



Portraits of Power: Women Leaders in African Art

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Introduction

"As leaders, priestesses, traders, cultivators, oracles, wives, and mothers, women have occupied key roles in the developments that have shaped the course of African history."

- Alexander Ives Bortolot, Columbia University

This assignment promotes the UN goals for Quality Education and Gender Equality through student investigation of the power of representation. Portraits of Women Leaders in African art provides rich context the development of skills in visual and data literacy, critical thinking, effective communication and self-reflection. Content can be adapted to any cultural context in order to empower women and help them envision themselves as leaders globally or in local communities.

Lead In (Instructor-led): set the scope and context of assignment and focus on topic: African women have always been leaders.

Listen, Read and Reflect on the self-identified strengths and challenges of African women leadership in the 21st century. (individual students, own pace, quiet reflection (if F2F))

Consider the questions:

- How do these women see themselves as leaders?
- How does society see these women as leaders?

[UN Africa's Year of Women's Empowerment](#) [4:14]

[Reclaiming our place at the table...](#), by Joyce Banda, Former President of Malawi

[Launch of the UN African Women Leaders Network, NY](#) [12:17 or excerpt]

Discussion

Think - pair - share + WCFB: Record responses on board, look for patterns in words used to describe women leaders (potential data points/tags)

Introduce SDGs - Discuss how the representation of women leaders intersects with SDGs and African art history.

- Why does Africa need more women leaders? Where are they needed? Why?
- How might visual presence or representation impact how we see and think about African women leaders?
- How might African art (history) positively impact how we see and empower African women leaders?

Demo Critical Looking and Object-Based Inquiry

- Instructor: Show three examples of African art representing women leaders from Ancient, Colonial and Contemporary Africa
- Individual Students, work alone, quiet (if F2F)
 - Have students Look for an instant/glance, then Look Closely for at least 1 min
 - Look again closely for 2-3 mins, take notes on visual qualities and subject/content
- Ss-Ss Discussion + WCFB:
 - What do you observe? - What is your response?
 - Based on what you see in the artwork:
 - What do you think, know wonder about this African woman leader?
 - How are the three images similar and different? Why do you think this is the case?
 - What can these artworks tell us about women leaders in Africa?

Assignment (student-led, peer reviewed, instructor as facilitator), designed as a full-semester project aligned with art history/visual literacy skill building embedded in the course content and schedule.

Part 1

Select a work of art by an African artist that represents or depicts a woman leader. The artwork may be from any geographic region, time period, and cultural context - the decision is yours.

1. QUICK LOOK: Record your initial impression of the artwork (e.g. "What caught your eye?"). This should be done loosely while browsing for images but record it so that it can be looked up afterwards.
2. CLOSE LOOK: After you select your work of art, spend a few minutes looking more closely. Note your observations about the visual qualities and content of the artwork.
3. INITIAL RESPONSE: Write down what words, experiences, or associations come to mind as you reflect on the overall style and subject of the artwork.
4. DESCRIPTION: Now describe what you observe in the artwork and how the visual qualities evoke a response. Use specific visual evidence to write a short summary about why you chose this image, how it connects to our discussion of African women leaders/leadership, and one or more of the SDGs.

Online Activity: Students should post the image they have selected and Part 1 in the Class Discussion Forum.

Part 2

5. CREATIVE INTERPRETATION: Write a very short story that can accompany your chosen image. Build your own narrative about the woman leader represented in your artwork.
6. CONTEXTUALIZATION: Collect research related to the woman represented in your artwork and her culture of origin. Use at least two reliable sources. Make sure you cite your data sources.
7. DISCUSSION: Pair an image of your artwork with the data you have collected. Provide a summary of your research for peer review.
 - a. Describe what you think your artwork communicates about this African women leader
 - b. Explain your interpretation of how the visual qualities of the artwork represent these ideas
 - c. Describe the historical and cultural context of the artwork and its subject.
 - d. Make an argument if the artwork accurately or inaccurately represents the role, symbolism or context of the life and achievements of the subject.
 - e. Briefly, speak to how hearing from current African women leaders has changed your perspective on how you see the artwork as a representation of a historical woman leader.

Part 3

8. CREATIVE RE-INTERPRETATION: Using your artwork, your knowledge about its subject and her culture of origin, and the research you have collected - it's time to tell a new story! (or adapt your previous one). Create something new that brings your artwork, interpretations and data together in a creative way.

After a close look at the artwork, learning about the subject's life, achievements and culture of origin, and understanding the strengths and challenges of contemporary African women leaders - consider these questions as you rewrite Herstory.

- What would be her story as a woman leader in Africa today?
- What issues or problems might she tackle as a leader? Why?
- What actions would she take to bring about positive change in Africa?
- What do you have in common with her as a leader? How might you work together with her toward a stronger and more equitable Africa?

You can express this final creative re-interpretation in any format: Visual Art or media, Graphic Novel, Video, Protest sign, TikTok, Newspaper Op-Ed, Infographic, H5P content, Blog post, Digital storytelling, Podcast...or something else I haven't considered.

Online Activity: Students should post their Creative Re-Interpretation in the Class Discussion Forum.

Tips on Selecting an Artwork and Staying Focused on the Visual (at first!):

Instructor Notes:

- *If possible, the artwork search should be instructor-led or facilitated to help students avoid learning context or meaning too early in the process. It's not required, but will better set them up for success if they only start with an image of an artwork or the object itself.*
- *Instructor may pre-select a collection of artworks to choose from and present students with the image files, paper copies, or ideally, the object itself to work from*

Google Search or Pinterest are not reliable or recommended for your artwork search! Please do not use them as artwork is often not labeled, misappropriated, unsourced or identified incorrectly.

Select an artwork with a **high-resolution image**. Ideally, you should be able to zoom in and out to look at the object in detail. Most museums and sources below have high quality images

DO NOT READ ABOUT YOUR ARTWORK before you do your observations. Always start with looking at the object!

The best way to **set yourself up for success in visual analysis** is to **use image searches** to find the object you want to work on. Although it will be tempting to read about the artworks - #resist! - keep your eyes focused on the image as you search. You may use the title to help you identify a woman leader as subject - but that is it :)

When you find one you find **visually interesting**, download, screenshot or save it as an image file IMMEDIATELY (noting or bookmarking the source). Your image file should be **text-free**, no words, just an image.

Repeat until you have a small collection of image files/objects to choose from. **Working directly from the image file**, not the original website, narrow your initial selection to **one artwork** you are curious about that you think represents or depicts an **African women leader**

These quick and easy steps will help you **stay focused on close looking** and help you **avoid unintended plagiarism** in your observations and description of the artwork.

Reliable sources for selecting artwork will include:

- websites from art-related publications, individuals or institutions such as: museums, galleries, artists, non-profits, news agencies, art fairs, art journals, art historians, art critics, exhibition catalogs, etc.
- WikiArt
- ArtStor
- Google Arts & Culture (if linked to the original institution or source)
- VADS: African and Asian Visual Artists Archive

Searchable Online Museum Collections (search Africa/African art)

- Met Museum, NY
- British Museum
- Art Institute of Chicago
- Smithsonian National Museum of African Art

