Expressions of Culture: Visual Forms of the Kuba

Karen J. Willis (Mary F. Franey, Pauline W. Wiessner)
College of Fine Arts, Department of Anthropology,
Utah Museum of Fine Arts, University of Utah

This project involves the research, development, and installation of an exhibition of African cultural material drawn from the Utah Museum of Fine Arts collections. Often museum visitors are unaware of, or underestimate the complexity of the African nations, yet the diversity of this continent is evident in the social, economic, aesthetic, and religious aspects of everyday African life. The project developed from a philosophical and ethnographic framework, connecting the physical, aesthetic, and spiritual elements that are critical to the production of cultural material. Objects produced by a people are a way of contesting and negotiating relationships, for they help affirm and reproduce those connections.

As cultures change, visual forms may remain stylistically constant, although the meanings attached to them may vary. By examining cultural material as the representation of a society, complexities are revealed—the artistic and social constructs become apparent in the functional and sacred objects made and utilized by a culture. Kuba culture is rich with ritual and symbolism; this heritage is striking in the language it presents—a visual language of varied forms and geometric patterns. A variety of works represent a range of designs reflecting indigenous beliefs. Examples illustrate that disparate objects often serve to convey, support and perpetuate different parts of this culture's belief system. In displaying common objects alongside those of the sacred and sublime, the correlations and ubiquity of this visual language can readily be observed. Visual forms also reinforce other types of communicative messages.