

HIST2391
African History to 1880
Dr. Jill E. Kelly (jillk@smu.edu)

ESSAY ASSIGNMENT 1: AFRICAN ART & ARTIFACT

Due Friday, October 9, 2020 before 10:00 a.m. via Canvas

20% of final grade

SLO: Students will demonstrate an ability to engage in historical thinking.



Images: African Art at the Dallas Museum of Art

In the 1960s, British historian Hugh Trevor Roper famously declared that Africa had no history prior to the arrival of Europeans on the continent. This idea of Africa as a place without a past has a long history. As late as 1805, maps depicted the center of the continent as a blank, unknowable space. Scholarly emphasis on written sources contributed to this notion; without written documents from Africa, there could be no African history. This train of thought not only ignores a plethora of written sources from the continent prior to European arrival—from hieroglyphics and hieratic scripts in Ancient Egypt to Ge'ez script in Aksum and Arabic texts in East, West, and North Africa—it assumes that written documents are the only sources worthy of historical analysis. Sources that can provide insight into African histories range from DNA and archaeological evidence to oral traditions and art. In this assignment, you will write an essay on an art piece from a museum collection to consider what it tells us about the society that produced it.

PART ONE: CHOOSE AN ART PIECE (remote due to pandemic)

Browse the [linked list](#) of museum collections and/or explore other collections on your own. Choose any piece dated before 1500 CE and report it to Dr. Kelly prior to our Library Session on September 11. You can report it via the discussion board on Canvas named “Art Choices.” This will allow your classmates to see your choices and avoid replication.

PART TWO: ESSAY

Write an essay (five-seven pages) on your item of choice. The most important question to consider in your essay is: **What does this piece tell us about the society that produced it?** To answer this, you might think about the following:

- Who produced this? When? What kind of creative process might have been involved?
- What was the position of the producer in this society, at this time?

- For what reason was this piece produced?
- Did it have an intended audience?
- What materials were used in its creation?
- How did it come to be held in the museum? (Must answer this one.)

To answer these questions, you should identify at **least five sources** that reflect recent literature on your topic—whether it is a Nok sculpture, Benin bronze, or Yoruba ring. These sources should be diverse and demonstrate the breadth of your research—they should not *all* come from encyclopedias.

Your essay will be graded on Turn It In according to the following rubric:

1. Insight and Analysis (40%)
 - Text embodies an understanding and application of key issues.
 - Text demonstrates critical reasoning and insightful analysis to make an original argument.
2. Evidence (30%)
 - Text includes appropriate and sufficient background information, evidence, and illustration in logical ways to justify the thesis/conclusion.
 - Students use proper citations appropriate to the historical profession (Chicago or MLA).
 - Secondary sources should be of an academic nature: i.e. textbooks, scholarly monographs, articles from academic journals, etc.
 - Internet sources must be assessed for reliability; this might include JSTOR, sahistory.org.za, overcomingapartheid.msu.edu, or other library databases, etc.
3. Principles of Writing (30%)
 - Purpose: the writer's goal for the text is focused, specific, and clear. A thesis is clearly conveyed.
 - Organization: the purpose of the text is achieved through systematic and logical structures and forms – chronological, thematic, etc.
 - Coherence: individual elements of the text are linked visibly and conceptually. Transitions are used between paragraphs and sections. All major points tie back to the purpose of the paper.
 - Clarity: the text is economical in syntax, accurate and precise in word-choice appropriate to the audience.
 - Format: Double-spaced, 12 pt Times New Roman, with one-inch margins (not the default); name and date in top right corner of first page only; Name and page numbers on all pages after the first.

You can always schedule a meeting with history librarian Rafia Mirza via the link in Canvas.

Please do not hesitate to stop by my virtual office hours or make an appointment to discuss the assignment. SMU's Writing Center (<https://www.smu.edu/Provost/ALEC/WritingCenter>) can also help!