



Smithsonian
National Museum of African Art

Earth Matters: Land as Material and Metaphor in the Arts of Africa

Bowdoin College Museum of Art
Brunswick, Maine
October 15, 2015–March 6, 2016



George Osodi
b. 1974, Nigeria
De money series no. 1, 2009
Fuji crystal archival print
National Museum of African Art
museum purchase, 2011-16-1

Earth Matters Lesson Plans
Exhibit related lessons and activities for the classroom

Engaging Learners with

EARTH MATTERS: Land as Material and Metaphor in the Arts of Africa

This curriculum resource unit is designed to accompany the exhibition ***EARTH MATTERS: Land as Materials and Metaphor in the Arts of Africa***. The units are designed around the five themes of the exhibition: *Material Earth, Power of the Earth, Imagining the Underground, Strategies of the Surface, and Environmental Action*. These lesson plans are developed for the purpose of teaching for content and at the same time encouraging self-expression. These classroom activities can be modified to align with Common Core and/or your state's SOLs. They can also be customized to integrate art with cross-disciplinary units in Language Arts, Social Studies, Science, and Arts, History and Culture.

More than 40 artists from 24 of Africa's 55 nations have employed media as diverse as ceramic, textile, film, drawing, printmaking, photography, wood, and mixed-media sculpture and installations to explore the themes in Earth Matters. Teachers can access the artist's biographies online at <http://africa.si.edu/exhibits/earthmatters/bios.html>. Students can work in groups to research selected examples of their work.

Introductory Discussion: Help students understand the connections between art and the environment and the cultural context of African works of art. Encourage looking at, thinking about, and making meaning from art with the Questions provided throughout this guide.

Look at your feet. Have you ever wondered what you are standing on or even what you're standing on is made of? Have you ever wondered how old the Earth is? Geologists estimate the Earth to be more than 4.5 billion years old and during that time Earth has gone through many periods of change. What does the word "*Earth*" mean to you? Clay? Sand? Salt? How about grass? Artists and scientists have thought about these questions and use their special skills to explore and answer these questions.

Beginning Activity:

What does the word “earth” mean to you?

- The earth’s surface - its rocky crust - is largely made of oxygen, silicon, aluminum, and iron.
- Have your students write down three words they think of when they hear the word earth.
- Save these for the end of your classroom lesson.
- At the end of the activity, ask students to re-read their first three written words. Now, have them write three different words on the same paper.
- Finally, ask students to title the first three words: I used to think.....
And the second group of three words: But now I think.....

Use this simple exercise for classroom reflection and assessment.

Unit 1: MATERIAL EARTH



Kurumba artist, Burkina Faso
Storage vessel, Mid-20th century
Ceramic
National Museum of African Art, gift of Saul Bellow, 81-10-1

Across the vast African continent, artists have found inspiration in the earth's mud, pigments, plants, stone, ash, and incredibly diverse resources. These materials have been used to express personal or cultural identity, provide connections to the generations who have walked the land before us, build fantastic structures, and imagine what we have lost to time. The ideas and arts inspired by the earth are as diverse as the materials this planet and its land provide.

Goals

Students will be able to

- make connections to art works that engage local environments
- Link the shape and design of containers and their function

Fired earth. The fired earth of this hand-built vessel speaks to the transformative capabilities of clay, the life-giving role of earth and women, and the extraordinary skill of the unknown woman who made it. Its raised patterns recall the scarification marks once adopted by Kurumba women, for just as a woman's body can sustain life, so too did the millet, sorghum, and other grains that it once stored.

Questions:

- **What do you see? Share some words or phrases that describe any aspect of the work.**
- **How would you describe the designs? Encourage descriptive language.**
- **What do you think it might have been used for? Why?**
- **Look again, and include as many details as you can see. Complete with ONE word "When I see this storage pot, I think of".**
- **What materials are containers made of in your school (or home).**

Unit 2: Power of the Earth



Across the planet, healing material and medicine comes from the earth. Natural substances, taken from such places as village foundational sites, an ancestor's grave, or soil from an anthill located at an important place are charged with history and memories.

Goals

Students will be able to

- link materials from the earth as a source for sacred and healing powers
- consider the importance of cultural context in meaning making in works of art

Yombe artist, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Angola, and Republic of the Congo
Nkisi nkondi (power object), 19th century
African teak (*Chlorophora excels*), metal, feathers, pigments, earth, glass, textiles, mirror, claws
Musée royale de l'Afrique centrale, Tervuren, Belgium EO.0.0.22438

The colors of the earth. Earth in this sculpture is not the dull brown of dust or dirt, but the rich red of blood, the shimmering white of water and reflective surfaces, and the deep black of decay and organic processes. Each of these symbolic colors and their earthen associations can be found in this affecting power figure that once overcame the obstacles and opponents of its users.

Camwood

Camwood is commonly used to make a red dye. It comes from the the *Baphia nitida* tree found in West Africa. The wood is of a very deep color and its dye is often used to make textiles, paints, as well as linings of baskets and pottery. The dye obtained from it is a brilliant red, but not permanent.

Indigo

Indigo is a deep and bright shade of blue. The color is named after the blue dye derived from the plant *Indigofera tinctoria*. Indigo is part of many longstanding art forms from the continent of Africa, particularly the use of indigo in textile arts.

Kaolin

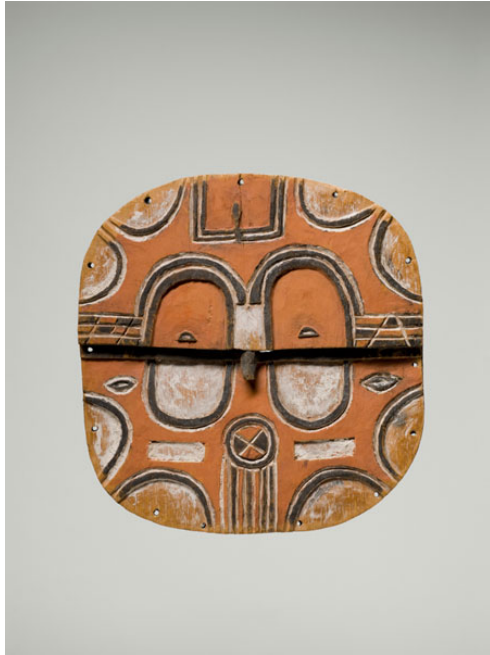
Kaolin is soft white clay that is an essential part of many artistic and religious traditions of Africa. When used on masks and sculptures, it often refers to the spiritual/ancestral realm.

The role of the *nkisi nkonde* is as a tool of the ritual specialist to activate close communication with ancestors and belief in the value of their powers to help mediate local conflicts. The figure is activated with spiritually charged medicines or other substances. The blades, spikes, and nails that are pounded into the surface of the figure aid in awakening the powerful spirits and to confirm the oaths sworn in resolution of social and legal disputes. Over time, the added metal and other substances accumulate and transform the appearance of the *nkisi*. Each nail and blade stands as evidence of a conflict and its resolution. It serves as a permanent record of community proceedings, both civil and criminal.

Questions:

- **Look closely at the human and gestural features on this sculpture. What do you notice? Analyze its form and materials, and how together they create a formidable (powerful) presence.**
- **Which details on this work might be natural substances from the earth?**
- **While today figures like this one are found in many museum collections, community diviners once called upon the spirit world to help them resolve disputes and protect the community. Who and what do we use to help enforce community rules and laws? What do you notice about their presence?**
- **Compare how rural and urban societies deal with enforcement of social control.**

Unit 3: Imagining the Underground



Teke artist, Democratic Republic of the Congo
Kidumu mask
Most likely early 20th century, collected 1929
Wood, pigment
Musée du Quai Branly, Paris, France, 71.1932.89.82

The earth's underground and surface spaces have inspired numerous, compelling metaphorical associations and models across cultures.

Goals

Students will be able to

- learn the meaning of abstraction and symbols as metaphor for transformation and regeneration.
- consider the creation of visual models as they relate to various realms under and on the earth.

Dividing above and below ground. Divided by a central band to provide a sense of "above" and "below," this mask was collected by French geologist Victor Babet in 1929. Its masquerader would cartwheel to suggest a cyclical relationship between subterranean ancestral realms and the world of the living. Realism is generally not the goal of the African artist. Many forms of African art are characterized by their visual abstraction from factual accuracy and interpret their ideas through innovative forms and creative compositions.

Questions:

- **Look carefully at the features on this mask. What do you notice? Human? Animal?**
- **Which details on this mask might be inspired by a story? How do these symbols help the audience understand the story?**
- **What might have inspired this artist?**
- **If you were going to create a mask designed to tell a story or a character in a story, what features would you include? Why?**

Unit 4: Strategies of the Surface

The earth's mountains, deserts, and grassy meadows have helped tell stories of the exotic, individual and collective identity, desire, and trauma. Never neutral, interpretations of a landscape can change over time or according to location. Once, a sun-kissed landscape represented the hopes and ambitions associated with frontiers; over time, however, the earth's open spaces have also become symbols of abandonment, or even desecration. For someone who has moved far away from the land of his or her birth, a landscape might symbolize what has been left behind-or what is sought. In similar fashion, maps tell us where we want to go and what we want to record. Maps, and landscape painting and photography, represent strategies



Iba N'Diaye
1928-2008
Senega
SAHEL
Oil on Canvas
Courtesy Madame Fatoumata Sow Diop
Collection, Dakar, Senegal

by which individuals and communities have interpreted and set priorities for the earth's changing surface.

Goals

- Explore geographical maps of Africa
- Understand elements of landscapes that relate to African environments
- students will create their own landscape

Questions:

- **Look carefully at this painting. What do you see?**
- **Every picture has many stories to tell – about the artist, a moment in time, or a glimpse of a culture or society. Which details in this painting might be inspired by the land?**
- **How do these features help the viewer think about the environment?**
- **What other ideas might have inspired this artist?**
- **Look at geographical maps of Africa. How do savannah, mountains, deserts, and other features influence the art that is created?**
- **If you were going to create a landscape, what features would you include? Why?**

Unit 5: Environmental Action



El Anatsui
b. 1944
Anyako, Ghana
Erosion
1992
Wood, paint, wood chips, sawdust
H. 268 cm (105 1/2 in.)
96-36-1, museum purchase

Artists in Africa and beyond, do not simply document transformations to their environment as passive observers, they are agents of change, often building awareness and provoking thought through their work and process. Take the words of Nigerian painter Jerry Buhari: "Today the talk of the world is about an endangered Earth. One often wonders how much of the talk is backed with genuine concern and the will to take positive steps. But it should not surprise the world that artists are in the forefront of the discussion on the environment. They have always been." How to care for a community surrounded by exposed asbestos; considering what becomes of the TVs, iPhones, and computers that get thrown away; and talking about the impact of war on land and animals-these are among the issues Africa's artists have tackled in the past two decades. But maintaining a healthy environment, climate and ecosystem have been of long-standing concern for artists and communities across the African continent.

Goals

- To explore ways that artists create art about political and social issues
- exploitation of the earth's resources and its impact on communities and over time

Questions:

- **Look closely at the features in this work. What do you see?**
- **How do these features help the artist communicate an idea?**
- **Examine photographs of eroded landscapes.**
- **What other environmental disturbances might have inspired this artist?**
- **If you were going to create a sculpture or painting designed to express your ideas of an environmental issue, what features would you include? Why?**
- **Why do you think the artist chose to make this piece out of wood?**
- **How would the piece be different if it were made out of different materials? (Gold? Cloth?)**
- **What objects represent exploitation or consumerism to you? Why?**
- **What are some of the ways in which the arts can effect positive change on the earth and its environment.**

A collaboration between the National Museum of African Art and Smithsonian Gardens

In a first-ever installation of land art on the National Mall, three artists have been invited to create site-specific earthworks in the Enid A. Haupt Garden. Strijdom van der Merwe of South Africa, El Anatsui of Ghana and Nigeria, and Ghada Amer of Egypt have each turned to the land as a canvas to explore such diverse and interrelated issues as memory, history, and land use; spirituality, materiality, and environmental sustainability; and gender and the interconnections between hunger and political corruption. These works also challenge the absence of African artists from the discourse on land arts and reinforce awareness of how the earth works as a medium and as a message.

See video here <http://africa.si.edu/exhibits/earthmatters/earthworks.html>

To Learn More:

DIGITAL MEDIA: Earth Matters

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/NMAfA>

Pinterest: <http://pinterest.com/siafricanart/>

Instagram: <http://instagram.com/nmafa>

Blog: <http://earthmatters2013.wordpress.com/>

ACTIVITIES:

Pre-K, K, Grade 1, 2

Earth Matters in the Classroom

Have students find examples of earthen materials in the classroom, outside the school or from home. Set up an area to display them in the classroom. Make labels for each mineral, flower, leaf, stone, or other natural material. Use the examples to teach the 3 Rs of eco-education: Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle. Use this exercise for the students to talk about what is special about where they live.

Pinch Pot Pottery

See Pottery vessel, Kurumba artist, Burkina Faso

Simple pinch pots are made by rolling clay into a ball, and then pinching a hole into the top. Then, slowly pinch and pull at the hole until it becomes big enough to use as a bowl. You can keep the sides of the bowl as thick or as thin as you like, and the hole or bowl as deep as they choose. Once the bowl has been created they can scratch designs into the side, or add extra clay for texture or sculptural effects.



Strike the Pose

See *Nkisi* power figure, Yombe artist, Democratic Republic of the Congo

Have students work in small groups.

One in the group assumes the stance or pose of a particular sculpture.

Others in the group using quick gestural drawings, connect the posture with the *nkisi*, [EN-kee-see]. Capture the pose, gesture, and facial expression.

Add nails, bundles, shells, mirrors, and other special items to your drawing.

Share with your class.

Elementary

Create a Mud Cloth

See *Bogolan* cloth by Nakunte Diarra.

Korhogo [Core- HO-go] cloth is made in the Ivory Coast and the Bamana [BAH-ma-nah] of Mali create the Bogolan [BOW-go-lan]. Both use similar methods and techniques to create ecorative mud cloth. Artists paint designs on hand-woven cotton cloth with a special recipe of mud that has been collected, placed in a clay pot with plant material, covered in water, and left to sit for a period of time to darken into a thick dye.

Materials:

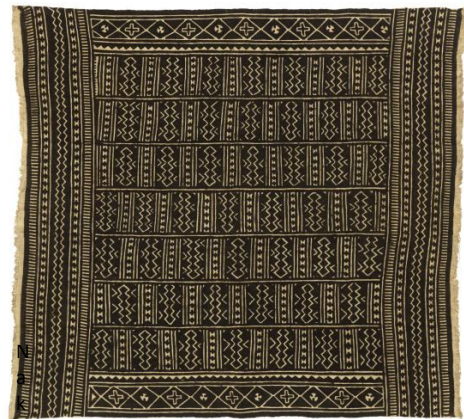
- Piece of cotton muslin, raw cotton canvas, or any white cotton cloth, like an old sheet, cut to size approximately 9" x 12"
- Mud, cleaned, about 1 cup
- Wire mesh strainer (or a piece of window screen)
- Brown and blue tempera paint
- Small coffee can with plastic lid, small containers
- Spoon, pencil, paintbrush, , small tree branch or twig.

To clean the mud:

Dig up one cup of mud, or use dirt if the earth is dry. Working at a sink, place the wire mesh strainer over the coffee can. Pour a little mud or dirt onto the strainer and run water over it. Throw away debris in the strainer outside. The mud will sink to the bottom of the can, leaving a layer of water on top. Pour off some of this water. Repeat the straining process until the mud is clean.

To make the mud and paint mixture:

- Add about ½ cup brown and ½ blue tempera paint to the cleaned mud in can.
- Stir well. This makes enough for several mud cloths.



u
n
t
e Diarra
B.C. 1939, Kolokani, Mali
Bogolan mud cloth, 1992
National Museum of African Art,
Anonymmous Gift, 2012-9-1

Making the design:

- Draw your design and border in pencil on the cotton cloth. Zigzag borders or triangle shapes look good. Double line the pencil drawing to make painting easier.
- Scoop a small amount of mud paint into a bowl.
- Use a variety of tools to apply the mud paint to your design. Along with a paintbrush, try using a small tree branch or sharp twig to make very thin lines.
- Cover the coffee can to store the mud paint. If it dries out, just add a little water.
- Collect all the finished pieces and have them sewn together into a community classroom cloth to display in the classroom or school hall.

Middle – High School

Unit 2: Power of the Earth

Nkisi [EN-key-see] figure.

See Nkisi Nkonde [power object].

An *nkisi nkonde* is often called a power object and is made and used by peoples of Central Africa. It begins with a foundational wooden carving of a figure or animal.

What is their reaction to viewing the nkisi?

[The *I used to think..., But now I think...* exercise described in the introduction to Earth Matters is remarkably effective with this activity in dispelling stereotypes.]

The efficacy of the sculpture—how well it works—is demonstrated by the many additions to it.

In Central African communities an *nkisi nkondi* may be used in conjunction with judicial proceedings. The parties involved and the specialist come before the figure, and together they investigate the problem at hand. When an agreement is made, representatives from both parties take an oath in front of the *nkisi nkondi*. Each sworn promise is recorded on the figure by the insertion of a sharp metal object or nail into its surface. How is this act similar to our tradition of signing an agreement or contract?

Have students think of a conflict in the classroom that has not yet been resolved. In groups, discuss possible solutions to the problem and write ideas for a contract that seals an agreement between the arguing parties. What do they consider a probable result of breaking the contract?

Create an Amulet

Diverse peoples throughout the world rely on various kinds of objects to insure their protection, prevent misfortune, and/or protect against an adversary, bad luck in general, or any negative force. Pieces of jewelry historically have served this purpose. Some Catholics carry images of saints, such as the St. Christopher medal, to insure safe traveling. In Thailand, people of all ages wear amulets of tiny Buddhas encased in gold frames around their necks.

What makes materials powerful to you (students)?

What would you use to send a powerful message?

Have students understand that different cultures may choose different objects to treasure, but we all have similar reasons for wanting to create personal charms. Discuss the value in respecting the diversity of traditions in our multi-cultural world.

Materials:

- Plastic cup
- Dry clay- reddish or Brown
- Matte Medium- the Matte finish creates a leathery finish
- Popsicle Sticks
- Wooden dowel or large round pencil

- Newspaper

Making an African Amulet

1. Arrange students in small table groups
2. To individualize the project, each student begins by writing down a personal wish on a small piece of paper (approx. 3" x 1") Wishes for peace, the community, and/or greening can also be the focus of the amulet secrets.
3. To insure that the wish is kept secret, it is folded into a small, flat packet and used as the foundation of the amulet bundle.
4. First layer: Students take a small rectangular swatch of cotton fabric, 4" x 4" (preferably red- a symbol of sacrifice)- but any cloth can be used. Recycling works here. Place the paper 'wish' inside.
5. Second layer: Important step- Students begin to wrap the fabric packet with cotton thread (tatting thread works best) by winding the thread in both horizontal and vertical directions. When satisfied that the wish will remain tightly contained- and not escape and dissipate- tie the end and cut any hanging thread
6. Third layer: Students take a rectangular swatch of brown cotton fabric (muslin works well) 4 ½" x 4 ½". Fold in half and place the bound packet inside at the crease. Fold the fabric so that there are three open sides.
7. Take a needle and thread and sew the three sides closed (slipstitch). Be sure that the loose edges are contained.
8. Students can then choose to adorn the amulet with buttons, cowry shells, or beads. We made a mud dip so that one side can take on the appearance of leather. See recipe below. This simple process takes just a few hours to dry to simulate a well-worn surface.
9. Decorate with beads, buttons, or cowry shells.

Note: This activity can be simplified for younger students by creating fewer layers and substituting sewn instructions with textile glue.

Unit 3: Imagining the Underground

Create a Teke [TECH-kay] Mask with Recycled Materials

See Teke *Kidumu* mask

Materials:

- Recycled cereal or other boxes
- scissors
- ruler
- pencil
- markers
- paper
- glue

1. Have students begin by flattening a cereal box
2. Cut apart the folds, ending with eight fraction pieces per circle.
3. Now have the students use the shapes to develop their landscape.
4. Choose an 8 ½ x 11 or 12 x 18 inch color paper for a background.
5. Discuss what properties make a landscape a landscape and write them down on chart paper, white board or blackboard to document the students' responses – making thinking visible!
6. Students can use layered tissue paper, torn magazine pages, sandpaper, or other on hand paper in the classroom.
7. Students will learn how parts can make a whole!

Note: paper plates from recycled materials can also be substituted

Elementary and Middle School

Unit 4: Strategies of the Surface

Create a Math Landscape

A Landscape shows a wide scenic view featuring sky, mountains, trees, and rivers.

Beginning Activity:

Have your students imagine a journey to a place they would like to visit (or have visited). What would it look like?

Materials:

- scissors
 - paper
 - glue
1. Have students begin by tracing circles of varying sizes on construction paper or (recycle magazine pages).
 2. Plastic lids from coffee cans, margarine containers and the like can be used for a template.
 3. Fold each circle THREE times, open it up.
 4. Cut apart the folds, ending with eight fraction pieces per circle.
 5. Now have the students use the shapes to develop their landscape.
 6. Choose a 8 ½ x 11 or 12 x 18 inch color paper for a background.
 7. Discuss what properties make a landscape a landscape and write them down on chart paper, white board or blackboard to document the students' responses – making thinking visible!

8. Students can use layered tissue paper, torn magazine pages, sandpaper, or other on hand paper in the classroom.
9. Students will learn how parts can make a whole!

Note: These instructions can also be supplemented with other geometric shapes and used to create a mask making activity. Familiarize your class first with different styles of masks and where they are found to emphasize the diversity of cultures on the continent.

Unit 5 – Environmental Action

Activity

Have each student write down a value or issue important to him or her. Possible values could be unity, freedom or peace. Important issues could be things like conserving water, electronic waste, replanting the rain forest, or endangered animals, cultures or languages. Once each student has chosen a value or issue, have them write it down. For older students, take it one step further by having them brainstorm specific found objects that they could use to build a sculpture. Have the students sketch what they want their sculpture to look like. Students can then begin building their sculptures. When the students are finished building, have them write a short paragraph explain their work. Create a display and allow students to share their works and descriptions.

- **Why do artists create art about political and social issues?**
- **Do you think it is effective? Why or why not?**
- **If you could display your sculpture anywhere, where would that be?**
- **Who is the primary audience of your artwork?**

Key Words Glossary

Unit 1

Material Earth- a general term that includes minerals, rocks, soil and water. These are the naturally occurring materials found on Earth that constitute the raw materials upon which our global society exists

Scarification- (scarify) puncture and scar (the skin), as for purposes or tribal identification or rituals

Millet a fast-growing cereal plant that is widely grown in warm countries and regions with poor soils

Sorghum- a widely cultivated cereal native to warm regions of the Old World. It is a major source of grain and of feed for livestock

Unit 2

Symbolism -the use of symbols to represent ideas or qualities or symbolic meaning attributed to natural objects or facts

Ritual- a religious or solemn ceremony consisting of a series of actions performed according to a prescribed order

Unit 3

Realism- representing a person, thing, or situation accurately or in a way that is true to life.

Abstraction- freedom from representational qualities in art

Transformation- thorough or dramatic change in form or appearance or a metamorphosis during the life cycle of an animal

Regeneration- reformed or reborn, esp. in a spiritual or moral sense

Unit 4

Representation- the description or portrayal of someone or something in a particular way or as being of a certain nature or the depiction of someone or something in a picture or other work of art

Interpretation- the action of explaining the meaning of something

Unit 5

Agents of change- Leaders, groups, coalitions and others that can initiate and drive positive changes toward the achievement of a development goal.

Other Resources and Activities:

Interview an artist in your community.

Visit local art galleries in your town and explore the types of materials they use.

Research the recycling projects in your local community. How do they deal with electronic waste?