

Educator's Resource: *Senufo Unbound*

Developed in conjunction with the exhibition **Senufo: Art and Identity in West Africa** (on view through May 31, 2015), this educational resource introduces students to objects produced by a group of linguistically related peoples inhabiting northern Côte d'Ivoire, western Burkina Faso, and southern Mali in an area known as the three-corner region. By comparing works from the exhibition with those from the museum's permanent collection, students can practice skills required by state and national academic standards. In this resource, teachers will find images, selected information, and Common Core-aligned prompts for classroom use.

www.clevelandart.org/learn



Bird Figure (detail). Unidentified artist. Wood. Private collection.
Photo © Jon Lam.

Senufo: Art and Identity in West Africa is organized by the Cleveland Museum of Art. This exhibition is supported in part by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts. Art Works.



Mother-and-Child Figure 1800s–1900s.
Africa, Western Sudan, Côte d'Ivoire,
Senufo people. Wood. The Cleveland
Museum of Art, James Albert and Mary
Gardiner Ford Memorial Fund 1961.198.



Senufo—What's in a Name?

For African art scholars and collectors, the label *Senufo* evokes a wealth of masquerade arts and figurative sculptures. The term commonly refers to a group of more than a dozen languages within the Gur language family located in a vast area marked by the contemporary borders of Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, and Mali. French colonial officials in the late 19th century established the term *Senufo* as an ethnic group marker tied to language, but the people themselves did not originally use this name.

Referencing language and cultural differences, scholars and art connoisseurs in the 20th century have recognized four broad Senufo divisions—Northern, Eastern, Central, and Southern—and various subgroups within each division. In their efforts to define Senufo culture and art styles, they recognized the important contributions of different artisan groups, including blacksmiths, woodcarvers, brass casters, potters, weavers, and leatherworkers.

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Mother-and-Child figures have different functions depending on the region. Though economy of detail sometimes indicates a specific use, it is impossible to determine the context of a particular figure based only on the figure's degree of sculptural complexity. In some areas, maternity figures are related to the *Tyekpa* association, the female counterpart of male *poro* associations, and are carried on *Tyekpa* members' heads during funerary ceremonies. Elsewhere, such sculptures function as stationary display figures for *poro*.

Madonna of Humility late 1370s. Caterino Veneziano (Italian). Tempera and gold on wood panel. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Dr. Rudolf J. Heinemann 1963.500.



Virgin and Child in Majesty c. 1150-1200. France, Auvergne. Polychrome wood (walnut), The Cleveland Museum of Art, Severance and Greta Millikin Purchase Fund 2012.52.



The Bath 1890–91. Mary Cassatt (American, 1844–1926). Drypoint, soft-ground etching and aquatint. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Bequest of Charles T. Brooks 1941.70.



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We often see representations of mothers and children in artwork, yet this familiar theme may have a variety of purposes. Choose an image above and contrast it with the Senufo mother-and-child figure on the right. Do you think the artist actually saw the people he or she depicted? Where do you think viewers would have encountered an object like this, and what message could be derived from the figures? After a period of observation and brainstorming, read about the images and compare your initial ideas to what was learned from additional sources.

Common Core: Research to Build and Present Knowledge

corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/W/7/7
Conduct short research projects to answer a question, drawing on several sources and generating additional related, focused questions for further research and investigation.

Key Ideas and Details

corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RH/6-8/1
Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

**Ohio Fine Arts Standards:
High School Accelerated, Perceiving and Knowing**

1PE: Analyze interdisciplinary connections that influence social and cultural contexts of visual imagery.

education.ohio.gov/getattachment/Topics/Ohio-s-New-Learning-Standards/Fine-Arts/Fine-Arts-Model-Curriculum/MC_visual-art-HS.pdf.aspx

3PE: Compare and contrast the styles in artworks by artists of different cultures and historical trends.

Helmet Mask early to mid-1900s. Africa, Western Sudan, Côte d'Ivoire. Senufo people; Wood. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Katherine C. White 1972.336.



Peoples throughout the world use masks in performances and on special occasions. Besides transforming appearance, masks aid in communication with the spirit world. Ask students to briefly research and then compare these objects, noting origin, function, and form, among other characteristics. Follow up by having students design their own masks and share their sketches and ideas in a classroom discussion.

Common Core: Comprehension and Collaboration

corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/SL/7/1
Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 7 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RH/6-8/7
Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts.



Yam Mask 1900s. Oceania, Melanesia, Papua New Guinea, Abalam people. Pigment, basketry. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Nathaniel Sloane in memory of Rose White 1998.84.

Helmet Mask early to mid-1900s. Africa, Western Sudan, Côte d'Ivoire Senufo people; Wood. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Katherine C. White 1972.336.



The composite iconography of this helmet mask comprises ram horns, warthog tusks, a crocodile mouth, and a hyena snout. A miniature hornbill and a chameleon holding an abstract wing-shaped motif, called *mangele*, are carved between the curved antelope horns. Intended to impress and terrify, the sculpture's fearsome aesthetic alludes to the mask's identification as a powerful antisorcery device.

Yam Mask 1900s. Oceania, Melanesia, Papua New Guinea, Abelam people. Pigment, basketry. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Nathaniel Sloane in memory of Rose White 1998.84.

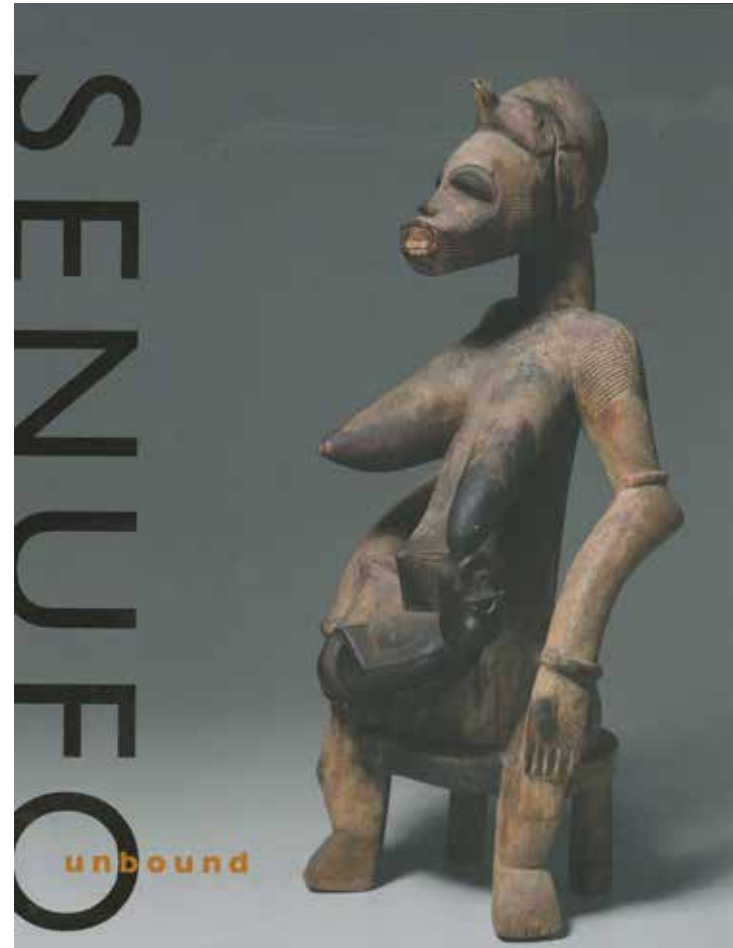




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Abelam men compete in growing extraordinarily large yams (over a meter in length), which they then display adorned with basketry masks.

In the following quote from the preface to *Senufo Unbound*, Dr. Constantine Petridis writes about why he assembled this group of objects. When curators coordinate an exhibition, they have to consider a big idea they'd like to present to visitors. What do you think he hopes visitors will take away from this exhibition?



**Common Core: Reading:
Informational Text**

corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RI/7/2
Determine two or more central ideas in a text and analyze their development over the course of the text; provide an objective summary of the text.



“One of the main outcomes of this publication and the exhibition it accompanies is that they insist on studying individual objects rather than lumping them together on the basis of some formal or stylistic affinities. *Senufo Unbound: Art and Identity in West Africa* asks that art students as well as exhibition-goers consider the particular contexts and historical individuals related to an object’s creation, use, and circulation. While in some instances details are available that allow better understanding of the forms and meanings of certain works, in many more cases these data are either inaccessible or simply nonexistent. Sometimes, however, even seemingly rich and reliable documentation proves to prompt more questions than answers.”

Dr. Constantine Petridis, Curator of African Art
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