

Aesthetic Similarities in Native American Totems and African Ritual Sculptures

Austine Emifoniye PhD

Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, NY

ABSTRACT: This research explores the aesthetic parallels between Native American totemic carvings and African ritual sculptures, emphasizing their shared approaches to form, symbolism, and cultural function. Although rooted in distinct geographic and cultural contexts, both traditions exhibit a stylized representation of the human figure and spiritual motifs. Through abstraction, each transforms physical materials into symbolic expressions of the sacred, conveying metaphysical concepts. Native American totem poles often feature vertically arranged figures that embody ancestral spirits and mythological entities, while African sculptures typically depict deities or ancestors using exaggerated and symbolic forms. These artistic strategies transcend decoration, serving as manifestations of communal identity, spiritual devotion, and cosmological insight. By conducting comparative visual and cultural analysis, this study reveals how both traditions utilize art to bridge the material and spiritual realms. Despite their cultural differences, the aesthetic choices reflect a universal human drive to represent the sacred and preserve cultural narratives through visual storytelling.

KEYWORDS: Totem carvings, Ritual sculptures, Symbolism, Abstraction, Ancestral art, African art, Sacred expression

INTRODUCTION

Art has consistently reflected cultural identity, spiritual belief, and collective memory. Across diverse regions and historical periods, Indigenous communities have crafted intricate visual languages to express their cosmologies, social systems, and ancestral connections (Emifoniye, 2022). Among these traditions, Native American totemic carvings and African ritual sculptures stand out as powerful representations of sacred heritage and artistic innovation. Though these forms developed in distinct cultural and geographic settings, they reveal notable aesthetic and symbolic similarities that merit thoughtful comparative study (Kaimal & Arslanbek, 2020; Wright, n.d.; Onibere, 2024). This study investigates the visual and conceptual parallels between selected Native American totems, particularly those from the Pacific Northwest Coast, and African ritual sculptures originating from regions such as West and Central Africa. Both artistic traditions employ stylized abstraction, layered symbolism, and hierarchical design to communicate spiritual narratives and social values. These works often act as mediators between the physical and spiritual realms, playing vital roles in ceremonies, rites of passage, and communal storytelling (Berj Gallery, n.d.; Coco Papaya, n.d.; Onibere, 2024). Far from being purely decorative, their forms are deeply symbolic, reflecting the cosmological beliefs and cultural frameworks of their respective societies (College Board, n.d.; Emifoniye, 2025).

By analyzing these artworks through the lenses of form, function, and symbolism, this paper aims to reveal shared aesthetic strategies and cultural roles. Drawing on insights from visual anthropology and art history, the study situates the carvings within their ritual and social contexts (College Board, n.d.). Native American totems and African ritual sculptures, though culturally distinct, both reflect a deep-rooted impulse to materialize the sacred and encode communal identity in visual form (Wright, n.d.). Rather than implying direct influence or cultural borrowing, the research emphasizes the universality of certain artistic expressions such as honoring ancestors and conveying cosmological beliefs, across Indigenous traditions (Onibere, 2024). The integration of Indigenous knowledge systems further enriches the interpretation of these works, highlighting their symbolic complexity and spiritual significance (Kaimal & Arslanbek, 2020).

This exploration contributes to a broader understanding of how Indigenous art across cultures reflects shared human concerns while remaining deeply rooted in local traditions (Emifoniye, 2022). By examining visual expressions from Native American and African contexts, the study highlights the ways in which sacred narratives, ancestral reverence, and communal identity are encoded in artistic form. It also challenges long-standing Eurocentric frameworks that have often marginalized non-Western art, advocating for a more inclusive and comparative approach to global aesthetics (Emifoniye, 2025; Kaimal & Arslanbek, 2020). Through this lens, Indigenous visual traditions are recognized not only for their cultural specificity but also for their universal relevance in the discourse of art history and anthropology (Berj Gallery, n.d.).

PHILOSOPHICAL FRAMEWORK

This study adopts a phenomenological framework to explore the aesthetic and symbolic dimensions of Native American and African sacred art. Phenomenology, particularly as articulated by Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger, emphasizes the lived experience and embodied perception of art as a means of accessing metaphysical truths. Merleau-Ponty (1974) argues that art and philosophy share the task of revealing the perceptual world, where visual forms express the essence of human experience. Similarly, arts-based phenomenological research views artistic creation as a method for intuiting and expressing the sacred and communal dimensions of life (Gupta & Zieske, 2024). This framework allows for a comparative interpretation of indigenous art as a phenomenological expression of cultural memory, spiritual reverence, and cosmological understanding.

LITERATURE SURVEY

Comparative studies of Indigenous art traditions have gained traction in recent decades, challenging Eurocentric frameworks and emphasizing the cultural specificity and global relevance of non-Western aesthetics (Thompson, 1983; Jonaitis, 2006). The art of the Pacific Northwest Coast, particularly totem poles, has been extensively studied for its complex visual language and cultural significance. Bill Holm's seminal work introduced the concept of "formline design," a system of stylized shapes and curves that structure the visual grammar of totemic carvings (Holm, 1965). Holm's formalist approach provided a foundation for both academic study and cultural revitalization among Native artists.

Aldona Jonaitis (2006) expanded on Holm's work by situating totem poles within broader socio-political and historical contexts. She emphasized the resilience of Native artistic traditions in the face of colonization and cultural suppression and critiqued the commodification of totem poles in museum and tourism settings. More recently, Yan and Su (2025) explored the spiritual dimensions of totemic art, arguing that these carvings embody a multidimensional aesthetic sublime, humanistic, and metaphysical that connects communities to the divine and the cosmos.

African ritual sculpture, particularly from West and Central Africa, has long been recognized for its symbolic richness and ceremonial function. Robert Farris Thompson's work remains a foundational text in this field. Thompson (1983) explores the spiritual philosophies embedded in African art, such as the Yoruba concept of *ashe* and the Kongo *cosmogram*, highlighting how sculpture serves as a conduit for ancestral and cosmic forces. Susan Vogel (1997) critiques Western interpretations of African art and emphasizes the dynamic role of sculpture in everyday ritual and social life. Her work underscores the importance of understanding African art within its original cultural context, rather than through the lens of Western aesthetics or museum display.

Emifoniye's (2022) research further enriches this comparative framework. His study on Urhobo ritual sculpture emphasizes the role of carved figures as objects of divination, deeply embedded in spiritual practice and community life. These sculptures are not merely aesthetics but are activated through ritual, serving as mediators between the physical and metaphysical realms. In his 2025 critique of museum practices, Emifoniye (2025) argues that African ritual sculptures lose their cultural and spiritual potency when removed from their original contexts and displayed in Western institutions. He advocates for culture-based interpretation and multimedia presentation to restore meaning and authenticity to these works within museum settings. Diakparomre (2022) offers a complementary critique of classification paradigms in African sculpture studies, arguing that both aesthetic and ethnological approaches are insufficient on their own and calls for a more holistic framework that accounts for historical mobility, cultural interaction, and Indigenous epistemologies.

While both Native American and African artistic traditions have been extensively studied within their respective cultural contexts, few scholarly efforts have undertaken a direct aesthetic comparison between them. This study addresses that gap by examining how both traditions employ abstraction, symbolism, and spiritual function to create visually and culturally resonant forms. Native American totemic carvings, particularly those from the Pacific Northwest Coast, utilize stylized forms and symbolic motifs to represent ancestral spirits, mythological beings, and cosmological beliefs (Holm, 1965; Jonaitis, 2006). Similarly, African ritual sculptures from West and Central Africa embody spiritual philosophies and serve as conduits for divine communication, ancestral reverence, and communal identity (Thompson, 1983; Vogel, 1997).

By placing these artistic and spiritual traditions in dialogue with one another, this study brings to light the shared aesthetic principles and sacred functions that transcend cultural boundaries. It reveals a profound and enduring human impulse to give tangible form to the sacred, transforming belief into visual expression, and to encode collective memory, identity, and meaning through the language of art. In doing so, it underscores the universal role of visual culture in shaping, preserving, and transmitting spiritual experience across time and space.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a comparative visual analysis approach, grounded in art historical and anthropological methods, to examine aesthetic similarities between selected Native American totemic carvings and African ritual sculptures. The methodology is qualitative in nature and focuses on formal, symbolic, and contextual elements of the artworks.

Aesthetic Similarities in Native American Totems and African Ritual Sculptures

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select representative examples from each tradition. For Native American totems, carvings from the Haida, Tlingit, and Tsimshian peoples of the Pacific Northwest were chosen. For African ritual sculptures, works from the Yoruba, Dogon, and Fang traditions were selected. Each artwork was analyzed using formalist criteria, including line, shape, symmetry, abstraction, stylization, compositional hierarchy, and technique. This analysis draws on the frameworks established by Holm (1965) and Thompson (1983). Beyond form, the study investigates symbolic meanings and ritual functions, including ancestral veneration, spiritual mediation, and social identity. Ethnographic and historical sources inform this interpretive layer.

The final stage involves synthesizing findings to identify aesthetic parallels and conceptual resonances. The comparison seeks to highlight shared artistic strategies that reflect universal human concerns. This study is limited by its reliance on secondary sources and museum-held artifacts, which may not fully capture the original ritual context or community interpretations.



Totem Haida Pole (1954)
Photo: Ryan Bushby (2006)
Source: [wikimedia.org](https://www.wikimedia.org)



Tlingit K'alyaan Totem Pole
Photo: Robert A. Estremo (2005)
Source: [wikimedia.org](https://www.wikimedia.org)



Tsimshian Totem (1994)
in honor of Albert Bolton
Source: www.amnh.org



Yoruba Ere Ibeji Twin Figures
Early 20th C.
Wood, bead, cowrie, leather
Source: [wikimedia.org](https://www.wikimedia.org)



Fang Ancestor statue
19th – early 20th C.
Wood and metal
Source: [wikimedia.org](https://www.wikimedia.org)



Dogon Ancestor figure
17th – 18th C.
Wood
Source: [wikimedia.org](https://www.wikimedia.org)

ANALYSIS

Both Native American totems and African ritual sculptures are profound expressions of cultural identity, spirituality, and artistic innovation. Despite originating from vastly different continents and traditions, these art forms share notable similarities in abstraction, symbolism, and ritual function, while also reflecting the unique worldviews of their respective cultures.

Abstraction and Stylization - Both traditions utilize abstraction not merely for aesthetic purposes but to convey spiritual and symbolic meaning.

Aesthetic Similarities in Native American Totems and African Ritual Sculptures

- Northwest Coast totems, particularly those of the Haida, Tlingit, and Tsimshian peoples, employ *formline* design which is a system of flowing lines, ovoids, and U-forms that create a rhythmic and dynamic composition. This stylization allows artists to represent animals and mythical beings in a way that emphasizes their spiritual essence rather than literal appearance (Holm, 1965).
- African ritual sculptures, especially those from the Yoruba, Dogon, and Baule cultures, often feature elongated limbs, exaggerated heads, and geometric simplification. These stylistic choices are not arbitrary; they reflect beliefs about the seat of wisdom (the head), the importance of spiritual vision, and the transcendence of physical form (Thompson, 1983). The abstraction serves to elevate the figure from mundane to the sacred.

Symbolism and Cultural Narratives - Symbolism is deeply embedded in both art forms, serving as a visual language for mythology, ancestry, and cosmology.

- Native American totems often depict animals such as the raven, bear, or eagle, each associated with clan lineage, ancestral stories, and moral lessons. These figures are not just decorative; they are mnemonic devices that encode oral histories and social structures (Jonaitis, 2006).
- African sculptures represent a wide array of spiritual entities, ancestors, deities, and mythological beings (Emifoniye, 2022, 2025). For example, Yoruba *ere ibeji* twin figures honor deceased twins and maintain spiritual balance, while Dogon sculptures may depict primordial ancestors who shaped the cosmos (Vogel, 1997). These symbols are integral to maintaining harmony between the living and the spiritual realms.

Ritual and Communal Function - Both totems and ritual sculptures are active agents in religious and communal life, not passive objects.

- Totem poles are raised during potlatch ceremonies, which are complex events involving gift-giving, status affirmation, and spiritual invocation. The poles serve as markers of identity, history, and spiritual presence, often standing at the entrance of homes or community spaces (Yan & Su, 2025).
- African ritual sculptures are used in divination, healing, initiation rites, and ancestor worship. They are often housed in shrines, consulted by priests, and activated through offerings and chants (Emifoniye, 2022). Their power lies not just in their form but in their ritual activation, which transforms them into vessels of spiritual force (Thompson, 1983; Diakparomre, 2022).

Sacred Presence and Ontological Bridge - In both traditions, the artwork functions as a bridge between the material and immaterial realms. It is not merely symbolic—it is sacred technology.

- The totem pole becomes a conduit for ancestral spirits and cosmic forces, grounding them in the physical world while pointing toward the metaphysical.
- The ritual sculpture similarly embodies spiritual presence, often believed to house the actual spirit of the ancestor or deity it represents (Emifoniye, 2022). It mediates between the human and divine, the seen and unseen.

Through abstraction, symbolism, and ritual function, Native American totems and African ritual sculptures reveal a shared understanding of art as a living force, a medium through which communities' express identity, engage with the sacred, and maintain continuity with their past. These works are not just art; they are embodied cosmologies, rich with meaning and purpose.

CONCLUSION

This comparative analysis underscores a profound convergence between the aesthetic strategies and spiritual functions of Indigenous North American and African sculptural traditions. Despite their distinct cultural contexts, both traditions employ abstraction not merely as a stylistic choice but as a deliberate method for expressing metaphysical concepts and spiritual realities (Holm, 1965; Thompson, 1983). The use of hierarchical composition evident in the vertical arrangement of totem poles and the structured forms of African ancestral figures serves to articulate mythological narratives and genealogical hierarchies, reinforcing communal memory and cosmological order (Vogel, 1997). Importantly, these artworks are not passive objects of visual pleasure; they are active agents within spiritual and social life. They function as conduits for ancestral presence, spiritual power, and communal identity, often playing roles in rituals, ceremonies, and acts of remembrance (Jonaitis, 2006; Diakparomre, 2022; Emifoniye, 2022).

While each tradition is deeply rooted in its own cultural and historical framework, they share thematic resonances such as reverence for ancestors, embodiment of spiritual authority, and the visual encoding of cultural memory that transcend geographic boundaries (Yan & Su, 2025). By highlighting these shared dimensions, this study contributes to the ongoing project of decolonizing art history. It challenges Eurocentric paradigms that have historically marginalized Indigenous and African art forms, advocating instead for a more inclusive and cross-cultural understanding of aesthetics. Recognizing the intellectual and

Aesthetic Similarities in Native American Totems and African Ritual Sculptures

spiritual sophistication embedded in these traditions affirms their rightful place within global art discourse and encourages a reevaluation of how we define and value artistic expression across cultures.

REFERENCES

- 1) Berj Gallery. (n.d.). The world of African sculpture: Timeless. <https://www.berjartgallery.com/news/the-world-of-african-sculpture-timeless/>
- 2) Coco Papaya. (n.d.). Native American totem poles: Symbols, beliefs and history of the indigenous peoples of the Northwest Coast. <https://www.coco-papaya.com/en/blog/ethnic-decoration-handicrafts-from-around-the-world/native-american-totem-poles-symbols-beliefs-and-history-of-the-indigenous-peoples-of-the-northwest-coast>
- 3) College Board. (n.d.). AP Art History Course and Exam Description: Indigenous Americas. <https://secure-media.collegeboard.org/digitalServices/pdf/ap/ap-art-history-ced-content-area-5-indigenous-americas.pdf>
- 4) Diakparomre, A. M. (2022). African traditional sculptures: An appraisal of classification paradigms. *African Research Review*, 4(1).
- 5) Emifoniye, A. (2022). Sculpture as objects of divination among the Urhobo of the Niger Delta, Nigeria: An overview. *Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 11(3), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.18533/jah.v11i03.2226>
- 6) Emifoniye, A. (2025). Are museums safe spaces or prisons for African ritual sculpture? *European Journal of Science, Innovation and Technology*, 5(2), 196–201.
- 7) Gupta, N., & Zieske, C. (2024). Arts-based phenomenological research: Theory and praxis. *Qualitative Psychology*, 11(1), 95–109. <https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000285>
- 8) Holm, B. (1965). *Northwest Coast Indian art: An analysis of form*. University of Washington Press.
- 9) Jonaitis, A. (2006). *Art of the Northwest Coast*. University of Washington Press.
- 10) Kaimal, G., & Arslanbek, A. (2020). Indigenous and traditional visual artistic practices: Implications for art therapy clinical practice and research. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, Article 1320. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01320>
- 11) Merleau-Ponty, M. (1974). *Phenomenology of perception*. London & New York: Routledge & K. Paul; Humanities Press.
- 12) Onibere, V. (2024). Intersection of art and religion in African cultures. *Peradaban Journal of Religion and Society*. https://www.academia.edu/122549480/IntersectionofArtandReligioninAfrican_Cultures
- 13) Thompson, R. F. (1983). *Flash of the spirit: African and Afro-American art and philosophy*. Random House.
- 14) Vogel, S. (1997). *Africa explored: European descriptions of African art from the 16th through the 19th century*. The Museum for African Art.
- 15) Wright, R. K. (n.d.). Totem poles: Heraldic columns of the Northwest Coast. American Indians of the Pacific Northwest Collection. University of Washington Libraries. <https://content.lib.washington.edu/aipnw/wright.html>
- 16) Yan, Z., & Su, Z. (2025). A study of spiritual expression in totemic art: Based on a multidimensional analysis of sublime beauty, humanistic beauty and artistic beauty. *Religions*, 16(9), 1148. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16091148>



There is an Open Access article, distributed under the term of the Creative Commons Attribution – Non Commercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits remixing, adapting and building upon the work for non-commercial use, provided the original work is properly cited.