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ARH2000

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Harn Diversity Project

Introduction

The city of Gainesville is home to a vast population of over one hundred thousand people, yet with that large population comes a very high fraction of residents represented by only two groups. The balance of races shows a heavy tilt towards Caucasians and African-Americans, with almost ninety percent of people falling into those two categories and the majority of them being in the former (African-Americans). Perhaps this has to do with Gainesville not being a particular hub of travel, tourism or development (despite the constant construction seen around the city) but rather a community based around a university. It is the college in this “college-town,” however, that helps to strengthen the population’s diversity.

While the Gainesville may not be all that diverse, the University of Florida assists in bringing a broader range of different characteristics. People from all around the world are represented on campus, with a slightly more balanced population at hand. The percentage of Caucasians is lower and Hispanic/Latino people hold the second largest group at UF at approximately twenty-two percent. Asian and African-American students represent two other main ethnicities found on campus, with American Indian, Multi-race, Pacific Islander, and unknown making up the rest of the population (Collegedata).

One of the greatest attributes of the University of Florida is its capacity to entertain the interests of over all fifty thousand of its students. Other than the many different educational routes that pertain to different aspects of diversity, there are over a thousand registered student organizations and clubs available, many of which focusing on religion, heritage and culture (Student Activities and Involvement). Another superb element of the university is its very own Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art, which brings together artwork from around the world in order to showcase different pieces of culture right here in Gainesville. The museum offers the opportunity to let art-lovers, random passersby, and everyone that falls in between experience fascinating collections from different time periods and distant locations. By doing this, one can learn about different peoples and catch a glimpse into the lives of others far different from them. One such collection is the Harn Museum's African Collection, an assemblage of art representative of the peoples of Sub-Saharan Africa, that is incredibly and beautifully different from the culture here in Gainesville.

A Look Into African Art, History and Culture

African art history incorporates a wide variety of different peoples spread out over the continent, and with those many peoples come many cultures. Throughout the course, many topics discussed originate from the ancient history of Africa, starting with one of the oldest pieces of art being found in South Africa: the engraved ochre, thought to be from approximately 75,000 BCE. As time passed and the people began to slowly develop through that time, despite the thousands of different peoples, certain common elements began to arise that persisted for centuries. These elements included a focus on the human figure, luster or luminosity (appearance-wise), a "composed demeanor," physical youthfulness and a preference for balance throughout the art (ArtHearty). Since the Harn Museum's African Collection dates back to the

5th century, those elements can be seen in variety of different artifacts located from all over Sub-Saharan Africa.



Ritual Axe, Yoruba People (Harn), 20th CE

One piece of art in the African Collection that exemplifies some of the previous characteristics is the *Ritual Axe* seen above, originating from the Yoruba people in eastern Africa. Created for ritual purposes by the tribe, there are many references to the different gods of the Yoruba people as a sign of honor, just as many elements of Christianity are woven into Western culture as well. The carved wooden handle contains a prime example of the strong presence of human figures found in African artwork, as well as perfect symmetry from one side of the handle to the other.

One question the *Ritual Axe* brings up, as do many other artifacts throughout the art community, is one encountered earlier on in the course: is the cultural significance of the axe lessened by being placed in an art museum and declared a piece of artwork? There is the possibility that people may appreciate the beauty of the piece while perusing through the museum, but may not consider the cultural significance in full due to it being classified as art.

Since the collection is supposed to highlight the diversity and historical depth of the African art, one would hope that those going through the Harn would take the time to learn about the history behind the piece, as that would be the proper way to accomplish that goal. I believe it is very possible, as well as probable, to both appreciate the craftsmanship and recognize the antiquity of the collection, thus fully taking in the cultural background. However, that is always up to the spectators of the art themselves.



Well 4, Chul-Hyun Ahn (Harn), 2007

Some of these characteristics, especially balance and symmetry, are used in other cultures' artwork, such as in ancient Greek and Egyptian artwork, and are often seen in forms of modern art today. Located in the Harn's Contemporary Collection, *Well 4* takes those specific concepts to an extreme level. Korean artist Chul-Hyun Ahn manipulates symmetry with a concrete enclosure, mirror, and light in this piece in order to create an optical illusion of infinite space, a topic generally associated with Buddhism ("Harn Collections"). Through this one can see the incorporation of a range of different cultures' elements of art in order to create an entirely original and provoking piece.

Overall, the many aspects of African history contained in the exhibit allow the opportunity for people of the different racial and ethnic groups of Gainesville to learn about a culture very different from their own, or one from which they originated from. Seeing as the second largest group of people in the city are African-Americans, the collection gives the chance to learn about their origins and possibly embrace it as well. And, in a country undergoing a decent level of racial strife at this time, the white majority can benefit from the information presented by learning, appreciating, and accepting the different culture.

Continuity of African Art

The strength of African culture is exemplified by the continuity of the before-mentioned themes throughout thousands of years. Earlier in the year, the question was posed to students in a focus discussion as to whether modern African-American artists upheld the characteristics of their ancestors' culture through their art. Just like many other students, I found that many African-American artists did embrace their heritage and expanded upon that with the work of Lois Mailou Jones in her 1971 painting *Moon Masque*. The painting is centered around a traditional African mask by the Kwele people, a mask which just so happens to be quite similar to the collection of African masks and headdresses found in the Harn exhibition "Symbolism and Ceremony in African Masquerades."

African masquerades originate from Paleolithic times, and are a vital part of traditional culture. Masks would be worn and used for ritual ceremonies to represent a spirit, generally pertaining to religion, celebrations, war preparations, and many other purposes ("African Masks History and Meaning"). The tradition has been passed down for centuries throughout the different African tribes, and still prove to be relevant today as seen in the Harn exhibition. The masks included were created between the 20th and 21st centuries, illustrating the continuity of the

use. Seen below are two such examples of traditional masks from two different peoples, showing the heavy



Chi wara Headdress, Bamana People (Harn), 19th CE



Zogbe Helmet Mask, Vai People (Harn), 20th CE

variety in cultures between peoples all over Africa.

On the left is a headdress from the Bamana People of West Africa, a group that has some of its more modern people living in cities and other more traditional people continuing to live in rural villages. The piece is worn as a headdress in a ceremony which honors farmers and the gods of farming. Note the use of multiple materials throughout the headdress, including more earthly ones like grass and palm fibers and wood, as well as metal and cotton as a likely result of colonial influence. The creature seen in a combination of multiple animals like the pangolin and aardvarks, both of which are similar to farmers in their digging of the earth. Generally, in ceremony the piece would be worn with an accompanying costume, as a common theme with these ceremonies is that the wearer would behave as if they were imbued with the spirits they portrayed (Cooksey).

On the right is another mask from the Vai people of southern Sierra Leone, a tribe that represents a part of the larger Sande Society. Made simply out of wood, the helmet mask was and is used during initiation ceremonies for young women, as it symbolizes a spirit that is supposed to watch over women throughout their lives (Cooksey). The facial characteristics of

the mask itself will be discussed further in the section below. This piece too would be worn with an accompanying costume in order to mimic the full essence of the honored spirit.

Despite all this continuity, it is no surprise that the majority African-Americans, or any other people here in Gainesville whose ancestors have a strong history for that matter, don't particularly follow their ancestors' cultural norms. Generally, one does not hear of an African tribal ceremony occurring out at Plaza of the Americas on an average day. This is not to say that there are not those who deeply value these cultures and carry them on – by walking through Turlington Plaza on an average day, one can usually see a few different religious or cultural groups presenting themselves and actively attempting to pique others' interests in them. But as society has grown more modern, many older traditions are forgotten or replaced by newer values and interests. Having them presented at the Harn can help to remember and value these parts of history.

Social Roles

It is without a doubt that the societies of sub-Saharan Africa and the more modern United States are and have always been far different from each other. Though both cultures have developed over time, the U.S. has advanced far more in terms of equality and rights, especially towards women. Here at the University of Florida, there are approximately five thousand more female undergraduate students than there are male, symbolizing that females are given just as much opportunity and access for higher education as males are. Women are able to make choices for themselves, live on their own, and pursue their own interests.

A common theme in Africa, however, is the regarding of women mainly as maternity figures. A common occurrence in ancient African art is the creation of female figures with exaggerated maternal characteristics, to emphasize their role as primarily caregivers and life-

givers. One such example, which happens to be a bit more modern, the *Maternity Figure* figurine. The carving, made out of wood, depicts



Maternity Figure, Osei Bonsu (Harn), 1944

a female holding and possibly breastfeeding a child (“Harn Collections”). This artifact also exemplifies some common characteristics mentioned before, including emphasis on the human figure and luster emanating from the smoothness of the material used. The primary role of women as caregivers, though, takes away from their opportunities to pursue other possible avenues in life, a commonly fought for entity here in America. The *Zogbe Helmet Mask* mentioned before emphasizes other characteristics commonly expected for women as well, including humility, modesty, and respect for men from the small, closed mouth and downcast eyes (Cooksey).

Something to gain from the comparison of these different roles in the different cultures is the realization that, despite advances made in more advanced parts of the world, including our very own town, work still needs to be done in the less noticed areas. Many African women don’t have access to proper education and employment, with much lesser opportunities in trade, industry and government. Art tends to exemplify the values of the culture from which it came, and from this art we can learn that areas of the world still lack what we consider norms.

Reflection on the Impact and Importance of the Harn

It is of no question that today's society is an imperfect one, with much work needed to be accomplished in the areas of increasing diversity, recognizing true equality and the appreciation of cultures worldwide. However, we as a people here in Gainesville will have an opportunity to improve upon it in the next coming years; according to a report by a member of The Associated Press, the United States is growing more ethnically diverse every year, with the population of whites, the majority, growing slower than the current minority groups (Kellman). By using the Harn Museum as an example of the assimilation and appreciation of other cultures we need to strive for, the University of Florida can spread a great understanding of diversity throughout its population. In doing so, there are the hopes of making it a value held both by all here at the university and the surrounding areas of Gainesville as well.

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