Educator Resource: The Power of Voice

Explore the art of Suzanna Ogunjami and Uche Okeke in this discussion guide for high school educators.

Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum

About This Resource

This discussion guide explores the power of voice through the art of Suzanna Ogunjami (c. 1885–c. 1952; lived and worked in Jamaica, United States, and Sierra Leone) and Uche Okeke (1933–2016, Nigeria), two artists featured in the exhibition African Modernism in America, on view at the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum March 10–August 6, 2023. It is designed as a companion for high school educators bringing students to visit the exhibition or for use in the classroom with high-resolution artwork images.
**Learning Objectives**

- Students will use visual literacy skills to express and support their own interpretations of artworks while considering other people's perspectives.
- Students will learn about how two important African artists of the mid-20th century expressed their artistic voices and responded to the sociopolitical contexts of colonialism and African independence.
- Students will engage in creative response and reflect on the power of their own artistic voices.

**Tips for Discussing Works of Art**

- Spend one minute looking at the artwork before discussing.
- Invite students to describe what they see.
- Ask students to share their ideas about the artwork, encouraging them to ground their ideas in their visual observations and in knowledge of the historical and cultural context.

**Resource Folder**

The following resource folder contains downloadable artwork images, a map of African independence, and a timeline of some relevant political and cultural events:
https://wustl.box.com/s/7u45hav25galu03526yh4ubw6wbuqnu d

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**Suzanna Ogunjami, A Nupe Princess, c. 1934**

**About the Artist**

*A Nupe Princess* is one of few extant works by artist and arts educator Suzanna Ogunjami (c. 1885–c. 1952), who was raised
in Jamaica and moved to New York as a young woman. Ogunjami exhibited the painting in her 1934 solo exhibition at the Delphic Studios in New York City. She studied textiles and fine arts at Teacher's College, Columbia University, earning her MA in arts education in 1928. Ogunjami identified as an artist of Igbo descent, and she dedicated her research and creative practices to documenting West African artistic traditions. In 1935, Ogunjami moved to Freetown, Sierra Leone, where she established two schools that offered alternatives to the British colonial educational system, and she continued to paint and exhibit her art publicly. Her paintings were also exhibited in major traveling exhibitions of African American and modern African art in the United States.

About the Artwork

In *A Nupe Princess*, Ogunjami depicts an elegantly adorned royal member of the Nupe from Nigeria. Similarities between *A Nupe Princess* and the German artist Carl Arriens's *Girl of Southern Yoruba*, a 1911 watercolor illustration published in the ethnographic survey *The Voice of Africa*, suggests that Ogunjami based her composition on the earlier work. While in New York Ogunjami often drew inspiration for her paintings from books that she read about Africa, her memories, and her imaginings, writing in 1934, "as to my paintings the subjects are often from what I know and what I have been told. I sometimes visualize the interesting things I read about and finally compose and paint a picture of the same."

While there are clear similarities between *A Nupe Princess* and *Girl of Southern Yoruba*, there are also significant differences. Following the conventions of ethnographic images, *Girl of Southern Yoruba* presents its subject in order to illustrate an ethnic "type" rather than to portray an individual. Ethnographic illustrations reinforced the power structures of colonialism by labeling and categorizing colonial subjects through a Eurocentric lens. While Ogunjami also identifies the
ethnicity of her subject in her painting's title, she elevates her status to that of royalty and imbues her with a distinctive persona. Ogunjami replaces Arriens's young girl with a more mature woman, and she alters her headscarf and jewelry, painting her necklace in the red, green, and black colors of the Pan-African flag. The colors in Ogunjami's painting communicate a message of Pan-African solidarity that speaks to the artist's deep interest in and respect for the cultures and artistic traditions of West Africa. By reimagining the ethnographic format to create a portrait of a woman with a distinct identity, Ogunjami asserts her own artistic voice and perspective as a woman artist of the African diaspora.
Discussion Guide

Invite students to spend a minute looking closely at *A Nupe Princess* by Suzanna Ogunjami. Ask them to share what they notice, and use the following questions to prompt further observations:

- *Who do you imagine the person in this painting to be?*

- *What do you see that makes you say that?*
What do you notice about the accessories that adorn this figure?

Paraphrase students' responses, noting connections, supporting the generation of multiple meanings, and inviting further questions.

Next, share with students some information about the artist and artwork. Invite students to consider how this new information expands their initial thinking about the artwork.

Left: Suzanna Ogunjami, A Nupe Princess, c. 1934; Right: Carl Arriens, Girl of Southern Yoruba, 1911.

Tell students that Ogunjami may have based A Nupe Princess on Arriens’s ethnographic illustration Girl of Southern Yoruba and invite students to look at these two portraits side by side. Use the following questions to prompt discussion, sharing additional information and answering questions as needed to scaffold the discussion.

• What similarities and differences do you notice between these two portraits?
Why might it be important for Ogunjami to reimagine Arriens's ethnographic illustration?

How does Ogunjami assert her own artistic voice in her painting?

Have you ever used another creator's work as a model for your own? How did you express your own artistic voice while doing so?

Uche Okeke, *Ana Mmuo (Land of the Dead)*, 1961

About the Artist

Artist and theorist Uche Okeke (1933–2016) created this painting, titled *Ana Mmuo (Land of the Dead)*, in 1961, one year after Nigeria gained independence from the British Empire. In total, seventeen African nations gained their independence from European colonialism in the year 1960, which became known as "The Year of Africa." Okeke began his studies in painting at the Nigerian College of Arts, Science, and Technology at Zaria (now Ahmadu Bello University) in 1957. He and several other art students in a group called the Art Society questioned the Eurocentric curriculum of their teachers and sought to forge a new artistic path for the Nigerian nation at the dawn of independence. Okeke and his friends from the Art Society spent their school breaks traveling to different parts of Nigeria to learn and document many of the traditional art forms that were not taught to them in college. Okeke articulated the group's ideas in a 1960 manifesto titled "Natural Synthesis," which argues for the critical selection and combination of elements of Nigeria's diverse cultural heritages and European artistic forms to create a new, forward-looking art. Several years later, Okeke
joined the faculty at the University of Nigeria in Nsukka, where he encouraged students to study indigenous art forms and to reflect deeply on African art and culture.

**About the Artwork**

*Ana Mmuo (Land of the Dead)* can be seen as exemplifying Okeke’s aesthetic theory of natural synthesis, for which he looked to the cultural production of his own Igbo ethnic group. In this work, Okeke depicts an abstracted Igbo funeral masquerade using oil paint, a medium popularized in European artistic practices. He also employs the visual language of *uli*, a form of drawing practiced primarily by Igbo women using juice from the uli plant to adorn both skin and walls. Although Okeke grew up in northern Nigeria away from the Igbo communities in the southeast, his mother had been an uli artist. Okeke asked her to teach him to draw uli symbols and motifs, which often use stylized outlines to depict human figures and animals. In *Ana Mmuo (Land of the Dead)*, Okeke creates a dynamic masquerade scene using both his technical expertise in oil painting and the visual language of uli drawing, with its linearity and inventive use of negative space.
Discussion Guide

Invite students to spend a minute looking closely at *Ana Mmuo (Land of the Dead)* by Uche Okeke. Ask them to share what they notice, and use the following questions to prompt further observations:

- **What stands out to you about the artist's use of shape, line, and color?**

- **What associations and ideas does this artwork bring to mind?**

- **How does the title *Ana Mmuo (Land of the Dead)* shape your response?**

Paraphrase students' responses, noting connections, supporting the generation of multiple meanings, and inviting further questions.

Next, share with students some information about the artist and artwork. Invite students to consider how this new information expands their initial thinking about the artwork.

Show students examples of uli designs. Use the following questions to prompt discussion, sharing additional
information and answering questions as needed to scaffold the discussion.

- **What similarities and differences do you notice between the examples of uli designs and Okeke’s painting Ana Mmuo (Land of the Dead)?**

- **Why do you think Okeke wanted to create a new kind of art at the time that Nigeria was gaining independence from British colonialism?**

- **Where did Okeke look for inspiration when seeking to create a new kind of art?**

- **How does Okeke assert his own artistic voice in his painting?**

**Creative Response: Erasure Poem**

Explain to students that erasure poetry is a way of engaging with a text and transforming it to create a new work by using someone else's words to express your ideas in your own voice. Distribute copies of the below passage from Uche Okeke's 1960 manifesto "Natural Synthesis" to students and ask them to first read through the passage and talk with a partner about what it means. Ask students to read the passage again and underline the words and phrases that resonate with them. Next, ask students to cross out the surrounding text to "erase" it so that only their chosen words remain visible on the page and form their erasure poem. Invite students to title their poems and ask for volunteers to read their poems aloud.

“**Young artists in a new nation, that is what we are! We must grow with the new Nigeria and work to satisfy her traditional love for art or perish with our colonial past. [...] This is our age of enquiries and**
reassessment of our cultural values. This is our renaissance era! In our quest for truth we must be firm, confident and joyful because of our newly won freedom. We must not allow others to think for us in our artistic life, because art is life itself and our physical and spiritual experiences of the world. […] The artist is essentially an individual working within a particular social background and guided by the philosophy of life of his society. I do not agree with those who advocate international art philosophy; I disagree with those who live in Africa and ape [imitate] European artists. Future generations of Africans will scorn their efforts. Our new society calls for a synthesis of old and new, of functional art and art for its own sake. […] It is equally futile copying our old art heritages, for they stand for our old order. Culture lives by change. Today’s social problems are different from yesterday’s, and we shall be doing grave disservice to Africa and mankind by living in our fathers’ achievements. For this is like living in an entirely alien cultural background.” — Uche Okeke, "Natural Synthesis," 1960

**Vocabulary**

*African diaspora* the voluntary and involuntary movement of Africans and their descendants to various parts of the world
**Colonialism** the practice of extending and maintaining a nation's political and economic control over another people or area

**Ethnography** the study and systematic recording of human cultures

**Igbo people** an ethnic group primarily of southeastern Nigeria

**Manifesto** a written statement declaring publicly the intentions, motives, or views of its issuer

**Nupe people** an ethnic group primarily of west central Nigeria

**Pan-Africanism** a worldwide movement that aims to encourage and strengthen bonds of solidarity between all Indigenous and diaspora peoples of African ancestry with the ultimate aim of social and political unification

**Yoruba people** a West African ethnic group that mainly inhabit parts of Nigeria, Benin, and Togo, constituting more than 50 million people in Africa and over a million outside the continent

**Sources**


Image Credits

Suzanna Ogunjami (c. 1885–c. 1952; lived and worked in Jamaica, United States, and Sierra Leone), *A Nupe Princess*, c. 1934. Oil on canvas, 20 x 15 1/2 in. Fisk University Galleries, Nashville, TN. Gift of the Harmon Foundation. Courtesy of American Federation of Arts.


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