Look down at your feet. Ever wondered what you’re standing on? Or what the earth is made of? Lend your imagination to this exploration of how Africa’s artists and communities have used the land and its resources as inspiration.

To begin...

Geologists estimate the earth is more than 4.5 billion years old and has gone through many changes during that time.

This guide to Earth Matters: Land as Material and Metaphor in the Arts of Africa has been supported through Smithsonian Institution funds from the Consortium for Valuing World Cultures and the Consortium for Understanding the American Experience.

The National Museum of African Art partnered with curators, educators and scientists at the Smithsonian’s National Air and Space Museum, National Museum of American History, National Museum of Natural History, the Smithsonian Conservation and Biodiversity Institute, the Smithsonian Environmental Research Center, the Smithsonian Gardens, the Smithsonian Global Earth Observatory, NASA, US Botanic Garden, US Department of Agriculture, MDA Information Systems, and the Environmental Film Festival in the Nation’s Capital.

Deborah Stokes, educator
Karen Milbourne, curator
Migs Grove, editor
Lisa Buck Vann, designer
Printed on 100% post-consumer waste paper!

Let’s start looking and unearth some new ideas!
Material Earth

What does the word earth mean to you? Clay? Sand? Grass? How about salt?

The earth’s surface—it’s rocky crust—is largely made of oxygen, silicon, aluminum, and iron.

Find examples of these earthen materials in the exhibition.

The earth, its minerals and natural materials, can contain many colors.

Can you spot these colors of the earth in this sculpture?

black (decayed plant substance)
white kaolin (ashlike tree for red dye)
red camwood (a kind of chalk)
grey iron (hand-forged blades)

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
Bogolan cloth is an artistic tradition from the country of Mali. The Bamana word bògòlanfini means bogo, “earth” or “mud”; lan, “with” or “by means of,” and fini, “cloth.”

A still life is an arrangement of everyday objects, such as fruit or flowers, used as subjects in drawings, paintings, and photographs. Find a still life.

Think about how the artist collected and used the plants in this image to symbolize South Africa’s history.

Visit the National Museum of Natural History’s exhibition The Mud Masons of Mali to learn more about hand building structures in West Africa with earth.
Power of the Earth

A *sculpture* is a three-dimensional (height + length + depth) work made by carving, modeling, or welding hard materials like wood, metal, stone, pottery, bone, and ivory into works of art.

African artists often add mixtures of plants and medicinal material to their sculptures over time. Soil taken from places such as a village’s first establishment or site, an ancestor’s grave, or from an anthill located at the center of an important field are charged with history, stories, and memories. Artists use them to communicate ideas about strength and energy.

Do you have a prized possession that reminds you of a powerful story? Share your story with your group.

Which words describe these works to you?

Can you find this object by an artist from Gabon?

- private
- peaceful
- caring
- mysterious
- healing
- beautiful

Look carefully to find these materials

- elephant hair
- feathers
- glass beads
- animal fur

LEFT
PUNU ARTIST, GABON
RELIQUARY ENSEMBLE: FEMALE HALF-Figure
19TH CENTURY
WOOD, KAOLIN PIGMENTS, HIDE, VEGETABLE FIBER, RELICS, ORGANIC MATTER
MUSÉE DU QUAI BRANLY, PARIS, FRANCE, 71.1943.0.433

ABOVE
TEKE ARTIST, REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO
BUTI OR NKIBA (HEALING FIGURE)
MID-20TH CENTURY
WOOD, PIGMENT, CLOTH, ENCRUSTATION, ELEPHANT HAIR
NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN ART, BEQUEST OF ELIOT ELISOFON, 73-7-399
Did you notice that the National Museum of African Art is 96% underground?

What have you found while digging in the ground or at the beach? Share it with your group.

Creatures that can move, tunnel, hibernate, and live both underground and on the earth’s surface are symbols of transformation and extraordinary ability.

Imagining the Underground

Can you find . . .

snake
mudfish
spider
**Strategies of the Surface**

A *landscape* is a scenic view depicting natural features like the sky, mountains, trees, deserts, and rivers.

*Find three different landscapes with*

- river
- palm tree
- sand

Postcards make landscapes easy to carry or mail to family and friends. Like photographs, they remind us of places we have visited and help us hold onto memories.

Imagine taking a walk through this landscape.

*Which words describe this scene to you?*

- quiet
- pleasant
- frightening
- worried
- relaxed
- lonely

Imagine a place you would like to visit. Describe it to your group.
This Mbuti bark cloth is reported to be a map of life in the forest. The drawings represent landmarks such as waterways, forest clearings, hunting areas, and camp.

Maps can contain easily recognizable landmarks that we use for giving directions or can help guide us to and through unfamiliar places.
Environmental Action

An abstract work of art can use the elements of form, texture, color, and line to create a composition that doesn’t look like what it represents in the natural world.

What words would you choose to describe this work:

towering
jagged
rough
smooth
destructive
resilient

Look for a wood sculpture carved with a chainsaw.
Before you leave the gallery, locate an abstract painting that looks like the artist spilled something on the canvas. What does it make you think about?

Can you find the white footprint?

Choose the work you liked best in the exhibition. Explain your choice to your group.
Visit the Smithsonian Environmental Research Center at www.serc.si.edu for information about nature and ecology programs, and a tree-banding project with students in Gabon.

Did you miss something in the exhibition?

You don’t have to see everything at one time... visit the museum again and again or view it online at africa.si.edu.