

3 WAYS TO DESIGN ARTS-BASED CURRICULUM IN AFRICAN STUDIES

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What does it mean to create art centered around ancient African artifacts, places, and people? How do we design learning experiences that *both* grow students' knowledge and motivation to know more about the continent while ensuring that they are critically self-aware of not decontextualizing, appropriating, or misrepresenting any person, place, or object? How to teach art through African Studies while instilling students' reverence and respect for the continent?

The following guidelines are for teachers to approach this work with a lens of social justice. Here are three "directions" for you to move toward as you structure lessons for your students' designs & creations. We encourage you to consider the specific theme and artifacts with a critical lens to determine what approach would best achieve the ultimate goals of 1) in-depth learning about an African kingdom; 2) designing with respectful cultural responsiveness in mind.

[Direction #1: Learn from, and build a replica](#)

[Direction #2: Learn from, and make it your own](#)

[Direction #3: Learn from, and envision the future: an African-futuristic approach.](#)

DIRECTION #1: LEARN FROM, AND BUILD A REPLICA

Each artifact from ancient and medieval Africa is replete with layers of meaning and context. Direction #1 invites you to consider these layers, to ask students to research the building or place in depth in order to create their own, modeled after the it. This approach is particularly encouraged for architectural features, buildings, and places, and discouraged for items having to do with clothing or bodily adornments. There may be cases where a building or object is not appropriate to reproduce and teachers should research the building in depth. In this way, students become experts of the artifact/building/object by researching it to understand it in context, followed by reproducing the item as a model. Students will use their research and writing skills to learn about the artifact's history, function, and use in its social context. Students will also research the material and structure that the artifact is made of. Then, followed by design skills to reproduce it. Students gain knowledge of the socio-cultural history of the artifact in context, the technical features of the artifact, as well as skills in design and creation. Teachers should always foreground the lives of people as they engage students in learning about African kingdoms and designing artifacts.



St George's Church, Lalibela, Ethiopia



Artwork by students from the Howard University Center for African Studies

Sample Lesson Sequence

Part 1: Research

1. Activator: questions about students' background knowledge of the artifact (and its context, e.g. a kingdom) & any connections to prior knowledge. Aim for questions that instill interest and that center the lives of people.
2. Introduction: Learning goals, learning agenda
3. Presentation about the kingdom in context.
4. Discussion; reflective writing
5. Presentation of various artifacts and art from the kingdom. Focus on one, modeling the sociohistorical story this artifact tells. Who made this? Why? How was the artifact useful to people? How was the artifact meaningful? What function did the artifact play in daily life? What is the story this object tells?
6. Students choose artifacts and research them using reliable sources (see rubric).
7. Students present their findings about the artifact in the context of the kingdom

Part 2: Design

8. Teacher leads with key materials as needed to show how to design a replica and build it.
9. Students plan their own designs on paper
10. Students create 3D replicas of the artifact

Summative Assessment:

Students present their artifact

Sample rubric [here](#).

The Howard University Center for African Studies has put out a call for art projects and you can find more ideas [here](#).

DIRECTION #2: LEARN FROM, AND MAKE IT YOUR OWN

Culturally responsive teachers know that African art -as well as topics related to African history- have been fraught with a long history of misrepresentation in the K-12 classroom, particularly when they have been appropriated and reproduced in ways that are not respectful and honoring the cultural practices they came from, or used by people in dominant groups in ways that align with historical racist misuse. To practice anti-racism in the classroom and invite students into understanding their own positionalities vis à vis the subject matter, a different type of lesson “Learn from, but adapt your own” may be appropriate.

This approach to lesson design invites students to research key artifacts in their sociocultural contexts but instead of reproducing the form or design, students consider the **meanings, principles, or values** inherent in the work of ancient art and invite students to adapt these principles to their own lives, using materials out of their own lives. In other words, this is a thematic and a values-oriented engagement, and not a direct replica of design. This avoids direct reproduction or appropriation while at the same time giving students an opportunity to gain knowledge from the artifact and adapt its meanings to their own lives. This approach is particularly relevant when the artifact has to do with bodily adornments or role playing (for example, clothing, masks, crowns, headdresses, etc.)

Sample Lesson Sequence

Part 1: Research

1. Activator: questions about students’ background knowledge of the kingdom & any connections to prior knowledge. Aim for questions that instill interest and that center the lives of people.
2. Introduction: Learning goals, learning agenda
3. Presentation/video about the kingdom or artifact in context.
4. Discussion; reflective writing
5. Presentation of various artifacts and art from the kingdom. Focus on one, modeling the sociohistorical story this artifact tells. Who made this? Why? How was the artifact useful to people? How was the artifact meaningful? What function did the artifact play in daily life? What are the meanings of this artifact for the people who used it?
6. Explicit teaching about why it matters to be reflexive when engaging with African art. Teachers discuss cultural appropriation: when can appropriation be hurtful? To whom? Does it matter *who* represents it? Teachers explain that there have been and continues to be misuse of African art (for example, the way museums display items, the ways artifacts were stolen, how artifacts are currently being repatriated, etc.) In which ways can we learn from this? How can we engage with African art in ways that are respectful and honoring the traditions the art came from and yet avoid appropriation? Teachers discuss why identity matters: Why does the way we take depend on who you are? Teachers lead students in discussing these questions.
7. Teachers explain that the task will be for students to research an artifact, but instead of reproducing it, students will make a list of the values and ideas that this artifact embodies, then create an artifact inspired by, but not directly reproducing
11. Students present their findings about the artifact and its values in the context of the

kingdom.

Part 2: Design

12. Teacher model their own “taking up” and interpretation of what it means to create with key values in mind.
13. Discussion of how to represent values in art and what that may look like for each individual student in their own lives.
14. Students plan their own designs on paper
15. Students create their own identity-focused pieces

Summative Assessment:

Students present their own creations and how these exemplify the values instantiated in the African artifact which was used for inspiration.

Two lessons from teachers and artists Paula Mans and Marie Darling use Gelede and Egungun Masquerades traditions, via the work of contemporary artists, to invite students to explore their own identities. They carefully avoid reproducing masks or asking students to make masks from African traditions. Yet they are able to impart substantive content about various cultural traditions while encouraging students to connect emotionally to the **values** the objects embody. These two lessons exemplify this second approach:

1. [Dancing with the Ancestors: A Study of the Egungun Masquerade and Nick Cave’s Soundsuits](#)
2. [Exploring Identity through Yoruba Culture, Masks, and the Diaspora of Contemporary African and African American Artists](#)

DIRECTION #3: LEARN FROM AND ENVISION THE FUTURE - AN AFRICAN-FUTURISTIC APPROACH

Students of today are growing to be adults a world fighting for to achieve climate justice, to end racism, to reverse gender- and sexual orientation-based oppressions, as well as all other forms of systemic oppressions. There is an urgent need to engage our students in acts of future envisioning, where they are invited to use the past to envision new aesthetics for more equitable worlds. Direction #3 invites us to take this work to the art classroom. How?

Jordan Ifueko, the award winning author of *Raybearer*, provides some wise guidance regarding writing speculative fiction (in an online lecture for the Global Issues through Literature series on May 24, 2022) . She explains that fantasy and sci-fi are misunderstood as being about endless potential or escapism from the current world, as if it is possible to design a new world from scratch. She warns, however, that designing new worlds from scratch is not possible because we have all reference points that are steeped in the current inequitable structures of the world, and that it is very easy for people of dominant groups to reproduce those same structures that continue to marginalize non dominant cultures while trying to create new worlds. She emphasizes that speculative fiction is more than just replacing white characters with characters of color. Retelling with new representation, although important, is not enough because there is so much more attached

to white supremacy than just representation. Instead, she urges designers and writers to consider challenging the inequitable economic structures that make up the current world and that continue to marginalize non-white cultures as doomed to stagnation or regression. She invites “empowered retelling” which is a retelling of the world in ways that address race meaningfully, challenge the privileges of the original narratives, and/or deconstruct the original narrative altogether.

What does that mean concretely for art-making in the classroom? One inspiring example of African-futuristic art that uses the past to envision new worlds and new structures is Toronto-based artist Ekow Nimako’s Building Black Civilizations. Ekow Nimako uses the capital of the kingdom of Ancient Ghana, Kumbi-Saleh to build with Black lego, as a form of celebration and recasting of the longevity and contribution of this great civilization, and of affirming beauty in Black civilization. Here he discusses his approach in this video:

[Ekow Nimako Uses Black LEGO Bricks to Rebuild the World](#)

and check out his art here: <https://ekownimako.com>

Ways to assess this approach beyond the aesthetic and technical dimensions are to ask with students (adapted from Jordan Ifueko):

Who has power in your art? How is this power maintained (the process of power construction)?

Rubric for Lesson Type 1:

Criteria	Comments
Research and content knowledge	
Used a variety of <i>reliable</i> sources to research, (websites, news articles, art magazines, texts and textbooks, and fiction/non-fiction writing, poetry, and documentaries)	
Thorough presentation of the artifact in context. History, geography, sociocultural dynamics are described in depth and accurately.	
People make artifacts: An attention to the lives of people is central.	
Techniques	
Used a variety of materials found objects out of the students' own lives	
Successful incorporation of elements and principles of design	
Used taught techniques	
Overall technique	