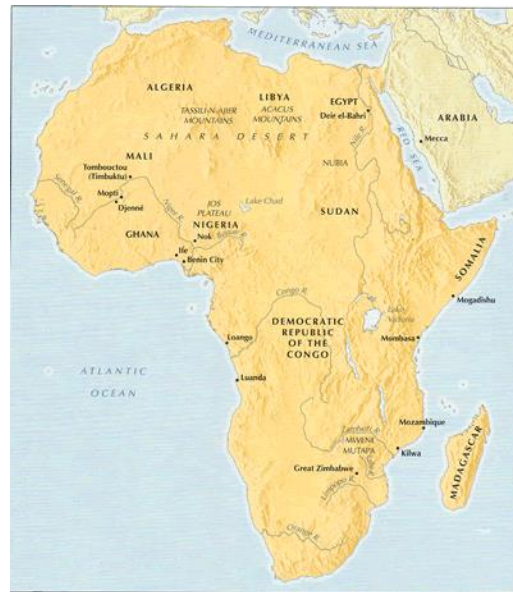


Africa (70,000 BCE – 1900 CE)



Many ancient African wooden objects have been lost to decay. Gold was another popular material, but many works were melted down by invaders when the areas were colonized. Most early African artworks that remain are made of stone, terra-cotta, or brass.

Prehistoric South Africa



(South Africa 70,000 BCE)

This incised ochre plaque dates to around 70,000 B.C.E. It was found in a South African cave, near the Indian Ocean Coast. It is an intentionally carved geometric pattern that predates similar work by around 30,000 years.

Ancient Saharan



(Cattle being tended, Algeria, 5,000-2,000 BCE)

The earliest figures from Africa are cave paintings of animals. As the climates of regions such as the Sahara and Kalahari changed to be more arid, the types of animals changed as well. Around 8,000 BCE the Sahara was fertile grassland. At that time there was ample vegetation for the people to raise large herds of livestock. By 2500 BCE, this area was drying and by around 600 BCE images of camels appeared.

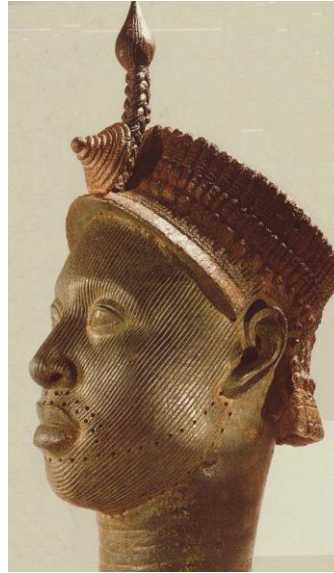
Nok



(Nok, western Sudan – modern day Nigeria 500-200 BCE)

The Nok culture that dates to around 500 BCE to 200 CE. The name “Nok” comes from a village near the place where the sculptures were found after they were washed away from their original contexts by the flooding of the Niger and Benue rivers. Most of the examples of Nok sculpture are human and animal forms. Although they are highly individualized, they are characterized by their distinctive “D” shaped eyes.

Ife



Ife Oba, Benin, 13th-14th centuries

The city of Ife began around 800 CE and remains a sacred city for the Yoruba people. This bronze, life-size head was most likely attached to a less costly, wooden body. The markings on the face are characteristic of Ife portrait heads. I am always amazed by the skill it took to make these lines. Notice how they remain consistent in spacing and depth even on the curved surfaces of the nose and other features!

Benin



Portrait Heads of Benin Obas, early 1500s & 1897

The city of Benin arose from Ife about 150 miles to the southeast. The Benin culture became distinctly separate from Ife around 1170 CE.

Early Benin portrait heads resemble Ife portraits in their naturalism and relatively small size. The head of the Oba (the title of their king) is representative of this early style. The other head is a Benin Oba from around 1700-1897. Later Benin portraits show less of a resemblance to Ife portraits. They are distinctly more abstract and larger in size. The second portrait you see here is almost twice the height of the first (9 $\frac{3}{8}$ vs 17 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches).

Bambara/Bamana



Bambara/Bamana *Ci Wara*, Mali, 19th – early 20th centuries

This antelope headpiece is from Mali. According to the mythology, the antelope taught humans agricultural practices.

During agricultural ceremonies, these figures of antelope are attached to the headdresses of the male dancers. The female dancers wear headdresses with a baby antelope on top of a larger one. The ceremonial dance includes movements that imitate those of an antelope.

Kongo



Kongo *Nkisi* Democratic Republic of Congo, 1875-1900

This is an example of a power figure, or *nkisi*. *Nkisi* contain sacred substances which are activated by supernatural forces to release spiritual forces into the physical world. The Kongo culture has a long tradition of using wooden sculptures to gain spiritual control over evil spirits and everyday problems, such as illness.

Nkisi start out unadorned. A figure becomes more unique as it is manipulated in various ways, depending on the particular situation and desired outcome. Many have distinctively marked cavities in their abdominal areas. Different things can be inserted to achieve the desired effect. Nails and other sharp objects were driven into the nkisi to liberate the powers of the added elements.