or leads it ad absurdum.

## Interdisciplinary approaches

**Religious education, Ethics:** The students are researching for an exhibition project. They gather images of crucifixes from all over the Christian world and supplement them with visual links to these visual worlds in extra-religious areas. Depending on the search strategy (keyword search, inverse image search), this round dance ranges from the ancient desecration of Marsyas to medieval men of pain to film quotes such as "Conan the Barbarian".

**Physik:** The students investigate the importance of the centre of gravity for the statics of a sculpture and its manipulation. They discuss the uncertain circumstance of whether Kofi's sculpture is able to stand on its own or needs to be fixed to the ground. They then conclude on static limits and possibilities of sculptural design in other exemplary works

**Sports, Physics:** Following their acting experiments (cf. visual approach: forms of expression for pain, suffering and death), they experiment with static possibilities and limits of the human body and their own centre of gravity.

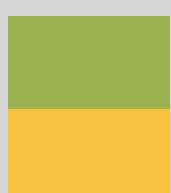
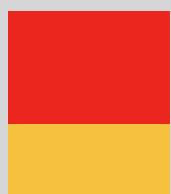
**German, History, Latin, Greek:** The students collectively research transcultural further and new developments of figures of older visual cultures, e.g. in Greek or Germanic mythology (gods as film heroes, such as "Percy Jackson", "Thor", "Loki", devil figures, such as "Hell-Boy"). They organise their results using the mapping technique and sift through the field together.

## The work as a trigger for one's own creation and reflection

The students develop their own hybrid beings in a pictorial-practical way. To do this, they combine opposing or related (film) heroines and heroes or gods and goddesses from different parts of the world and times of their choice. This search is supported by the young people's previous knowledge based on comics, graphic novels and mangas. The connection of the Chinese moon goddess Chang'e (manga) and the figure of Pandora (Greek mythology) serves as an example.

The students develop this hybrid being in the form of a traditional, drawn metamorphosis.

Students divide their work between sifting through the sources of stories about people sacrificing themselves around the world, from Ahor to John Maynard, from Christ to the Shimpū Tok kōtai, and compare facts, myths, research statuses, functions and the forms of reception of their deeds. They supplement their summaries (poster or presentation) with the visual material collected in the process.



## 6. Kente – A traditional fabric between indigenous cultural product and political statement



Figure 1: Dr Kwame Nkrumah (right), Prime Minister of Ghana, talks to UN diplomat and human rights activist Ralph Bunche at a reception in his honour in New York in 1958.

### I. Fakts and analyses

The black-and-white photo (Figure 1) shows two people facing each other, dressed in two different fashion classics. The man on the left is wearing a suit, the one on the right a coverlet reminiscent of a toga. This is made of an indigenous woven fabric called kente, which was worn by rulers and kings for special occasions and ceremonies in Ghana before colonial times. The suit as a three-piece ensemble is considered "classic" in the Western dress code. The coverlet is still worn as a "classic" by men in Ghana (Essel 2022).

The photo shows the meeting of two political figures in 1958 with a common political interest: Freedom, Equality and Independence. On the left is Ralph Bunche (1904-1971), a US diplomat and civil rights activist who was awarded the Springarn Medal in 1949 and the Nobel Peace Prize in 1950 for his social commitment against racism and against segregation. Opposite him, on the right side of the picture, is Francis Nwia Kofi Kwame Nkrumah (1909-1972), who was instrumental in the decolonisation process of Africa. He was one of the leading figures in the struggle against British colonial rule over the so-called Gold Coast (Republic of Ghana since 1957), which had existed since 1820. In his struggle for Ghana's independence, he organised strikes and boycotts. As prime minister of Ghana, he also supported other African countries on their way to independence (Zeitler 2020). In 1960, Nkrumah was elected Ghana's first president.



Looking at the photo, one quickly gets the impression of an interested, possibly friendly bond. The men meet each other at eye level, their interaction seems trusting and friendly. They look into each other's eyes with a smile. The two men's garments, suit and kente, are linked by a common history, the history of colonialism. Under the occupation of Ghana, the British colonial rulers had introduced the western suit for official occasions and prohibited the wearing of national cultural items such as indigenous fabrics, hairstyles, signs and symbols, as Osuanyi Quaicoor Essel pointed out in conversation. Wearing a pre-colonial cultural product can be seen as a boycott of colonial order and a political statement. The kente became a symbol of liberation from imposed constraints and conventions. The return to one's own cultural identity shows the desire and urge to shake off external domination.

And yet it is probably precisely this break with the conventionally European dress code as an element of the emancipation process that creates rather a deep bond between the two politicians. While they stand up for their rights on different continents, they contest a common struggle for equal rights for the black population and liberation from an oppressed position.

Wearing the kente has a long tradition in Ghana. The fabrics are woven in a combination of different patterns in individual panels and then sewn together to form a large cloth. The individual patterns each have a symbolic meaning and in their interplay they are supposed to reflect the character of the wearer. Thus, a designer always takes care to characterise the wearer of the Kente fabric and to give him/her positive powers with the choice of patterns. The patterns, which are mostly geometric, are often named after plants or animals to which special powers are attributed, as well as after important personalities. According to Osuanyi Quaicoor Essel, by wearing the patterns, the powers, forces and good qualities are to be transferred to the person being dressed.

Thus, it can be assumed that the pattern of the Kente fabric worn by Nkrumah in the photo was not arbitrary, but that the combination of patterns was chosen by him and the designer with the symbolic meaning in mind. Wearing kente is a way of socio-cultural communication. Osuanyi Quaicoor Essel, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Textile and Fashion Education at the University of Education, Winneba, Ghana, interpreted the Kente fabric worn by Nkrumah in the photo as follows:

"Careful examination of the fabric (in black and white) reveals its resemblance to the *toku kra ntoma* pattern. It is a unique version of the *toku kra ntoma*. The term *toku kra ntoma* is an Akan expression that literally means '*Toku's soul cloth*'. [...] Nkrumah's use of it in this context represents his innate transformative leadership, patriotism and messianic character in achieving Ghanaian political independence. The fabric celebrates Nkrumah's statesmanlike demeanour. According to history, the *Toku kra ntoma* was designed to celebrate the soul of the brave *Toku*, Queenmother of the Asante, who was defeated [and killed] in a battle with *Nana Opoku Ware I*, King of the Asante Kingdom (1731-1742). Although she was defeated, her exploits and bravery were worthy of appreciation in the annals of Asante history. Because of this historical precedent, the *Toku-kra-ntoma* design was awarded to leaders who demonstrated true courage and bravery in the face of adversity. [...] In designing the fabric [the] patterns *babauduhene*, *nkyemfre*, *nkyinkyim* and *kaw mframe* were used. The babauduhene pattern symbolises growth, healing and spiritual protection." (Translated after Asmah, 2009). *Toku-kra-ntoma* fabric with all its patterns symbolises courageous leadership, heroic deeds, self-sacrifice, spiritual vitality and rebirth (Lloyd 2017). *Nkyemfre* [...] symbolises history, recyclability and healing power, knowledge and service. *Kaw mframe* symbolises uniqueness, while *nkyinkyim* symbolises the dynamism of life. The interplay of these motifs represents the good political leadership and bravery of President Kwame Nkrumah."



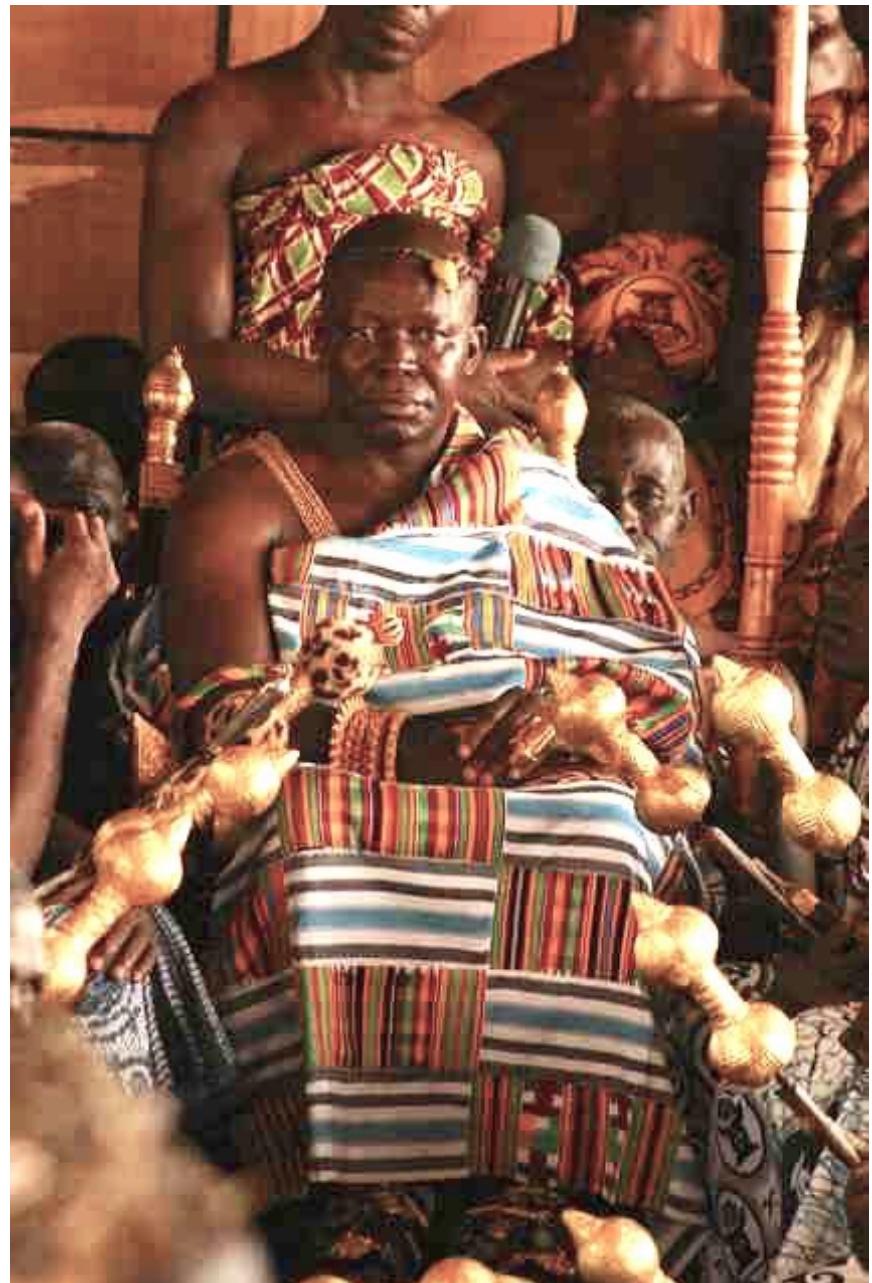


Figure 2 shows the enthroned Asantehene (King of Asante) Nana Otumfoe Sir Osai Agyemang Prempeh II robed in kente. He reigned from 24 April 1933 to 27 May 1970.

Figure 3 shows the 16th Asantehene of the Ashanti people Osei Tutu II, 2005, also robed in kente.

## II. Interpretations

### Interpretative approach 1: Kente as an indigenous cultural product with symbolic power

Legend has it that two young men, Otaa Karaban and Kwaku Ameyaw, went into the forest and saw the spider Ananse spinning its web. In the moonlight, the web sparkled in wonderful patterns. Inspired by this, they wove a kente fabric from a single thread and brought the special cloth to Asantehene Osei Tutu, the Ashanti king. He made the special textile the king's fabric for special occasions and called it Kente (Micots, 2022).

Since then, kente with their special pattern symbolism have been the fabrics of rulers and kings (Figure 2, 3). They stand for "pride, wealth, power, authority and status of the wearer" (Essel 2021). In the past, the cloths were made of silk and, as a symbol of power, were reserved only for rulers and served to represent rule and wealth. Today, the cloths are mainly made of cotton and viscose and are also worn by the ordinary population (Bauer 2001).

The wearing of kente on ceremonial and special occasions has a long tradition. Even today, the Asantehene (king of the Ashanti) and the Queenmother wear kente fabrics at public appearances. Men wear them in toga style and women wear dansikran (female way of wearing the toga) as kaba and slit, a three-piece of top, skirt and wide coverlet (Essel 2022).



## **Interpretative approach 2: Kente as a cultural product with a socio-political function**

After Ghana's independence in 1957, the fabrics experienced a veritable political revival. As a sign of African identity, pride and patriotism, kente have since been worn by politicians as official attire on official occasions. This political trend started with Ghana's first president, Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, who wore kente for his inauguration in 1960. He wore the special fabric with its long and above all pre-colonial tradition already to Ghana's independence negotiations in 1957 "thus distancing himself from the European clothing of the colonial masters", whereupon kente became a symbol of "independence and liberation, but also of a new African self-confidence" (Bauer 2001, p. 60).

"We were denied knowledge of our African past and told that we had no present. What future could there be for us? We were taught to regard our culture and traditions as barbaric and primitive. Our textbooks were English books that informed us about English history, English geography, English way of life, English customs, English ideas and English weather. All this has to be changed. (...) [It] is vital to nurture our own culture and history if we are to develop the African personality that must form the educational and intellectual foundations for our Pan-African future." (Nkrumah, quoted in: Schramm 2010, p. 195)

The return to indigenous cultural products, such as traditional fabrics and symbols, as Africa's cultural heritage, had the goal of distancing itself from the consequences of colonial education in order to create and strengthen a new African self-confidence based on Ural African identification (Schramm 2021). On official political occasions, Nkrumah exchanged the "classic" European suit for the indigenous Ghanaian garment (Essel 2022). After Kwame Nkrumah led Ghana to independence in 1957, the first African country to do so, politicians from other African countries also ordered kente from Ghana to wear on political occasions and ceremonies as a sign of "a return to one's own African identity" (Bauer 2001, p. 60).

In a study, textile designer and senior lecturer Osuanyi Quaicoo Essel examined presidential inauguration dress choices from 1960 to 2017, finding that seven of the eight elected presidents wore traditional African dress as a sign of cultural identity and attachment to the country's pre-colonial history. The renunciation of Western clothing can be seen as a symbolic gesture of independence, a "mental decolonisation" (Essel 2019, p. 50) as well as a sign of Ghana's new self-confidence. "This is due to the fact that clothing was one of the means by which the British colonised Ghana." (Essel 2019, p. 50)

## **Interpretative approach 3: Kente as a sign of solidarity**

The particular fabric Kente, with its colourful, mostly geometric patterns, has undergone an unexpected evolution from traditional indigenous handicrafts and insignia of power to a political instrument of the decolonisation process in the late 1950s. In 2020, kente was reactualised as a political sign of solidarity in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement.

As a result, kente are also worn outside West Africa as a sign of solidarity on political occasions around the world. In 2018, for the commemoration of the 400th anniversary of the arrival of enslaved Africans in America, kente was worn by the Association of African American Members of Congress, the Congressional Black Caucus, as a sign of African heritage and pride.

During a moment of silence on 08 June 2020, Democratic members of the US Congress, led by Nancy Pelosi, wore Kente stoles while taking a knee. In this way, they made a political statement in support of the legislative goals of black equality in America and commemorated the death of African American George Floyd from police violence in 2020 and all other black victims of police violence (Essel 2021).

Today, kente is much more than a special craft. Kente is still worn by leading political figures or kings as a sign of power and leadership. In the same way, kente is worn today for fashion reasons. Whereas in the past it was forbidden to cut up a woven fabric, today the fabrics are used to make fashionable garments or the patterns are even printed industrially on cotton.

Kente has thus become a global cultural product that meanders between power insignia, political statement, fashion trend and tourist commerce.



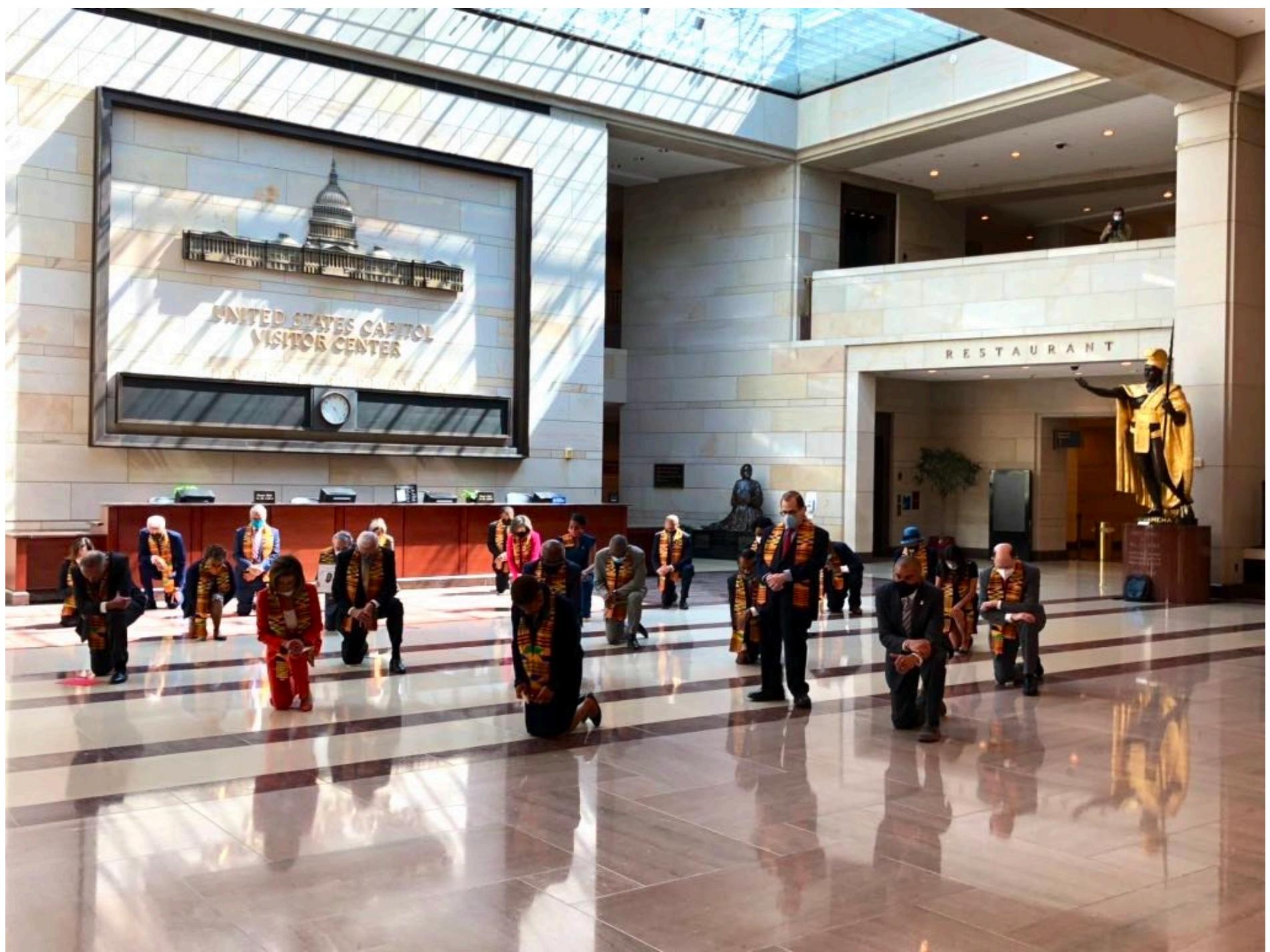


Figure 4 shows members of Congress taking a knee in memory of African American George Floyd, who died as a result of police violence, and all other African American victims of police violence. This image was shared on Twitter on 8/6/2020 by Congressman Bred Sherman - saying, "Together with my colleagues, I observed a moment of silence today to remember the African American victims of #policebrutality and systematic injustice. We hear the American people demanding change, and the time to act is now. #BlackLivesMatter".

### Excusus: History, origin and technique of Kente fabrics

Kente are among the most valuable fabrics in West Africa. The intricately woven fabrics are worn as wrap-around cloths in toga style by tying them around the abdomen and draping them once over the left shoulder, leaving the right shoulder free. They are the fabrics of the Ashanti, who are one of the most famous peoples of West Africa, and served to represent rulership and wealth. At the court of the kings, particularly talented designers and experienced weavers were selected to design and weave extraordinarily beautiful examples that would never have been available on the markets (Essel 2021). In the past, the cloths were made of silk and were reserved only for the rulers as a symbol of power; today the fabrics are mainly made of cotton and viscose (Bauer 2001, p. 59 f.).



## Technique

Kente are colourful fabrics consisting of simple geometric, non-figurative patterns. They are woven in individual strips of differently coloured threads. The 16 to 24 individual strips are then sewn together to form one large fabric. Traditionally, the threads were spun and dyed by hand, but today industrially produced yarn is increasingly used.

The weavers of Kente fabrics are still men. They sit in a frame loom where they operate the loom (the heddles) with their feet. The coloured strands of yarn are around 60 metres long and are weighted down at the end for tension with stones that lie on a wooden sledge (Gillow 2021).



Figure 5 shows the exterior of a Kente weaving mill in 2021. Long coloured threads are dried by stretching them with stones lying on the ground.

## Symbolism

The particular pattern depends on the skill of the weaver and the intended symbolic language. Symbolic and philosophical messages are encoded in the patterns. Yellow stands for gold and thus symbolises power and prosperity, whereas red and black stand for death and mourning. The cloths bear names such as "Gold Dust", "Family is War" or "Fear the People" (Bauer 2001, p. 59). The individual patterns of the kente have different meanings. Kente can be worn as insignia of rulership, allude to historical events or typical Ghanaian proverbs (Bauer 2001).





Figure 6 shows the stretched coloured threads in detail.

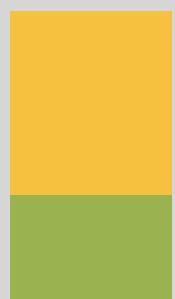
Figure 7 shows a Kente weaver in the loom. The photographs were taken in 2021.

### III. Ideas for the lessons

#### Pictorial approach

In small groups, the students interpret the photo of the meeting of Kwame Nkrumah and Ralph Bunche and then read the text about Kente. After researching what the patterned fabric is all about, they let the two garments have their say in a creative writing process by adding speech bubbles to the photo using the collage technique.

The students make a collage in which they add kente patterns to the suit and design the kente toga in the grey of the suit. Afterwards, they look at the results and analyse their effect after the redesign.



#### Linguistic discussion

Students research the biographies of Kwame Nkrumah and Ralph Bunche and discuss what political goal could link the two.



In small groups, the students think about how to #hashtag the photo of the meeting of Kwame Nkrumah and Ralph Bunche. The results are collected in a large mind map and discussed in plenary afterwards.



The students discuss the question of whether everyone is allowed to wear kente or whether it is only Ghanaians, or more precisely Ashantis, who are allowed to wear a traditional kente.

The students research pattern symbolism in other cultural contexts (paisley, tartan, kimono patterns, etc.) and collect their findings on a shared pinboard or display board.

The students research works of art in which kente fabrics appear. They decide on one and present it to the class. This can be done as group, partner or individual work (possible artists: Zohra Opoku, Atta Kwami, Bernard Akoi-Jackson, El Anatsui).

## Interdisciplinary approaches

**History:** The students research the two persons Kwame Nkrumah and Ralph Bunche and the occasion on which the photo of the encounter was taken and write a short newspaper report about it.

**History:** Students research garments from other historical and local contexts that are or were worn to demonstrate power or make a political statement.

**History, German:** Students discuss the advantages and disadvantages of uniformity in a society or institution.

**History:** Students research and critically engage with historical nation-building processes.

**English:** Symbols and clothing that create identity are often used in pop culture as a sign of belonging and are often torn away from their origin and transformed. The students research cultural processes in which a transformation of traditional cultural goods has taken place in pop culture and critically deal with this in a discussion (example: the hip-hop bands Salt-N-Pepa and Heavy D. & The Boyz use traditional Kente fabrics and patterns for their outfits).

## The work as a trigger for one's own creation and reflection

The students design a common Kente fabric. They develop a graphic pattern on a virtue of their own choice and reproduce it as a print or painting on fabric. In the second step, the students put the patterns together in a rhythmised composition and sew them into a large communal cloth.

The students research Kente fabrics and choose one that suits them. A detail of the fabric is printed and translated into a large-scale painting on canvas. For this, the works of the artist Atta Kwami can be viewed and analysed.

The students are inspired by Kente designs and create their own pattern design for a garment. The pattern as well as the material and the technical realisation can be freely chosen by the students. The artistic process of integrating tradition into modern fashion creations is discussed and analysed using the example of the South African fashion designer Laduma. His designs are inspired by the aesthetics of traditional beadwork of the Xhosa, a South African ethnic group.

The students build small weaving boxes from wooden slats or sturdy cardboard as well as (nylon) cords and try out the technique of weaving with different materials (strips of fabric, cords, parcel string, plastic foil, paper, etc.). The woven parts can then be sewn together to make a large cloth or carpet.



## 7. Christ or Emir? – Uche Okeke: untitled, 1961

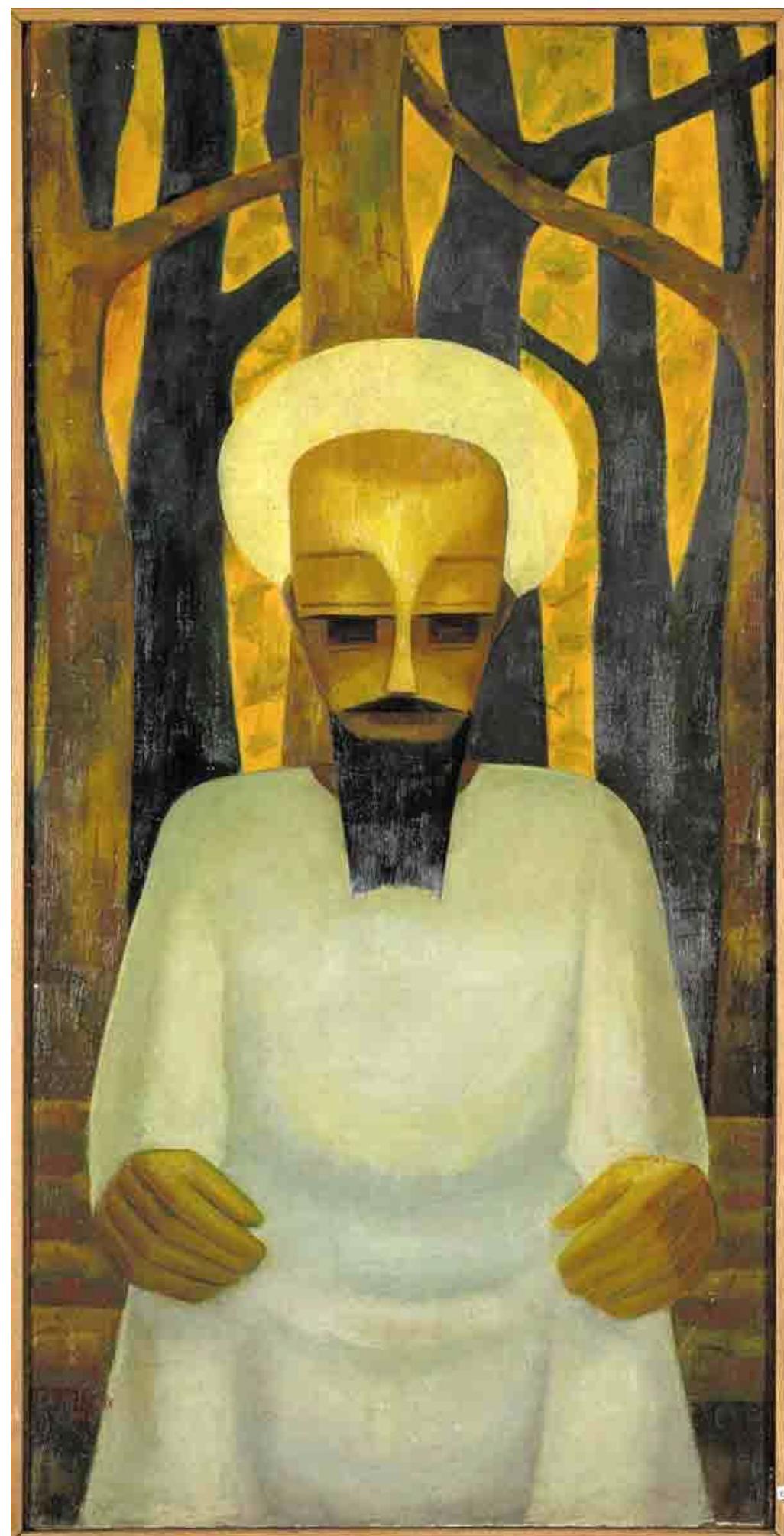


Figure 1 shows Uche Okekes: untitled (Christ), 1961  
Oil on cardboard, 122.3 x 60.5 cm, Iwalewahaus Bayreuth

### I. Facts and analyses

Knowledge about this painting is obviously scanty. What is certain is that it is by the artist Uche Okeke (1933-2016). On the back there is a title (by an unknown hand): CHRIST. The team of the Iwalewa-house, where the work is located, doubts this titling and lists the work with the note "unknown title".



## Object biography

The picture was probably painted in Zaria (Nigeria). It is not known whether there was a specific reason for it. It was presumably acquired there by Ulli Beier (1922-2011), a linguist who had lived in Nigeria since 1950 and at that time taught at the University of Ibadan. Ulli Beier, who had published a study "Art in Nigeria" in 1960, was later - from 1981 to 1997 - director of the newly founded Iwalewahaus in Bayreuth. In 1981, the painting was acquired by the collection of the Iwalewahaus, since then it has been in the in-house collection. In 2022, it was shown in a large-scale Okeke solo exhibition in Bayreuth.

## Context

The regional and historical context in which the artist Okeke worked is essential for understanding this work. Born in 1933, Okeke studied art in Zaria, Nigeria, and in 1958, at the age of 25, founded the Zaria Art Society (also known as the Zaria Rebels), an independent group of artists, at the local college, where mainly British teachers taught.

Zaria is a town in the north of Nigeria, in the state of Kaduna, where there has always been tension between followers of Christianity and Islam. "The state [Kaduna] is politically classified as belonging to the northwestern part of the country with about 6.1million people (2006 estimate). Kaduna State is a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic state populated by over 60 different ethnic groups with Hausa/Fulani and Gbagyi as the dominant ethnic groups." ([web link 8](#))

The "Zaria Art Society" saw in the local traditional aesthetics of the Igbo, Yoruba or Haussa reference points for their own ideas of modern Nigerian art. In the same year, he also founded a cultural centre. He thus became a central figure for artistic modernism in Nigeria, seeking a way for political liberation from colonialism and artistic liberation (through experimental syntheses of different traditions) to inspire each other (Okeke-Agulu 2016, page 641 ff.).

In 1960, Nigeria achieved independence from Great Britain, which had colonised the country since the late 19th century. One year later, in 1961, this painting was created. From 1971, Okeke taught art at the University of Nigeria in Nsukka, where he also became director of the Institute for African Studies. Nsukka is further south in Nigeria, the place where El Anatsui ([chapter 12](#)), eleven years younger, also began teaching in 1975 and where he still lives and works today. Okeke's graphic and pictorial work is characterised by the adoption of the sign language and aesthetics of the Igbo, the Uli ([web link 9](#)), an influence that is not visible in this painting but is important for the overall understanding.

## II. Interpretations

The idea for the three following texts arose on 26 April 2022 in Bayreuth, when the three authors discussed the picture in a larger circle. As mentioned above, the representatives of the Iwalewa House expressed their doubts about the title of the painting, "Christ", which had been assumed until then. Consequently, the question of who was depicted in the picture, Christ or another person, came to the fore. The texts presented here were written one after the other, beginning with Mahmoud Malik Saako's interpretation, to which first Osuanyi Quaicoo Essel and then Ernst Wagner responded. All texts are translated and slightly abridged summaries of the versions published on the EVC website.

### Interpretive Approach by Mahmoud Malik Saako

The painting shows a male figure seated on a staircase with a long black beard, white turban and white robe. His hands rest on his knees, possibly a meditation posture. In the background, tall trees, painted in two colours (black and yellow). Sunlight penetrates through the trees and creates light reflections.

**An Islamic perspective:** I [Mahmoud Malik Saako] base my interpretation of the painting on an Islamic perspective. Islam was already very influential in northern Nigeria in the 15th century, long before Christianity and the colonisation of Nigeria by the British. A Muslim ruler (emir) here is usually male, wearing a white robe with long sleeves and a white turban tied around his head to demonstrate his authority. The painting thus perhaps depicts an emir of the state of Zaria at the time, sitting in a garden and meditating.



The use of the mask: the face has the shape of a mask. Perhaps this is a reference to the conflicts between Muslims and Christians at that time in the state of Zaria. In such an uncertain time, the use of a mask in depicting an emir could give him more respect among the people. The mask - a sign that is present in many cultures - can be used in many ways: to represent religious discourses, to create artistic forms or even to create a mythology for the present.

On the basis of these preliminary considerations, the following possible conclusions now emerge: The painting shows the power of the emir in the state of Zaria in the garden of his palace, where he retreats to relax. But it also shows the importance of the trees, as they provide natural air and shade. Thus, the image also reflects the symbiotic relationship between man and the natural environment or biosphere. The long beard, the white long robe and the white turban are symbols of the emir's power and authority in the context of an Islamic state. They reflect the dress code of the emir in Muslim states.

The representation of the face does not correspond to a normal human head. It is probably the mask of an Egyptian pharaoh, i.e. an African mask. Through it, the spirit of the pharaoh is embodied as a royal figure who wielded much power. The use of masks in the African context activates their inherent spiritual powers so that the wearer transforms, becomes possessed by these spiritual powers - i.e. comes into a situation that can only be explained in terms of this belief system.

The black and yellow-brown tall trees also represent the diversity of the ecosystem and the symbiotic relationships that prevail in the environment. This in turn also reflects the complexity of human society with its different cultures. But this complexity also needs a person with wisdom and patience to rule, like the emir who occupies the position of an Egyptian pharaoh.

Uche Okeke was a revolutionary artist who tried to break with the concept of art imposed on Africa by the white colonial powers. This reorientation was to Africanise artistic activity in West Africa and in Africa as a whole. That is why Okeke chose the Egyptian pharaoh mask here (Egypt is a country in Africa).

### **Interpretive approach by Osuanyi Quaicoor Essel**

In his painting, Okeke shows a composition depicting a seated figure in a white, long-sleeved, flowing garment with trees in the background. The figure is centrally placed, the head forming the visual centre of the entire composition. The hands rest gently on the lap. The head is "cubist" in style, reminiscent of pre-colonial African wooden sculptures. The hands are also similarly designed, with even less detail - in other words, quite different from naturalistic representations. Interestingly, the head is disproportionately large compared to the body and thus emphasised. In African sculpture, the human head is considered the seat of wisdom and is therefore depicted larger. Realistic proportions play no role in favour of the Afrocentric symbolic essence. This concept of head representation is therefore also called "African proportion".

In order to create a harmonious contrast of colour and form, yellow tones form an arched pattern around the head. This possibly indicates a halo, as in representations of saints in the Western art tradition. However, it could also depict a human figure wearing a turban. As the artist comes from a predominantly Muslim community, this depiction is perhaps a tribute to his own religious and cultural background.

The eyes are depicted with dark brown rectangular dots, while the forehead is gently highlighted with light yellow tones, a design that gives the human figure a meditative mood and a pious character. Although Okeke has chosen a portrait format, the clever placement of the human figure and the peculiar colouring of the head regions create a compositional triangle when diagonal lines are drawn upwards from the lower corners of the painting across the halo-like form. In the opposite direction, the halo shape and the "pharaonic" beard again create a triangle, which is visually very interesting.

In the African colour scheme, yellow is symbolic of wealth and royalty. So with this colour scheme, Okeke gave an indication of the royal qualities of this human figure. The white-looking robe of the figure furthermore contributes to the pious impression of the figure, again starting from the African colour symbolism. This form of combination of royal posture, pharaonic beard, colouring and body language is reminiscent of sculptures of ancient Egyptian kings.



In doing so, Okeke cleverly deceives the viewer. He leads him to believe that this composition is symmetrical, but closer inspection reveals deviations, for example in the nose or - more clearly - in the background with its tree-shaped forms in rich shades of colour. These trees and the sprouting branches form a psychedelic or mind-expanding cross and help to break a possible monotony.

So in this composition, Okeke shows a figure in a regal, majestic posture. Perhaps he thereby combines the concept of a Christian icon with Africanised posture and Africanised cultural practice. This connection shows his personal position: he is not willing to adopt Western artistic forms and traditions skin and hair. However, he is also not ready to adopt his indigenous Nigerian artistic traditions without modification. Accordingly, in the manifesto he formulated, he stressed that "... it is pointless to copy our old artistic heritage because it stands for our old order. Culture lives from change. The social problems of today are different from those of yesterday, and we do Africa and humanity a disservice if we live in the achievements of our fathers" (Okeke, n.d.). For this reason, he appropriated Western artistic concepts and fused them with Afrocentric ones. In this way, he created a hybrid artistic language that is neither purely African nor Western, a new art.

Okeke studied at the University of Zaria with mostly British teachers who advocated a Eurocentric, formal art education: realistic representation, perspective spatial representation, accurate proportions and tonal colour gradations. With his approach to reinterpreting this Western art style, he founded - with others - the Nigerian non-conformist artist group "Zaria Rebels". In this way, Okeke became a pioneer of the new Nigerian art in the context of the independence movement.

### **Interpretative approach by Ernst Wagner**

When asked whether the figure wears a turban or has a halo, I [Ernst Wagner] initially saw quite clearly a halo. That is precisely why I was really surprised by Saako's interpretation as a turban. An unprejudiced examination showed: there are obviously no arguments - based solely on the picture as well as on historical photographs of emirs - for the interpretation as a halo. So a turban, as Saako suggests? But a search in another direction, namely to Okeke's work, shows that there are indeed pictures that quite certainly depict Christ or Mary, there are even similar halos and, incidentally, a similar composition. So a halo after all? Is the title "Christ" justified after all?

However, does the question of whether Christ or a Muslim is depicted make any sense at all? Are such attributions or deprecations not quasi "denominational claims of ownership"? To which faith does the work of art belong? Does it belong to the Christians, the Muslims or the traditional believers in northern Nigeria, if one also considers a traditional wooden mask?

Therefore, in the following I will try to understand the painting differently, i.e. not from the artist's point of view and what, if anything, he wanted to represent, but from an "ideal" viewer's point of view (one without a specific context). In doing so, I am aware that with this (reception-aesthetic) approach I am taking a specifically Western approach to a modernist work (where I now place Okeke's painting). The associated concept of art takes the loss of a binding iconography and a fundamental openness of "autonomous" art as its basis.

### **Black Athena**

Black Athena. The "Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization" is a three-volume work by Martin Bernal published in 1987, 1991 and 2006. In Black Athena, he puts forward the controversial hypothesis that the culture of ancient Greece derived from the cultures of the Phoenicians and Egyptians. This would place the origin of Western civilisation in the Near Eastern and North African region and not in Europe as previously assumed. In addition, he endeavours to prove that the Egyptians and Phoenicians were mainly of African and not Mediterranean origin.



The axial symmetry in the high format and the geometric structure of the figure speak of order, immovability, sublimity and dignity. And this dignity is not fed by external insignia or theatrical staging, but by a calm that radiates from within. It is an image in front of which one can become calm if one trusts this order as a viewer.

The degree of abstraction in the depiction of the human figure also contributes to this effect. We do not see a portrait of a specific person, nor do we see any movement, gestures or facial expressions. This abstraction is most obvious in the eye parts: it remains completely unclear whether the figure is looking at the viewer, whether it is looking forward or - contemplatively, with closed eyes - inwards. The parallels in the eyelid, lacrimal sac and eyebrow support this. A human being is depicted in an abstracted ideal form, like a mask. The mask-like quality is also supported by the made, the mounted, as for example in the upper lip beard.

Even the design of the background between two-dimensional and spatial effect, between symmetry and asymmetry serves this degree of abstraction: horizontal stripes at the bottom, tree trunks (without leaves) at the top, which form the liveliest, most restless element in the painting, even though the alternation of light and dark here again shows the abstracting and consciously composing hand of the artist. With the spatial layering and the simplification of the forms, the painting seems almost like a carved relief, which would then also be matched by the colourfulness, for instance when the "sky" behind the trees as well as the lighter trees have the same colourfulness as the face, and on the other side the beard, eyes and the dark trees form a second colour zone. The lightest zones are formed by the robe and the shape around the head. Clearly outlined contours outline the objects in one, spatially modelled main colour each.

The degree of abstraction, the modelling construction of the clear objectivity out of a colourfulness, the strict symmetry of the composition, the tectonics of the pictorial space thus unfold an image that not only creates zones of ambiguity, but itself remains ambiguous. The viewer must fill this openness with his or her own ideas. This means that the viewer's gaze is directed towards the picture, but the eyes do not look back. In this respect, the painting is suitable for contemplation, meditation, spiritual experience. In seeing the painting, one's own can come to rest. And so the distinction between the Christian halo, the Muslim turban and the ritual mask can also come to rest in the contemplation of the painting.



Figures 2, 3 and 4 show analytical composition lines in Uche Okeke's work. In Figure 2, the strict alignment with the image diagonals and the side bisectors can be demonstrated, in Figure 3 the clear inscription of a centred circular shape. Figure 4 shows symmetrical diagonals that clearly flank the figure in the picture..



### III. Three perspectives: Attempt at a summary

Based on his perspective as a Muslim in Ghana, Mahmoud Malik Saako opens up a whole range of possible interpretations that play around two basic ideas: Starting with the trees and the calm, meditating figure, he opens up the possibility of seeing the painting as a formulation of the resonance of nature and man. The second approach sees in the strongly abstracted face an Egyptian or African mask (cf. Sarg, on p. 88) that enables the depicted emir (defined by clothing and turban) to legitimise his power - by using the spiritual power of masks. With regard to Saako's interpretation, historical photos of emirs are helpful, e.g. of Emir Abdelkader (in Damascus in 1862) in the English-language Wikipedia or of Abdallah ibn Husain I in the German-language Wikipedia. This comparison shows how obvious the interpretation as emir is if one is familiar with this tradition of representation.

In contrast, Osuanyi Quaicoo Essel avoids the question of iconographic attribution, not excluding the turban, even though he always speaks of a halo in the following. Instead, he develops the thesis from the observation of the formal design as well as from the artist's biography that a hybridisation of Western (European), African and Egyptian representational traditions takes place in the picture. With this idea of synthesis, Essel sees a connection to Nigeria's independence movement, which - his argumentation suggests - must also feed on different roots in order to decolonise them and thus create something new. A clear political statement with regard to the decolonisation of Africa after the World War II.

In contrast, Ernst Wagner designs a rather non-political perspective when he suggests that the abstraction, which prevents an unambiguous interpretation, should be understood as an invitation to (today's) viewers to overcome unambiguities, appropriations, and thus delimitations in their perception and to open themselves to a spiritual experience. The argumentation is similar to Essel's, both start from an analysis of form, but it is now reception-aesthetically oriented towards today's perception, not - as with Essel - production-aesthetically and in the historical context.

## IV. Ideas for the lessons

### Preliminary remark

In dealing with this work, we have received not only the analysis and interpretation but also teaching suggestions from one of the performers, Osuanyi Quaicoo Essel. These are included below as quotations in appropriate places.

### Pictorial approach

The students think about a meaningful context or space in which they would present the image. They test this presentation in a digital montage. They discuss how this contextualisation influences the effect and also the meaning of the picture.

Variation: The students think about a meaningful context or space for each of the interpretation positions and simulate a presentation of the picture in a digital montage.

Essel suggests: "Teachers could also provide learners with printed copy of the painting and ask them to redraw this religious-centred figure to suit their own religious understanding and cultures." ([web link 10](#))

The students look for possible pictorial references to the work in the following areas: Cubism, Mexican Muralismo (e.g. Diego Rivera), ancient Egyptian art, (Igbo) masks and together create a visual mapping of the possible references.

The students visualise the three different interpretation positions in comparison.

### Linguistic discussion

Half of the class receives the information that the picture probably represents an emir, the other half receives the information that it is probably Christ. Both groups analyse the picture and compare their results.



Essel emphasises: "Furnishing learners with links to the biographical account of the artist for them to understand his cultural nuances" In this way, learners receive contextual information that helps them "to explore with their own interpretation of the artwork." (also [web link 10](#))

Students examine the interpretations at hand for their respective underlying method (iconographic, production-aesthetic and reception-aesthetic analysis) and address the question of what each method does and what advantages they each offer.

The students research further images of Okeke and compare them with those of other Zaria Rebels artists, e.g. Yusuf Grillo, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Oseloka Osadebe, Demas Nwoko, in terms of artistic approaches. They look for formally comparable positions in European art after the Second World War and examine how the theme of black identity is formulated in the works of the Zaria Rebels.

### Position 1 (Saako)

The students compare suitable photos of an emir (e.g. Abdelkader in Damascus in 1862 in the English-language Wikipedia or Abdallah Ibn Husain I in the German-language Wikipedia) and compare them with the depiction in Okeke's work, especially with regard to clothing, posture, image composition. This comparison shows how obvious the interpretation as emir is if one is familiar with this tradition of representation. They now relate their own spontaneous interpretation of Okeke's picture to their own roots in other pictorial traditions, if any, and write a short essay on this.

By comparing the photos, the students clarify the pictorial means that Okeke uses. How does he create his subject, an emir?

### Position 2 (Essel)

The students inform themselves about positions of Pan-Africanism or Négritude in the context of the decolonisation of African countries and examine the possible content-related references of Essel's position to these political movements.

For Okeke's work in the 1960s, three primary points of orientation have been diagnosed with regard to his engagement with Western art: Fauvism, Cubism and organic-gestural art (Informel). Students research Okeke's work and examine the plausibility of this approach.

### Position 3 (Wagner)

The students discuss whether this interpretation could also be in a religion book.

### Interdisciplinary approaches

**Music:** Music styles such as Jamaican reggae, Afrobeat or hip-hop are associated with Pan-Africanism. The students examine the method by which these musical styles contribute to the question of black identity (see, for example, Andreana Clay: "Keepin' it Real: Black Youth, Hip-Hop Culture, and Black Identity"). To what extent are there similar approaches here to those presented in position 2?

**History:** Starting with the reference to Egypt in items 1 and 2 (with the intention that the origin of ancient Egyptian and other civilisations in sub-Saharan Africa should be acknowledged), students examine the image of Egypt in German history or art textbooks. Do black Egyptians appear here? What lines of development are formulated?

**History:** The students discuss why in German art books almost always only ancient Egypt is made the subject of the oldest epoch and not, for example, early Asian cultures? They reflect on the principle and possible justification of linear representations of history in art and other subjects (music, history) and compare the structure of textbooks with, for example, the understanding of history in Neil McGregor's book "A History of the World in 100 Objects".



## **The work as a trigger for one's own creation and reflection**

The students research other images by Okeke and other Zaria Rebels artists, such as Yusuf Grillo, Bruce Onobrakpeya, Oseloka Osadebe, or Demas Nwoko. They develop ideas for a common thread between individual selected paintings and conceive an exhibition or a brochure for them: What is the title? What is the arrangement? What story should be told?

The students analyse Okeke's art political strategy as emphasised by Essel (position 2). They transfer this as a model to a fictitious group of artists at their school location and try, for example, to create a new synthesising, hybrid art from local craft traditions in combination with the illusionism of photorealistic painting (e.g. Franz Gertsch, Chuck Close, Ralph Goings).

This suggestion is based on an idea of Essel's: "Using this painting in teaching and learning in the context of collective memory could inspire relevant competencies in the learners. Gathering inspiration from the artistic pursuit of Okeke, learners could fuse multiple artistic traditions of the artworld to arrive at their individualised artistic accents. Teachers could engage learners in this manner by asking them to borrow and appropriate a foreign artistic style and fuse it with their nationalistic art making techniques to develop a new breed of art or concept. Teachers could also discuss with learners about the fact that gathering artistic inspiration is multicultural with no boundaries." (also [web link 10](#))



## 8. Between local and global goals – National Theatre Building of Ghana



Abbildung 1 zeigt eine Ansicht von Cheng Tainings & Ye Xianghans National Theatre Building of Ghana aus dem Jahr 1992.

### I. Facts and analyses

With a building area of 11,896 square metres, the monumental National Theatre Building of Ghana looks very imposing ([web link 12](#)). The first impression suggests sculptural but also maritime associations.

The National Theatre is located in the capital Accra near the sea in the Victoriaborg district and there near the junction of Independence Avenue and Liberia Road next to the Efua Sutherland Children's Park in Accra's centre. It was designed and built by architect Cheng Taining and architect Ye Xianghan (both of China) between 1990 and 1992. "The National Theatre was however completed on 16th December 1992, commissioned and handed over on 30th December 1992." ([web link 13](#))

The arts educator and lecturer at the School of Creative Arts in the University of Education, Winneba, Ebenezer Kwabena Acquah, describes its use: "It is supported by the government, and largely devoted to musical performances and stage productions, among others." (Kwabena Acquah 2020, according to Wilson 1988, [web link 14](#)) He goes on to say that the "[t]heatrical performances in the National Theatre are part of the nation's cultural heritage and present the people with creative thoughts and reflections on life. The establishment of the National Theatre of Ghana was, to a large extent, largely supported by the National Theatre Movement of the 1950s by cultural experts like Efua Sutherland and Professor J. H. Kwabena Nketia" (Kwabena Acquah 2020, after Agovi, 1990, [web link 14](#))



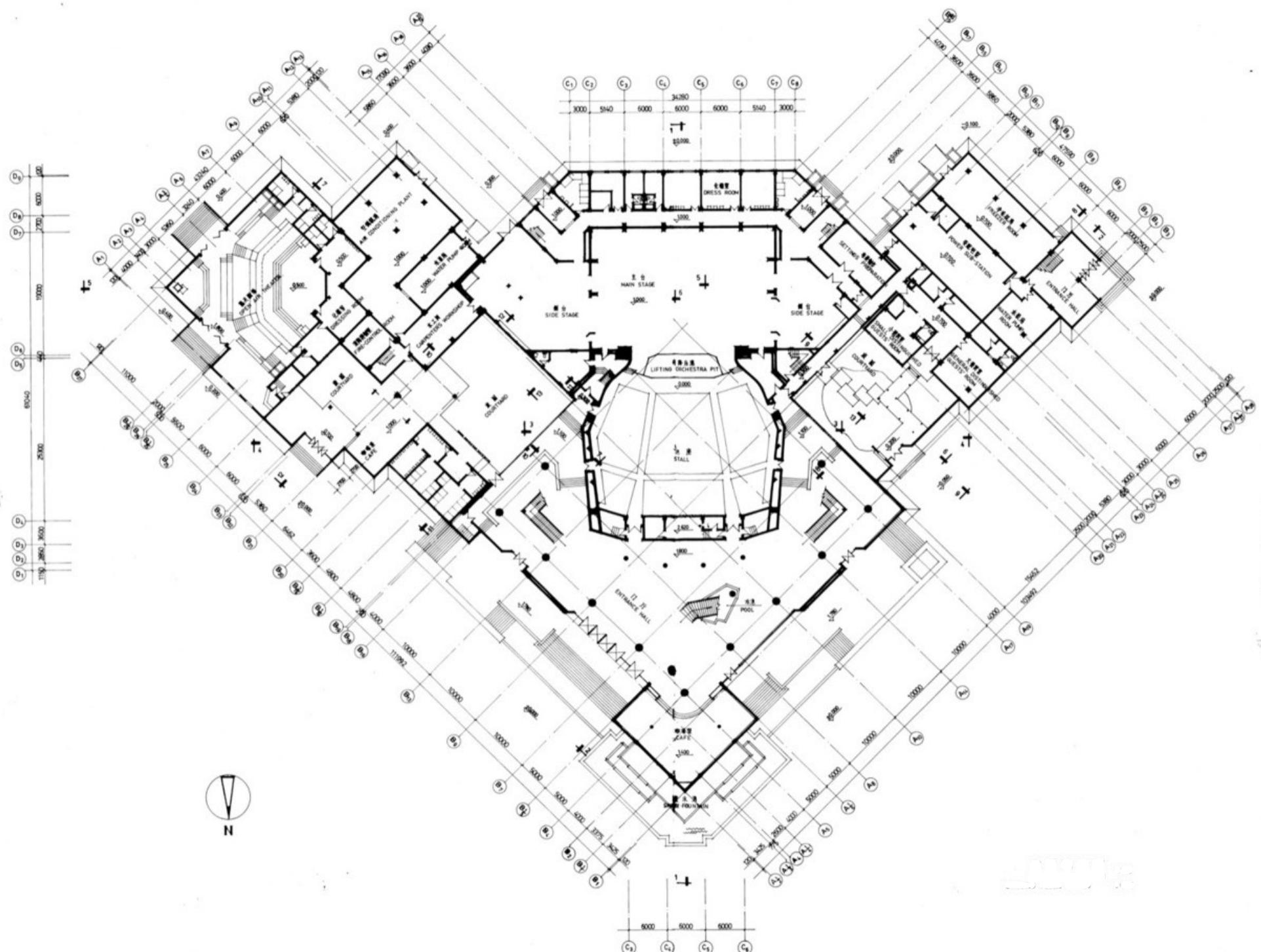


Figure 2 shows the floor plan of the National Theatre at ground floor level.

The building of the National Theatre consists of three different structures, which rest on a kind of base zone. Each of these structures houses its own theatre group or company: the National Theatre Players, the National Dance Company and the National Symphony Orchestra. A closer look at the entire building reveals three distinct parts, in addition to the structural forms already mentioned. The upper part represents three interconnected boats supported by rectangular pillars with curved projections to the outside, and a rectangular base with entrance and exit openings. The entrances and windows appear to be carved out of the rectangular plinth. In addition, the three zones have been boarded up by three staggered large areas of tile or mosaic.

Kwabena Acquah vividly points out the formal language of the building: "Above the base, there are distinct white forms. They taper upwards from the centre and meet towards the outside of the base. The walls curve inwards and are lifted just above the solid base, with glass in between them, making the base and white forms more distinct and thereby reinforcing the differences between them. Small white tiles cover these forms, giving the building its shape and colour. A closer look at the shape of the National Theatre reveals a display of three boats/canoes or fishing vessels that meet at a central point, which takes the form of a captain's bridge. The entire structure is supported by curvy piers and rests on a rectangular base as presented in the image above." (also [web link 14](#))



All entrances are accessible from ground level via stairs leading to the glass entrances and into the building. The main entrance area has the words National Theatre in capital letters. The building is located on a triangular plot and can be accessed from all sides. The design of the square is in keeping with the building. Flower troughs with a surface structure similar to that of the tiles attached to the building can be discovered. In addition, the National Theatre is surrounded by sculptures by Ghanaian artists. For example, there is a sculptural representation of Sankofa (see **chapter 9**) - a traditional Ghanaian Adinkra symbol.

If the viewer now wants to explore the inner structures of the building in more detail, digital-media approaches are available that visualise the building structure very clearly. For example, there are conceptual differences between the individual theatre spaces, ranging from the classic proscenium building to various open stage concepts. Atrium-like atriums can also be discovered. In addition, several other works of art by Ghanaian artists can be found inside.



Figure 3 shows the audience space of the National Theatre with stalls, two tiers and open boxes as seen from the stage. The ceiling is undulating and is symmetrically structured by strip lights in the direction of the audience's view. The stalls have an average width of about 40 rows of seats divided by two aisles. It has four entrances, the first tier with 42 rows of seats has three openings and the second tier with about 40 rows of seats has two openings. There are about 20 rows of seats in depth in the stalls.



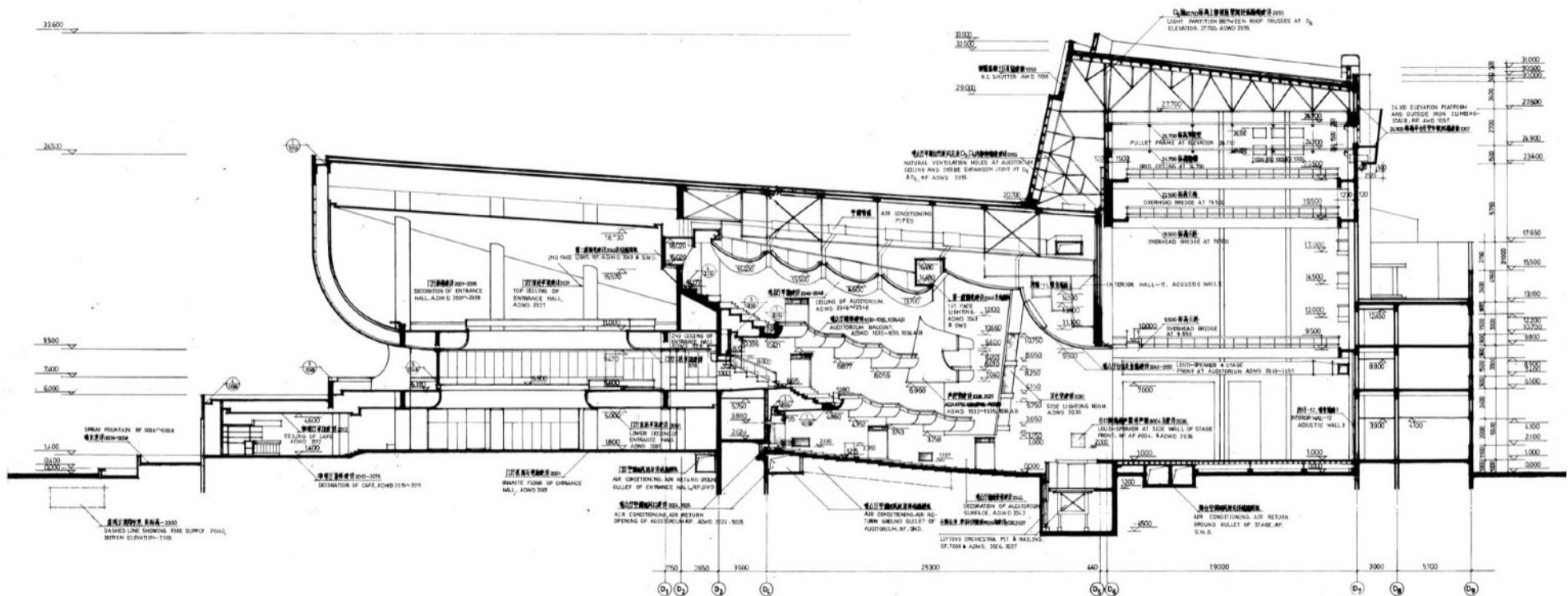


Figure 4 shows a diagonal section through the building from north to south

## II. Interpretations

## **Interpretative approach 1: Melange**

Ebenezer Kwabena Acquah interprets the impact of the National Theatre, taking into account the above-mentioned history of its creation, as follows: "A careful study of the architectural 'language' of the National Theatre reveals a combination of interior and exterior Asian architecture, symbolic Ghanaian forms and boat construction. Generally, Chinese architecture is based on the relevance of influential local cultural traditions and adherence to hierarchy" (Kwabena Acquah 2022 after Lianto 2020, [web link 14](#)) He also explains: „It prioritizes spatial designs with balanced symmetrical central pivots and a reverence for nature and aesthetics. Additionally, the dominant use of red represents happiness, which is also found throughout the interior of the National Theatre.” (Kwabena Acquah 2022, [web link 14](#))

## **Interpretative approach 2: Stage spaces**

The president of the Art Teachers' Association of Ghana, Osuanyi Quaicoo Essel, picks up here and mentions the seating that can be found in some places. These benches are equipped with square cushions covered in red, which can also be used as lounging areas. They are known among visitors as the "Lovers' bench". With regard to the interior design, a comparison with the concepts of the British theatre and film director Peter Brook suggests itself. In his book "The Empty Room" from 1968, there is a concise description of the minimum requirements for a theatre performance: "I can take any empty room and call it a naked stage," it says. "One man walks through the room while another watches him; that is all that is necessary for theatrical action." (translated after [web link 15](#))

The exchange with the Ghanaian project partners resulted in exciting insights into the Ghanaian theatre landscape. Among other things, the following questions were discussed:

**Question:** What form does traditional theatre take? In what setting did dance and music performances originally take place?

**Answer:** Originally, theatre (various performances) took place in open areas of the street or in a community centre. These are still held now and announced by "towncrys".

**Question:** Has cultural life in the city changed as a result of the theatre building, has it produced new structures? What urban planning influence has it had on the surrounding area?

**Answer:** More hotels and restaurants have opened. Previously there was an embassy at the back, now it has been converted into a hotel. Opposite is a park and the National Museum.

**Question:** How did the cooperation with China work out?

**Answer:** It is a historic friendship between countries. The handover is to be seen as a collaboration between the two countries. The self-image is: "We want treat not aid."

**Question:** Do you mean a boat or a ship?

**Answer:** Definitely a boat! The theatre is located near the sea.

**Question:** Is the shape of the plot decisive for the ground plan of the building?

**Answer:** Yes, it was specially kept free for this purpose.

### III. Ideas for the lessons

#### Pictorial approach

The students approach the National Theatre through photographs and architectural plans. They ask questions about the building.

The students walk through the building via digital-media visualised access points and find answers to their questions.

The students present and reflect on their own spatial experiences in plenary.

The students collect associations with their own personal national theatre in drawings or paintings. Not only the design of the form, but also the surroundings and aspects of interior design can play a role ("architecture parlante").

The invention of an individual, contemporary form of a "stage" should be visualised by the students through small model constructions (sections). Kinetic constructions are also conceivable.

The students construct an architectural model for a national theatre of their choice. Possible materials and techniques are edible paper (water), paper (gluing, folding), model cardboard (sticking) or clay (plate technique).

#### Linguistic discussion

The students examine the National Theatre according to werkanalytic criteria. For example: materiality, entrance situation, access routes, stage design, light or shadow situation inside (skylights, openings).

The students record these in analytical sketches or written descriptions.

The students collect the results obtained as a travel diary digitally or analogue.

The students compare the buildings of the national theatres of different countries, e.g. according to formal criteria, materiality, and discuss their effect in partner work.

The students research, analyse and explore different theatre and stage concepts of current productions worldwide. The conception and planning of plays for their own school theatre can be encouraged.

The students then investigate and discuss, for example: Code of conduct, dress code and accessibility (spatial, content, psychological) within institutions such as the National Theatre in Accra or another national theatre.

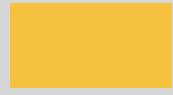


## Interdisciplinary approaches

**German:** The students work in groups to devise a play or fragment on current topics relevant to them. They explain their decision for a classical or a modern staging of their topic.



**History, political education, economy:** The students research the historical and political background of the countries Ghana and China. They discuss the saying: "We want treat not aid."



**Latin, History:** Students research the history of theatre architecture worldwide. They can complement the research with the globally developed forms of theatre or stage.



**Geography:** The students examine the location and surroundings of the National Theatre from an urban planning and geographical perspective.



**Computer science, art:** The students design a visualised tour of their own school building for the orientation of the fifth classes. The students design an image film for their school's website.



## The work as a trigger for one's own creation and reflection

The National Theatre is depicted on the 20,000 cedi banknote (2002) of Ghana. The students research and examine depictions of buildings on banknotes worldwide. They take a stand on the phenomenon of identification symbols. They discuss the pros and cons of national allocation on currencies with reference to corresponding analogue and digital articles.



The students develop and design their own currency for their summer festival.



The National Theatre was temporarily coloured by a light installation. Students investigate facade lighting strategies for structures such as stadiums, towers or artistic interventions such as light art and light installations in public spaces.



The students experiment with the lighting of their (above) developed architectural model (torch, coloured light, natural light - times of day or orientation north, east, south, west).



They record these experiments photographically in an analogue or digital portfolio.



The Ghanaian artist Ibrahim Mahama (cf. **chapter 13**) also covered the National Theatre with jute sacks. The students explore Ibrahim Mahama's way of working. They try out their own wraps by varying the wrapping material or the particular object to be wrapped.



They record the experiments photographically in a digital or analogue research diary and comment on their discoveries in writing or drawing. The wrapping action can be recorded or documented with a smartphone by means of a stop-motion video.



## 9. Look into the past and you will see the future! – Sankofa on the Burial Ground



Figure 1 shows the "Logo of the Global Sankofa Project"

### I. Fakts and analyses

The Sankofa symbol is part of a West African sign system called "Adinkra". The signs stand for abstract ideas or aphoristic sayings. Since the early 19th century, mainly in Ghana, Adinkra motifs initially adorned mainly textiles, pottery and house walls. The name "Sankofa" is derived from Twi, an Akan language that is also the official language in Ghana. It means something like "to recover, to reclaim". It is often understood as a historical-philosophical metaphor, in the sense of "Only those who know the past can understand the present and shape the future". In the African diaspora, the Sankofa symbol is associated with an identity-forming motif. In the example of the African Burial Ground Memorial in New York discussed below, the Sankofa symbol is also used as a memory-cultural signifier (Schramm 2010, p. 191 ff.).



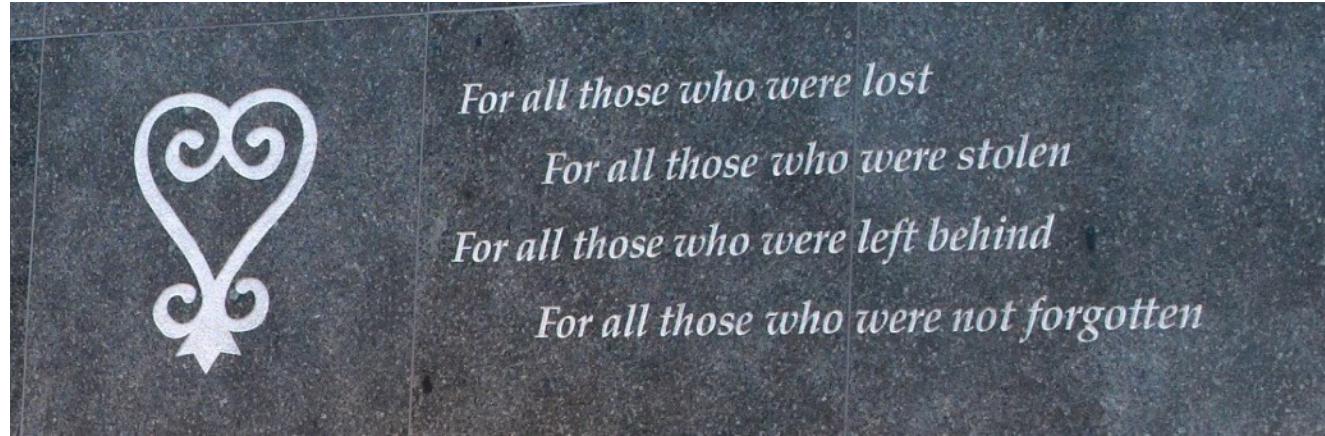


Figure 2 shows the inscription on the "African Burial Ground Monument", New York, 2006. Next to the heart-shaped symbol, the text is carved in four lines and in a plain cursive.

Figure 3 shows the "Sankofa" symbol as a sculpture in front of the Ghana National Theatre Accra, 1992.

## Description

In a photo, one can see engraved on black granite a heart-shaped symbol decorated with spirals, which ends in three points at the bottom (see figure 2). Next to it, also engraved, is written:

*For all those who were lost  
For all those who were stolen  
For all those who were left behind  
For all those who were not forgotten*

Engraved on shiny polished granite, the inscription is reminiscent of the aesthetics of gravestones and memorial plaques.

The "heart" shows the Ghanaian Adinkra symbol Sankofa, which means: "Look into the past and you will see the future". It is also often interpreted as "Learn from your past" (Kwami 1993, p. 47).

The engraved Sankofa symbol with its accompanying inscription is part of a large, walkable monument in a public space in New York City. It adorns the side walls of a kind of triangular portal surrounded by water. Passing through this portal, one enters a roundel on whose walls other Adinkra symbols can be seen, as well as other signs, some of them religious, of various origins. The grey and dark grey floor tiles depict a section of an Afrocentric world map. They are also laid in a spiral. West Africa is in the centre of the spiral. The monument thus develops a counter-design to the common eurocentric view of the world.

## Prehistory of the African Burial Ground Monument

During construction work on an office tower in Lower Manhattan, between Duane and Reade Streets, human remains from a burial site were found in 1991. The construction project was stopped and archaeological excavations and investigations were initiated. More than 400 skeletons and grave goods were found, including a coffin lid with a heart applied from nails, reminiscent of the Sankofa sign. It is not certain whether this is the Adinkra symbol (Schramm 2010).





Figure 4 shows the African Burial Ground (National Monument) in Duane Street, New York, in 2006. A circular paved and walled square in a spiral shape can be seen leading gently down a circular ramp. On the ground is a circular map of the world with the shapes of the continent of Africa in the centre. A complex geometric body made of the same stone material adjoins on one side. It bears the inscription already mentioned. Around the stone part of the monument, a well-kept lawn can be seen, and on the top of the picture, a representative-looking architecture adjoining to the southwest.

The graves found were the "African Burial Ground", a cemetery used between the years 1630 and 1795 with an area of six hectares, where around 15,000 partly enslaved African Americans were buried. After the discovery, only part of the area was built on at the insistence of the local population. The mortal remains were ceremonially buried in handmade coffins from Ghana at the original site in 2003 (Schramm 2010).

In 1998, the design and construction of an outdoor memorial was put out to tender, which was won by AARIS architects, led by architect Rodney Leon, and the memorial was erected in 2007. "We commemorate this African burial site with an 'Ancestral Libation Chamber'. Through its seven elements, the Ancestral Chamber serves to physically, spiritually, ritually and psychologically define the site where the historic reburial of the remains and artefacts of 419 Africans took place." (AARIS architects) In 2006, the African Burial Ground was designated a National Monument.

"Walking along the African Burial Ground National Monument, seven grassy hills surround the side of the memorial where a granite prism stands, solid and grounded, the sound of water can be heard. The granite stone is modelled on a ship that carried thousands of Africans through the Middle Passage to North America. [...] On each side of the ship are a Nsibidi and a Sankofa symbol. The Sankofa symbol stands for the ability to learn from the past. The Nsibidi symbol represents progress and unity and is engraved on the side of the ship to remind us of the journey of the enslaved in the African diaspora and how it was able to spread culturally that really influenced the history of the world."



## II. Interpretations

Sankofa is one of around 60 Adinkra symbols from Ghana. These are stylised representations of objects, natural forms, animals, plants, cosmic signs or geometric shapes. These symbols represent human or animal behaviour, attitudes, traditions and plant life forms, but they can also depict historical events. They are the symbols of the Akans, the largest ethnic group from Ghana in West Africa. There are many different Adinkra symbols that are still used today. They adorn house walls, everyday objects, clothing and appear in fabric printing. The symbols convey messages such as Ghanaian philosophies, virtues and beliefs as well as popular proverbs. The symbols are often linked to proverbs or tell of folk tales, wisdom and experiences of previous generations, which are supposed to guide people through life and act as a kind of counsellor.

Sankofa is one of the best-known and most popular Adinkra symbols - even beyond the borders of Ghana, the country of origin. There are two manifestations of this symbol. One is the original, spiral-shaped heart and the nowadays more popular and figurative sign of a bird turning its head back on its back to pick up an egg from there. This sign also carries the saying "Look to the past and you will know your future" (Vidal 2019, p. 54) or also "Turn back and get it!". It is not forbidden to turn back and get what you have forgotten. Learn from your past" (ibid.). This means not only learning from one's past mistakes, but also looking to traditions of past generations and to history for guidance.

Katharina Schramm, professor of cultural and social anthropology at the University of Bayreuth, sheds light on this in her essay "Sankofa Interpretations: Black Self(discovery) between reference to the past and orientation towards the future" from 2010, she highlights the different aspects of the Sankofa symbol and its various interpretations through shifts in context. The following multi-perspective interpretations of the Sankofa symbol refer to this article.

### Interpretative approach 1: Sankofa as an identity-forming and cultural-political symbol

The national cultural policy of Ghana's first president, Kwame Nkrumah, in the 1960s gave indigenous cultural products, such as traditional fabrics and symbols, an important status as Africa's cultural heritage. Nkrumah thus tried to overcome the negative consequences of colonial education and to create a new African self-confidence based on African values: "The African personality is [...] defined by the cluster of humanist principles which underlie the traditional African society. (The African personality is defined by the cluster of humanist principles which underlie the traditional African society). (Nkrumah, Axioms, 1967, p. 5). On official political occasions, he exchanged the "classic" European suit for a traditional Ghanaian garment called a kente. Kente are woven, very colourful fabrics of geometric patterns that have a symbolic meaning and are worn in toga style (see p. 50). Adinkra symbols were also deliberately incorporated into the state iconography as an indigenous cultural product, for example by including them in the façade design of important buildings (Schramm 2010).

Sankofa can thus be seen as an important "African cultural heritage" (Schramm 2010, p. 212), whose return to the roots of an original African self draws strength from it for a new self-awareness and African identity.

### Interpretative approach 2: Sankofa as an icon of remembrance with a claim to healing

However, if you look at Sankofa in today's context in the USA, the interpretation of the symbol shifts. Here, the recollection of the past is associated with the history of slavery. "Particularly in Afrocentric discourse, the memory of this violence-filled history is linked to a decided claim to healing, the expression of which is Sankofa." (Schramm 2010, p.198). The trauma of the crime can only be overcome by remembering the time before. I understand this as a kind of struggle out of the victim role of oppression. Coming to terms with the Maafa (term for the cruel history of the slave trade and its consequences in Afrocentric parlance, Schramm 2010) is also a way of facing one's demons and thus becoming capable of action: Out of oppression, into a self-determined shaping of one's own future.

There are several translations for the symbol, but they always refer to the past. "It stands for the cultural reawakening that is not only affecting Ghana today, but is touching people of African descent worldwide. It means that only he who knows where he comes from knows where he is going." (Glover 1993, p. 7)



In the diasporic space, Sankofa has become the "memory icon for the slave trade" (Schramm 2010, p. 206). The choice of the Sankofa heart symbol for the entrance of the memorial in New York was not chosen by architect Rodney Leon by chance. By recalling the past, the future is to be shaped consciously and with respect. For "although slavery is long gone, it is still a major part of African American history and should be recognised and not forgotten" (National Park Service).

The popularity of the symbol was also contributed to by the 1993 film of the same name, "Sankofa" by Ethiopian-American director Haile Gerima. The film is about a black American model's journey back in time to the era of slavery. The film relentlessly shows the history of slavery full of brutality and oppression, but also tells of resistance against white tyranny. If at the beginning the protagonist was only an object viewed through the "Eurocentric gaze" (Schramm 2010, p. 202), she comes back to the present as a proud woman with an awareness of her own identity (Schramm 2010).

### **Interpretative approach 3: Sankofa between commercial marketing and individual happiness symbol**

The Sankofa symbol in its two guises stands for the "concept of black identity" (Schramm 2010, p.198) as well as for progress and optimism for the future. Through its comprehensible symbolism and catchy form, it has also become a sign of "global consumer culture and heritage industry" (Schramm 2010, p. 197). Today, there are Sankofa restaurants, beauty salons, schools, language schools, shops and online shops in the USA (Schramm 2010).

In Ghana itself, so-called "Sankofa Tours" are offered to interested African Americans, which are organised by black Americans and in which "the various diaspora-oriented marketing strategies have a sure share" (Schramm 2010, p. 204). Thus, there are numerous companies and small entrepreneurs who use the name "Sankofa" to boost their sales through the associated appeal and emotional as well as identity-forming attachment to the symbol.

In conclusion, it can be said that "Sankofa [...] is considered a key reference for a positive reference to the past and tradition and [...] is consequently appropriated not only aesthetically but also politically - both in the national and increasingly in the Afro-diasporic framework. At the same time, especially in the diasporic context, the symbol refers to the complex history of slavery - and the related question of black identity and belonging" (Schramm 2010, p. 191).

### **Excusus: History and origin of the Adinkra symbols**

With the end of British colonial rule over Ghana (1957), Adinkra signs became symbols of identity, representing a self-conscious return to the pre-colonial history of Ghanaians.

Traditionally, they were printed on dark fabrics by means of stamps and worn as mourning clothes at funerals to bid farewell to the deceased. In Akan, "dinkra" means something like "to say goodbye" or "to say farewell". Unfortunately, there is still no well-founded scientific research on the origin of the Adinkra symbols, because everything that is known about the symbols and their history is based on oral traditions. However, it is believed that the origin of Adinkra fabric printing is in Gyaman (17th-20th century kingdom), now Ivory Coast. The king Nana Kwadwo Agyemang Adinkra provoked the Asante people in 1818 "because he had copied the golden chair of the Ashanti, the sacred symbol of their unity" (Kwami 1993, p. 13). This led to war, which Kwadwo Agyemang Adinkra lost. Thus, it is assumed that the Adinkra fabrics were brought by the Ashantis after the war. However, this assumption that these fabrics only came to Ghana after the war is contradicted by the fact that the head of the British mission Thomas Edward Bowdich bought an Adinkra cloth in Kumasi (Ghana) for the British Museum as early as 1817 (Kwami 1993). The Asante people further developed the Adinkra symbols over time, adding their own beliefs and philosophy and combining them with folk tales and legends.

According to Ghanaian graphic designer Dr Patrique deGraft-Yankson, whose work explores the meaning and history of the Adinkra symbols, there is a popular belief that they have a long history before the reign of Nana Kwadwo Agyemang Adinkra. Some traditions indicate that some of the abstract figures have their roots in the Arab world. An example is the Adinkra symbol Osram ne Nsoroma (symbol of fidelity and loyalty), which shows a crescent moon with a star (deGraft-Yankson).



Today, the symbols are integrated into the everyday life of the Ashantis in various ways. They can be found as decorative elements in architecture as well as in logos of companies and educational institutions, on furniture and other everyday objects. They are also printed on clothing, worn as jewellery or even as tattoos. By integrating them into everyday life, they are meant to serve as orientation for this worldly life.

The illustrations below show the production of Adinkra textile prints using stamp printing techniques. The town of Ntonso is now considered the largest producer of Adinkra cloth. In a specially established visitor centre, interested tourists can witness the individual stages of cloth production from the extraction of the dye to the printing of the cloth.

In the fabric printing process, the Adinkra symbols are printed onto the fabric using the stamp printing method. For this purpose, the symbols are carved into calabashes (bottle gourds) and stamped with dye onto the fabric. The stamps are available as single Adinkra symbols or as a block with many small symbols. Printing the Adinkra symbols using calabash stamps is the traditional printing method of the Ashanti people. Today's printers also use the screen printing process to print Adinkra symbols on T-shirts and cloths. The ink for the printing process with the calabash stamps is obtained from the plant fibres of the Badee tree. For this, iron slag is added to the root bark of the tree and boiled down to a thick and viscous dark colour. The rows of fabric of the printed squares are sewn together with the colours red, yellow, black and green.



Figure 4 shows a selection of wooden Adinkra stamps.

Figure 5 shows the process of printing.

Figure 6 shows printed fabrics hung to dry.

All photographs are from the year 2021.



## Excusus: Adinkra symbols in art

Patrique deGraft-Yankson is a lecturer in graphic design at the University of Winneba and has launched a project with his colleagues to make the Adinkra symbols more accessible and attractive to students. In short explanatory and animated videos, the symbols with their traditional visual language become more attractive to young people and ensure wider visibility through digitalisation and its application in education.

In another project, Patrique deGraft-Yankson translated the symbols of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations Agenda 2030 into the symbolic language of the Akan to bring the essential projects and goals closer to the people of his country.

The image shown above is a demonstration of how various traditional symbols speaks to the SDGs in a language which is understood by the traditional Ghanaian. These symbols transcend language barriers and their meanings are inherent within their traditional belief systems, making the goals both physically and spiritually relevant to people. (deGraft-Yankson, 2020)



Figure 7 shows Patrique deGraft-Yankson's graphic "17 Sustainable Development Goals" of the United Nations 2030 Agenda in Akan symbolic language, 2020.

### III. Ideas for the lessons

#### Pictorial approach

Students develop their own symbol for the meaning of Sankofa "Look into the past and you will see the future" according to the rules of design (abstraction of the image to geometric shapes or stylised representations).



The students research the meanings, stories or proverbs about the Adinkra symbols. They decide on one of the symbols, the meaning of which is then painted as an illustration in a large-format picture.

The students develop their own symbol for a special proverb, virtue or feeling that has an important meaning for them in their lives according to the rules for creating an Adinkra symbol (see above).

Students choose an Adinkra symbol and design it in a work technique of their choice (print, stencil, sculpture / sculpture, painting, etc.).

The students draw a concept of an Adinkra symbol for the public space. For this, they choose one of the symbols and think about an artistic form (material, size) as well as the function (sculpture, architecture, façade, mosaic, logo, memorial plaque, etc.) and the location (underground station, square, building, etc.) for the Adinkra object.

## Linguistic discussion

Students identify the meanings as well as the background stories, folktales or parables of individual Adinkra symbols.

Students research works of art in which Adinkra symbols play a role. They decide on one and present it to the class. This can be done in group, partner or individual work (possible artists: Owusu-Ankomah, El Anatsui, Zohra Opoku, Bernard Akoi-Jackson).

The students do an extensive image search on the internet to find out the different functions of the Adinkra symbols in the everyday life of the people in Ghana and exchange their findings.

The students research the meanings of the Adinkra symbols from the work of Patrique deGraft-Yankson, in which he translated the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations into the symbols of his fellow Ghanaians. They compare these 17 Adinkra symbols with the originally chosen symbols for the Sustainable Development Goals.

## Interdisciplinary approaches

**Religious education, Ethics:** Students philosophise about different concepts of time based on the meaning of the Sankofa symbol "Look into the past and you will see the future"

**History:** The students read the sub-section "Interpretations" from this text and work out the different levels of meaning as well as occurrences and uses of the Sankofa symbol. Afterwards, the students discuss in plenary why Sankofa has become a postcolonial symbol.

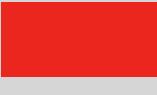
**History, Ethics, English, German:** The students discuss in small groups what a symbol can do for identity formation using the example of the Sankofa-Adinkra symbol (identity-creating symbol for the diaspora). For this purpose, identity-creating symbols from different contexts are sought and presented with specific examples (bands, persons of public interest, digital media). The results will then be presented and discussed in plenary.

## The work as a trigger for one's own creation and reflection

The students create a memory game together based on the Adinkra symbols. There are two cards of each symbol (class set). Each student draws a card and designs the symbol in a technique of his/her choice (print, painting, stencil, drawing, etc.) on a square cardboard of the same size. The pairs should differ in technique and colour but not in shape (symbol).

The students cut stamps out of foam rubber to form various Adinkra symbols and print them on a textile. The composition of the individual symbols with their meanings as well as the composition as a design element must be considered. The fabric can be designed as group, partner or individual work.

Based on one or more Adinkra symbols, the students design an image fabric for an organisation (scarf, flag, carpet, curtain, napkin, etc.) for an organisation of their choice (for example, Iwalewahaus, museum, university, school, company, non-profit association, etc.).



## 10. Surreal reappraisal of colonialism – Yinka Shonibare's Mrs Pinckney

... and the Emancipated Birds of South Carolina



Figure 1 shows Yinka Shonibare's larger-than-life mixed media sculpture "Mrs Pinckney and the Emancipated Birds of South Carolina" from 2017.



## I. Facts and analyses

The all-visible sculpture "Mrs Pinckney and the Emancipated Birds of South Carolina" was created in 2017 by the British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare CBE (RA) (\*1962). It consists of a figure made of fibreglass, printed wax fabric, a birdcage and birds, leather and a globe. The sculpture measures 246 x 115 x 134 cm. It is housed at the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Connecticut, USA, and was specially commissioned by the Yale Center for British Art and Kensington Palace (Historic Royal Palaces) for the exhibition *Enlightened Princesses: Caroline, Augusta, Charlotte, and the Shaping of the Modern World*.

Seemingly wobbly, a female mannequin balances on a globe which, when viewed from the front, shows the African continent and parts of Europe and America. In place of the head is an empty birdcage from which three colourful birds have escaped. One bird sits on the cage, another on the shoulder and yet another on the figure's splayed little finger. The figure is dressed in a magnificent blue robe in the style of the 18th century. This contrasts with the bright colours and large-scale patterns that adorn the fabric of the dress.

The figure of "Mrs Pinckney" is Elizabeth Lucas Pinckney (1722-1793), an American plantation owner from South Carolina who had to take over her father's business at the age of 16. She was one of the driving forces behind the venture to grow and distribute the indigo plant with its distinctive blue dye in the United States. The trade in indigo as an important export commodity had a great influence on the economic development of South Carolina, and the exploitation of slaves was directly linked to this development.

## II. Interpretations

### Interpretative approach 1: Paradox

In order to fathom the object of the headless figure on the globe in all its facets and diversity, one must go in search of clues when viewing it and look at the work from multiple perspectives as well as explore the different attributes of "Mrs Pinckney".

The title "Mrs Pinckney and the Emancipated Birds of South Carolina" already provides information about the personality depicted. The headless figure is given a name and it is already clear from the first research that Mrs Pinckney is a historical and not a fictional character.

The **figure** itself, however, appears rather fictitious, even surreal, in the way it is portrayed, as if it were the product of a dream interpretation or a fantastic apparition. Seemingly wobbly with outstretched arms and slightly bent posture, she stands on a globe. In the figure's posture, one could see a reference to Fortuna, the blind and fickle goddess of fortune and fate, native to European iconography (Kiyonaga / Van Haute 2021). "The narrative thus presents a paradox between the white woman's privileged but unstable position as a powerful, wealthy mistress and her volatile desire to free the black slaves whose fate is entirely in her hands." (Van Haute 2021)

Likewise, the **posture** and **position** of the figure on the globe reminds me of a sculptural representation of Mary. This is reinforced by the bright blue fabric of the dress, which is adorned with a starry sky-like sparkling pattern.

The figure's **dress** has several references. On the one hand, the strong blue is a reference to the indigo cultivation on Mrs. Pinckney's plantations. Secondly, Shonibare took a yellow silk dress also shown in the exhibition "Enlightened Princesses ..." as a model for the cut of the blue gown. Mrs Pinckney wore this dress when she met Princess Augusta and recorded this in a letter (Yale Film Study Centre).

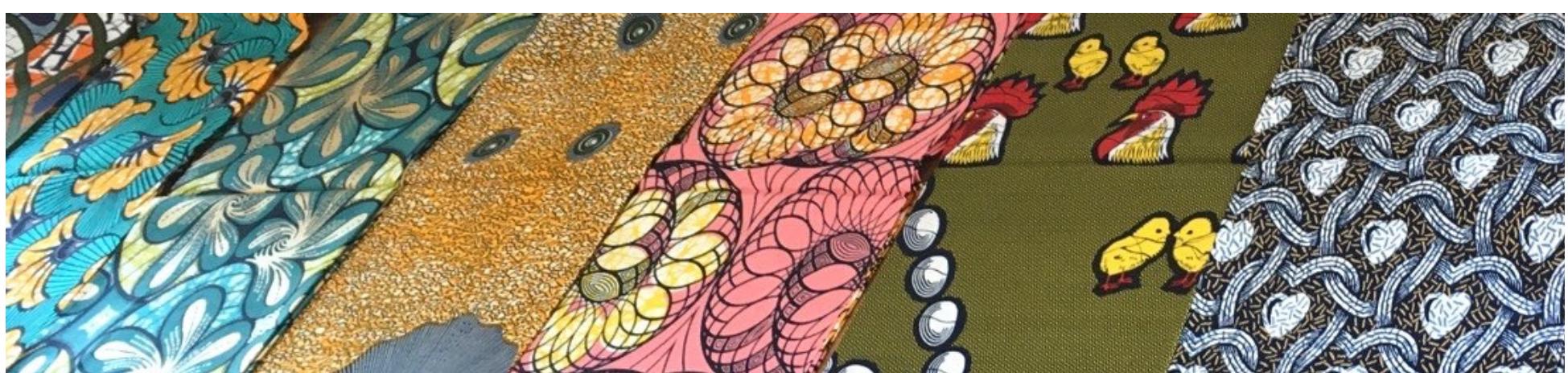
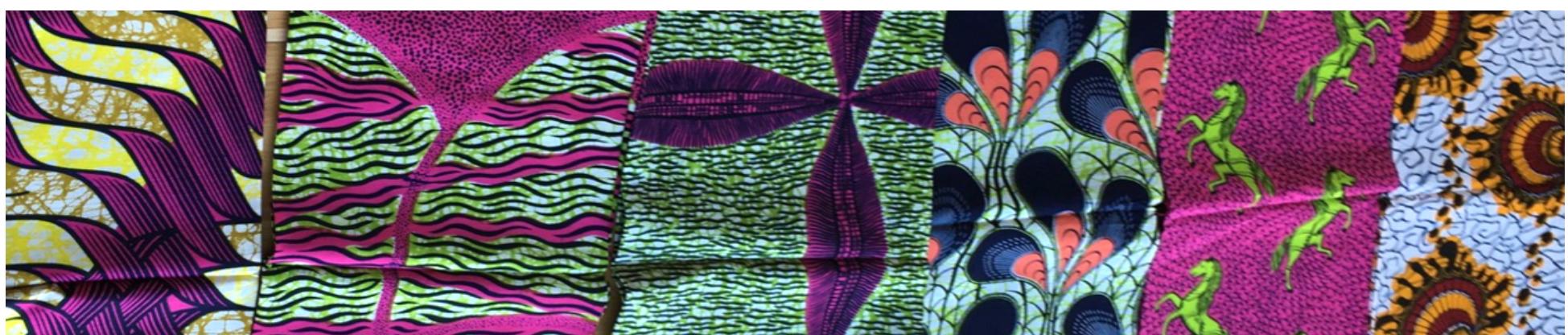
In the style of the dress and the strong blue, Bernadette Van Haute, Professor of Art History at the Faculty of Art and Music at UNISA, University of South Africa, also sees a clear reference to the cultivation and processing of the indigo dye. "The material of the woman's dress thus not only identifies her as a member of the elite, but also refers to Africa as the source of her wealth: because of the exploitation of African slaves, Eliza was able to run her family's plantations in America." (Van Haute 2021)



The **fabric** chosen for the dress differs significantly from the style of 18th century fashion and creates a break and tension in the work. The heavily patterned textile is a "classic African" wax print. The choice of this fabric is a clear reference to West Africa, where the pop colourful fabrics are very popular. "In the African countries where [waxprints] are common, they have [...] economic, social, religious and political significance. For example, they are an expression of identity, can convey certain messages, testify to a certain wealth or serve as a sign of power. [...] Rich in symbolism, they have their place in the history of globalisation [...]." (Boutiaux 2019, S.11)

Van Haute interpreted the **posture of the figure** standing on the globe as rising above the world, since she was in a position of power as a plantation owner and the British colonies of the 18th century are marked on the globe. Parts of West Africa as well as some provinces of North America were under the colonial rule of the Kingdom of Great Britain in the mid-18th century. The province of South Carolina was only able to break away from British rule in 1776, along with 13 other North American colonies, after the Wars of Independence. Looking at the object from the front, one sees the continents of America, Africa and Europe, whose inhabitants were involved in the history of slavery - either as oppressors or as oppressed. The view of the globe is thus also a reference to Mrs. Pinckney's history as the operator of a slave plantation and to the historical events of that time.

The head of the figure is replaced by a **bird cage** by Shonibare. Three colourful **birds** have found their place outside the cage on the figure itself. However, the birds do not fly off to freedom, but remain in the immediate vicinity of their "mistress" (Van Haute 2021). Bernadette Van Haute interprets this as the emblematic "[...] dehumanisation of black people as a consequence of colonial policy [...]." They are "[...] liberated, but so tamed - that is, oppressed and enslaved - [...] that they cannot fly" (translated after Van Haute 2021). For even after their liberation, the once enslaved people - without sufficient education, money and housing - found themselves in a relationship of dependency and were forced to continue working for the white upper class.



Figures 2 and 3 show different waxprints from the Dutch textile company Vlisco.

### Interpretative approach 2: Act of liberation

Dr Nobumasa Kiyonaga of Shimonoseki City University, Japan, on the other hand, sees the birds as an act of liberation from internalised gender ideology and thoughts that "drag you down and hinder our actions" (translated after Kiyonaga 2021). "Thus, the lady proves to be both an encouraging and a cautionary symbol of women's emancipation, which is never linear and is still threatened and endangered everywhere today."



### **Interpretative approach 3: Factual vs. surreal**

At first glance, the work "Mrs Pinckney and the Emancipated Birds of South Carolina" has something illustrative about it, as it seems to tell a story. And indeed it does tell a story. If you look at all the elements separately, everything seems clear and unambiguous. In the combination and interplay of all the objects, however, the installation no longer seems as clear-cut as it does at first glance. "Through the montage, she merges these associations into a hybrid that is ultimately no longer resolvable, an in-between that can no longer be assigned." (translated after Wagner 2021)

However, the object lives precisely through the tension of its ambiguity and it is a question of perspective from which one views "Mrs Pinckney". Ernst Wagner reminds us of a surrealist montage or a Magritte painting with the birdcage as its head. In the historical exhibition with mainly historical exhibits, Shonibare's "Mrs Pinckney" must have seemed like a mirage or a dream figure. "If one takes the object seriously, however, one gets the impression of a strange balance of instability and stability, of theatricality and ridiculousness, of immediate sensuality and erudite insinuation." (translated after Wagner 2021)

The work of the artist Yinka Shonibare moves between play, drama, history, identity and the question of origin and belonging. Nothing is clearly named, lamented or answered. The playful level plays a major role in all his works. "Mrs Pinckney" also seems to be caught in a paradoxical game between a position of power as a plantation owner and a woman in a male domain. Seemingly insecure, she balances in theatrical performance on the globe, which, however, stands still. In this illusionistic game, which seems to have conspired against the laws of gravity, Shonibare sees the magic of this work (cf. Yale Centre video from 2017, 5:20).

As a British-Nigerian and "postcolonial artist, his work explores the legacy of the former British Empire and Western colonialism, the aftermath of which can still be felt today" (translated after Sadowsky 2021, p. 7). Born in London and raised in Nigeria, he has a connection to both countries with their history. In his work, he wants to connect different cultures and not limit himself to one cultural history or identity. His art can be seen as a statement of a "citizen of a world". He himself says: "People always have the need to categorise things. I am more interested in the idea of a hybrid." ([web link 16](#))

### **Exkurs: Geschichte und Herkunft der Waxprints**

The artist Yinka Shonibare sees the wax prints as "not really authentically African, as people think; they have a cross-cultural background all their own. And it is the fallacy about that meaning that appeals to me" (Shonibare, quoted in: Spring 2012, p. 76). But if the fabrics that are, after all, considered "typically" African are "not really authentically African", where do they come from? To understand the history and the globalisation aspect of these particular textiles, one needs to look a little closer at the history of waxprints.

Waxprints, also known as wax batik, with their strikingly pop-coloured patterns, are probably one of the most popular "typically African" fabrics. These are fabrics that are industrially produced using the resist dyeing process. The patterns are cut out by applying wax with the help of a mechanical roller system and the fabric is dyed in the desired colour. This creates the craquelé effect typical of wax prints. The patterns and symbols in the foreground are then applied colour by colour in individual printing processes using stamps. Batik is a dyeing technique whose pattern is created by applying and thus leaving out wax. This technique has a long tradition in Indonesia and especially on Java. The intricate patterns are painted or stamped onto the fabric by hand in meticulous detail and then dyed. In 2009, Indonesian batik was declared a UNESCO Intangible World Heritage Site (Boutiaux 2019).

After 1799, parts of Indonesia became Dutch and British colonies, which attempted to industrialise the elaborate technique of batik in order to reduce production time and costs. However, although they based their production on the look of traditional batiks and the tastes of the Indonesian people, the fabrics were not accepted in Indonesia. On the one hand, the industrial mass-produced goods lacked the quality and authenticity of handicraft, and on the other hand, it seems to have failed due to the high taxes on imported goods, which were introduced by law to strengthen and protect the regional economy (cf. Boutiaux 2019). Via African soldiers, female slaves and slave women brought to Indonesia by the rulers of the Dutch colonies, the colourful fabrics finally arrived in West Africa at the beginning of the 20th century.



There, the motifs were then altered for the African market and the business with the wax prints was conducted on a large scale by Dutch and English companies (Boutiaux 2019 / Spring 2012). "Waxprints are African without being so in their origins, and can be understood - depending on the place and time at which they are viewed – as a cultural tradition or a passing fashion trend. Thus they present themselves as a cultural asset full of surprises and contradictions." (translated after Boutiaux 2019, p. 11)

Like many other African fabrics, waxprints are not only worn for fashion purposes, special patterns are also used as a means of non-verbal communication. Waxprints show luxury goods, objects, animals, plants and ornaments, concerns expressed in proverbs and aphorisms, in addition to symbols of modern life. They often contain themes such as love and jealousy, but also money, power and education. Sometimes they symbolise the wearers' consumer desires and an aspired lifestyle or educational status. By wearing wax prints, a position can be taken, criticism can be expressed or messages can be conveyed. This often occurs in interpersonal relationships and is a tried and tested means for women in respect relationships and polygamous marriages to criticise or draw attention to their situation without having to say it openly (Gerlich 2004 / Boutiaux 2019, p. 93). For example, there are fabrics that send a clear message to the rival, such as the rising horse pattern entitled "I run faster than my rival" (Boutiaux 2019, p. 94). But there are also substances directed at the partner. In addition to expressions of loyalty and fidelity, the patterns can be worn as a criticism or even a threat, clearly indicating to the husband that one does not depend on him and that the wife will take the same rights as the husband. The motif "The Family" shows a chicken (the mother) surrounded by loud chicks and eggs. "The father - the rooster - is nothing but trouble and only his head can be seen" (Vlisco website). This pattern represents the cohesion of the family, with the caring and nurturing mother at the head. Sometimes the motif is also referred to as "My husband is incapable" (cf. Boutiaux 2019, p. 95).

Waxprints are often bought (mostly by women) as investment pieces. Special designs are so timeless that they do not lose value, but rather gain it. "Wax batiks with classic motifs stand for durability [...]. Some wax patterns such as 'ABCD' and 'Hands and Fingers' have been produced since the end of the 19th century and still have a demand in the market." (cf. Bauer 2001-2, p. 105).

Special fabrics are bought for specific occasions and are very rarely if ever worn. A collection of wax prints represents an economic value. But the fabrics are also mementos of important occasions or stations in one's life (cf. Bauer 2001, p. 106).

So-called fancy fabrics, which are printed entirely by machine and only on one side, are much cheaper to produce and buy. The industrial printing process allows photographs to be printed, which is why fancies are used on certain occasions for guests or for political events. Portraits of politicians, for example, are printed for election events and worn by people as an expression of approval (Bauer 2001). Portraits are also printed on clothing and scarves to pay tribute to important people. For example, Barack Obama was the first African American president of the United States to be printed on wraparounds and clothing. The handbag carried by his wife Michele during her visit to Africa also received a special tribute in its own wax print, "Michelle Obama's handbag" by the Vlisco brand (cf. Boutiaux 2019, p. 44).

In addition to the messages that wax prints convey in the form of symbols and proverbs, there are some designs that capture historically relevant events. Michelle Obama's bag, for example, is not merely a status symbol intended to make the wearer of the fabric dream of a modern and carefree life. The bag becomes a symbol of pride for the first black first lady at the side of the first African-American president.

The Covid pandemic was also thematised by the Ghanaian textile company "Ghanaian Textil Printing" in a wax print series. In addition to symbols such as locks and chains for the lockdown, a pair of glasses with distinctive frames was depicted on one fabric as the identifying feature of President Nana Akufo-Addo, who always wore these glasses during his television appearances in which he informed the population about the Covid 19 developments and regulations (BBC News 2020).

The colourful cloths with their abstract decorations and symbols from everyday life have not gone unnoticed by the Western fashion world. Even though the most important companies are still based in Britain and the Netherlands, the designs are still made according to the taste of the West African population. This is what makes waxprints the "typically African" fabrics they are perceived as by Africans themselves and also outside Africa. It can also be expressed in the words of anthropologist Igor Kopytoff, who researched the "social life of objects":



"The development of objects makes comprehensible what would otherwise remain hidden. In intercultural contacts, for example, it can show what anthropologists have so often emphasised: When foreign objects (or ideas) are adopted into one's own cultural sphere, it is not the fact that they are adopted that is decisive. Rather, it is the way they are culturally redefined and used that is important." (Kopytoff, quoted from and translated after Boutiaux 2019, p. 47)



Abbildung 4 zeigt Frauen bei der Arbeit in Kleidern mit westafrikanischen Waxprints.



### III. Ideas for the lessons

#### Teaching suggestions for "Mrs Pinckney and the Emancipated Birds of South Carolina"

##### Pictural Approach

The students experiment with the object by using the means of collage to swap the individual picture elements, recombine them or omit elements. The results are compared with the original and examined to what extent the statement of the object changes.

The students recreate the work as a staged photograph. Since balancing on a ball is not possible and involves a great risk of injury, the ball must be replaced by something else. The students can recreate the object elements such as birdcage, birds, globe and dress out of paper or cardboard and paint them accordingly.

##### Linguistic discussion

The students interpret the work "Mrs Pinckney" in plenary and then research the historical background of the work. The work is then interpreted together again and compared with the first interpretation. The students realise that a multi-perspective examination of an object is often necessary in order not to draw false conclusions regarding the message.

In a creative writing process, the students let the individual figures as well as objects (Mrs Pinckney, birds, globe, wax prints, ...) of the work "Mrs Pinckney ..." by Shonibare have their say by adding speech bubbles to the illustration in the collage technique.

In a creative writing process, the students write a fictional diary entry of Mrs Pinckney about the depicted scene by Shonibare (for example, dream interpretation, inner images, vision).

The students research the symbolic meanings of the individual object items (the colour blue in art, representational forms of globes, symbolism of the birdcage, birds in art, ornamental fabrics from different cultural and temporal contexts) and collect the results on a large display board in the form of a giant mind map, starting with "Mrs Pinckney" in the middle.

##### Interdisciplinary approaches

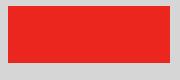
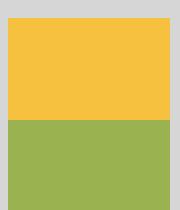
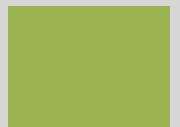
**History, Geography:** The students develop a large map (printed or self-drawn) on which they mark the routes of the slave trade starting from West Africa with creative means of their choice (pens, threads, adhesive strips, pins, etc.). One possibility would be to divide the students into small groups and to determine the topics (chronological limitation, starting from certain colonial powers) for the individual groups.

**Geography, History:** The students look at and analyse the representations of the world on globes from different temporal as well as historical contexts. In doing so, they can compare the world views that come into play in the individual forms of representation.

**German:** Students research occurrences of the symbol of a birdcage in literature.

##### The work as a trigger for one's own creation and reflection

The students try out and experiment with the artistic practice of a three-dimensional montage by combining different objects. In doing so, the students can play with different combination variants and decide on a coherent one.



## Teaching suggestions for the wax prints

### Pictorial approach

The students experiment with the different techniques of textile processing (printing, painting, embroidery, resist dyeing, batik etc.).

The students develop their own pattern design based on the design of the wax prints, which build up in their pattern composition in several levels (background: small-scale, net-like ornament; middle ground: coherent but coarse-meshed pattern; foreground: striking signs and symbols).

### Linguistic discussion

The students research works of art in which wax prints play a role. They decide on one and present it to the class. This can be done in group, partner or individual work (possible artists: Ibrahim Mahama, Kehinde Wiley, Romuald Hazomè, Barthélémy Toguo, Yinka Shonibare, Samuel Fosso, Jacques Touselle).

The students research different meanings or statements of waxprint designs. They decide on one and present it to the class.

Students collect examples where clothes or textiles are used to make a statement to the outside world (logo, colour, pattern, etc.).

Students research the history of "typical African" fabrics in the text section **Excursus: History and Origin of wax prints** and write a travel diary for their historical development.

### Interdisciplinary approaches

**Geography:** The students develop a large map (printed or drawn) on which they mark the global economic network of the product Waxprint with creative means of their choice (pens, threads, adhesive strips, pins, etc.). All important aspects (origin, production, resources, marketing) should be taken into account by the students and a design solution should be sought to illustrate them.

**Economy and law:** The students research the economic "curriculum vitae" of wax prints and then critically discuss the individual stages (traditional Indonesian cultural asset; Dutch industrial product; Chinese mass-produced goods as cheap imports).

### The work as a trigger for one's own creation and reflection

The students research traditional handicraft techniques from different cultural contexts. They decide on a technique and translate it into a new, modern artistic work technique of their choice. Possible transformations: craft technique (printing → spraying; embroidery → sticking; weaving → painting etc.), material (wood → plastic; textile → foil; metal → paper etc.).

The students design a common fabric. In the process, they draw inspiration for patterns from a digital research and create their own pattern collection. These are painted on equal-sized pieces of fabric and then sewn together to make a large cloth.

The students search for black and white portrait photographs from newspapers or copy photographs to paint or draw pattern creations on the garments worn in the image.



# 11. Art and Death – Paa Joe: Nike Trainer (Size 42) and Selasi Awusi Sosu: untitled

## I. Facts and analyses on “Nike Trainer (Size 42)”

The Nike Trainer Coffin was designed in 2014 by the Ghanaian artist and casket maker Paa Joe (Joseph Teteh-Aschong, born 1947). It is a coffin object in the shape of a trainer. It bears an emblem of a well-known shoe and sporting goods manufacturer on the top of the shoe tongue and a shoe size (42) in the footbed.



Figure 1: Paa Joe: Nike Trainer (Size 42), 2015, wood, oil paint, fibreglass, filling foam, rubber thread, 72 x 57 x 155 cm, Ghana, Museum Fünf Kontinente, Munich

With its dimensions of 72 x 57 x 155 cm, the shoe coffin is smaller than one might expect from the photograph. The body is made of wood and foam and is painted with oil paint. The basic colour of the shoe is white. The upper part of the shoe merges smoothly into a sole, which is marked by border lines. From below, a narrow black edge borders the sole of the shoe, which makes the shoe appear somewhat floating. On the side of the shoe are three curved colour stripes in black, moss green and a dark turquoise green, they almost completely border the shoe. In the centre of the heel there is a small, blue and oval bulge. The top of the shoe acts as a coffin lid and is encircled in a v-shape by static-looking lace flaps. Fixed lasts serve as laces, which are tied in a crossed fashion but appear strangely congealed. They rest on the upper edge of the shoe tongue.





Figure 2 shows the opened "Nike Trainer (Size 42)".

The shape of the shoe tongue is delimited by the surrounding lace flaps and flows seamlessly underneath into the body of the shoe and this into the sole. A warm yellow painting can be seen on the sole, which leads into heart-shaped arches on the upper part. This painting is almost parallel to the curved shape of the white shoe tongue at the top. The white part of the shoe tongue bears the word "Nike" in blue and below it the so-called "Swoosh" as the symbol of the shoe and sporting goods manufacturer of the same name. The lace flaps, the lettering and the Swoosh symbol as well as the bulge on the shoe heel are in the same shade of blue.

The coffin can be opened according to its function. The dividing line between the lid and the lower part runs below the black border. The inside of the lid is concealed by a heavily gathered, shiny emerald green fabric in the lid. The lower part is covered with a shirred, likewise glossy, magenta-coloured fabric at the upper edge. Both textiles are synthetic fibre fabrics. The coffin is opened and presented all-view in the Museum Fünf Kontinente.

"Like life, like coffin" is a motto in the region around the Ghanaian capital Accra ([web link 19](#)) "The design depends on the profession, preferences and passions of the deceased," says an explanatory plaque of the Museum Fünf Kontinente. "In this way, the dead should be able to continue their earthly activities in the afterlife and thereby remain favourably disposed towards the living." ([web link 20](#)) In this case, the model of a branded sports shoe was made by Paa Joe especially for athletes. The artist was born in Ghana in 1947 and served an apprenticeship as a coffin maker under Kane Kwei (1922-1992). ([web link 21](#))

"Since the mid-20th century, this coffin art has been a regional feature of Ga adangme coffin design, which developed from the figurative palanquins in which Ga chiefs had themselves carried as early as the beginning of the 20th century.



The figurative coffins are made in the form of fruits, animals, status or family symbols, according to the wishes of the deceased themselves or their surviving relatives. Ga people living in the South and Greater Accra region use these figurative coffins for their funeral rituals.

They are also called 'fantasy coffins', 'design coffins' or 'fantastic coffins' outside the region; the indigenous terms 'abebuu adekai' or 'okadi adekai' are also commonly used beyond the region." ([web link 22](#))

"Families try to make the spirit of the dead benevolent with the elaborate figurative coffins. Social status in the afterlife depends not only on success in life but also on the extent of the funeral ceremony and the exclusivity of the coffin [...].

- The coffin design serves less of a decorative purpose, it is rather predetermined by symbols.
- Figure coffins often refer to the profession of the deceased and are intended to help him continue to pursue his earthly activity in the afterlife (goals unattained in the life of the deceased).
- A sword or chair coffin, on the other hand, is a royal or priestly insignia with a magical-religious function for people with a corresponding status.
- Such coffins, just like certain animals, partly represent clan totems, such as the lion, the cock or the crab, which are only entitled to the heads of certain families.
- Many coffin motifs refer to proverbs, which are interpreted differently by the Ga. The figurative coffins have been used in the Greater Accra region since about 1950, mainly by the rural, traditionally devout population, but increasingly also by Christians, and are now an integral part of the local funeral culture.
- The main purpose of the figurative coffins, called adekai or abebuu adekai by the Ga okadi, are funerals in the Greater Accra region." (also [web link 22](#))

## II. Interpretations on Paa Joe's Nike Trainer (Size 42)

### Interpretative approach 1: The search for the origin

"The carpenter Kane Kwei from Teshie is believed to have invented the figurative coffins of the Ga, the people of the south-east coast of Ghana, around 1950. There were no scientific papers or empirical studies that seriously investigated their origin, function and social context from an empirical perspective, which aroused my curiosity," writes ethnologist Regula Tschumi in her dissertation and continues:

"Ataa Oko (1919-2012) was a pioneer of Ghanaian coffin art, creating his first figurative coffins around 1945. Unlike the younger Kane Kwei (1924-1998), who was widely recognised in the Western art world as the inventor of figurative coffins, Ataa Oko had never been in contact with journalists or Western art dealers. [...]

Looking at old photos of the early figurative coffins by Ataa Oko or later by Kane Kwei, it becomes clear how much coffins have changed since then. Contemporary coffin artists have constantly improved their working techniques and further developed the art form. Today, apart from Paa Joe's workshop, which is very well known in the Western art world, there are several other established and new coffin workshops, as well as some excellent young masters working with their apprentices in and outside Greater Accra, who have become very popular in Ghana.

In my opinion, the most innovative coffin artists are masters Kudjoe Affutu, who has a large studio in Awutu in the Central Region, Eric Kpakpo in La near Accra, who has an excellent reputation, the slightly older Daniel Mensah in Teshie and Samuel Cudjoe, who recently opened his workshop in Nungua. All these artists continue to surprise me with their creations. They are all training several apprentices and some of them have already opened their own spaces, so there are now many workshops and a lot of competition between them. Paa Joe's workshop is now run by his son Jacob, who works with his father's former master, Ben Amartey. When there is a lot of work to be done, Jacob calls on some of Paa Joe's former masters such as Eric Kpakpo or Samuel Cudjoe to help. The well-known painter from Teshie Daniel A. Jasper also works there. This workshop no longer makes coffins for funerals, but sells them to the Western art market. Ghanaians who use figurative coffins do not see them as works of art as the West does - although beautiful coffins are certainly highly valued at funerals - and the name of the artist does not matter. At least, I have never heard mourners discussing who made the coffin." ([web link 23](#))



## **Interpretative approach 2: How the coffin came to the museum**

Some of these coffin objects are created specifically for museums and collectors. Like the "Nike Trainer (Size 42)", by Paa Joe. During a guided tour at Museum Fünf Kontinente, the head of the Africa and North America departments, Dr Stefan Eisenhofer, reports:

"He was contacted directly by the artist Paa Joe via Facebook. He offered the museum the coffin for sale in the after-sale of an auction at Bonham's auction house in London. Presumably the return transport would have been quite complicated and too expensive. This was a great opportunity for the museum's collection." (Eisenhofer 2022) Now the Coffin is on display for visitors at Museum Fünf Kontinente. On the question of whether the Nike coffin was executed relatively small because of its destination for the art market, "there are different opinions. Some say yes, others say that the deceased were often buried in a squatting position." (Eisenhofer 2022)

There is also the open question of whether the coffin was art or a coffin in the sense of a utilitarian object. The head of the collection, Dr Eisenhofer, sees both areas fulfilled.

## **Interpretative approach 3: On rituals and art**

In 2022, a group of authors presents a study of the factors that led to changes in the traditional burial rituals of Frafra subgroups in northern Ghana. The funeral rites include

1. Preparation,
2. the mourning before the funeral (including the wake),
3. the funeral, the mourning after the funeral, and finally the regular mourning. In the case of state burial, the deceased is prepared for burial with appropriate clothing, grooming and so on. (Tengolzor Ba-an et al. 2022, p. 8 according to Nketia 2010)

Here, a change in these rituals is described, e.g. the changes in the food and drinks served, the renovation of the house of the deceased, music and dance or cultural groups or burial in coffins. They see this development as being due to modernisation, religion, technology and prosperity.

It is noted, among other things, that "[t]he emerging younger [...] generation shares the recent deaths of their friends and family members via social media" (Tengolzor Ba-an et al. 2022, p. 10, also under [web link 24](#))

## **Videotaped documentation of the funeral**

"... traditional funeral rituals were changing and included examples of shaving and fasting no longer being common and instead highlife music being played at the funeral site. Through the study, it was found that special equipment was needed for an effective funeral, including tape recorders, record players, loudspeakers and generators. Witte (2001) and van der Geest (2004) also noted that the latest development in Akan funerals is the documentation of the event. They say it is impressive to see visitors standing around the body; these scenes are edited together with footage of the deceased laid out in state and surrounded by well-wishers." (Tengolzor Ba-an et al. 2022, p. 10)

## **Deutungsansatz 4: The artist Selasi Awusi Sosu**

### **... describes her encounter with the Coffin in the Museum Fünf Kontinente:**

„Since the unfortunate and untimely death of my dear mother in 2012, I have found myself on a number of occasions, pondering about the thin line between life and death. As an artist, the fantasy coffins of internationally renowned artists like Kane Kwei and Paa Joe have fascinated my students and I in Ghana, and have been the reason for class excursions from Winneba to Accra.

Seeing the "Nike Coffin" in the Museum Fünf Kontinente in Munich brought many worlds together in my mind! Ghana, Germany (and their cultures of preservation); life, death (and rituals of celebrating them). The paradoxes that are embedded in all of this leaped at me as I beheld the fantasy "Nike Coffin" made by renowned Ghanaian artist Paa Joe on European soil. The daughter of a disciplinarian head teacher and a teacher herself, my late mother's simple oak coffin contrasts Paa Joe's exaggerated "Nike Coffin". Yet, they're both united by the eternal fact of death." ([web link 25](#))





Figure 3 shows a film still of the moment of coffin selection from Selasi Awusi Sosu's still unfinished video work. Four coffin models can be seen in a pattern book, in the form of a log, a taxi, a stack of books and a ship.

### III. First Facts and analyses

#### ... on Selasi Awusi Sosu's still unfinished video work

The funeral of Selasi Awusi Sosu's mother was also documented with the help of videography. It is an unfinished work that documents the individual episodes of the funeral service in a rhythmic sequence of cuts and is yet to be published.

In this approx. 15-minute video project, excerpts from the real recording of her mother's entire funeral service are put together to form an art video. From the perspective of a subjective camera, both the preparations for the funeral service and the phases of the funeral itself are documented. As a viewer, one is kept at a documentary-neutral distance on the one hand by the professional-looking image construction and an elegiac-looking editing sequence. On the other hand, the video quality, which has developed considerably in the last decade, even with semi-professional equipment and smartphones, is reminiscent of very personal recordings. The subjective camera work and the corresponding closeness of the camera to the action also create an impression of great familiarity, which can have an embarrassingly touching effect on a stranger. But the creative strategy could also blur the voyeuristic feeling of participating as a viewer in an encounter to which one was not invited at all.

Especially at the intimate moment of coffin selection, for example, the hand leafing through the sample book for coffins takes on an identifying function that goes beyond that of a European romantic back figure. In the film clip, the hand becomes the viewer's own hand, is drawn into the action and creates the impression of being a participant, a co-decision-maker and thus directly affected.





Figure 4 shows another film still of the coffin selection from Selasi Awusi Sosu's still unfinished video work. Again, four coffin models can be seen in the pattern book, one in the form of a quite recognisable, elaborately structured coffin, one in the form of a drum kit, one in the form of an omnibus and one as a lying standing drum. At the bottom, the hand of a viewer comes into the picture.

In Europe, the open filming of a funeral, the immersion of the film camera in the event, even the occasional photographing of the mourners and the ritual procedures is affected by the suspicion of irreverence. If the documentation is in the public interest, e.g. in the case of an outstanding personality, the cameramen usually maintain the so-called "due" distance, keep away from possibly emotional, personal scenes - at the latest in the corrective post-production – and usually cast a cautious, reserved glance at the events from the background. Identification with the participants is often and clearly not intended, the subject of death is reduced to a minimum of mostly verbal mention. If necessary, attitudes towards religious symbols have to replace closer, more fleeting impressions of the concrete events.

Against this backdrop, the openness and closeness of Selasi Awusi Sosu's video work may at first seem somewhat disturbing to a viewer from the global North, but it provides unusual, possibly even intimate insights into the events, perhaps even allows for sympathy, and leaves the illuminating impression that dealing with personally drastic events elsewhere in the world is also shaped and reflected upon differently.

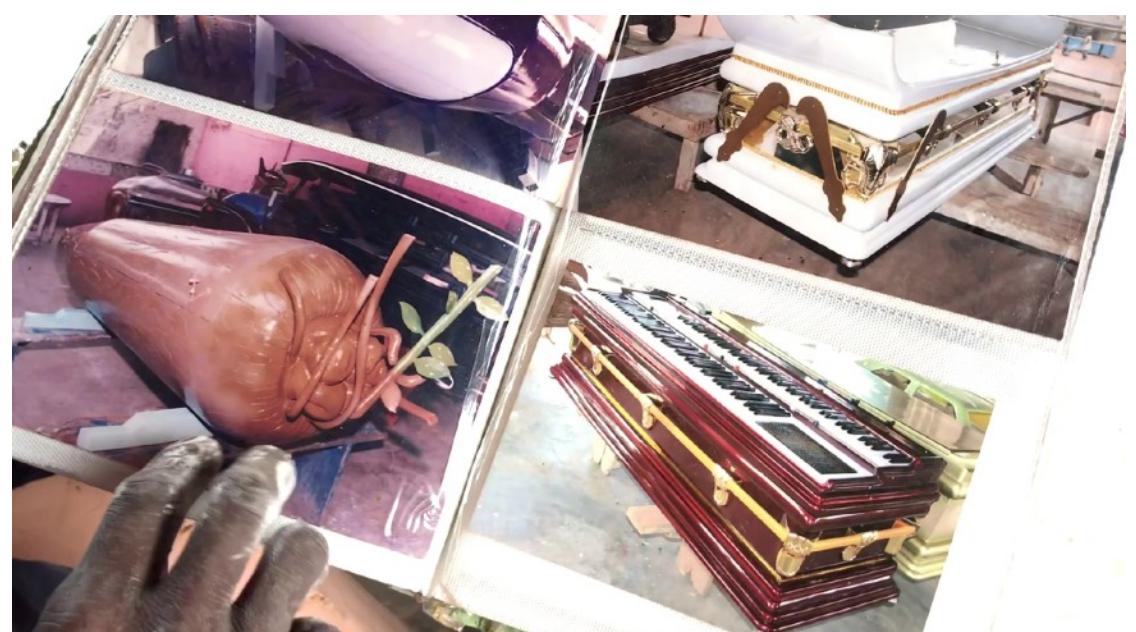


Figure 5 shows another film still for the coffin selection. Only three models are recognisable here. Two of them are again very expectable, yet very elaborately designed specimens, one of them has a lid depicting the double keyboard of an organ. The last model, on the other hand, looks more like a sausage or a severed body part from which a branch is sprouting.



## **IV. Interpretations**

**... on Selasi Awusi Sosu's video work in particular and on funeral culture in general**

### **Interpretative approach 1: Position of the artist**

Selasi Awusi Sosu describes the video recordings at funeral ceremonies as a way of remembering for the bereaved, who could hardly breathe during the ceremony. It was only years after the funeral that she says she was ready to begin the artistic processing of this raw material. She writes:

"This video is an attempt to help my family and I heal after the painful loss of our most cherished mother Olivia Xetsa Afi Sosu, (née Kpordugbe), affectionately called "Buff, Buff". It took us 8 years to finally watch the video documenting "Buff, Buff's" funeral ceremony. It has also become a means of educating others about funeral traditions in Ghana. Since art, has therapeutic properties, this video may have such an effect on its audience as it has had on some of my family members. In honour of my mother who was a poet, there may be some poetic tendencies in this piece without apology and just to connect with some truths about how we are surviving/overcoming."

### **Interpretative approach 2: Positions from the Global North**

... show that the approach described at the beginning is no longer able to fully capture the picture: "... the trend towards creative ways of dealing with mourning, dying and death continues. More and more people, according to personal characteristics such as age, gender, race, origin, religion, worldview and sexual orientation, are looking for new ways to actively shape their 'last journey'." (Blurb to Sörries 2016)

"According to a study by the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies in Cologne, however, demand behaviour has changed significantly over the last two decades, which has meant that undertakers have also had to increasingly adapt to the realities of the free market economy. Dominik Akyel, sociologist at the MPI, summarises the study results and explains that 'the trend is towards individual funerals or cheap offers'." (translated after [web link 26](#))

"Germany's mourning culture is changing: many mourners don't want a classic funeral with a priest and fixed rituals, but a lively and creative way of saying goodbye." (translated after [web link 27](#))

"Be they sociologists, theologians or consumer representatives: Asked about the future, they are all ultimately concerned with the same thing - making the cemetery more alive, understanding it as a place not only of death but also of life and mourning." (translated after [web link 28](#))

Such empirical findings are flanked by relevant statistics and forms of explicit negotiation in the field of art. ([web link 29 und 30](#))

These findings can be summarised to the interpretation that a lively mourning culture can be noticed in Ghana as well as in Europe, which could possibly develop or have already developed connecting abilities to each other. The expectations of an essential traditional and human ritual are changing and opening up to each other. Other examples can both prove and differentiate this. The ethnologist Regula Tschumi, for example, describes her experience of photographically documenting funerals:

### **Interpretative approach 3: Celebrating life**

"Since 2002, I have attended about 100 funerals. It wasn't easy at the beginning; I was shy and the occasions are always different, so I needed time to learn how to prepare. In Ghana, taking pictures at funerals - and photography in general - is a male domain. Of course, I stand out when I take pictures at such events because I am a woman holding a camera and because I am white. I think people are surprised when they see me at funerals, but Ghanaians are very polite - although I don't know what people say about me! I have never been stopped or disturbed as the mourners usually know who I am and that I have a permit to take photos, and sometimes the families are proud when I attend their rituals. When I first started photographing funerals, I found it very strange how some families posed their deceased for the wake. I was also surprised that photographing and filming the deceased at funerals is very popular; there are professional cameramen who photograph the mourners with the body, and even the people who are crying are relaxed when they are photographed.



All this would be unthinkable in my society back home, but the Ghanaian attitude towards death is completely different from the one I grew up with. Ghanaians focus on life, not death. At funerals, they celebrate the good times spent with the deceased; they even call funerals 'celebrations of life'. At least for traditional believers, death is not the end, but just another transition in life; death is part of an eternal cycle of life' in which the deceased becomes an ancestor and is later reborn in the family. This has taught me that at funerals we should not just mourn our loss, but be more humble and grateful for the precious time we spent with the deceased." ([Weblink 31](#))

### **Ein Welthit: der ghaneische "Coffin dance"**

The pallbearer entrepreneur Benjamin Aidoo from Ghana's capital Accra wanted to offer a cheerful variant of the last journey. Videos were shown on the internet in which costumed pallbearers dance a choreography. They balance a coffin on their shoulders and move rhythmically to the music. As early as 2013, the TV station BBC broadcast the programme "Ghana's Dancing Pallbearers". ([web link 32](#)) Internet users worldwide also use these video clips to develop memes around the topic of death and dying. The Ghanaian pallbearers performing in the video become symbolic figures for a casual and dignified approach to death.

## **V. Ideas for the lessons**

### **Pictorial approach**

The students stage pictorial-practical contextual shifts of the "Nike Trainer (Size 42)". They place the object through analogue or digital collages in different environments, such as another museum, a gallery, a white cube, a flagship store.

The students continue these productions in pairs in role-playing games by having the "Nike Trainer (Size 42)" questioned or speak.

The students document this analogue or digitally with a photo story or cinematically as a short stop-motion clip.

The students design a funeral object for a pop icon or idol who has already died. For example, they use PET bottles as the basic body.

The students work in groups to build a coffin prop for the play "The Visit of the Old Lady" by Friedrich Dürrenmatt.

The students research the biographical travel story of Coffin and recreate it as an analogue or digital narrative.

### **Linguistic discussion**

The students approach the "Nike Trainer (Size 42)" through photographs. They ask questions of the object.

The students encounter the object via digital-media visualised approaches and find answers to their questions.

The students present and reflect on their findings in plenary.

The students research the term sepulchral culture and find individual approaches to the topic (e.g. Museum für Sepulkralkultur in Kassel).

The students discuss the contextual shift of the Coffin and its respective effect on the viewers or its respective contextual assignment.



## Interdisciplinary approaches

**German:** The students examine classical or contemporary literature for metaphors and images to address transience.

**English, Art:** Students discuss and analyse poems by Edgar Allan Poe, for example "The Raven" and its citation in Paul Gauguin or the series "The Simpsons".

**Ethics, Religion:** Students learn about different forms of mourning and their rituals.

**History:** Students research the history of burial in Germany and beyond and learn about its forms and rituals.

## The work as a trigger for one's own creation and reflection

The students research the term ritual and find criteria for it. They look for rituals in their own world and document them through explanatory drawings, comics, photographs or films.

Starting with the "Nike Trainer (Size 42)", the students research design objects, e.g. beds in the shape of cars (form follows fiction).

The students design their own creative ideas for furniture objects.

The students invent their own ceremony or ritual within a play, musical or performance.

The students address the concept of kitsch in art, e.g. in Jeff Koons, and discuss this using current examples from their world.

The students critically question the biographies of certain objects from ritual to art object and vice versa.



## 12. Between art and admonition – El Anatsui's Rising Sea

### I. Fakts and analyses

**Origin:** The work was created in 2019 for El Anatsui's solo exhibition at Munich's Haus der Kunst. This exhibition, entitled "El Anatsui. Triumphant Scale" was initiated by the curator at the time, Okwui Enwezor. Enwezor, who himself had Nigerian roots, was very concerned to give a voice to artistic positions beyond the mainstream of global art, which is largely committed to concepts of the global North.



Figure 1: El Anatsui, Rising Sea, 2019, mixed media, 1450 x 700 cm, 2019, Haus der Kunst, Munich

For the exhibition, the place of presentation, the Haus der Kunst, played an important role. The Haus der Kunst was built in 1933-1938 under Adolf Hitler and was a central instrument for the art policy of National Socialism.

The work "Rising Sea" was painstakingly handcrafted by many people according to El Anatsui's design in his workshop in Nsukka (Nigeria), where the artist lives and works. As in many other works with which the artist became known, we also find here a huge number of bottle caps (extrapolated to almost 200,000), which were beaten flat and then connected on each of the four sides with copper wire. The production of such works has been tried and tested many times in the artist's workshop. Videos that can be found on the net show not only this work, but also a test hanging as well as the joining of larger parts that were first produced on the floor.



**Presentation:** The work was created especially for this very room in the "Haus der Kunst" and was also shown there. The work completely covered one wall. No other work by El Anatsui could be seen in the room itself (see Figure 1). Following the presentation in Munich, the work travelled to the Mathaf Arab Museum of Modern Art, Doha, then to the Museum of Fine Arts in Bern and was finally presented at the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao ([web link 33](#)). Later, as far as can be researched, the work was shown once more, in 2021 at an exhibition in Athens, so obviously mainly in Europe.

**Title:** The artwork, which stands in the context of Global Art (with English as the lingua franca), has an English-language title, "Rising Sea". The German translation in the booklet accompanying the exhibition is „Steigender Meeresspiegel“ (rising sea level), which latently suggests a certain interpretation in the sense of thematising environmental threats. An alternative would have been „Ansteigendes Meer“.



Figure 2 shows "Rising Sea" in detail from the point of view of a viewer standing close to the work and looking upwards. In the foreground, the bottle caps connected with wire can be seen. Most of them are silver-coloured like the aluminium they are made of. A small row consists of colourfully painted found objects.

## II. Interpretations

**Preliminary remark:** Immediately after the exhibition in 2019, Patrique deGraft-Yankson from the University of Education, Winneba, Ghana, and Ernst Wagner from the Munich Art Academy wrote an analysis of this work in a parallel writing process (Brosch / Wagner 2020, p. 410). In order to minimise any mutual influence on the interpretative approaches, the two authors did not exchange views during the writing process. They therefore knew nothing of the perspective on the work in the other text; the texts were written independently of each other.



## Interpretative approach 1: Patrique deGraft-Yankson (summarised by Ernst Wagner)

**Description and effect:** The work "Rising Sea" by El Anatsui shows the churning ocean. The work consists of flat-knocked aluminium bottle lids that are "sewn" into a solid grey wall covering. Through this production technique, the artist achieves the illusion of a churning ocean. With the sculptural modelling of the surface and the rhythm created in the process, he represents the waves. In this way, he charges the surface with energy with the sewn-together metal pieces, emphasising the ever-flowing character of the sea and the power of the hypnotising ocean waves.

**Interpretation / concern of the artist:** In El Anatsui's home country and other parts of the world, the improper disposal of rubbish in the sea is a real plague. Therefore, it is not difficult to hear the artist's admonishing voice in this work: The sea rises against improper treatment, it rebels against it; and the artist emphasises - also through his efforts to assemble each piece of material - the need for us to save the sea from improper treatment.

**Context - The importance of the sea in Ghana:** The sea has always been an important source of livelihood for Ghanaians. It is used for subsistence as well as for leisure. But it is also the basis for spiritual action and worship. El Anatsui, who grew up by the sea in Ghana, has certainly heard many stories about the sea as a god, a provider or a friend. He witnessed how people were healed by bathing in the sea, or how their destiny took a turn after they threw some coins into the ocean, entrusting their wishes to the sea.

In the process, he was certainly warned of the consequences of disrespecting the sea and the rules for "using" it, such as the prohibition against polluting the sea. There are also, for example, certain days on which fishing is not allowed, otherwise the sea is desecrated.

But the sea also gives signs. Even if these signs are interpreted differently locally, there is a basic consensus here. For example, there are swelling sea waves that can become a storm tide. Fishermen should then not "climb the sea", as they say in local parlance. Rising sea always has something sinister, ominous. Perhaps someone has broken the rules of the sea god?

But the "rising sea" doesn't have to be as unfriendly as it seems. After all, if you can't fish, you can dry your canoes, mend your nets, even enjoy the beautiful view and watch the big waves. Waves that gather in the deep ocean, roll furiously towards the coast, but dissolve into creamy white foam on the beach. The view of the sea is then nothing other than an aesthetic experience. The observer simply enjoys.

**The motif of the sea in this artwork:** So what motivated El Anatsui's depiction of the rising sea? For one thing, the sea has probably simply had enough of pollution. That's why it has to rise! But it is also a spectacle that viewers of El Anatsui's depiction of the rising sea see. "Rising Sea" is therefore frightening, confusing and chaotic, but it is also always beautiful. If we treat the sea right, it will calm down in due time so that we have nothing to fear. The sea is still our God, our friend, our provider and our protector.

## Interpretative approach 2: Ernst Wagner (abridged version)

**Description and effect:** In 2019, El Anatsui (b. 1944) created the over 100 sqm large work "Rising Sea" especially for his exhibition at Munich's Haus der Kunst, and specifically for a previously determined wall. The work consists of approximately 200,000 bottle caps knocked flat and connected to each other, resulting in a stable and at the same time soft, seemingly textile structure. The effect is monumental and magnificent in equal measure, impressing by its sheer size as much as by the sensual materiality of the different coloured tinplate pieces that shimmer in the light.

**Interpretation:** The work suggests two different ways of seeing, from a close and a distant point of view.

- From a **distance**, one sees the composition with three horizontal zones: The lower, coloured, narrow, fragile-looking stripe is probably to be read as an indication of human habitation; the middle zone, grey, criss-crossed by falling folds, as the sea. Above, a "silver stripe" rising from left to right, the sky.
- Up **close**, however, the bottle caps with the inscriptions "Turn to open" or the names of high-proof alcoholic beverages, which are popular in Nigeria, catch the eye.



With these two perceptions, two different stories are told, two different issues are addressed. Both are of the highest political and social relevance:

- From a **distance**, the rising water level caused by global warming is addressed: The powerful waves in the middle section destroy the coloured stripe below, which can stand for the fragility of human dwellings. The silver lining on the horizon disappears. In this way, the artist formulates his view of the ecosystem in which the sea, the sky and the environment shaped by humans and endowed with hopes are related.
- The bottle caps, perceptible from **close** up, in turn speak of alcohol and the slave trade. (For the sugar cane plantations in the Caribbean, people were enslaved from Africa and taken across the Atlantic in ships to cut sugar cane on plantations to produce rum. This was then transported back, also to Africa - among other things, to have a means of dominating the exploited peoples with alcohol).

This view, the one from close up, thus speaks of the past, while the view from a distance addresses the future, which concerns the entire globe. The narrative strands are connected by the idea of upcycling: discarded bottle caps become art, cheap material becomes magnificent beauty, the past becomes the future, regional colonialism becomes the narrative of a global threat.

**Context:** The Challenge of the Western Concept of Art: First of all, it seems important that it is a black artist from Ghana who showed this major exhibition in a space built to serve Nazi racism. The title of the exhibition "Triumphant Scale" in the entire East Wing also spoke of this: a scale-less regime had created the scale-breaking building, which is now triumphantly countered by another scale

Furthermore, El Anatsui works in a visual language that challenges Western viewing conventions. The almost striking unambiguity of the themes poses a challenge to conventional expectations of contemporary art. Art, according to the mainstream public's understanding, should at least be ironically broken or distanced if it is content-related, thus saving the intrinsic value of l'art pour l'art, which eludes partisan appropriation. But there is no sign of this distance here: "Turn to open" is the instruction that is written a thousand times on the grey of the middle section, each time with an arrow, up or down. The sentence is to be read as an immediate instruction to the viewer: Turn! In this way, El Anatsui negates the immanent "prohibition" of unambiguous symbolism in the conventional Western concept of art as well as the ban on agitation.

The following observation also fits in with this: El Anatsui's oeuvre lies beyond all the usual genre boundaries. We first see huge "fabrics", magnificent capes or robes that hang, fold and sometimes lie on the floor. But these material assemblages are not made of fabric, they are only structured like fabric. "Rising Sea" is therefore not a textile work. But is the work therefore a relief or a mural (emphasising the material)? Is the work, which was created for this specific space, an installation? The artist calls his works sculptures, an attribution that remains irritating.

## Two Perspectives - Attempt at a Summary

The analysis and interpretation of Patrice deGraft-Yankson and Ernst Wagner coincide in some aspects, in other points they differ significantly. What they have in common, for example, is the appreciation of the production process with regard to the impressive effect of material and surface. The interpretation of the middle zone as a threatening sea, with which man's destructive treatment of the environment is thematised, is also found in both authors. In the process, again both emphasise an ambiguous, even contradictory meaning: in deGraft-Yankson's work, the sea is used pragmatically and is at the same time God, who can be friendly but also unfriendly. "Rising Sea" is accordingly frightening and at the same time also beautiful, "Rising Sea" threatens and at the same time invites aesthetic enjoyment. In Wagner's work, the ambiguity is established in the different "narratives" that arise from proximity or distance, which overlap in the work: past and future, colonialism and climate change.

But already in this last example of agreement, a very central difference also becomes clearly visible: deGraft-Yankson speaks **of the sea** - on the basis of the work, of the effect of the sea itself, while Wagner speaks **of the work** - and not of the sea itself. With this different focus, the main difference is marked: deGraft-Yankson is concerned with the sea, which he brings to us through his discussion of the work, while Wagner is concerned with a work of art that - in this specific case - "only" has the sea as its subject. For deGraft-Yankson, the sea is "in" the work, it is really present. For Wagner, the sea is a depicted motif, it lies "behind" the work, so to speak, serves as a reference, which is especially juxtaposed with a second theme, the history of the slave trade.



Consequently, Wagner then provides a classical analysis of form in the tradition of art pedagogy (which is irrelevant for deGraft-Yankson), while the latter dedicates a large part of his text to the significance of the sea for the people on the Ghanaian coast (which again is not directly relevant for Wagner). Behind these two approaches are, on the one hand, fundamentally different understandings of what the sea is (even if both agree that its pollution is a catastrophe): deGraft-Yankson speaks of an independent, quasi-souled entity, an acting being or a god that enters into a relationship with humans. For Wagner, the sea - as part of the ecosystem - is also in relation to humans, but no independent will is attributed to it. The latter is the privilege and thus the responsibility of humans.

This different understanding of the human-world relationship is echoed in an obviously equally different concept of art or work. In deGraft-Yankson's text, the work of art is charged with energy, just like the sea itself. The sea appears in the work, as it were, and is itself present there. In the work, then, the sea materialises as something perceived by the artist: "The spectacle that viewers see of El Anatsui's gigantic depiction of the rising sea conveys in many respects the impression of an actual natural phenomenon." (cf. Brosch / Wagner 2020, p. 410) In this sense, the work - like the sea itself - appeals to us to save it "from improper treatment [...], otherwise it will be desecrated".

This approach, in which everything interpenetrates, is contrasted with Wagner's approach, which separates everything analytically: proximity and distance, splendour to be enjoyed and admonition to be taken seriously, discourse on colonialism and ecology, work and (reference) motif, art system and ecology, art system and colonialism. In the end, he does arrive at a synthesis, but it only functions on a meta-level by addressing the irritation of the Western concept of art through Anatsui's work, as he does here in this text. An irritation that dissolves or at least relativises the fundamental separation in Western understanding of viewer and object, of sign (here the concrete work) and signified (here the rising sea), of spirituality and reality, of art and ethics.

Both positions in comparison can show that obviously - as not to be expected otherwise and yet illuminating - different ideas of the relationship between art, nature and education exist in different contexts. Addressing this in contemporary art education is an important task.



Figure 3 shows El Anatsui's work in detail and photographed from the side. The wave-like formation clearly detaches itself from the supposed two-dimensionality of the image.



### III. Ideas for the lessons

#### Pictorial approach

Half of the class reads one of the interpretations, the second half reads the other without seeing an illustration. They draw how they imagine the work based on the texts and then compare their results.

El Anatsui uses throwaway material found on site for his work, which also conveys a specific meaning and thus contributes to the overall message. The students think about which throwaway material could represent their place or region or Central Europe and collect it in larger quantities. They spread this material out in a suitable place and think about groupings, arrangements, compositions. The definition of the theme can be done beforehand or in the creative process.

The students measure the floor space of their classroom or drawing room and compare the dimensions with those of El Anatsui's work. They make a picture support of this size, possibly in the auditorium, and think about how they can design this surface. They develop a technically sensible solution for implementation, including interim storage. (El Anatsui has backed his work with chicken wire mesh in fragile places).

The students develop several design ideas on how they could respond to the threats of global warming, possibly with other classes to have a large pool of ideas. In smaller groups they each choose one idea and implement it in a way that it can be presented in a public place, e.g. on billboards near the school.

The students translate the three-zone composition of Caspar David Friedrich's painting "Mönch am Meer" into the material language of El Anatsui and vice versa.

The students research local craft traditions that tell something about the history of the region, e.g. in the nearest local or city museum. They playfully develop ideas on how they can use these for design experiments, e.g. with contemporary materials, and possibly also transform them. This can then lead to an exhibition of the class in the local history museum, where pupils' works are presented as interventions in the permanent collection.

#### Linguistic discussion

The students read the two interpretations here and compare them. In both, the motif of the sea plays the most important role. What image of the sea is created in each of the two texts?

In comparing the two texts here, the students examine where there are similarities and where the greatest differences are. What do the students miss in both texts? In order to justify their results, they also take into account the respective methodological approach.

The students formulate a thesis as to which of the two texts the artist might be happier with and justify it.

What distinguishes El Anatsui's depiction of the sea from elementary depictions of the sea in European painting, e.g. by Friedrich, Turner, Courbet or Nolde?

The students look for works from art history in which they discover pictorial strategies similar to those in El Anatsui's work (e.g. the use of felt by Richard Morris or Joseph Beuys, Christo's Valley Curtain, Klimt's Kiss, Pollock's Drippings). They compare the respective approaches and use them to develop a mind map that locates El Anatsui in the network of current or historical artistic positions through relationships.



## Interdisciplinary approaches

**Geography, Ethics, History:** How can people react to storm surges or tsunamis? How do these disasters occur? Which regions of the world are particularly at risk?

**History:** Students research ways humans have responded to climate change in the past.

**History:** They research the history of the slave trade in West Africa.

**History, Economy:** The names of the alcoholic beverages El Anatsui shows in his work carry their own history. The students research these stories and develop visualisations of the retail chains, also in longitudinal time.

They research videos on the net showing the work processes in El Anatsui's workshop in Nigeria and discuss the importance of such a workshop for the development of the place.

**Philosophy:** Students research different concepts of art in European history or in different cultures today. They relate El Anatsui's work to the findings.

**Languages:** Students research European or Western literature (e.g. Ernest Hemingway, "The Old Man and the Sea") for views of the sea that are close to Patrice deGraft-Yankson's view in his analysis.

**German, Political education:** "flood of images", "rolling waves of refugees", "streams of tourists swelling and to be contained", "drowning in the sea of literature"; again and again metaphors are used that originate from the field of natural disasters to make current phenomena appear particularly threatening. The students collect examples and also examine their function in current political debates.

## The work as a trigger for one's own creation and reflection

The students research buildings from the National Socialist era, if possible on site or in the surrounding area. They develop ideas on how they could respond to this architecture through design interventions.

The students look for examples of how artists and creative people react to the threats of global warming and design an exhibition in the school building or in public space.

Students discuss ways in which people can develop attitudes towards problems that overwhelm them. They formulate a repertoire of attitude types and compare their results with current political positions on environmental issues.

Decolonisation also plays an important role in current discourses on art, as evidenced, for example, by the reviews of biennials worldwide. The students research positions on this topic in art and in the art world, especially with regard to positions from sub-Saharan Africa.

With regard to the latent "ban on agitation" in the Western concept of art, the students examine reviews of documenta 14 (2017 in Kassel and Athens). The students deal with the possible backgrounds for this attitude, e.g. the experience of art being used in totalitarianism or specific philosophical traditions (e.g. Schiller's letters "On the Aesthetic Education of Man" from 1795). In this context, they also reflect clearly political images, for example by George Grosz or Pablo Picasso, which also avoid directives for action.

The film "The day after tomorrow" (2004) by Roland Emmerich also deals with the topic of rising sea levels. The students watch this film, analyse the creative, genre-specific means and compare the effects. How are the viewers constituted by the works in each case?



# 13. End of the line for departure – Ibrahim Mahama: Aeroplanes

## I. Facts and analyses

Six decommissioned aircraft of different types stand on a dusty area on the outskirts of Tamale, Ghana's third largest city. There is no sign of a functioning airport with a runway, tower and terminal; instead, there are scattered trees and, in the immediate vicinity, "Red clay", a collection of studios for young artists. The complex also includes the Savannah Center for Contemporary Art (SCCA) and a recently acquired former silo called "Nkrumah voli-ni".



Figure 1 shows Ibrahim Mahama's Aeroplanes from 2020 from a bird's eye view. The converted decommissioned aircraft can be seen in the foreground and the "Red clay studios", Tamale, Ghana, in the background.

Tamale is the dynamic centre of the north, a transport hub on the way to Burkina Faso, Benin and Niger. The city is home to the University of Development Studies, and to the conceptual artist Ibrahim Mahama, born in 1987, the creator of the "Airoplanes" installation, which was realised in 2020 and can be walked through and experienced. But Tamale is also a province in Ghana, far away from both Accra and Kumasi, the culturally and economically important metropolises.

The machines placed here do not form a graveyard for scrap planes, but are, as part of the "Red clay Studios", a place of encounter and learning. Young people, children and adults create and experiment with colours, clay and other materials in the aircraft, which have been converted into studios, workshops and galleries.

The six aircraft, which differ greatly in size, origin and technical aspects, all appear to be old. First there is the Antonov, a single-engine biplane built in 1987. The aircraft was first built in 1947 in the Soviet Union and subsequently mainly in Eastern European countries, and is still in use today in modernised model series for individual and agricultural purposes, as well as on short routes to reach remote settlements.



Tamale's example originates from Poland, was originally designed as a 14-seater in 1987 and then converted to a luxury 4-seater before being decommissioned in Ghana due to lack of operating licence. The fuselage is constructed of metal, the wings of metal struts and covered with waterproof impregnated canvas. Ibrahim Mahama bought it from a Swiss for 15,000 US dollars. The smallest of the aircraft on the site is a Cessna, the largest a four-engine airliner. On some of the planes we see the inscriptions Citylink and Starbow, both Ghanaian airlines that have since ceased operations.

Mahama says it paid a total of 110,000 US dollars for the six planes, and another 250,000 US dollars for permits and transport. They were transported by road the 400 km from Accra to Tamale - with enormous spectacle and effort: some of the wings had to be taken off first and put back on at the end of the journey. For the reconstruction inside, the rows of seats were largely removed to gain space for learning, talking and working. Only a few of the seats for passengers remained, where one can indulge in the idea of flying away. In the preserved cockpit, however, children can sit at the controls and play pilot - a dream Mahama himself had in his childhood.



Figure 2 shows Ibrahim Mahama's Aeroplanes and the "Red clay studios" still under construction from a vertical perspective from above Tamale, Ghana.

Artist Selasi Awusi Sosu describes Mahama as an approachable, modest and straightforward young artist who uses his international success to support people in his home country. Exhibitions in Venice, London and his participation in documenta 14 in 2017 marked his breakthrough in the international art market. As there is no public funding for the SCCA Tamale, he finances it entirely from the proceeds of his installations and collage-like drawings. A circumstance that earns him respect and recognition respect and recognition, but in a society in which many cling to the dream of material wealth, it also arouses astonishment in disbelief. Mahahma is a student of Kärl'kachä Seid'ou at the Department of Painting and Sculpture at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), who - charismatic and well-connected - is a major influence on Ghana's art scene.

According to Selasi Awusi Sosu, the artist is not an entrepreneur who is concerned with profit. Rather, the money he earns gives him opportunities to invest responsibly in projects that benefit the community.



The use of the Arts Centre is free of charge for everyone. For the people who travel here, this is a special place. Although Tamale has its own airport, many of the city's residents perceive them only as objects flying overhead on air routes. Many are excluded from the possibility of travelling to other places. Stepping onto an aircraft on the ground, however, can trigger the imagination of a journey.

In the beginning, there was a void, the lack of a place where children in particular could be creative. So it was a conscious decision to go out of the centre into the province: "The idea of the void can also be a starting point where we can actually even create things that can move humanities". (Interview: Ibrahim Mahama in conversation with Jonathan Bebs Sennor, a Ghanaian YouTuber. ([web link 35](#)) Mahama formulates the claim that by breaking down the conventional notions of a gallery space, a museum and a classroom, he is giving an impulse to try out one's creative potentials.



Figure 3 shows the exhibition hall of the SCCA in Tamale in 2020.

## II. Interpretations

### Interpretative approach 1: Transformation

The work, as it functions on different levels, allows for multiple readings. On the symbolic level, we experience the transformation of several vehicles into a learning and encounter space. Aeroplanes stand for man's age-old dream of flying, of rising above himself. But because the planes no longer fly, they challenge the users to realise their dreams in the here and now. Physical mobility becomes mental mobility. "You don't have to leave the place to go on a journey." (Selasi Awusi Sosu)

### Interpretative approach 2: Scrapping

At the same time, however, the site also triggers the association of an aircraft graveyard, at least when viewed from a distance on the basis of photographs. The decommissioning of the aircraft seems final and like a preliminary stage to scrapping.



### **Interpretative approach 3: Place of learning**

The African reality is often characterised by the search for success. Quite a few parents push their children to take up professions that promise social recognition and financial success. Doctor, lawyer, engineer are therefore sought-after career goals. But this can also lead to ignoring one's own ideas and desires. Many parents cannot imagine anything worthwhile for their child in a life as an artist, and art classes do not enjoy a high status at school either, in contrast to the STEM subjects. Nevertheless, in many schools and ambitious extracurricular projects, there is an agenda to change this in order to strengthen artistically oriented competences and help them gain more recognition.

### **Interpretative approach 4: Social sculpture**

The aeroplanes as an unconventional place of learning are on the one hand a social sculpture, but on the other hand also formal sculptures. They were reminiscent of a fish, a dolphin and told of the ancient dream of liberation from constraints and heaviness with the help of wings, which we know from many myths (Mahmoud Malik Saako). On the other hand, the static character of the abandoned aeroplanes cannot be denied; a certain ambivalence in the symbolism is noticeable here.

### **Interpretative approach 5: Lightness and heaviness**

But the spectacular transport of the aircraft across the country also has a strong performative character; it was always accompanied by numerous onlookers. An aeroplane on the road seems quite out of place, the slow speed and enormous slowness of the heavy transport stands in clear contrast to the lightness suggested by flying. This heaviness still clings to them when they are parked in their final position. They stand grotesquely in the landscape, arranged at right angles as if around a courtyard, continuing the architectural axes of the neighbouring buildings, and seem like foreign bodies in a place without a runway or tower.

### **Interpretative approach 6: Upcycling**

At the same time, the installation may be understood as an example of upcycling: Through an unusual change of functions, the discarded machines become spaces filled with life.

## **III. Ideas for the lessons**

### **1. Space for art**

Based on existing spaces, the students develop models for unconventional forms of exhibiting. In doing so, they create a place of encounter and a counter-design to the representative gallery space. In this way, ideas are developed in class as models of how existing locations can be transformed into communicative spaces in which art is shown.

### **2. The dream of flying**

The students research technical aids and flying machines around the world with which people have hoped to take off and compare the different constructions. They follow in the footsteps of the age-old dream of flying.

### **3. Social sculpture**

The students compare the concept in "Airoplanes" with Beuys' "Social Sculpture". They distinguish between practical and social demands and their effects on the participants. They reflect on the community-building functions of art.





Figure 4 shows schoolchildren visiting the exhibition "In Pursuit of Something Beautiful perhaps ... ", a retrospective of the Gallery Winston Kofi Dawson.



# 14. Experimentation stage – Priscilla Kennedy's studio

## I. Facts and analysis

In November 2021, a Bavarian delegation of the Exploring Visual Cultures project (EVC) visited the art department of Kumasi University in Ghana. This is a central hub for artists from West Africa who successfully participate in the global art scene. Ibrahim Mahama (see [chapter 13](#)) is a good example. The visit also included a tour of the annual exhibition of students there as well as a visit to individual studios, including Priscilla Kennedy's workspace presented below. The studio is housed in a series of other individual studios in a flat building on the campus of the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST).



Figure 1 shows Priscilla Kennedy's studio in Kumasi, Ghana, in the form of a digital photomontage from 2021.

Three walls were photographed frontally and then the two flanking walls were each transformed into a perspective distortion to create an impression of space.

The photo of the studio presented here is a digital montage of three frontal wall views (see figure 2). They were taken after the visit for publication on the EVC website and provided by the artist. In the combination, the side walls were distorted to give the impression of seeing the room after entering it with a view of the opposite window wall. The back wall with door, which was not included in the illustration, can be seen in the lower right-hand corner. This form was chosen together with the curator and the artist from a number of alternatives (parallel perspective, 3-D models).

In November 2021, the artist had specially redesigned her studio for the exhibition visitors in order to present the current facets of her work. So we can also see this kind of presentation as a (studio) exhibition or an artistic installation. Kennedy was present during the visit and was available for conversation.

Priscilla Kennedy completed her art studies at KNUST in Kumasi, Ghana in 2017 and works as an artist in Kumasi. She has participated in major exhibitions and won many awards including the Yaa Asantewaa Award in 2022. She has gratefully accepted the invitation to document and explain her studio.





Studio Wall 1\_v2.jpg



Studio Wall 2\_v2.jpg



Studio Wall 3\_v2.jpg



Studio Wall 4\_v2.jpg

Figure 2 shows four screenshots of the photographic raw material. The four walls of the studio are shown in frontal view.

## II. Interpretations

### Explanation and commentary by Priscilla Kennedy

#### A journey

My studio is literally a ball of yarn, part of a complex whole. Everything that belongs to its "composition" is a thread that creates a tapestry of narratives. I have no idea what impact connecting individual dots will have or how the result will be received. I am immersed in the rollercoaster of joy.

#### Unravel

I connect the nodes to form my own artistic journey. The space of my studio has several "subspaces", which I also call "moods". I literally "swing" back and forth between these moods in search of a particular artistic expression for my interests and concerns. I begin my journey at the IDEA BOARD on the left wall (fig. 1). There my thoughts materialise, become starting points for decision streams. The IDEA BOARD is like a snapshot of all my thoughts. From there I make decisions that then guide me to a particular work. Then I switch to another "mood", another "subspace", to my RED BOOK, which is on the left-hand table (fig. 4, page 116). Here I research and write down my thoughts. The writing is important for the further work.

I deliberately oscillate back and forth between these two "moods" in order to establish a certain dialectical relationship between them. In this way, I explore - from a female perspective - the subject of the body and the politics of marginalisation and subjugation. To do this, I use materials and techniques that are associated with a bodily presence, such as craft.

I see the body as a fluid material that changes over time or under certain conditions. It is at the same time like the one thing that is connected to other things. I am interested in the materiality of the body that allows it to be transient. And in relation to this materiality, what it can become and what it can do.

Apart from this constant change, I am also interested in the female body in its ongoing self-referentiality. So the idea of the hand in craft becomes crucial to my practice. The idea of the hand also speaks subtly of subjugation or oppression, such as those associated with manual labour in the home. This sense of marginalisation linked to the body, which is powerless, interests me. With the hand, I can rethink the value of craft.

But the critical distance gained through these reflections is brought back into proximity with the body through "intimate" artistic approaches such as thread embroidery and beadwork. I "swing" to my TAMBOUR TRESTLE SPACE, on the table in front of the window (fig. 5). This is about starting an elaborate and "intimate" embroidery with beads. I see this bead embroidery as a metaphor for reclaiming the self, while also highlighting the remnants of power that still remain in this system of subjugation. This embroidery is a subtle performance that takes place in the studio and yet belongs to this very context.



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I can describe my whole studio as a space of ideas where certain themes and artistic strategies come together to form narratives around important issues. Through constant exploration and experimentation, a work of art can emerge from a mixture of all these themes and artistic strategies. For example, by combining fabric cuts with bead patterns or by combining different printing techniques (from thermal transfers to screen prints to digital prints) as well as many other artistic expressions.

The materials and artistic approaches are combined to create fantastic figures that emerge from playful hybridisations of the human body, and sometimes other life forms. The narratives in this realm of symbols and images seek to emancipate the repressed female body through a new culture of materials and technology.



Figure 3 shows Priscilla Kennedy's RED BOOK on the table.

Figure 4 shows Priscilla Kennedy's IDEA BOARD.



Figure 5 shows the table in front of the window in Priscilla Kennedy's studio.

Figure 6 shows an embroidery in Priscilla Kennedy's studio. Deutungsansatz von Ernst Wagner

In the photo we see the artist's workroom; in it, work tools (such as rubber gloves, a sewing machine, rulers), materials to stimulate the artistic process (e.g. image sources, sketchbooks, materials) and artistic work results. The room is painted white, even the crumbling block in the right-hand corner. This echoes the idea of the "white cube" with neutral walls as a currently still valid basic model for exhibition spaces of contemporary art. Everything is very clean and tidy. On the three work tables in the room, materials and tools are arranged like in a still life. For example, on the table in front of the (curtained) window, an arrangement showing, among other things, a round embroidery frame with a bead embroidery that is not yet finished: work in progress. Everything is obviously deliberately placed in this museum-like working space, which thus develops a programmatic expressiveness.

Fabrics, textiles play a major role in this scenario. They are simply material (the Kente fabrics on the right) or supports for the two larger works (also on the right). But they also play a major role in the many pictures (A4 printouts on the left wall), now as depicted clothing: women's dresses in older prints, on works of art (since ancient Egypt) to more recent photographs. Surprisingly, there are images of the vestments of Catholic priests and, beyond that, abstract fabric patterns, ornaments. Work with fabric (which also includes the embroidery frame) is repeatedly found as an important field of work for feminist-oriented artists or for a feminist-oriented visual language in contemporary art.

The A4 printouts are partly annotated in writing, which reinforces the impression that we are dealing with a "picture atlas" in the sense of Aby Warburg or an "atlas" in the sense of Gerhard Richter, i.e. an often surprising compilation of pictures that in this combination can or should provide very systematic suggestions for pictorial design and for reflecting on contexts.

This also includes the other collections of images in the room, in the photo album, on the computer or in transparent sleeves (on the right-hand table), which are obviously often biographically oriented, for example through the baby and children's photos or through images of their own artistic works.

Thus the overall picture is dominated by central aspects of current "global art", an art that could just as easily be shown in Berlin or New York. In this one, however, site-specific aspects, i.e. aspects related to Kumasi, Ghana or West Africa, appear again and again: the Kente fabrics, the photos in the album, even the materiality and construction of the walls speak of the place of origin.

This coming together of different thematic layers becomes clear once again in a detail, the painting that the artist presents on the right wall in her studio, which she herself sees as a technical experiment (see figure 7, page 114). "This work has no title. I saw it as an experiment to try out the combination of print and embroidery. What shows through on the bottom right was part of the experimental process: I transferred heat behind the fabric to test the interaction of images with different materials. I don't think of it as a body of work, but as an experiment." (Kennedy's information to the author via email on 5.10.2022)



It shows an adaptation of Ingres' 1814 painting The Great Odalisque, now in the Louvre. The superimposed head of an older white man (Arthur Schopenhauer) is reminiscent of the same pictorial strategy that the Guerilla Girls successfully tried out with the odalisque in 1989 by putting a gorilla head on it ("Do women have to get naked to get into the Met. Museum?"). While the other elements of the work vary from Ingres' painting, mainly in colour and technique, there is one crucial addition in this work: a small baby in silhouette, black, looking up at Schopenhauer and casting a shadow on the pale odalisque body. The whole thing is printed or embroidered on a transparent, light fabric that throws folds.

These references make the picture seem familiar to Europeans, but in its combinatorics and with the harsh contrasts it is enigmatic, just like Kennedy's studio itself. Here, an icon of Western art is cheekily alienated, here the canvas becomes a thin nettle, here the woman becomes a man, the soft cushion becomes a hard wedge, the white woman gets a black baby. On the one hand, objects and their meanings are thus unambiguously designated and named, but at the same time, through the artistic formulation and its combination, they are placed in an enigmatic resonance space, which immediately eludes the unambiguous settings that have just been made. An "in-between space" between black and white skin colour, man and woman, opaque and transparent, old man and young child, European (old) art and West African (young) art.

If one looks back through this image (which is taken here - against the artist's intention - as a key image) to the studio, one finds very similar constellations there: empty chasubles of Catholic, i.e. male priests against female bodies in erotically charged clothing, falling, soft fabrics against rigid measuring instruments from geometry lessons, physicality against abstract patterns and ornaments. With such contradictions Kennedy creates an experimental constellation, she spans a field that reports on possibilities in between without letting them culminate in a final work. The open, unfinished field of experimentation thus becomes the actual "work".



Figure 7 shows Priscilla Kennedy's experimental study „untitled“.



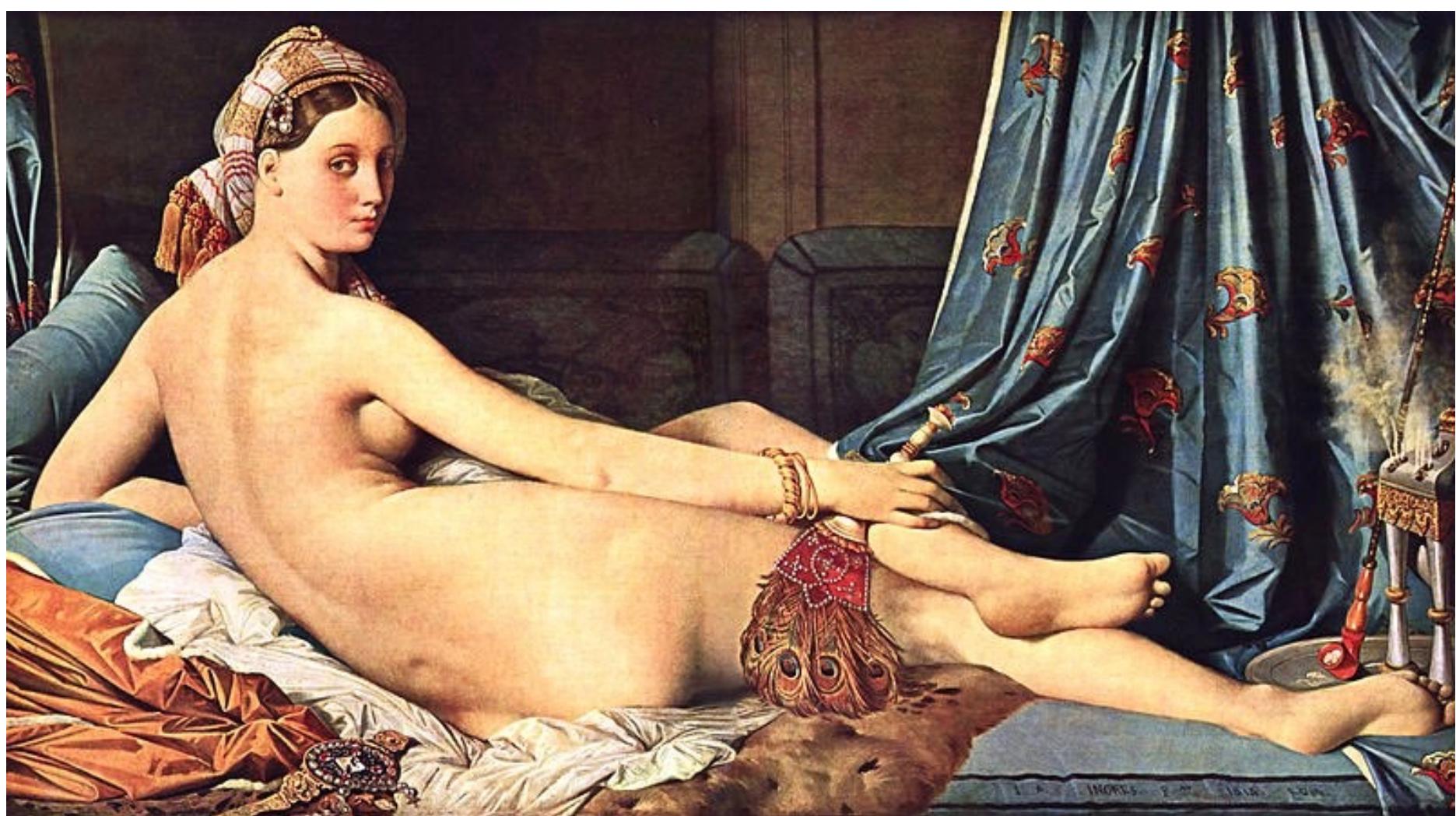


Figure 8 shows J. A. D. Ingres oil painting "The Great Odalisque" from 1814, Louvre, Paris.

### III. Ideas for the lessons

#### Pictorial approach

The students set up a room in a box with objects that are related to each other. This room is meant to bring up their current interests. They prepare the model in such a way that - together with the models of their classmates - it results in a small museum on the situation of children or young people today.

The students "tidy up the studio" by cutting out the individual objects on printed images of the individual walls according to an order they have developed themselves or one suggested by the teacher and then arrange them on a poster - e.g. in terms of the space they occupy. On the basis of this visualisation, which should also reveal meanings, they develop an interpretation.

#### Linguistic discussion

The students bring together the fact that Kente fabrics obviously play a role in this studio with the information about Kente fabrics in this handout (cf. **chapter 10**), and develop a multiple branching narrative from this.

The students create meaningful connections between the objects and transfer the original three-dimensional studio into a mind map on this basis. The content information in this chapter can serve as a guide.

The students research the historical and geographical roots of the individual details that can be seen in the photos (e.g. Ingres' odalisque, fashion graphics, etc.) and investigate which contemporary questions can be connected to them (e.g. the use of Ingres' painting by the Guerilla Girls). They compile a "Kennedy Reader" for this purpose, which helps to decipher the iconographic references.

The students compare the two approaches to the image of the studio presented above and discuss how one can recognise the different perspectives of the producer and the recipient and how one can evaluate this. They pay particular attention to the points of view: What different goals are pursued with the texts? What information do the texts draw on? What (argumentation) structure do the two texts have?



## Interdisciplinary approaches

**History:** Priscilla Kennedy won the 2022 Yaa Asantewa Award for her artistic work. Based on the insights to be gained in this handout, students consider why Kennedy was selected for this award in particular. They write an appreciation of the work from this point of view, e.g. for a magazine, the Facebook page of the awarding body, for the social media account of the artist or the laudation at the award ceremony.

**Politics and society:** The students analyse the image of women that comes up in Kennedy's text, also using the images on their Idea Boards. They then relate this to experiences from their own environment, e.g. through interviews with grandmothers, mother or other women.

**History, Geography:** The students research the significance of pearls in colonialism and examine Kennedy's use of pearls in her work against this background. They also include European art history (e.g. Vermeer).

## The work as a trigger for one's own creation and reflection

The students formulate a thesis (a sentence) for all parts or objects in the studio and then also give the parts a title on this basis. They use this material to create their own exhibition in a specially designed room. They look for an attractive title for the exhibition.

The artist has won several prizes. Based on the fictitious case that a curator has nominated her for another prize with the view of the studio presented here, the students simulate the jury meeting with distributed roles, some against the award, some in favour. At the end, a decision is made.



# Biographies

**Ebenezer Kwabena Acquah** is an art educator, Fulbright scholar and book illustrator. He is currently a lecturer at the School of Creative Arts at the University of Education, Winneba (UEW) in Ghana. He holds a PhD in Art Education from the University of Illinois, USA. His teaching experience includes philosophy of art, artistic research, aesthetics and criticism, drawing and contemporary art. He has illustrated a number of teaching materials (textbooks and supplementary reading books) for schools in Ghana and West Africa. His research interests include the influence of culture on learners' artistic practices, art teachers' response to cultural policies, the study of learners' visual representations and other related areas.

**Osuanyi Quaicoo Essel** teaches in the Department of Fashion and Textiles in the Department of Art Education at the University of Education, Winneba. He is an African fashion and textile historian, a practicing textile designer, sculptor. He is the President of the Art Teachers' Association of Ghana (ATAG). His doctoral research focused on Ghanaian icons of fashion design, while much of his scholarly work examines how Ghanaian dress culture has evolved over time. His research interests include textile and fashion history, hair and Afrocentric beauty culture practices.

**Patrique deGraft-Yankson** is a lecturer and Dean of the School of Creative Arts at the University of Education, Winneba. For more than thirty years, he has been engaged with various pedagogical practices in Ghanaian education. His research interest aims at grounding contemporary design education in Ghana in terms of its cultural and social relevance. This is the reason for his interest in traditional symbolic worlds and iconographies that have profound pedagogical implications. He has played an important initiating role in the restructuring of graphic design education and has worked to integrate digital media into teaching at the University of Education, Winneba and in Ghana. He is a member of the World Council of InSEA.

**Gertrude Nkrumah**'s areas of interest are African history (language and colonialism, language and national identity, etc.), gender and women's history. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in English and History (2007, University of Ghana) and is currently working on her dissertation "A History of Language Policy in Ghana, 1920-1971". She was a teaching assistant at the Department of History, University of Ghana from 2007 to 2014, a history tutor at the Institute of Continuing Distance and Adult Education, Legon from 2011 to 2016, and a history lecturer at the University College of Management Studies, Accra from 2013 to 2016. She currently researches and teaches at UEW.

**Selasi Awusi Sosu** studied textile design at Achimota School and sculpture at KNUST, Kumasi. As an artist, she is interested in the medium of glass and its aesthetics. Through photography, videography, sound and installation, she illuminates the seemingly hidden history of Ghana as well as current environmental, socio-economic, geo-political and developmental issues. She teaches at the Department of Art Education, University of Education, Winneba, where she initiated the Exploring Visual Cultures project between three UEW departments and international partners. Her first solo exhibition was held at UEW in 2015, and at the Venice Biennale 2019 she was one of five artists in the Ghanaian pavilion "Ghana freedom".



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9. Uche Okeke: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uli\\_\(design\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uli_(design))
- 10.Uche Okewe: <https://www.explore-vc.org/en/objects/uche-okeke-christ-without-title-1961.html>
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- 19.Coffin: Exhibition: <https://www.kimmerle.de/artwork/samuel-kane-kwei-wie-das-leben-so-der-sarg/>
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Status of all web links on pages 131 to 136: 27 October 2022



# Recommended reading

The following recommendations give an overview; they are often exhibition catalogues. They can often be purchased cheaply via online antiquarian bookshops.

## **Traditional Art from Sub-Saharan Africa (German)**

Eisenhofer, Stefan (2008): Die „tyrannische Macht der Tradition? Afrikanische Bildhauer und westliche Blicke. In: Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde München (Hrsg.): Weiter als der Horizont. Munich: Hirmer

Eisenhofer, Stefan (2010): Afrikanische Kunst. Cologne: Taschen

Kecskési, Maria (1999): Kunst aus Afrika. München, New York: Prestel

Phillips Tom (1996): Afrika – Die Kunst eines Kontinents. München, New York: Prestel

## **Modern and Contemporary Art from Sub-Saharan Africa (German)**

Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie (2010) (Hrsg.): who knows tomorrow – Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König

Hermann Forkl (Hrsg.) (2004): Die andere Moderne Afrikas. Stuttgart: Verlag Lindenmusum

Museum Kunst Palast (Hrsg.) (2005): Afrika Remix – Zeitgenössische Kunst eines Kontinents. Ostfilern: Hatje Cantz

## **English and french**

Enwezor, Okwui & Museum Villa Stuck (Hrsg.) (2001): The Short Century – Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945–1994. Munich: Prestel

Kidenda, Mary Clare & Kriel, Lize & Wagner, Ernst (Hrsg.) (2021): Visual Cultures of Africa. Münster, New York: Waxmann

Musée du quai Branly & Chirac, Jacques (Hrsg.) (2021): Ex Africa, Gallimard, Paris



# Recommendations of the Bavarian State Agency for Civic Education

The following provides background information and suggestions for further discussion of the topic:

## **Zeit für Politik**

„Zeit für Politik“ (time for politics) is a format on current political topics that are relevant for young people. Impulses, information and materials suitable for teaching support teachers in discussing these topics with their students. Every fortnight you will find ready-made units for immediate use in the classroom: for each topic you can download a lesson concept for 45 minutes, worksheets, plus videos or other accompanying materials. The units are suitable for all secondary school types from grade 8. We recommend the series Racism and Racism & Language.

<https://www.blz.bayern.de/zeit-fuer-politik.html>

## **ganz.konkret.magazin**

The magazine „ganz konkret gegen Rassismus“ is aimed at young people aged 13 and over and brings together information and perspectives from numerous people on the subject of racism; the magazine also contains a comic strip on the subject of colonialism, a quiz on the subject of diversity and a sticker insert. It can be ordered in class sets.

[https://www.blz.bayern.de/ganz-konkret-gegen-rassismus\\_p\\_374.html](https://www.blz.bayern.de/ganz-konkret-gegen-rassismus_p_374.html)

## **J. Osterhammel / J. C. Jansen: Kolonialismus – History, Formen, Folgen**

Colonial rule was a prominent feature of world history between about 1500 and 1975. Using examples from all colonial empires of the modern era, the authors describe methods of conquest, securing rule and economic exploitation, forms of resistance, the emergence of special colonial societies, varieties of cultural colonisation as well as the basic features of colonialist thinking and of colonial culture, the continuing impact of which is once again the subject of much debate.

[https://www.blz.bayern.de/kolonialismus\\_p\\_397.html](https://www.blz.bayern.de/kolonialismus_p_397.html)



# List of figures

- Cover: Museum Fünf Kontinente, München und Yinka Shonibare, graphic: Werner Bloß
- p. 2 Bayerisches Staatsministerium für Unterricht und Kultus
- p. 3 Engagement Global, Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung, Staatsinstitut für Schulqualität und Bildungsforschung (ISB)
- p. 5 photography, signé: ISB, München
- p. 13 graphic translated after: OR-BK, S. 7
- p. 16 object: Museum Fünf Kontinente, Nicolai Kästner
- p. 19 photography: Gertrude Nkrumah, Ghana
- p. 20 object: Museum Fünf Kontinente, Nicolai Kästner
- p. 22 object: Museum Fünf Kontinente, Swantje Autrum-Mulzer
- p. 25 object: Museum Fünf Kontinente, Swantje Autrum-Mulzer  
signé: open fond
- p. 29 painting: Kunstmuseum Basel  
[http://sammlungonline.kunstmuseumbasel.ch/eMuseumPlus?  
service=ExternalInterface&module=collection&objectId=1207&viewType=detailView](http://sammlungonline.kunstmuseumbasel.ch/eMuseumPlus?service=ExternalInterface&module=collection&objectId=1207&viewType=detailView)
- p. 30 3 object views: Museum Fünf Kontinente, Swantje Autrum-Mulzer
- p. 31 interior Museum Fünf Kontinente, Munich: Dr. Ernst Wagner  
view: Universal Images Group North America LLC /DeAgostini /Alamy Stock Foto
- p. 32-33 object views: Museum Fünf Kontinente, Marianne Franke
- p. 36 book pages: Almanach „Der Blaue Reiter“ 1912, S. 22–23
- p. 40 3 photographies: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum / CC BY-NC-SA 4.0
- p. 41 objekt: Museum Fünf Kontinente, Marianne Franke
- p. 42 Photography: Courtesy Akinbode Akinbiyi, Berlin, in: Wendl 2002, S. 88
- p. 47 object: Patrique deGraft-Yankson
- p. 52 Press photo: Prints of Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Reproduktionsnummer LC-USZ62-112313
- p. 54 portrait: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kente\\_cloth#/media/File:PrempehII.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kente_cloth#/media/File:PrempehII.jpg)  
portrait: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/  
File:King\\_Asantehene\\_Osei\\_Tutu\\_II\\_of\\_Ashanti-Asanteman.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:King_Asantehene_Osei_Tutu_II_of_Ashanti-Asanteman.jpg)
- p. 56 Twitter-post: Bred Sherman (MoC)
- p. 57–58 weaving mill: Tim Proetel
- p. 60 painting: Iwalewahaus, Bayreuth
- p. 64 painting with graphics: Iwalewahaus, Bayreuth, Dr. Ernst Wagner
- p. 68 view: [https://www.istockphoto.com/de/foto/ghana-national-theatre-  
gm488578577-39543194?phrase=theater%20accra](https://www.istockphoto.com/de/foto/ghana-national-theatre-gm488578577-39543194?phrase=theater%20accra)
- p. 69 floor plan: [https://www.livinspaces.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Drawings\\_Ghana-  
National-Theater\\_CCTN\\_01-Plan.jpg](https://www.livinspaces.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Drawings_Ghana-National-Theater_CCTN_01-Plan.jpg)
- p. 70 interior: Alessandro Costa /Alamy Stock Foto



- p. 71 section: [https://images.adsttc.com/media/images/5ab2/dbb4/f197/cc7b/4500/0018/large\\_jpg/10-Section.jpg?1521671088](https://images.adsttc.com/media/images/5ab2/dbb4/f197/cc7b/4500/0018/large_jpg/10-Section.jpg?1521671088)
- p. 74 signé: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:SakofaTime2.jpg?uselang=de>
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- p. 94–95 filmstills: Selasi Awusi Sosu
- p. 99–100 photographies: El Anatsui
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- p. 106–109 aerial photos, facade, interior view: SCCA Tamale
- p. 111–114 digital print and screenshots: Priscilla Kennedy
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