

# Google Arts & Culture

## Learn Together: The Culture of Mali

"Waving the flag of Mali in front of the Great Mosque of  
Djenne." Instruments for Africa



## Using the lesson plan and Google Arts & Culture resources

This lesson plan is designed to support you as you explore Google Arts & Culture stories and exhibits related to the lesson topic. The images you will see here are just a sample of the media—texts, images, audio, and video—available to you on the Google Arts & Culture website and app. As the lesson uses only resources found on GA&C, it cannot present every aspect of a given topic. A parent or teacher might be guiding you through the lesson, or you might choose to complete it on your own.

All you need to access the lesson is an internet connection and a web browser or the Google Arts & Culture app. You may want to take notes, whether you do that digitally or with paper and pen.

The lesson plan has an **introduction**, which will describe the topic and provide some background information that will help you understand what you are seeing, hearing, and reading. Then the lesson will take you on a journey from one **Story** to another, fill in some details along the way, and pose **questions** that will help you focus on important ideas. A **quiz** and a link for **exploring the topic further** are followed by **ideas for projects** related to the lesson topic that you can do at home or in the classroom.

As noted, the lesson plan includes **questions** about the main stories, and there is also a **quiz**. You will want to write answers to the questions in a notebook or on a piece of paper. Then you can check all your answers when you've finished the lesson.

**Resources on the Google Arts & Culture** website include Themes, Stories, Museum Views, items, and images.

- ❖ **Themes** bring together stories, exhibits, collections, images, audio, and video files that relate to a topic.
- ❖ In a **Story**, scroll to view each new page. Audio and videos on slides will play automatically. Clicking on an image title will take you to a page with more information about it.
- ❖ In **Museum Views**, you move through a 3D space. Click to move forward. Click, hold, and move the cursor left or right to turn.
- ❖ An **item** will take you to an individual **image**, where you can zoom in and sometimes read more about the artefact.



## In this lesson, you will learn about:

- ❖ Some of the history and culture of the African nation of Mali.
- ❖ A treasure of historic manuscripts and how the people of Mali saved it.
- ❖ The music of the different peoples of Mali.
- ❖ Mali's unique and ancient architecture.
- ❖ Malian modern artists.

## You will:

- ❖ Explore some stories and exhibits about Mali and its culture.
- ❖ Answer some questions about what you have seen and read.

This lesson will take **30–45 minutes** to complete.

## Learn Together: The Culture of Mali

Mali is a country in the northwestern part of Africa. It covers two very different environments: the vast and harsh Sahara desert in the north; and warm, wet subtropical areas in the south. Linking them is the Niger River.

Mali's geography made it a crossroads for much of history. Traders from sub-Saharan Africa, the Arab world, North Africa, and Europe all meet here to exchange goods, culture, and knowledge. The historic city of Timbuktu, in Mali's remote center, was a critical stop on trade routes across the Sahara desert. Salt, gold, slaves, and most importantly, knowledge was brought here for centuries.

Today, Timbuktu is recovering from a takeover by religious extremists who tried to destroy the city's unique history and diverse, tolerant culture. Mali draws on both its history and on the strength and inventiveness of its people to create a hopeful future.

**As you view the exhibits and stories in this lesson, think about these questions:**

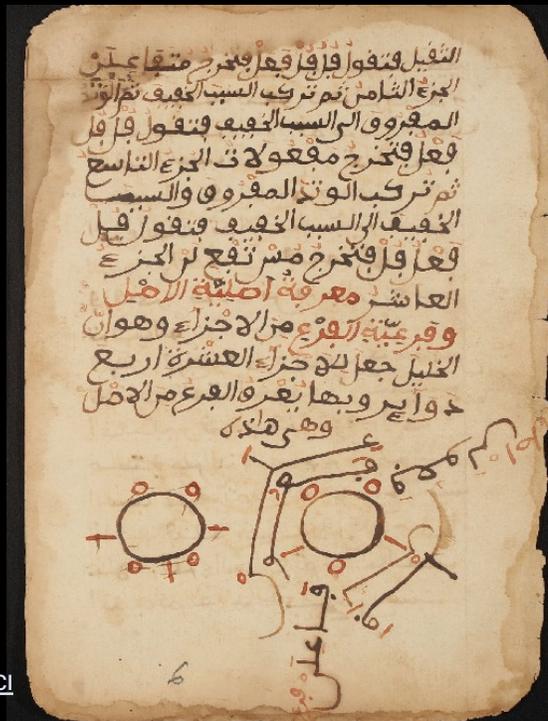
- ❖ What makes the art, music, and culture of Mali unique?
- ❖ How do artists, musicians, and other people in Mali draw on its history?
- ❖ How do the people of Mali create contemporary art and culture?



# Mali's Manuscripts

The northern Mali city of Timbuktu was an ancient site of learning, where hundreds of thousands of books were collected at schools and libraries. These precious, handmade manuscripts recorded everything from government business to love poems. Many had beautiful calligraphy and illustrations. They preserved African knowledge and also recorded information from the thousands of travelers from different lands who passed through the city.

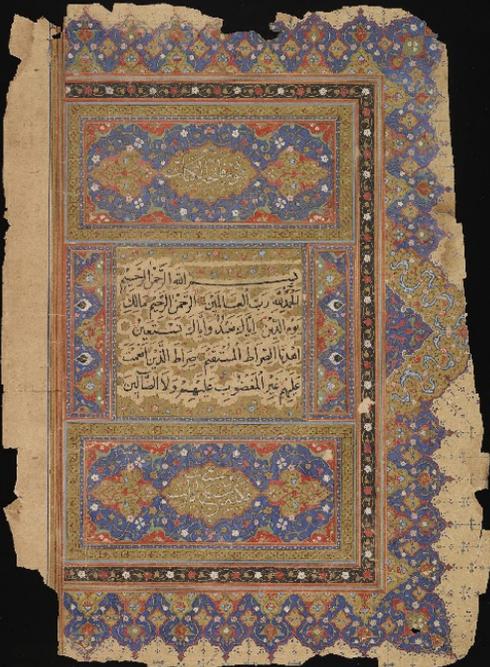
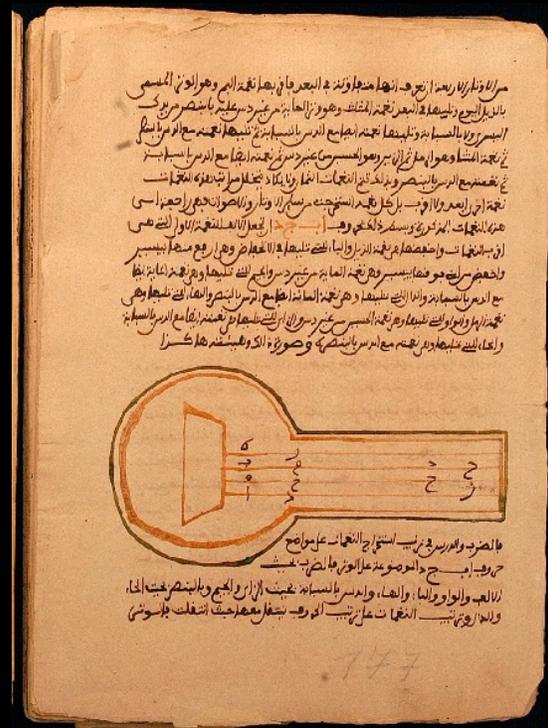
"Manuscrit de métrique," SAVAMA-DCI



In 2012, extremists threatened the manuscripts. The knowledge they contained went against their strict version of Islam. They burned some of these precious historic artifacts.

But many more were saved. Dedicated librarians, scholars, and ordinary people smuggled the manuscripts out of the city. This heroic act saved not just priceless artworks, but irreplaceable history and knowledge.

"2013 Evacuation manuscripts Timbuktu, copyright Prince Claus Fund (3)" SAVAMA-DCI



Click [here](#) to learn about the manuscripts of Timbuktu and [here](#) to read how many were saved.

"SAV\_MH\_34116\_00000," SAVAMA-DCI



"2013 Evacuation manuscripts Timbuktu, copyright Prince Claus Fund (6)" SAVAMA-DCI

Then come back to answer these questions:

1. Where were the manuscripts stored in Timbuktu?
2. Why did the Islamists who took over Timbuktu object to the manuscripts?
3. How are scholars in Mali working to preserve the manuscripts for the future?



# Mali's Music

[Music in Mali](#) is impossible to summarize. It includes the traditional festival music of the nomadic people of the southern Sahara and contemporary hip-hop. It includes musicians who play electric guitar and musicians who play instruments so rare and sacred that they are considered magical.

As with other art forms in Mali, Islamic extremists tried to stamp out its [rich and diverse music](#). But performers and teachers in Mali have preserved their music and continue to spread traditional and modern African music around the world.

Click [here](#) to learn how the people of Mali used music to reconnect to their past and to the world after the extremist takeover.

Then come back to answer these questions:

1. How is the music of West Africa connected to contemporary pop music?
2. What did musicians in Mali do during the time when the extremists ran parts of the country?
3. How does the music of Mali reflect the diversity of its people?

To learn how Mali's musicians revived an international music festival in Timbuktu, click [here](#).



## Mali's Monuments

Much of Mali's land is desert, with limited building materials. Ancient Mali developed a distinctive type of architecture created from dried mud. It is similar to adobe, the mud building material found in southwestern North America—another desert environment.

In Mali, mud architecture reached its greatest heights, literally. The Great Mosque of Djenné is the largest and tallest mud structure on earth. Because of the harsh weather of Mali's rainy season, the mud plaster on the surface of the building gets replaced every year. The city has turned this chore into a festival, where neighborhood communities compete to see who can complete their section first.

To learn about mud architecture in northern Mali, click [here](#). To learn how the Djenné mosque is refinished each year, click [here](#).

Then come back to answer these questions:

1. What is the recipe for the material used to build the mosque?
2. What are the threats to the Djenné mosque and other mud-architecture buildings?
3. How is the Djenné mosque different from and similar to other architectural styles?

To learn how Mali is restoring structures destroyed by religious extremists, click [here](#).

## Mali's Modern Art

Today, artists in Mali draw on the country's history and culture, but also work in modern media. Painter Mama Famata started painting colorful designs on traditional fishing riverboats. Adbou Ouologuem also looks toward Mali's fishing tradition, but creates very different abstract art. Mohamed Diabagaté draws inspiration from the color, crowds, and movement of contemporary Bamako, Mali's largest city. Diabagaté works in collage, combining fabric, paint, and glue to create patterned canvases with images that emerge from the chaos.

These artists work in modern forms, but draw on the traditions of their surroundings. They ensure that Mali will continue to add to its artistic history.

Click the links to learn about [Mama Famata](#), [Adbou Ouologuem](#), and [Mohamed Diabagaté](#)

Then come back to answer these questions:

1. What subject matter does Mama Famata paint, and why?
2. Why did Adbou Ouologuem title his painting "Blue Death"?
3. What is the effect of using small pieces of fabric in Mohamed Diabagaté's artwork?



["Opa Bathily artwork1" Instruments for Africa](#)

## It's Your Turn!

In this lesson, you learned about the culture of Mali. Here are some ideas for projects that you can do at home or in the classroom.

- ❖ The mud that makes up the [architecture of Timbuktu](#) is similar to artist's modeling clay. Use modeling clay to build a structure with walls and a roof. What shape does it need to be? What makes it stronger? What do you need to add to it to make it sturdy and long-lasting? Get inspiration from the architecture of Timbuktu.
- ❖ Look again at the art of [Mohamed Diabagaté](#). Create a collage using small pieces cut from fabric. How will you make a picture using many pieces with the same colors?
- ❖ Watch [this video](#) on the Bolon, a sacred instrument from Mali. Write a paragraph, record a short podcast, or make a short video about music you think is special or that should be saved for a sacred occasion.

["Re-plastering of the Great Mosque of Djenné." Instruments for Africa](#)



## Quiz

Read the questions and write your answer in your notebook or on a piece of paper.

1. What makes the Great Mosque of Djenné unique in world architecture?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of mud as a building material?
3. How did so many precious manuscripts end up in Timbuktu?
4. How did the people who saved the manuscripts get them out of harm's way?
5. How are the artists of Mali practicing modern forms of art?
6. How do the artists of Mali draw on its history?
7. What types of instruments are featured in traditional music from Mali?
8. How did musicians in Mali go about re-starting the festival in Timbuktu?

## Explore Further

You have learned a bit about the culture of Mali. To learn more, click [here](#).

## Answers

### Mali's Monuments

1. Mud is mixed with sand and clay to make bricks. The plaster is mud with rice husks and either shea butter or engine oil.
2. The rainy season threatens the mud plaster. Religious extremists have also threatened the mosque because it is too ornate or beautiful.
3. Answers will vary. Possible response: The mosque is similar to other mosques because it has towers and gates, though its minarets are more pyramid shaped than tower shaped. It is also similar to adobe buildings in North America with thick mud walls held up by wood beams that stick out from the sides. The mosque is much larger than most adobe buildings.

### Mali's Manuscripts

1. The manuscripts were stored in some historic libraries, but also in many private collections and homes.
2. The Islamists objected to non-Islamic information in the manuscripts, and also to texts about Islam that conflicted with their interpretation of the religion.
3. Scholars in Mali are working to digitize the manuscripts so their content can be preserved online.

### Mali's Modern Art

1. Mama Famata paints scenes and objects from his life as a fisherman and his people's culture on the river to give expression to his community.
2. Ouologuem titled his painting "Blue Death" because he was inspired by fishermen who could not swim but who still went into the ocean, risking their lives.
3. Answers will vary. Diabagaté's fabric pieces create a repetitive pattern that is colorful and chaotic, but also repeats and creates an image that is in harmony with its background.

### Mali's Music

1. The music of West Africa was brought to the Americas when African people were enslaved. It became the blues, which became the foundation of rock, hip-hop, jazz, and pop.
2. Some musicians stopped performing, while others left the country and performed for international audiences.
3. Mali's music includes instruments from North Africa, from sub-Saharan Africa, and from around the world.

## Answers

### Quiz

1. The Great Mosque of Djenné is the largest adobe, or mud, structure in the world.
2. Mud creates thick walls that stay cool in the hot desert climate. But it is fragile, and mud buildings must be replastered when it does rain.
3. There were many scholars in Timbuktu who wrote manuscripts based on learning that was brought into the city. Other manuscripts were written elsewhere and brought to the city by scholars, students, and travelers.
4. The people who saved the manuscripts hid them in crates or even under fruits and vegetables and smuggled them out by jeep, canoe, and cart.
5. Artists in Mali paint abstract or simplified images, like much modern Western art.
6. The artists in Mali are inspired by the historic traditions around them, such as fishing or attending an urban market.
7. Music in Mali features different kinds of drums and guitar-like stringed instruments.
8. Musicians in Mali teamed up with international organizations to sponsor the festival and bring it back to Timbuktu.

["The Nightingale for Peace and Justice," Molly Knight Raskin, 2015. Timbuktu Renaissance](#)

