

REVIEWS

***Art and Life in Africa.* CD-Rom Program with *Teacher's Guide.* Iowa City, Iowa: University of Iowa, 1999. Macintosh & Windows (95/98NT compatible). CD-Rom \$50.00 (20% discount for 10 or more); *Teacher's Guide* \$10.00; S&H \$5.00 for up to 4 copies; \$10.00 for more. Order from Obermann Center for Advanced Studies, University of Iowa, 134 Oakdale Hall, Iowa City, IA 52242-5000.**

The *Art and Life in Africa* CD-Rom is an interactive program designed to involve teachers and students in the rich culture and history of ethnic Africans. The use of art as the medium for this engagement is a winning formula because art is as valuable a resource as are the written documents of the past for understanding different social, religious, economic, educational, and cultural systems. For much of human history, people have used art to represent their systems of beliefs, and to record important events in the lives of individuals and their communities. By studying the art of a particular culture, one is able to understand a great deal about why people do the things they do.

However, with regard to African art, many American students, probably because of popular media depictions of African cultures view African art as strange, abstract, and exotic, and invariably they fail to discern the meaning and ideas that African art communicates. The purpose of the *Art and Life in Africa* CD-Rom program is to de-exoticize African art, to increase appreciation of the power and beauty of African art, and to foster better understanding of Africa and its ethnic peoples.

This innovative CD-Rom is arranged in multimedia modules. One module contains eleven thematic chapters (e.g., "Abundance," "Governance," "Education/Initiation," and "Healing") written by specialists in the field of African cultural studies. These chapters depict the various life contexts in which art objects function in African societies. Another module contains thirty-seven essays by leading scholars drawing from their fieldwork in various aspects of African art history. The thematic chapters and field research essays provide the textual component of the CD, but are beautifully illustrated with high-quality field and museum photographs. Some of the essays contain video and music clips. In fact, the CD-Rom contains 10,000 images of 600 objects, 750 field photographs, 107 ethnographies, 27 ethnographic maps, and 1400 bibliographic entries. Country Database, People Database, Bibliography Database, Image Catalog, and Media Catalog are additional modules.

A *Teacher's Guide* is also available to augment the content of the CD-Rom; it contains several sample lesson plans and glossaries. For K-12 teachers with internet access, a web site is available (<http://www.uiowa.edu/~africart/>) with a Teacher's Forum, within which an electronic version of the *Teacher's Guide* is available with additional lesson plans for classroom instruction. Furthermore, teachers are able to submit their own lesson plans, participate in a password-controlled discussion, and visit a chat room for scheduled discussions with African art historians.

A particular strength of the CD-Rom is that it is user-friendly. Not only can teachers and students with limited computer confidence navigate through the chapters, databases, and essays, but they can also use the search, bookmark, and slide tools of the program with relative ease. To search for specific information, the user simply accesses a catalog or a database with a mouse. For instance, to read one of the Field Research Essays, the user clicks on "Field Research Essays" from the "Resources" menu, and the Field Research Essay Index appears with a list of names and essay titles from which the user can make a selection.

Perhaps the main merit of the CD-Rom is its versatility in recontextualizing African art. For instance, when students view an African mask, it is often out of its original context. The CD-Rom allows the user to see the contexts (e.g., initiation or coronation ceremony) within which certain masks are used. Not only does a text describe in words the function/meaning of a particular object, but also the user can click on a camera icon to see a photograph of the object in a localized African setting. To see how a specific object is used in a particular context, the user simply clicks on a filmstrip icon for a video and/or audio clip. The multimedia feature of the CD-Rom, which allows the user to see art objects in use contextually, and to hear associated sounds, allows for a range of possible teaching structures that would not be achieved easily with a standard textbook on African art or even with a video tape. For instance, for upper-level art students, the slide show tool can be used to create a presentation on the variety (political, religious, etc.) of African masks, and the masks in turn can be studied in terms of application of design, focusing on concepts such as repetition, emphasis, and symmetry.

But while the scope of *Art and Life in Africa* is very broad, it is not comprehensive. The thematic chapters, field essays, and images are excellent representations of the aesthetic traditions of Sub-Saharan Africa, but the CD-Rom provides very little information on northeast Africa and no mention of Egyptian antiquity. Also, this interactive CD-Rom with its impressive library of texts, images, and audio clips requires quite a bit of system resources on either a Macintosh or Windows 95/98 platform. The designers recommend 32 MB RAM for Windows and 24 MB for a Macintosh. But aside from the question of proper equipment, *Art and Life in Africa* is a well-produced, informative, and versatile product that is very appropriate for undergraduate students, but also useful for graduate African art history courses. I strongly recommend it.

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