

**A MASTERWORK OF
AFRICAN ART**

THE DOGON COUPLE

Activities for Learning



A CLOSER LOOK

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

A MASTERWORK OF AFRICAN ART

THE DOGON COUPLE

This **Closer Look** focuses on a single work from The Metropolitan Museum of Art, a sculpture of a seated couple created by the Dogon people of Mali in West Africa (see area indicated on the map below). The goal is to inspire young people and adults to look more closely at works of art—to discover that details can be fascinating and often essential to understanding the meaning of a work of art. This packet may be used as an introduction to looking at and interpreting the Dogon couple, or as a springboard for exploring how it reflects the culture in which it was made. Teachers and students can use these materials in the classroom, but we know that study and preparation are best rewarded by a visit to the Museum.



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Front and back cover:

Seated Couple, 16th–20th century

Dogon people; Mali

Wood, metal; H. 28 ¾ in. (73 cm)

The Metropolitan Museum of Art,

Gift of Lester Wunderman, 1977 (1977.394.15)

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HOW TO USE THESE MATERIALS

The focus of this learning activity set is the puzzle card and poster activity designed to engage students in the process of close looking (see page 8). We recommend that the teacher do these activities before introducing them to the class.

This packet also contains background information for the teacher, questioning strategies for class discussion, extension activities, and resources.

We encourage the teacher to adapt or build on these materials to suit the needs of the group.

GOALS

To learn to look closely at a work of art and consider line, shape, materials, and composition.

To learn that some sculpture is intended to be viewed from all sides.

To learn that a work of art can provide a great deal of information about the ideals and beliefs of the society in which it was made; in this case, that of the Dogon people of Mali in West Africa.

To understand that art is a form of communication. In this sculpture the carver communicates Dogon beliefs about the ideal role of men and women through symbols and forms well known to the Dogon people.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Dogon people of the Republic of Mali live at the foot of the Bandiagara Escarpment, one of the most spectacular landscapes in Africa (see map at right). It consists of a row of steep, jagged cliffs 125 miles long and up to 2,000 feet high. Today, about 250,000 Dogon people live in small villages—usually with fewer than 500 people—built against the steep face of the cliff as well as on the plane below and plateau above. Rainfall is scarce in the area, as is flat land suitable for farming. Nevertheless, the Dogon manage to grow crops of millet, rice, and other grains, cotton, tobacco, and onions.

It was not until the 1930s that anthropologists undertook the first serious studies of Dogon society, religion, and art. What they discovered showed that, even in a harsh and isolated environment, the Dogon had created a rich, complex culture with a religion and mythology filled with sacred beings, ancestors, and nature spirits.

Although the Dogon continue to make masks and small sculptures, they have not made figures of couples like this pair for several generations. Consequently, little is known about who owned couple figures, where they were placed, and upon what occasions they were displayed. They may have been commissioned by individuals to be the visual form and permanent reminder of a prayer for the cooperation needed in an ideal marriage. Such figures may have been placed on the lineage shrine of the persons for whom they were made. More likely, they would have been kept by the village *hogan* (priest) in his shrine and would have been displayed at funerals of important village elders.

We do know that couple figures represent Dogon concepts of male and female roles in Dogon society. This sculpture does not portray the human form realistically, nor was it intended to do so. Rather, the artist has altered and



Western Africa, showing Mali and its neighbors

manipulated the forms to express Dogon ideals about social and moral behavior.

This couple represents man and woman, the ideal pair who provide continuity in the human community. Each has a particular role, which is equally important, as indicated by the pair's symmetry of design and the similar size of the figures. Each needs the other, a bond conveyed by their supportive pose, their similar adornment, and the interrelated shapes of their faces and bodies. Note, for example, the parallel and crossover forms. The arms, legs, and torsos are conceived as cylindrical shapes of various thicknesses and echo the single piece of wood from which the couple was carved. The spaces between these cylinder shapes (1) create lively patterns and suggest energy in their outlines, as do the expressions on the figures' faces.

The man indicates his role as husband by embracing his wife, and reminds us that he is also the procreator by pointing to his genitals. Across his back is slung a quiver (2) for arrows, which refers to his role as hunter, warrior,

protector, and provider of food for his family. Although he is strong and in the prime of life (notice the exaggerated pectoral muscles), he wears the beard of an elder (3) to symbolize his wisdom and composed behavior.

A small child (4) clings to the wife's back to show that a woman's most important role is to be the giver of life. Her enlarged breasts indicate that she is also the nurturer. Her husband points to her breasts to emphasize this idea. Both figures are portrayed with very large navels, which suggests their physical connection with their ancestors and therefore the couple's respect for the wisdom of past generations.

The pair is adorned with symbols of beauty and status such as the metal jewelry (5), elaborate hairstyles, and decorative linear designs, indicating scarification (6), on their faces and torsos. The woman wears a labret (7), an ornament suspended from the lower lip. Notice how the labret shape balances the shape of the man's beard. Another sign of rank is that the couple sit side by side on a stool. Sitting on a stool symbolizes rulership and the power to make decisions in traditional African societies.

Highlighted words are included in "Key Words" on page 10.



ACTIVITIES

1. PUZZLE CARDS

looking and deciphering

The following activity should be done **before** the class sees the images on the posters.

1. Divide your class into five groups.
2. Give each group two of the enclosed cards.
3. Each group should examine the images on their cards and write descriptions of them.
4. Ask each group to show their cards to the class and read their descriptions. As more images are displayed, the class may begin to see that the cards match up and create an image of the back of the Dogon couple.
5. Ask the class to place the cards in the correct order.
6. You may want to pin the cards on a bulletin board.

2. POSTER DISCUSSION

looking and comparing

1. Now display the poster of the *back view* of the couple.
2. Ask each student to study the poster for a few moments and then make a list of the similarities and differences between the two figures.
3. Ask the students to read their lists aloud and discuss their findings.
4. You may want to compare the students' observations of the poster image with their previous descriptions of the cards.
5. Now display the poster of the *front view* and ask the students what additional similarities and differences they notice between the two figures.

3. CLASS DISCUSSION

inquiry

The following questions may help your class analyze this work of art in greater depth.

1. How has the carver indicated that the man and woman are a couple and support each other? (gestures, sharing a stool, similar features)
2. What details indicate their respective roles?
3. Do you think these figures look like real people? The sculpture represents ideas about the roles of Dogon men and women rather than showing how they actually look. What forms of the figures has the artist exaggerated to convey the ideal roles of men and women? (breasts=nurturing, pectoral muscles=strength, navels=respect for the wisdom of their ancestors)
4. What does the size of each figure indicate? Is one figure more important than the other? Similar size indicates that the roles of Dogon men and women complement each other. Although different, their roles are equally important for continuity from one generation to the next.
5. What symbols of rank and beauty has the sculptor portrayed? (scarification patterns; metal ornaments; the man's beard, which symbolizes the wisdom of the elders; sitting together on a stool)
6. You may want to discuss the background information with your class as well as the artist's portrayal of the Dogon couple and their cultural significance.

4. CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

creativity

The following activities may help students relate their experiences with gender roles in their own community to the culture of the Dogon.

1. Ask each student to write about his/her own family and each family member's role in the home and community. The students may also express this information in a drawing or painting.
2. Ask each student to bring to class a picture (photograph, advertisement, magazine cutout) of a couple.

Have the class compare these images with the image of the Dogon couple. What have the creators emphasized in their images?

The class could create a large collage of the students' pictures to hang near the poster.

You may want to expand the class discussion to include gender roles and symbols of status in other cultures, from ancient to modern.

3. The students can create a three-dimensional sculpture out of wood, clay, or found objects. Ask them to think about the sculpture's form, decoration, and texture as they work.

KEY WORDS

ancestor

one from whom a person is descended

anthropologist

a person who studies human beings: their origins, distribution, culture, and relationship to the environment

cylindrical

having the form of a cylinder

escarpment

a long cliff or steep slope

hogon

Dogon priest

labret

an ornament worn in a perforation of the lower lip

lineage

a group of people tracing descent from a common ancestor

mythology

a body of myths or allegorical narratives that reveal in part the world view of a people

parallel

extending in the same direction, everywhere equidistant

quiver

a holder for carrying arrows

sacred

holy, worthy of worship

scarification

patterns scratched or cut in the skin which signify a person's status and accomplishments

shrine

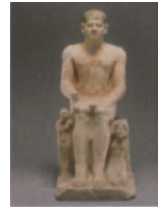
a place for contemplation and devotion, often containing an image or relic

symmetry

balanced proportions

MUSEUM CONNECTIONS

If you plan to visit the Museum to view the Dogon couple, you may also want to see works of art that depict family groups in other collections of the Metropolitan.

**Nikare and Family Members**

Egypt (Saqqara), Dynasty 5,

ca. 2420–2389 B.C. or later

Painted limestone, H. 22 1/2 in. (51.1 cm)

Rogers Fund, 1952 (52.19)

Egyptian Art, first floor

**Shiva, Parvati, and Their Son Skanda**

India (Tamil Nadu), Chola period, 11th century

Copper alloy, H. 21 1/2 in. (54.6 cm)

Purchase, Lita Annenberg Hazen Charitable

Trust Gift, in honor of Cynthia Hazen and

Leon Bernard Polsky, 1982 (1982.220.10)

Asian Art, second floor



Peter Paul Rubens (Flemish, 1577–1640)

Rubens, His Wife Helena Fourment, and Their Son Peter Paul, 1639

Oil on wood, 80 3/8 x 62 5/8 in. (204.2 x 159.1 cm)

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Wrightsman,

in honor of Sir John Pope-Hennessy,

1981 (1981.238)

European Paintings, second floor

RESOURCES

Ezra, Kate. *Art of the Dogon: Selections from the Lester Wunderman Collection*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1988.

Seiber, Roy, and Roslyn A. Walker. *African Art in the Cycle of Life*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987.

Video: *The Art of the Dogon* (24 min.). New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Home Vision, 1988.



NOTES

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

We would like to know what you think of this learning activity set. Did you adapt the activities to suit your particular needs? How did the students respond to the activities? Your observations will help us improve our educational resources. Please send your comments to:

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Or email us at education@metmuseum.org.

Thank you.

THE DOGO



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The Metropolitan

Seated Couple, 16th–20th century; Dogon people, Mali; wood, metal; H. 28 ¾ in. (73 cm);



Museum of Art

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Lester Wunderman, 1977 (1977.394.15)

IN COUPLE



THE DOGO









Museum of Art

Seated Couple, 16th–20th century; Dogon people, Mali; wood, metal; H. 28 3/4



The Metropolitan

in. (73 cm); The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Lester Wunderman, 1977 (1977.394.15)





















