



Shaun Sartin/Daily Nebraskan



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ABOVE: Fulani medicine bag
LEFT: This Batik depicts a daily chore of Nigerian women.

BELOW: Ekto mask was used as protection and represented authority before the European Colonization started in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Nigerian artwork exhibited

By John Payne
Staff Reporter

African art and craft work, particularly that of Nigeria, is growing in popularity among western cultures. Often expressive of traditional native life, Nigerian folklore almost always influences its art.

Of course, those who visit the exhibit of Nigerian art at the Nebraska Union will get a taste of that country's culture, but Joseph Akpan, president of the Nigerian Students Association, says that students should take the time to find out about African art.

Every item at the display has some history behind it, Akpan said.

"We are thinking about opening our membership to all that are interested in Nigerian affairs, not just Nigerians," Akpan said. The NSA is considering this in part to make more people culturally aware, he said.

Akpan said the Nigerian attire on

hand at the display is "very typical" of his homeland. The colorful "tie-dyed" shirts are loose and cool to accommodate the African climate.

'I think that we will be offering a very broad (spectrum of art), ranging from the traditional to the modern.'

-- Akpan

Video footage of traditional dances and secret society rituals also can be seen at the display. Akpan described one of the dances being shown as a "skinny bride" dance. He explained to some of

the viewers that in many Nigerian tribes, if a tribesman's bride-to-be is deemed by the tribe to be too thin, she is taken for a length of time to be "fattened up," until she is thought to be ready for marriage.

It is important to remember, however, that Nigerian artwork does not consist entirely of tribal war masks and handmade jewelry. Intricate woodworking and painting also will be on hand this week at the Nebraska Union.

Many stereotypical attitudes about African art will be dispelled this week, Akpan said.

"I think that we will be offering a very broad (spectrum of art), ranging from the traditional to the modern," he said.

Also of interest is a collection of Nigerian currency, with an accompanying book about the country's monetary system both before and after the British colonization of Nigeria.



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Grant helps fund 'What is art?' courses for schools

By Mark Lage
Senior Reporter

A deceptively simple yet important question -- what is art? -- is one that has been debated for centuries, and is currently the topic of heated discussions in the nation's capitol in relation to the controversy currently surrounding the National Endowment for the Arts.

"Serrano (creator of "Piss Christ," the controversial photograph which has sparked much of the debate over the NEA) puts a plastic crucifix in a jar, urinates in the jar, takes a picture of it, and calls it art," said Sheila Brown, fine arts consultant for the Nebraska Department of Education. "But is it art?"

"It (the NEA controversy) is really the same question as this," Brown said, pointing to a picture of a Pablo Picasso sculpture in which a bicycle seat and handlebars are arranged to resemble a longhorn's head and horns. "Is this art?" Brown asked.

Brown is also the director of Prairie Visions: The Nebraska Consortium for Discipline-Based Art Education (DBAE), a group that hopes to have Nebraskans debating this question at an earlier age than ever before -- in elementary school -- and to continue the debate throughout high school.

The consortium, made up of Nebraska high schools, museums, universities, and educational service units, is using a grant from the Getty Center for Education in the Arts to change the way that visual arts are taught in Nebraska schools.

The group was founded two years ago by the Nebraska Department of Education and the Nebraska Art Teachers Association. The

groups wrote a joint proposal to the Getty Center on their art education ideas for Nebraska, and, based on the proposal, they received the Getty Center grant, Brown said.

The grant provides Prairie Visions with \$625,000, paid in five annual increments.

"And we're arranging \$475,000 more from foundations and other private sources in Nebraska," Brown said.

The grant requires the consortium to raise matching funds during the five-year period. Altogether, "that's a lot of money," Brown said.

"The goal (of Prairie Visions) is to make art a part of K-12 general education," Brown said. "And you can underline that as many times as you like."

Prairie Visions is basing its approach on DBAE, which is a new structure for art curriculums that has been developed by Elliot Eisner of Stanford University, Brown said.

Its principal goal is to create a systematic, sequential training in the four things that people do with visual art: make it, appreciate it, learn to understand it in relation to culture and make judgments about it.

In contrast to this, Brown said, previous elementary art education has involved nothing more than "isolated production activities, mostly involving holiday crafts."

"Art is not taught," Brown said. "Turkeys at Thanksgiving and Dove-bottle angels at Christmas are nice, but they don't teach children much about art, or anything else," she said.

Steps are being taken to create a "rich, substantive content area," for art education,

she said, so that visual art will be a subject on equal footing with math, science and other primary subjects.

Textbooks are being created for elementary schools that draw upon art history and include visuals ranging from Picasso, to folk art of other cultures, all the way to walk/don't walk signs, Brown said.

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-- Brown

The Prairie Visions consortium is one of six groups across the country which is setting up institutes to intensively train general classroom teachers, art specialists and school administrators in the theory and application of DBAE, Brown said. The other consortiums are in Florida, Minnesota, Ohio, Tennessee and Texas.

"It's important that Nebraska is one of the first six states," Brown said. "The school districts involved will have national attention because they are involved in pioneering work."

Last year was the pilot year for Prairie Visions. Institutes were held over the summer, and some of the programs are being implemented in schools this fall.

This past summer the consortium gathered for two weeks of DBAE training and study. The first week's institute took place at Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha, where 180 consortium members studied visuals, solved visual problems, looked at, talked about, debated and made art, Brown said.

After that, the members divided into their regional groups and gathered at the four regional hubs -- Joslyn in Omaha; Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery in Lincoln; The Museum of Nebraska Art in Kearney; and West Nebraska Arts Center in Scottsbluff -- for another week's activity and study.

Brown said she hopes that after five years, when the grant runs out, the new art curriculum will be instituted in the schools, and that the public will be behind it.

In the meantime, the consortium is arranging for the collection of the matching funds from groups like The Nebraska Arts Council, The Seacrest Family Trust, The Cooper Foundation and The Nebraska Art Association. Public school districts also are helping out financially, Brown said.

The consortium currently includes 22 school districts and eight colleges and universities, Brown said. Twenty-nine new districts have applied, she said, but she doesn't know how many the consortium will be able to add right away.

"Our goal is to be open to all who want it," she said.

"It's really great," Brown said of the consortium. "Groups usually try to just carve out their own little niche, but this is a wonderful partnership between people and groups who care about what happens to young people."