

## Summary of Discussion on Feb. 9: Who is the traditional African artist?

Theme: How is the traditional African artist different from our conceptions of the artist in western cultures?

The first point is that we were speaking of “traditional” artists who may be very different from diasporan artists. This is immediately apparent in the first point that was made: the traditional artist is often unknown or anonymous. They did not sign their names to their work or take credit for making it.

We added to this the fact that one reason why they did not sign their names was because they made something to be used in a specific ceremony or ritual. This means that individual expression is not the goal of the art work. The artist must understand the needs of the ritual, whether these include movement or healing, in order to make the art work.

We talked about the existence of many situations in which the people who make the art work may not be the same as the person who directs it. The artist in this case may be like an architect, in making plans, and then other people, often townspeople, do the work of making it. We compared this to the workshop model which dominated the Renaissance and which is still used today in many instances.

We also talked about the artist as “conduit” or channel for the expression of ideas about the world of spirits. This role means that the artwork is used to communicate these ideas in some form. The artist, in a sense, is making a spiritual journey to the other world in order to learn how to make this art work and to discover the “correct” means of communicating these ideas. Other analogies we made included the artist as a spiritual healer and as a doctor.