

Active Looking in the Reinstalled Gallery of African Art

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THE YALE UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY offers a vibrant teaching and learning environment, welcoming hundreds of courses across the arts, humanities, and sciences every year. The museum's global collection supports a myriad of academic topics and can be drawn upon to help strengthen subject-matter understanding as well as to cultivate specific skill sets. For example, dozens of Yale language instructors bring their classes to the Gallery so that students can engage firsthand with works of art and discuss them in both English and the target language. Practicing vocabulary, solidifying grammar acquisition, and facilitating direct contact with cultural objects are some of the more obvious goals of teaching in the galleries, but, just as often, faculty members aim to spur intercultural

learning and foster creative and interdisciplinary thinking by forging broader, conceptual connections.

Candace Skorupa, Yale alumna and faculty member in French and Comparative Literature, is no stranger to the museum nor to art-based pedagogy. Numerous times, she has brought her language and literature courses to the Gallery to work with the curators. She continued this practice during the pandemic through virtual visits that were envisioned and implemented with expert help from education curators and the staff of the Visual Resources Department. As soon as the museum reopened, Skorupa's classes returned in person and encountered artworks that were familiar from previous visits, along with others that had just been put on view. Of special interest was the

Laura and James J. Ross Gallery of African Art, newly reimagined by James Green, the Frances and Benjamin Benenson Foundation Associate Curator of African Art, and affording exciting possibilities for teaching and learning.

Inspired by the installation's emphasis on context and on the original practical and aesthetic function of the African works of art, Skorupa reached out to Gallery staff to discuss connections to her Spring 2022 course, Intensive Intermediate and Advanced French, two units of which focus on literature and film from Francophone countries in Africa. Green was delighted to partner on designing a content-rich learning experience with Skorupa's concrete pedagogical objectives in mind. Over the course of several meetings with Green and Liliana Milkova, the Nolen Curator of Education and Academic Affairs, the collaboration took the form of a class visit co-led by Skorupa and Green in late March. This session built upon a previous one facilitated by Milkova, in which students in the class explored works by French and Francophone artists active in the 20th century, including Pablo Picasso and Suzanne Phocas.

French courses at Yale increasingly encompass the literature and culture of French-speaking countries beyond metropolitan France. In this framework, the Ross Gallery presents an ideal setting for confronting the

French colonial past and the related issue of provenance for works acquired by French and Belgian art dealers in the colonies. "The provenance histories of many of the works in the African collection lead back to French colonial Africa," notes Green, "with Paris developing as a central market for these works from the 1920s. To have students engage with specific works in the collection through the lens of the French language is to bring this history into sharp focus."

Early in the week of the scheduled visit, Skorupa's class studied the first feature-length film from sub-Saharan Africa, *La Noire de...* (released in the Anglophone world under the title *Black Girl*; 1966) by the Senegalese director Ousmane Sembène. Since masks figure prominently in the film, Skorupa wanted the students to engage—in real space and time—with the significant selection of wooden masks displayed in the African gallery. Equipped with folding chairs, paper, pencils, and drawing boards, the participants got down to the first task at hand, namely, to choose and sketch one mask, while Green shared art-historical context. Halfway through the activity, students switched places with a partner, literally adopting a new point of view from which to examine the mask and discover more about it as they sketched. The shift in position

and perspective was designed to enrich the students' engagement with art from former French colonies by emphasizing the importance of different vantage points, both literal and figurative.

The group then moved to an adjoining gallery to look closely at a late 19th-century Ngil initiation mask from present-day Gabon. Examining facsimiles of documentation from art auctions in Paris, students deciphered the handwriting to locate more information about the mask in question. With Green's encouragement, they pondered how the museum tradition of naming the artist on an object's label—in this case, as an "unidentified Fang artist"—poses particular challenges for African art, given different cultural norms concerning the significance of the artist's identity. Finally, the students reviewed recent French auction catalogues, with a prompt to consider the essential role that language continues to play in defining how these works are presented in the art market.

The students' written feedback was overwhelmingly positive and suggested that the visit to the Gallery had been fruitful in a number of ways. The sketching activity at the start of class was intended to deepen students' observations of the works and to promote skills

in visual and literary analysis. In the process of translating a mask's three-dimensional form onto the two-dimensional surface of the paper, students focused on details they would not have noticed otherwise. Observing the visual form, they reported, provoked reflection on its meaning and use, as well as on the artistic process entailed in its making. One student declared, "This was the most enjoyable exercise I've done in a class in so long. . . . It felt like a return to the fundamentals, which opened up my mind to . . . the works in question." Another student remarked, "Sketching the masks really forces you to take in every detail . . . to absorb and analyze the mask." Judging from the learners' immersive attention and deep engagement, this visit to the museum succeeded in helping Skorupa achieve her pedagogical goals.

Besides allowing students to slow down and look mindfully, the drawing activity gave them a natural and embodied entry point into thinking about questions related to colonialism, provenance, repatriation, and the ways in which the French language has shaped Western perceptions of African art—topics relevant not only to this course but also to other academic disciplines. Indeed, while one student drew on prior art-historical knowledge to analyze the colonial lens through which African art has long been viewed, a theme also explored in the film *Black Girl*, others made connections to fields of study as varied as music, ethics, and economics. Clearly, the students' time in the galleries amplified, if not anchored, their understanding of the topic at hand. It may have also inspired them in personally significant ways: "Today's Gallery session brought up questions that I would love to explore on my own," said one of the students.

This interdisciplinary collaboration between Green and Skorupa exemplifies the Gallery's approach to teaching with art, rather than strictly about art or art history. With thoughtfully selected works, carefully designed lesson plans, and skillful facilitation, class visits to the museum expand student learning beyond content connections: they foster curiosity, creativity, and intellectual agility, opening students up to multiple perspectives and to the value of taking a really good look.

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