

# 1.6 Visual Media

## Aim

- To learn alternative ways of communicating through low-cost visual media.

## Materials Required

- Three volunteer students

### : Input

: Introduction

: Alternative media are also called group media as distinguished from mass media. These forms of media are easy to use, cheap and pertain to local issues. They are alternative forms of exercising change and social transformation in society and operate at the grassroots level where people are. In this sense they are democratic and liberating - as opposed to mass media that are centrally controlled by the corporates and that communicate the message that the sender considers important. In this chapter, we will explore traditional African art and the various forms of alternative media. The choice of media selected and the duration of the period will be left to the discretion of the educator.

### : History of African Art

: African art constitutes one of the most diverse legacies on earth. Though many casual observers tend to generalize “traditional” African art, the continent is full of peoples, societies, and civilizations, each with a unique visual special culture. The definition also includes the art of the African Diasporas, such as the art of African Americans. Despite this diversity, there are some unifying artistic themes when considering the totality of the visual culture from the continent of Africa.

\* Emphasis on the human figure: The human figure is the primary subject matter for most African art. In historical periods involving trade between Africa and Europe, the introduction of the human body into existing European pottery and other art forms can reliably be taken as evidence of contact with African cultures. For example in the fifteenth century Portugal traded with the Sapi culture near the Ivory Coast in West Africa, who created elaborate ivory saltcellars that were hybrids of African and European designs, most notably in the addition of the human figure (the human figure typically did not appear in Portuguese saltcellars).

\* Visual abstraction: African artworks tend to favor visual abstraction over naturalistic representation. This is because many African artworks, regardless of medium, tend to represent objects or ideas rather than depict them. Even the so-called portrait heads of Ile-Ife in modern day Nigeria, usually thought of as naturalistic representations of rulers, have actually been smoothed and simplified in an effort to abstract and generalize stylistic norms. Ancient Egyptian art, also usually thought of as naturalistically depictive, makes use of highly abstracted and regimented visual canons, especially in painting, as well as the use of different colors to represent the qualities and characteristics of an individual being depicted.

\* Emphasis on sculpture: African artists tend to favor three-dimensional artworks over two-dimensional works. Even many African paintings or cloth works were meant to be experienced three-dimensionally. House paintings are often seen as a continuous design wrapped around a house, forcing the viewer to walk around the work to experience it fully; while decorated cloths are worn as decorative or ceremonial garments, transforming the wearer into a living sculpture.

\* Emphasis on performance art: An extension of the utilitarianism and three-dimensionality of traditional African art is the fact that much of it is crafted for use in performance contexts, rather than in static ones. For example, masks and costumes very often are used in communal, ceremonial contexts, where they are “danced.” Most societies in Africa have names for their masks, but this single name incorporates not only the sculpture, but also the meanings of the mask, the dance associated with it, and the spirits that reside within. In African thought, the three cannot be differentiated.



## Material Collection

Making audio-visuals often requires basic material such as:

- Pencils, pens, a ruler, an eraser
- Paper, glue, scissors, brushes and paints, ink
- Pins sticking-tape, paper clips, stapler and staples
- Coloured paper, cardboard, tinsel, decorative papers...
- Pictures: keep a watch for good pictures. File them in folders or boxes according to various topics.

## Pictures and Photos:

- There are essentially two types of pictures: those that require text for their explanation and those that speak by the power of their visual images.
- When selecting pictures for pastoral purposes we may have need of both types in different situations. For notice boards that are wordy and require pictures to break the monotony of text, the first of the two types comes handy
- The second type of pictures/ photos are those that say a lot even without a single word. Such pictures make very powerful messages for notice boards. No words are required - or if they have to be used, it is best to keep them to their minimum.
- Such pictures can also be used in group sharing and reflection. Sometimes they can tell us about the values we live or do not live by. They can also supply the inspiration for prayer.
- To find such pictures is not easy. We require to train our eyes to look for them.
- In using pictures or in producing them, it is essential to keep in mind the audience and the situation for which the photo is made. It is helpful to concentrate on one theme and to isolate one key-word or key-image and make it the centre.

## Exercise:

Design a notice board on the theme: “The best things in life are free” Or “A picture is worth a thousand words.”

## Posters

- Like photographs, posters are of two types: those that are colourful and require many pictures, and those that are based on text.
- Imagination and aesthetics are important requirements in designing a poster. Spelled out in detail this means attentiveness to colour and shape; a sense of balance as well as off-balance; a clear idea of what has to be communicated; the aptitude to put text and pictures together in a perfect composition.
- For the purpose of creating a poster, one needs to have lots of magazines, newspapers, big and small.
- Choose a background colour pinned on to the notice board of soft board or plywood and cloth (on which elements can be fixed and dismantled again) scissors, glue and string.
- Different colours express different meanings.
- Shapes can be determined by the material you have, the size of a sheet of paper, but you can also express something by giving it a precise form: a circle, square, horizontal or vertical oblong.
- It is very important to use the symbols used by the people. This also includes colour and shapes.
- Keep the poster simple and the message clear.

## Exercise:

Create a poster on the theme (PEACE, UNITY, LIFE IS PRECIOUS)

## Collages

- Collages are an excellent visual tool for group work. A collage is a composition of pictures, words, or objects, which have been collected according to a given theme. The process of selection and arrangement is already a reflective one and continues through presentation and group discussion. It can be undertaken by the group as a whole in exploring a theme, or by an individual presenting a theme.
- While doing a picture/photo collage, the group members are asked to cut (or tear) from the newspapers or magazines provided any pictures and texts which “speak” to them of the given theme. The group then selects and arranges the material whereby the most striking picture is to be the centre around which the rest is arranged. Then everything is fixed to the background sheet.
- In a word collage a similar process is followed except that instead of pictures, we use words and write them on slips of paper, large enough to be legible from far. The arrangement of paper slips can be circular with the keyword in the centre, or words can be grouped according to similarity.
- Object collage is a way of deepening in people an awareness of the symbolic in ordinary things of life, and helping them discover how everything around us is charged with meaning. Ask the group to wander about in the open and bring back objects which speak to them on a given theme: Life, Danger, Suffering, etc. The object can be placed on the ground or pinned to a soft board. It helps if the theme appears written on the collage to focus attention when people say why they have chosen an object and what it reminds them of.

## Collage Composition

- Composition, layout, format, should be agreed upon by everybody. If a group is large, it is advisable to divide people into smaller groups and have each group present its collage to the large group.

- The way the pictures, photos, words or objects are arranged is also important. There are feelings ascribed to lines and shapes. Avoid gluing picture elements together in just any odd way, to fill the space available. Study the psychology of lines and shapes explained in the previous lesson. Composing words and pictures within such a framework can be challenging.

### Exercises:

Get the group to make collages on the following themes:

- Beauty of Creation (Photo collage)
- HIV/AIDS Awareness (Word collage)
- Conserve Nature (Object collage)

### Banners

- Banners have the advantages of long life. They can be used vertically or horizontally. Some large pieces of cotton or silk cloth provide the backdrop for new designs. Text may be painted directly on the cloth, while a collage work can be stuck or sewn onto the cloth.
- Banners are useful for liturgical purposes and for providing visual reflections. The group preparing the liturgies can thus share their reflection visually, and help the congregation to enter into a particular theme. The theme can also be built up over several Sundays, as for example during Lent and Advent. Display the banner in a prominent place in church and replace it or remove it punctually.

### Exercise:

Create a banner on the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit or the Beatitudes.

### Murals

- Murals are very much like collages. Instead of sheets of paper, it is the wall space which provides the framework for a composition. In a mural a theme can be worked out in more detail, with pictures and texts, and then be arranged and stuck on to the wall. It is important that all the elements are linked up to each other and the eye can follow a certain order. Pieces of coloured paper, possibly one colour for all the “linking elements” can give direction. Limit words to telegrams style and give key phrases some bold lettering.
- Since painting a whole wall can be expensive and the local authority may not be inclined to trust the capacity of the artists, the mural can be done on cloth fixed onto a wooden framework.
- Often, murals are designed as backdrops for performances. In this case, it is important that the colours and symbols chosen do not distract the audience from watching what is performed on stage. (Psychedelic lighting on the backdrop for example, is out of place.) A backdrop must be attractive, but must also retain its ‘background’ identity and not become the focus of attention.

### Exercise:

Get students to do a backdrop for the feast day variety entertainment programme. Eg. Community Day, Feast of Don Bosco.

## Review

1. Alternative media are also called group media as distinguished from mass media. These forms of media are easy to use, cheap and pertain to local issues.
2. Though many casual observers tend to generalize “traditional” African art, the continent is full of peoples, societies, and civilizations, each with a unique visual special culture.
3. The unifying artistic themes of African art are: emphasis on the human figure, visual abstraction and emphasis on sculpture.
4. There are essentially two types of pictures: those that require text for their explanation and those that speak by the power of their visual images. When selecting pictures for pastoral purposes, we may need both types in different situations. The second type of pictures/ photos are those that say a lot even without a single word. Such pictures make very powerful messages for notice boards.
5. Like photographs, posters are of two types: those that are colourful and require many pictures and those that are based on text.
6. A collage is a composition of pictures, words, or objects, which have been collected according to a given theme. The process of selection and arrangement is a reflective one and continues through presentation and group discussion.
7. Banners are useful for liturgical purposes and for providing visual reflections.
8. In a mural, a theme can be worked out in more detail, with pictures and texts, and then be arranged and stuck on to the wall. It is important that all the elements are linked up to each other and the eye can follow a certain order.

## Reflection

We have seen that African art tends to be representative, rather than depictive. What kinds of art in modern day are similar? Categorise the types of arts into either depictive or representative.



## Relevant Skills

Pick a saying of your choice and present it in a number of ways; through a drawing, posters, photos or a collage. Notice how the message will be translated through the various forms.

## Resources

BOSCOM-INDIA, 2000. 'SHEPHERDS' FOR AN INFORMATION AGE. Matunga: Tej Prasarini,

## References

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