New Orleans is often called “the most African of American cities.” Its music and cuisine are recognized worldwide as unique contributions to the cultural fabric of the Americas; the most famous of those contributions—jazz, America’s quintessential musical idiom—is intrinsically African in origin. It is, therefore, appropriate that the New Orleans Museum of Art was among the first American municipal museums to form an important collection of African art. Unlike most European national museums which began as repositories for the material culture of their colonies, the New Orleans Museum of Art focused on aesthetics. In 1966, the museum opened a permanent gallery for the arts of Africa and a major bequest in 1977 from Victor K. Kiam added over a hundred works to the collection. While covering much of the African continent, the museum’s collection is not an encyclopedic presentation of the art of all African peoples; its strongest concentration is in Yoruba, Dogon, and Fang sculptures.

What to look for in the exhibit:

The first step to understanding any work of art is to take the time to look closely. This collection of African Art is broad in scope, depth, and size, so go slowly and again, look closely. There are so many different kinds of sculptures included in this exhibition you might want to narrow your viewing to one area at a time, or to the same kinds of artworks, masks and figures, or vessels and tools.

Here are some questions for you to consider as you observe the collection. As an organizational structure, we’ve started with the masks, moved on to the figures, and then to the vessels. This allows comparison between the works from different geographical areas and tribes. You may choose to view the work as it is exhibited – grouped by country and kingdom.
The maps on the wall identify the areas of Africa represented in this exhibited collection. The text panels provide historical and contextual information that will help you better understand these cultures and the art work they have created.

**Masks**

- When you look at the masks, what types of characters do you see represented (i.e. animal, human, other)?

- Based on your reading of the text panels next to the masks, what are their purposes? Are they symbolic? If so – of what? Are they meant to teach a story or moral? Are they used to invoke spirits? Why? Is it the same for each cultural group or are there differences?

- Which of the masks seem to exude power and authority? What artistic qualities of the masks give you that impression (i.e. size, shape, expression)?

- Which of the masks seem feminine and which seem masculine?

- What materials are the masks made from?

- Which is your favorite mask and why?

**Statement about Resonance from the Past: African Art from the New Orleans Museum of Art**

... any comprehensive study of African art is, by necessity, multidisciplinary, with art historians and anthropologists heading a list that also includes musicologists, folklorists, linguists, dance historians, architectural historians and scholars of religion, aesthetics, ethnology and philosophy. Visions of this fusion were dancing in my head as I traveled ... to the Museum for African Art. So I wasn’t surprised that the word exciting repeatedly came to mind as I walked through a show for which I’d had only mild expectations. Piece after piece, no matter how familiar the form, made me slow my pace. Every encounter was a contact high. I wasn’t seeing just objects. I was seeing a network of ideas. ... The New Orleans museum’s African collection is a fine and representative one, as befits a city with a 70 percent African-American population. And, the curator, Frank Herreman, former deputy director of exhibitions at the Museum for African Art, has chosen well, from a Kota reliquary guardian figure (a modernist icon) and a Ciwara crest mask (its form now a logo for and African airline) to pieces notable for their rarity. ... And until fairly recently, anonymity was assumed to be standard in African art. Not necessarily so. In many cultures, individual artists were and are revered; sometimes their fame was widespread. ... the material in this exhibition is choice, and the atmosphere bracing and expansive. So pay a visit. Browse a marvelous African collection. And start looking hard at what you don’t see.

- Holland Cotter,
  *The New York Times*,
  April 29, 2005
Figures

• How is the human form represented in this exhibit? Are the figures large or small? Are they anatomically correct or exaggerated in some way?

• How do shape, form and detail influence your initial impression of the figures? Does your impression remain the same or change after you have read the accompanying text panels?

• Do the figures serve a specific purpose? What is that purpose? Is it the same or different in each cultural group?

• What materials are the figures made from? Do you think it is easy or difficult to construct the figures from these materials?

Vessels

• Many of the clay vessels you see here are pit fired. This means that they are placed in a pit with different materials that will burn and form hot coals. Those materials are lit on fire and allowed to burn, causing the clay pot to harden and darken with color from the smoke. Different burning materials will cause variations in the color. Do these vessels look like any you have seen before? If so, what are the similarities and/or differences?

• What function do the vessels serve in each culture? Are they primarily functional, ceremonial or symbolic? How can you tell?

• What type of decoration do you see on the vessels? Does the ornamentation have specific meaning or purpose?

Other art objects

Find the other types of art objects on display and consider their construction and purpose as well. Now consider the following questions.

• What do these art objects make you think about? What do these art objects make you feel?

• What is art in relationship to people and their land and culture?

• In what ways did the Africans use art?

• What is African art and how is African art different than any other kind of art?

• Of all of the work on exhibit, which is your favorite and why?
**Vocabulary to know**

Aesthetics – the study of art

Altar – a raised ceremonial religious structure, where religious ceremonies are performed

Ancestral - belonging to former generations of somebody’s family

Anthropomorphic – attributions of human characteristics to nonhumans

Canonical – relating or belonging to the biblical canon or a canon of artistic works established as genuine and complete

Ceremony – ritual for formal occasion

Culture – shared beliefs and values, social behaviors of a particular group, nation or people

Deceased- dead, no longer living

Deity – god, a god or goddess or other divine being

Divine – having a godlike nature

Divination – seeking knowledge by supernatural means

Fecund – fertile, capable of producing much vegetation or many offspring

Funerary – relating or suitable for a burial or funeral

Hermaphrodite – organism having both sexes

Icon – image of holy person

Initiation – ceremony only by which somebody is admitted to a group, organization, religion or society

Manifestation – an indication that something is present, real or exists

Masquerade – pretending to be somebody or something else by wearing a mask.

Myth – an ancient story

Mythology – a traditional story about heroes or supernatural beings, often explaining the origins of natural phenomena

Ornament – a decorative object

Reliquary – a container or shrine where relics, like the remains of a saint, are kept

Resonance – the effect of an event or work of art beyond its immediate or surface meaning

Rite – a ceremonial act

Ritual – a formal and repeated behavior established, for example, in a religion in observance of something

Sacrifice – the giving up of something valued

Scarification – to make scars on the skin deliberately for beauty or for meaning in a society

Shrine – holy place of worship

Spirit world – a world beyond the physical and known world

Supernatural – not of this natural world

Symbol – something that represents something else

Transformation – a complete change, usually into something with an improved appearance or usefulness