

**Linguist staff finial,
Fante, Akan, Ghana**

Wood with silver and gold leaf
University Art Museum, CSU,
gift of Richard and Jan DeVore,
1999.1.46



About the people...

The Fante are a subgroup within the Akan culture. They live in the south-western coastal region of Ghana, Africa, and are matrilineal with a social hierarchal ranking system. The Akan, including the Fante, create art with verbal and visual nexuses or symbolic meaning based upon oral literature.



Lesson Overview

Students will examine the art of Akan linguist staffs and the proverbs associated with the carved symbols on the finials. They will be able to understand the social and cultural importance of linguist staffs, proverbs and iconic representations. Students will create their own meaningful proverb and a three-dimensional linguist staff finial to go along with what they have written.

Objectives

1. Students will be able to describe, analyze and identify the components within a piece of art.
2. Students will evaluate the different functions of a piece of art.
3. Students will explore the context or history about a piece of art and the significance that art has to a culture.
4. Students will learn about the meaning behind symbols or iconic representations.
5. Students will be able to identify what proverbs and maxims are.
6. Students will be able to write their own proverb or maxim.
7. Students will be able to create their own linguistic staff finial based on their written proverb.

Vocabulary

- Linguist staff finials (sculptures)
- Linguist (*Okyeame*)
- Symbols
- Proverbs / Maxims
- Semantics
- Akan royalty
- Royal regalia
- Matrilineal

Artists

- Fante people
- Louise Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun
- 13th century Aachen Master Artists
- Scott Gustafson
- Miles Metzger
- Emily Floyd

Procedures: Part I - Comprehend and Reflect

1. Show an image of the Fante linguist staff finial (Slide 1). Ask the students to explain who they think these figures are on this statue. Ask them to identify what other objects or details they see in this piece (such as her hair style, clothing, adornments, the stool, gold and silver leaf). Ask if they think this woman and her two children are important people or not? Why? How did the artist show this? What do they think this piece is trying to express or say? What do they think this sculpture was used for? Why? Could it have been attached to something else? Who would have owned such a piece? What would they have done with it?

2. The Fante and other Akan peoples create these sculptures to adorn the top of staffs, known as linguistic staffs. (Slide 2) (Monica Blackmun Visonà, Robin Poyner, and Herbert M. Cole, *A History of Art in Africa*, 2nd ed., Upper Saddle River: Pearson, 2008) The men who own and carry these staffs are called *okyeame* (singular *okyeame*), and are the royal historian or spokesman for the ruling chief. The *okyeame* uses the linguist staff to convey different proverbs or maxims as a way to guide the chief when he is seeking counsel. For the Akan, proverbs operate to define acceptable behaviors, employ traditional customs or values and provide words of wisdom. On top of every linguist staff is a carved finial sculpture associated with multiple proverbs that can be applied to different situation or subjects. The *okyeame* will choose a linguist staff and a metaphorical proverb that wisely illustrates a solution to the current state of affairs. Linguist staffs function as semantics, which is the relationship between phrases or symbols and what they represent or their meaning.

3. Discuss the symbols associated with this linguist staff finial (Slide 1):

--Linguist staffs traditionally have gold or silver leaf applied to their surface. To the Akan, gold is seen as a living-being that can move through the earth and is a symbol of the chief's and the state's power. By creating objects from metal or applying metal to the piece, this then expresses the importance or powers of both the object and the owner. This linguist staff finial has both gold and silver leaf over top of the wooden sculpture.

--This finial depicts an important woman, or more specifically a Queen-Mother, which means the ranking royal Fante queen or chief. The Fante people are matrilineal, which means an individual's family lineage is descended or inherently passed through their mother's side. Thus, mothers are an important symbol to the Fante.

--The Queen-Mother on this finial is shown adorned with traditional Akan royal regalia. "Royal regalia" is a term that refers to the privileges and symbols of royalty or an important person in society. Some Fante royal regalia includes gold adornments or jewelry and clothing, such as Kente cloth. Look at (Slide 3) (http://cah.csudh.edu/art_gallery/kentecloth.htm), this photograph is of the Asante chief Nana Diko Pim III wearing his royal regalia. Ask the student what else do they see that makes this chief look important?

--Show students how specific coiffures or hairstyles can be considered royal regalia too. (Slide 4) (eds. Roy Sieber and Frank Herreman, *Hair in African Art and Culture*, New York: Museum for African Art, 2000). Look at this photograph of a Fante girl with the same coiffure style as the Queen-Mother on the linguist staff finial. Consider the time and effort it takes for someone to have their hair done like this.

--Other royal regalia can be important objects, such as stools (Slide 5) (<http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1986.478.2>). To the Akan culture, stools are not only used to sit on but also symbolize the power of the government leadership. Look at this portrait of the late 18th century queen of France, Marie Antoinette, done by Louise Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun (Slide 6) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Louise_Elisabeth_Vig%C3%A9-Lebrun_-_Marie-Antoinette_de_Lorraine-Habsbourg,_reine_de_France_et_ses_enfants_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg). Notice how Antoinette is depicted seated (or enthroned) and is wearing royal regalia to express her high social status? Look at these 13th century sculptures of Madonna and child seated on a throne (Slide 7) (<http://sites.tufts.edu/textilerepics/>). How do the artists express the mother and child's importance?

--Ask the students to compare these two European pieces with the Fante linguist staff finial (Slide 8). For example, both the Madonna and child sculpture and the linguist staff finial have the application of gold. Also, all three images show the women seated on a stool as a symbol of their importance.

--Another important symbol to the Fante culture is twins; this is for the reason that they believe twins are good fortune. This linguist staff finial (Slide 9) depicts the Queen-Mother holding on her lap twins as a symbol of fertility, fortune and the continuation of the royal matrilineal bloodline.

4. Consequently, these many different symbols can express many different verbal metaphors or oral proverbs. Proverbs or maxims are basic truths or words of wisdoms. Some example proverbs are, "Practice makes perfect," and, "Better safe than sorry." Ask students what are some proverbs or maxims they know. Have students write a proverb or maxim for this linguist staff finial sculpture (Slide 9). Remind the students to consider the different features or elements of the sculpture; for example the woman is a mother of twins, she is wearing royal regalia, she is seated on a stool.

Procedures: Part II – Create and Transfer

5. Discuss other examples of Fante linguist staff finials:

-- This finial (Slide 10) (<http://prv.mfah.org/twa/main.asp?target=images2&iid=45&cp=6>) depicts an elephant with human ears and multiple ears carved down the shaft of the staff. The proverb for this piece is, "The ears of the chief are as big as those of an elephant," which means, "Be careful what you say, for the chief hears all."

-- This finial (Slide 11) (Doran H. Ross, "The Verbal Art of Akan Linguist Staffs," *African Arts*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Nov., 1982)) depicts a leopard holding a gun in its mouth and is standing on top of a man. The proverb for this sculpture reads, "It is better not to have fired at all, than to fire and only wound the leopard;" in other words, "Power must be used judiciously and with precision," or basically, "Think before you act."

-- This finial (Slide 12) (Doran H. Ross, "The Verbal Art of Akan Linguist Staffs," *African Arts*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Nov., 1982)) depicts an elephant with a type of antelope standing on top of it. The proverb for this piece is, "Although the elephant is the strongest animal, it is the duiker that rules the forest," which expresses how "intelligence is prized over brute strength."

-- These two finials (Slide 13) (Doran H. Ross, "The Verbal Art of Akan Linguist Staffs," *African Arts*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Nov., 1982)) illustrate the benefit of teamwork. The finial showing a woman with chickens conveys the proverb, "If the old woman takes care of the hen, the hen will take care of the old woman." It explains how if you feed a chicken, the chicken will lay eggs for you to eat in return; ultimately, "Working together is success." The finial depicting leaves exemplifies the proverb, "Two leaves put together become thick," or in other words, "Two heads are better than one."

6. Have students think about and discuss some of the proverbs they know. Show a few example proverbs. Ask the students to explain how each of these artists used only symbols or images to represent the proverb.

-- Show this example (Slide 14) (http://www.scottgustafson.com/WN_Proverbs_paintings1.html) representation of the Japanese proverb by Scott Gustafson, "Hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil."

-- Another proverb example by Gustafson is (Slide 15) (http://www.scottgustafson.com/WN_Proverbs_paintings1.html), "Birds of a feather flock together."

-- The fountain sculpture by Miles Metzger (Slide 16) (http://www.milesmetzgersculpture.com/art_pages/fountains_thumbs.html) depicts the artist's interpretation of the proverb, "When it rains, it pours."

-- Look at this piece by Emily Floyd (Slide 17) (<http://www.broadsheet.com.au/melbourne/arts-and-entertainment/article/emily-floyd-conversation>). It represents the proverb, "The early bird gets the worm."

7. Have students then write their own proverb about something meaningful to them. Ask them to think about an experience they learned from in the past. When was the last time they did something embarrassing or were unsuccessful at something and how could you have done this better? Can they think of any certain animals or objects that have symbolic meanings, which could relate to the proverb they write about?

8. After students have written their proverb, have them draw an image of it using only symbols or images to express their proverb. Then have them create their proverb drawing in a three-dimensional form.

-- This can be done using clay, papier-mâché, cardboard, plaster, wood or other found materials.

-- The application of gold or silver to their linguist staff finial can include using metallic paint; for advanced students the applying of the metal can be done with metal leaf sheets.

-- To complete their linguist staff, students can attach their finial sculpture to a shaft by using a broomstick handle, a plastic tube or thick cardboard tube and paint it with gold or silver.

-- (For an example linguist staff created by a student, view Slides 18–21.)

Discussing Student Work / Assessment

1. Have students display their linguist staff finials. Like an *okyeame*, each student will then orally present to the class their proverb associated to their linguist staff.

2. Have the class discuss each of the student's linguist staff finial.

-- Ask them to identify the symbols, images or icons used in the finial.

-- Describe the symbols and how it is presented on the finial. Be specific. How are they positioned on the finial? Does the symbol interact with another symbol?

-- How do these symbols represent their proverb? Was the proverb easily seen in the finial or did you have to think about it? Did the artist use their symbols well to express the proverb? Explain.

Standards and 21st Century Skills

All lessons created using the University Art Museum's Permanent Collection align with the four Colorado Model Content Standards for Visual Art:

1. Observe and Learn to **Comprehend**
2. Envision and Critique to **Reflect**
3. Invent and Discover to **Create**
4. Relate and Connect to **Transfer**

Since lessons are written so that teachers can modify them for a variety of grade levels and learning objectives they are not aligned to grade level expectations. Lessons are aligned to Prepared Graduate Competencies. PGCs addressed in this lesson include:

--Analyze, interpret, and make meaning of art and design critically using oral and written discourse

--Explain, demonstrate, and interpret a range of purposes of art and design, recognizing that the making and study of art and design can be approached from a variety of viewpoints, intelligences, and perspective

--Recognize, interpret, and validate that the creative process builds on the development of ideas through a process of inquiry, discovery, and research

--Create works of art that articulate more sophisticated ideas, feelings, emotions, and points of view about art and design through an expanded use of media and technologies

--Recognize, compare, and affirm that the making and study of art and design can be approached from a variety of viewpoints, intelligences, and perspectives

--Critique personal work and the work of others with informed criteria

--Recognize, articulate, and implement critical thinking in the visual arts by synthesizing, evaluating, and analyzing visual information

Extensions

1. Experimenting with different carving media to create a linguist staff finial.

-- For younger students try using material such as papier-mâché, foam clay, air-hardening clay, or cardboard with plaster strips over top.

-- For older or advanced students try using wood, fire clay or plaster molds.

-- The application of gold or silver to the piece can be metallic paint or sheets of metal leaf.

2. Explore the possibilities of writing proverbs.

-- Students can write a proverb using a proverb they already know, but alter it to something valued in today's terms. For example, "Don't put all your eggs in one basket," can be altered to, "Don't save all your files to one USB flash drive."

-- Students can write a proverb based on their own life experiences.

3. Older or advanced students can research the Akan people, their art and historical proverbs. They can investigate the cultural importance of symbols or icons and the tradition of oral literature.

Relevance and Application:

-- Students can expand their skills working with art in a three-dimensional form.

-- Proverbial knowledge and the ability to articulate this in a well manner develops higher-order thinking and social skills.

-- Students can develop their writing skills by creating their own proverbs and symbols that imply meaning.

-- Students can learn how art is important and how art reflects a culture's style.

-- Learning about another culture's art teaches students about the people's history, religion, government, lifestyle and values.

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