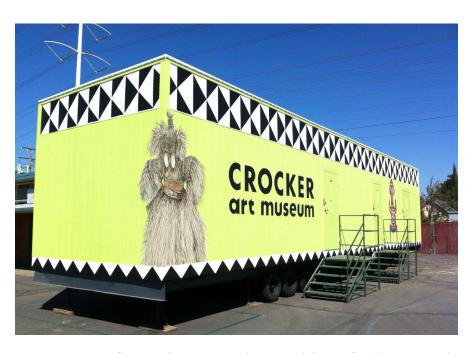
African and Asmat Art: A Brief Overview

The current installation of the Art Ark features African and Asmat art. Although these two genres are not geographically close, and Africa is made up of many cultures, there are enough similarities to provide unity of theme and make the combination logical. At the same time, there is enough variety to make the installation fascinating for preK-8 students and the adults who accompany them.

The **Asmat** (pronounced "oz mot") are a group of people who live in the Indonesian portion of the island of New Guinea, occupying an area along the southwestern coast of that island. Dense forests,



Form & Function: African and Asmat Art, a dynamic exhibition of sculpture, musical instruments, textiles, masks, and other objects from diverse African communities and the Asmat people of New Guinea.

rivers, and swamps are prominent features of the area. Because of its harsh and remote location, the Asmat people have been fairly isolated for centuries. Outside influence has begun to creep in and affect some elements of the culture, but many elements have remained largely unchanged over many generations.

The art of the Asmat is highly recognizable and collected worldwide. The most remarkable art form is the bis (usually "beezh") pole, a sculpture carved from the trunk and one root of the mangrove tree . Other prominent art forms include shields, costume items , canoes , and drums , with woodcarving being the most practiced form of art. Many of the art objects are used in ceremonies, and others are part of everyday life. Asmat art utilizes three colors only - white, red, and black - and makes striking use of bold lines. Much of their art is related to spiritual beliefs about ancestors and the world of spirits; thus, it is full of representations of humans and of animals with significant symbolic associations. The hornbill, for example, is viewed as a kind of bridge between this world and the next and is invariably found somewhere on every bis pole.

The term "**African** art" is too broad to convey much meaning, but there are some generalizations that can be made. Much of the African art in the Crocker's collection and introduced in the Ark is West



African, from cultures such as the Ashanti in Ghana and the Yoruba in Nigeria. Like that of the Asmat, the art of these peoples conveys a great deal of cultural symbolism and plays central roles in ceremonies and in everyday life.

Some essential African art forms are represented in the museum collections and in the Ark. Kente cloth , with its bright colors and bold designs, immediately conveys a sense of Africa and is a representative example of the important art of weaving in many African cultures. Masquerade is another widespread cultural feature, requiring the use of many types of masks and other costume items. Adinkra symbols are pictographs that communicate the values and other important concepts of the Ashanti people of West Africa; they adorn fabric and other items and are created with special stamps carved from gourds by artists. Beadwork is an important art form, as is sculpture - countless human figures, household items, masks, musical instruments, ceremonial items, and other works are carved from wood; terracotta and other forms of sculpture are found in African art as well.

One common feature of both Asmat and African traditional art is that, in most cases, the creator of a piece is unknown. While observers of Western art can often associate a body of work with a particular artist, observers of these art forms focus instead on concepts such as an artwork's context, form, and use. Careful observers will find that the elements of art and the principles of design can be applied universally and that doing so will open our eyes and our minds to an exciting understanding of other cultures, and an ability to see the world from someone else's point of view.