

A HISTORY OF
ART IN
AFRICA

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PREFACE

SINCE ITS INCEPTION LAST CENTURY, the field of African art studies has been vexed by the problem of cross-cultural translation. How can one, for example, meaningfully present to a Western audience two radically different Yoruba works? The *ako* is a seated, life-like, life-sized, human-garbed burial effigy carved in wood which is painted to enhance its mimetic qualities—a social and psychological reconstruction of the dead (fig. i). The *aale* is a hanging, seemingly abstract sculptural construct made from a bit of red rag, a slipper, a metallic soup spoon, and some sticks—a deterrent impregnated with *ase*, the catalytic life-force, to stop thieves and ward off unauthorized

i. AKO EFFIGY FOR MADAM ALADE, IPELE-OWO, NIGERIA. PAINTED WOOD. PHOTOGRAPH 1972



ii. AALE (AN ABSTRACT POWER-IMPREGNATED SCULPTURAL CONSTRUCT). PHOTOGRAPH 1982

persons from one's property (fig. ii). Both of them could have been created around the same period, possibly even by the same artist. Quite often, our inadequate preparation to grapple with seeming incongruities of this kind has led to many misconceptions, bizarre conclusions, and at other times, brilliantly presented but untenable theories on African art. This simple comparison reveals how, in considering African art, conventional Western art-historical assumptions of stylistic progression and individual artistic identity are called into question. To make any substantial progress in dealing with the problems of cross-cultural translation as it pertains to the study and presentation of African art, we must consider both perspectives: the indigenous as well as the Western.

While it may have been useful to utilize only Western theoretical paradigms in the study of African art history and aesthetics in the early twentieth century, it has now become imperative to search carefully within the African cultures in which the art forms originate and to use internally derived conceptual frameworks in any critical discourse on African art. There are, however, difficulties in translating this theoretical position into practice. The study of African art, having begun within the discipline of anthropology, inherited some pertinent and vexing questions. Among these is the false assumption that Western scholars can fully understand and interpret the cultures of other peoples only by using their Western cultural notions, values, and standards—a claim that cannot be divorced from a long-standing Western, imperialistic involvement in Africa. In the traditional discipline of art history, the importance of African art has hardly advanced beyond that of catalyst and sanction for the revolutionary goals of European artists such as Pablo Picasso at the beginning of the twentieth century. Thus, Roy Sieber, a leading scholar in African art, has noted that an insufficient understanding of African art has caused it "to fall prey to the taste of the twentieth century."

In a bold and innovative manner, the authors of this textbook have taken a major step toward the goal of fashioning a new "lens"—one which appreciates the methodology of the finest traditions in Western art history but which also recognizes the need to critically examine, modify, and expand. This will enable scholars to deal with the special challenges presented by the visual art traditions of

predominantly non-writing, pre-colonial peoples of Africa. To illustrate my point, let us consider the question of anonymity in African art, a problem exacerbated by the fact that traditional African artists do not sign their works in the way artists in many contemporary Western societies do. Western audiences have become accustomed to appreciating and enjoying African works of art without knowing the names of their creators. Why should there be an interest in the issue of artists' identities now? Have we not read works by many scholars and even some "African art experts" premised on the notion that supposedly rigid African traditions are oblivious or even hostile to notions of individuality itself? The situation is complicated further when we consider how some art dealers and collectors view the issue of anonymity. A collector has been quoted as saying, "I am completely enchanted by the artist's anonymity. Not knowing the artist is something that gives me enormous pleasure. Once you hear who made it, it ceases to be primitive art."

To continue with the example of the Yoruba of West Africa, research confirms that Yoruba people not only know the value of the authorship of works of art, but that they, in fact, celebrate it through the literary genre known as *oriki* (citation poetry). There are, of course, other appropriate traditional contexts and occasions in which an artist's name may be heard and used. They include child-naming, installation and burial ceremonies, blessing and healing rituals, and important family gatherings. The myth of anonymity was constructed and reinforced by many early Western researchers who believed that,

although the artifacts and the traditional thought systems (their *raison d'être*) belong to Africans, the interpretation of such works and the theorization of African art would always be a Western prerogative. Many scholars today (including the authors of this volume) are, however, more cautious about not repeating that same old error; i.e., believing that if the definitions of art or artistic procedures in other cultures do not take the forms with which we in the West are familiar, they must be lacking.

In considering the question of anonymity, it is important to note some reasons that the Yoruba may not publicly or openly associate specific art forms with the names of their authors. Often, names given at birth are closely linked to and identified with the essence of one's personality and destiny called *ori inu* (inner spiritual head), which in Yoruba religious belief, determines a person's success or failure in this world and directs his or her actions. In Yoruba society, the act of calling out a person's given names generally functions to differentiate individuals. In their religious system, naming also is believed to have the ability to arouse or summon a person's spiritual essence and cause him or her to act according to the meaning of those given names or in some other way desired by the caller. This is the basis of the Yoruba saying, *oruko a maa ro'ni*: "one's name controls one's actions." For example, a name like Maboogunje is actually a plea, the full sentence being "*Ma(se) ba oogun je*," the translation of which is "Do not render medication ineffective."

Yoruba naming ceremonies and practices are among the most elaborate and sophisticated known anywhere. In

addition to serving as identification, a name also incorporates elements of family history, beliefs, and the physical environment. With every naming, there begins a corresponding *oriki* (citation poetry), which grows with an individual's accomplishments. Thus, leaders, warriors, diviners, and other important personages, including artists, are easily identified by their *oriki*, which chronicles intricate oral portraits of all that is notable in their character and history. To illustrate, let me cite a part of the *oriki* of Olowe, one of the greatest traditional Yoruba sculptors of the twentieth century:

Olowe, oko mi kare o

Olowe, my excellent husband

Aseri Agbaliju

Outstanding in war.

Elemoso

Elemoso (Emissary of the king),

Ajuru Agada

One with a mighty sword

O sun on tegbetegbe

Handsome among his friends.

Elegbe bi oni sa

Outstanding among his peers.

O p'uroko bi oni p'ugba

One who carves the hard wood of the *iroko* tree as though it were as soft as a calabash.

O m'eo roko daun se ...

One who achieves fame with the proceeds of his carving ...

Ma a sin Olowe

I shall always adore you, Olowe.

Olowe ke e p'uroko

Olowe, who carves *iroko* wood.

Olowe ke e sona

The master carver.

O lo ule Ogoga

He went to the palace of Ogoga

Odun merin lo se libe
 And spent four years there.
O sono un
 He was carving there.
Ku o ba ti de'le Ogoga
 If you visit the Ogoga's palace,

Ku o ba ti d'Owo
 And the one at Owo,
Use oko mi e e libe
 The work of my husband is there.
Ku o ba ti de'kare
 If you go to Ikare,
Use oko mi i libe
 The work of my husband is there.
Ku o ba ti d'Igede
 Pay a visit to Igede,

Use oko mi e e libe
 You will find my husband's work
 there.
Ku o ba ti de Ukiti
 The same thing at Ukiti.
Use oko mi i libe
 His work is there.
Ku o li Olowe l'Ogbagi
 Mention Olowe's name at Ogbagi,
L'Use
 In Use too.

Use oko mi i libe
 My husband's work can be found
Ule Deji
 In Deji's palace.
Oko mi suse libe l'Akure
 My husband worked at Akure.
Olowe suse l'Ogotun
 My husband worked at Ogotun.
Ikinniun
 There was a carved lion

Kon gbelo silu Oyibo
 That was taken to England.
Owo e o lo mu se.
 With his hands he made it.

The *oriki* of Olowe was collected by John Pemberton III in 1988 from Oluju-ifun, one of Olowe's surviving wives, and has been found to be instrumental in reconstructing his life and work (fig. iii).

Clearly, neither Yoruba culture nor the Yoruba system of storing and retrieving important information about their artists is impoverished. We do know, however, that artists may become vulnerable targets of unknown malevolent forces because of their profession and special position in the traditional community. For this reason, until relatively recent times, artists rarely revealed their full given names to strangers. It is, therefore, not surprising that many outstanding Yoruba artists whose works have been collected and studied by researchers have been identified in scholarly literature only by their nicknames or bynames such as, for example, Olowe Ise (meaning Olowe from the town of Ise); Ologan Uselu (Ologan from Uselu quarters in Owo); and Baba Roti (father of Rotimi). (The status of such personal information is as confidential as modern-day codes such as Personal Identification Numbers for banking purposes or government-issued social security numbers.) Early researchers were clearly ill equipped in their training to grapple with the problems of naming traditions different from those with which they were familiar. This initial lack of understanding may have led them to assume that the authorship of art works was unimportant among the Yoruba. Moreover, the biases of these early researchers must have prevented them from carrying out any diligent probing for artists' full given names. It is ironic that such



iii. IBEJI (TWIN FIGURE). OLOWE OF ISE. BEFORE 1938. WOOD, BEADS, IRON, PIGMENT; HEIGHT 13³/₁₆" (33.5 CM). THE COLLECTION OF MAREIDI SINGER, MUNICH

information was so highly valued by art historians in relation to Western art.

Most Yoruba people would, in fact, be surprised about the sensitivity I am attributing to them about the identity or name of a person. When a person's *oriki* is recited, it is assumed that anyone who listens carefully and understands it will know enough about the subject's identity, name, lineage, occupation, achievements, and other qualities so that stating the person's given name becomes superfluous. Hence a Yoruba saying (from the collection of Oyekan Owomoyela):

A n ki

We recite someone's *oriki*

A n sa a

We intone his attributes

O ni oun o mo eni to ku

But one person says he does not know who has died

O ngbo "iku meru

He hears, "Death has taken a renowned man.

Opaga,

A titled man,
Abisuutabiododo

Whose yams spread like petals
Alabaoka,

Who possesses a barn of corn
Arokofeyeje"

Whose fields are a bounty for birds"

After this description, which clearly identifies a certain individual, there is a question:

O ni "Agbe lo ku ni tabi onaja?"

This (foolish) person still asks, "Is the dead man a farmer or a trader?"

African societies recognize the contribution of individual artists, but they frame their praises in their own distinctive terms. Thus, according to Gene Blocker, a philosopher of art and aesthetics, the problem of anonymity in African art "has more to do with a tradition of individuality than with the 'fact of individuality.' "

The contributors to this book have critically reflected upon cultural and art

historical assumptions and biases similar to the one just described. They have sought to locate meanings within the thoughts and practices of Africans themselves. This assembled volume on the art of the continent of Africa is also measurably more comprehensive than previous works of its kind. It includes, notably, Africa north of the Sahara and the African diaspora, both of which embody some of the most important developments spatially and temporally in the history of African art. These areas have likewise either been either underrepresented or simply ignored by a majority of textbooks on African art. In their detail and sympathetic insight, these chapters are a testament not only to the massive amount of research that the contributors have conducted over the years but equally importantly, to an open-eyed alertness to individual human achievements. This publication, therefore, represents a milestone in the study and future perception of African art.

AFRICA, ART, AND HISTORY: AN INTRODUCTION

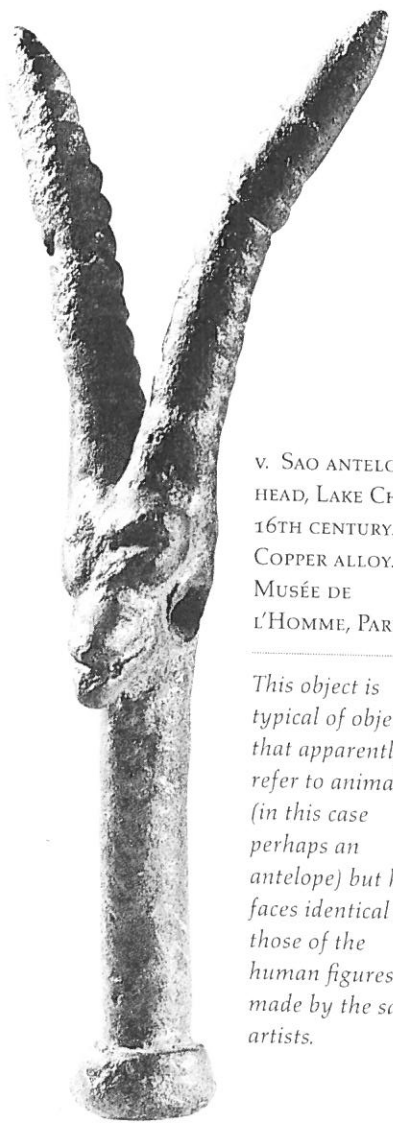
iv. MASK FOR SANDE/BONDO,
MENDE OR SHERBORO, SIERRA
LEONE. LATE 19TH–EARLY 20TH
CENTURY. WOOD AND SILVER;
HEIGHT 16" (40.5 CM).
BROOKLYN MUSEUM, NEW
YORK



AFRICA, A CONTINENT OF STRIKING cultural richness and ecological diversity, is distinguished by the visual power and creativity of its arts. This book examines the full corpus of these arts. It includes ancient art from Egypt and northern Africa as well as rock art from southern Africa and archaeological artifacts from western Africa (fig. v). It surveys architecture and arts of daily life, in addition to contemporary works by African artists and artists of African descent. The book's overarching focus is on Africa's many diverse peoples and regions, the artistic developments of each region, the broader cross-cultural traits that link them, and the different local and regional responses to historical concerns. This can be seen, for example, in the blending of Islam and Christianity into existing social and aesthetic structures, the creation of art in the context first of the slave trade and then colonial rule, and the rich, creative impact of recent post-nationalist and international art movements. Accordingly, this volume presents the arts of many different "Africas:" not only those of distinct regions, historical periods, and religious beliefs (varied local forms as well as Islamic and Christian) but also arts representing a diversity of social and political situations (dynastic and plebeian, urban and rural, nomadic and settled, outwardly focused and inwardly defined).

AFRICAN ART—GENERAL COMMENTS

At the risk of promoting an inaccurate sense of Africa as a place of unified or monolithic artistic practice, the question of what, if anything, is



v. SAO ANTELOPE HEAD, LAKE CHAD. 16TH CENTURY. COPPER ALLOY. MUSÉE DE L'HOMME, PARIS

This object is typical of objects that apparently refer to animals (in this case perhaps an antelope) but have faces identical to those of the human figures made by the same artists.

distinctively "African" about African art is an intriguing and interesting one to address as a preface to the survey that follows. The answers to this question are subtly different with regard to specific areas of the continent and periods of its history. Among the formal features which stand out across the broad sweep of Africa are the following (not in order of priority):

Innovation of form. The impressive diversity of art traditions across

Africa offers evidence of a larger continent-wide concern with artistic innovation and creativity. This can be seen not only in the variety of forms within a relatively small area (a single culture, a city or town, an individual artist) but also through history. The great differences between early (archaeological) works from the Yoruba city of Ile-Ife and twentieth-century art made at the same site are but one example (see chapter 8). Innovation has been widely promoted by local art patrons and cultural institutions, as in the imperative that kings coming to the throne must create a new palace and capital for themselves (fig. vi) along with a range of new art forms or textile designs that will distinguish their reigns. This interest in innovation can be seen in masquerades such as Flali, invented by an artist working with a performer in a Guro community in Côte d'Ivoire during the 1970s (fig. vii), and in the *mbari* houses built by the Igbo in the Owerri Igbo region of the Lower Niger River

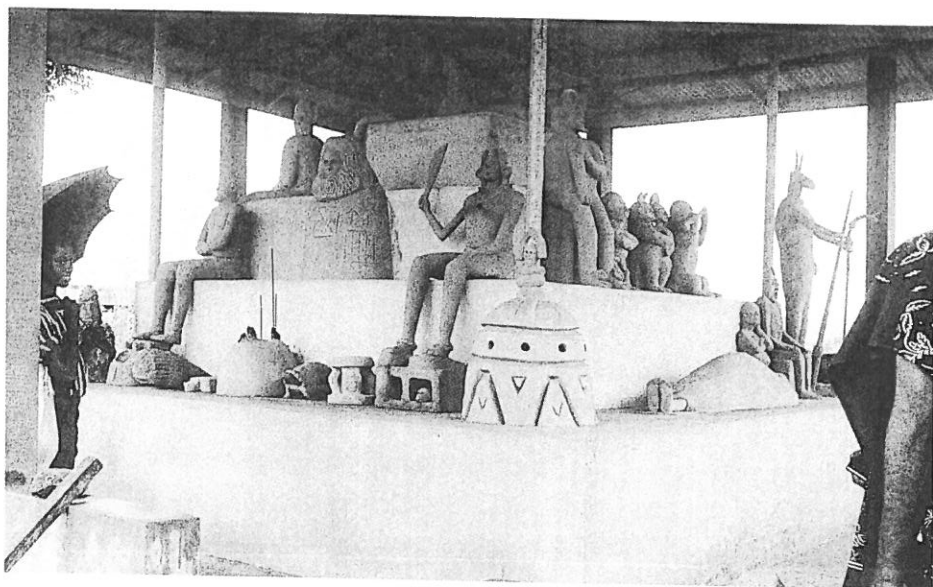


vi. ANEI KYR, THE RETH (DIVINE KING) OF THE SHILLUK, STANDING IN FRONT OF HIS PALACE, FASHODA, SUDAN. 1947

The palace is built upon the holy mound known as Aturwic. The Reth retires here for three days following his coronation.

vii. FLALI MASK IN PERFORMANCE, BANGOFI, NORTHERN GURO REGION, CÔTE D'IVOIRE. 1983





viii. CEMENT MBARI HOUSE, OWERRI REGION, NIGERIA. IGBO. 1982

(fig. viii, see also chapter 9). African artists have long looked outside their own communities for sources of inspiration, not only in other cultural areas of Africa but also in Europe, Asia, and, recently, America.

Visual abstraction. There is a preference in much of Africa for varied forms of visual abstraction or conventionalization: that is to say, art works which in bold and subtle ways lie outside more naturalistic renderings of form. It was indeed these features of near-abstraction and visual boldness that in part led European artists at the beginning of the twentieth century to turn to African art in rethinking form more generally. The importance placed on abstraction in African art is evidenced across media—sculpture, architectural facade paintings, textile design, and other forms. In some cases, this non-realistic stylization is fairly subtle, as in the portraits of the Yoruba king of Ile-Ife mentioned above; only careful observers will note the ways in which the artists have smoothed and simplified the facial features. In other

works, such as a mysterious stone sculpture left in Central Sahara by an ancient Berber group, only minimal suggestions of brow and forehead tie the forms to the human head (fig. ix).

ix. STONE SCULPTURE, CENTRAL SAHARA. BERBER. MUSÉE DE L'HOMME, PARIS



x. ELANDA MASK. BEMBE. LEATHER, CLOTH, PEARLS, AND COWRIE SHELLS. INDIANA UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM, BLOOMINGTON

Complementing the importance of abstraction is an emphasis on visual boldness. Many African masks, such as one used in the Elanda masquerade of the Bembe in eastern Zaire, are particularly forceful in their visual impact (fig. x) while many others are inventive departures from any animal or human form. Such dazzling images, however, are not confined to performed art works; a Christian manuscript painting from Ethiopia displays large staring eyes, juxtaposed patterning, and the color palette of Ethiopia (fig. xi). While illustrating similar biblical scenes to those in Christian European manuscript painting, Ethiopian compositions from the same period are strikingly unusual.

Parallel asymmetries. African artists often reveal a fundamental concern with a visual combination of balanced composition and vital asymmetries. This gives even a relatively

static form, such as the equestrian figure atop an iron staff of a Bamana association (see fig. 4-11), a sense of vitality and movement. Parallel asymmetries are also evidenced in profile and back views of the same figure and in the push/pull of negative and positive spaces. The overall painting of the symmetrical features of the body is frequently distinguished by asymmetry, as in the lines and shapes painted on the human body by the men of a Nuba group in southern Sudan (see fig. 13-48). Similarly, bold asymmetries characterize African architectural design (fig. xii) and facade paintings (see fig. 5-44), particularly when one looks at these works alongside the rigidly symmetrical architectural traditions of other parts of the world. In African sculpture and textiles, as in architecture, broken or undulating lines are generally preferred to rigidly straight lines. Varied pattern elements and intentional breaks or shifts in a pattern are also emphasized over exact replication (fig. xiii).

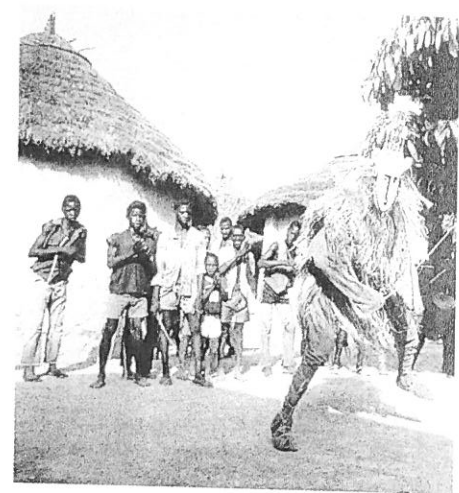
xii. MINARET OF THE GREAT MOSQUE AT AGADEZ, NIGERIA. BUILT FOR TUAREG AND SONGHAI PATRONS. ADOBE



xiii. DANCE SKIRT. KUBA, BUSHOONG. 20TH CENTURY (?). RAFFIA WITH APPLIQUÉ. KASMIN COLLECTION

The gently uneven slopes of the minaret resemble those attached to the mosques of Sahara oases further south, particularly those of Mزاب (see fig. 1-24).

Sculptural primacy. Most art in Africa is carved, molded or constructed into three-dimensional forms, even though important traditions of two-dimensional painted, engraved, or raised designs also exist. In many cases, even two-dimensional art forms are

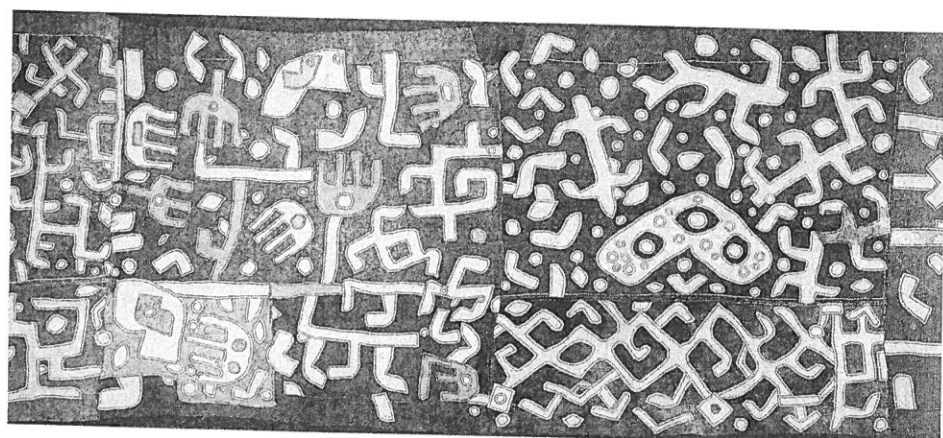


xiv. AGE-GRADE MASQUERADE DANCED FOR THE INAUGURATION OF A HEALTH CLINIC, MALINKE, GUINEA

meant to be seen and admired primarily three-dimensionally, as when wall paintings (such as those mentioned above) wrap around building surfaces in ways that enhance their sculptural effects. Flat textiles become three-dimensional when used as tents or enclosures; they become four-dimensional (spanning time as well as height, breadth, and depth) when they move through space on the human body, as in the astounding variety of performed masquerades (fig. xiv).



xv. SAINT LUKE FROM A PAINTED MANUSCRIPT OF THE FOUR GOSPELS, ETHIOPIA. THE BRITISH LIBRARY, LONDON





xv. FIGURES ORNAMENTED WITH ELABORATE PAINT AND BEADWORK. ROCK PAINTING, TASSILI N'AJJER REGION, ALGERIA. ARCHAIC STYLE, 8000–6000 BC. PIGMENT ON STONE

Earthen and stone architecture also have a sculptural tradition (see fig. xii) that distinguishes African Islamic and Christian examples from those of other areas.

Performance. Many of the visual art forms surveyed in this volume were first seen in performance contexts. Indeed, it may well be that for African peoples, performance, which always implies music and dance, is the primary art form. Elaborate personal decoration, for example, nearly always involves public display and very often invokes gesture, dance, and other stylized forms of behavior: in short, performance. Many groups of people both perform *with* art (such as sculptures, masks, and dance wands) and, in their collectivities, often *become* art. Statuary that resides in a shrine for most of its “life” may be

ceremonially carried to the site in a “festival of images.” The ultimate performance genre is the festival—with events invoking visual, auidial, and kinetic forms of great variety and richness. These events are all orchestrated toward a large communal or state purpose, be it a proper funereal “send-off” for a prominent person, an initiation of youths, or a New Year’s or First Fruits ceremony. Masquerades—in both prevalence and astonishing variety—are among the most complex and prominent of African arts.

Humanism/Anthropomorphism. Home to the first humans, Africa is remarkable for the emphasis its patrons and artists have historically placed on the adornment, and often transformation, of the human body. This use of the human skin as canvas

can be seen in images painted in rock shelters of the Sahara more than seven thousand years ago, which seem to depict humans in elaborate paint and beadwork (fig. xv). The We of the Côte d’Ivoire consider a painted face to be the spiritual as well as the conceptual and physical equivalent of a mask (fig. xvi). African art also focuses on representations of the human body, human spirit, and human society, and most sculptural traditions in Africa incorporate human beings as their primary subjects. Even portrayals of animals in masquerades and other arts often include human-derived elements, such as jewelry or elaborate coiffures. Virtually all art and architecture on the continent (with the exceptions of Ancient Egypt) has been conceived on a human scale. Anthropomorphism also features prominently in African architecture, with the naming of particular construction elements to represent parts of the human anatomy, or the decoration of building facades to suggest textile patterns or body scarification.

Ensemble/Assemblage. An isolated statue or other African work is rare and exceptional. Varied works are usually assembled together, as in a shrine or multicharacter masquerade. And many individual works are themselves composite, having been made from diverse meaningful materials. Power figures from Mali to Benin and Nigeria and on to the Congo make this point with particular force, as the purposes of these images *derive* from their varied materials, just as their visual character is dependent upon them. Thus the ensemble—the collection of works or the assembling of composite materials



xvi. OUDHUÉ, OR TITLED FEMALE DANCER, PERFORMING AT A WOMEN'S FESTIVAL, OULAITABLI VILLAGE, BÔ REGION, WESTERN CÔTE D'IVOIRE

in a single work—is a vital trait of visual arts all over Africa. The idea is driven home by the elaborate assemblages of personal decorations featured for ceremonies nearly everywhere—scarification or tattoo, coiffure, jewelry, cloth, and sometimes body or face painting—and by the combination of varied arts, including music and dance, in festivals. It follows, then, that these art works and ensembles—in part because they comprise many materials and forms—will have many meanings.

Multiplicity of meaning. Like a telephone line that carries multiple messages simultaneously, African art is characterized by its multiplicity of meanings and intellectual complexity. As in the varied rhythms and competing melodies of jazz, these differential meanings exist concurrently and harmoniously within the same work, giving it an even larger (broader) sense of symbolic and intellectual grounding

than it otherwise might have. In contrast to the Western Christian art traditions of symbolism (iconography) where a form would carry a single meaning (so that observers would associate a rose with the Madonna, for example), in African art a single form is often intended to mean different things to different members of society, depending on age, level of knowledge, and level of initiation. A Dogon *kanaga* mask form (see fig. 5-19) signifies at once a variety of beings, such as a bird, a crocodile, or a primordial being. Another example of this multiplicity of meanings is that of an Asante goldweight depicting a bird scratching its back with its beak or looking backwards. “Pick it up if it falls behind” is one common translation. This can refer to the “wisdom of hindsight”—how one can learn from one’s mistakes—or it can indicate more literally that one needs to clean up things left behind,

such as an incomplete task or a mess. Thus there are many possible meanings for an apparently simple image depending on the circumstances of its occurrence or use, as well as each viewer’s experience, knowledge of proverbs, and wisdom. This multi-referential quality in African art makes research into art symbolism both challenging and rewarding; artists and users frequently offer different interpretations to the meanings of a single given form.

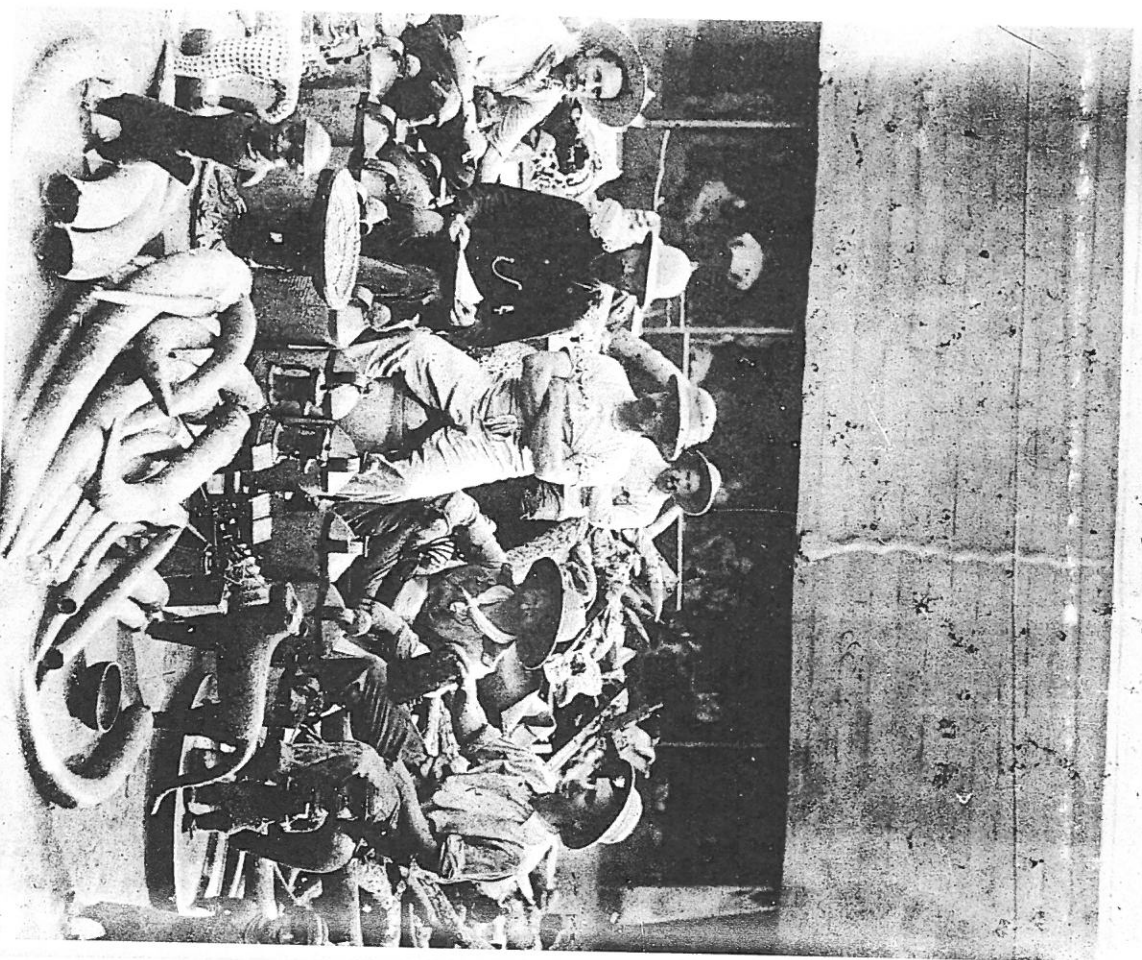
CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF AFRICAN ART

Africa was known to the ancient world for the power, wealth, and artistic magnificence of Egypt’s monarchies and was a place of thriving art production during much of Europe’s “dark ages.” Great inland art centers, such as Zimbabwe and Ile-Ife, were flourishing at this time and have left behind striking evidence of the aesthetic and cultural complexity of powerful indigenous political systems. Africa has also been host to larger artistic encounters. Early on, Nubia, and later Ethiopia, became important global sites of Christianity, with local rulers commissioning handsome works of painting, sculpture, and architecture, cojoining the new liturgical concerns with indigenous African aesthetic vibrancy. Africa also played a crucial role in the development and expansion of Islam. Timbuktu (in present-day Mali) became the home to one of the world’s most important universities, its large library specializing in law. The kings of Mali, who controlled much of the world’s gold trade at this time, were wealthy beyond compare.

In addition to the gold-ornamented horse trappings and other decorative arts, made in Mali, court builders created magnificent multistoried architectural projects using local earth. During this period (eleventh to fifteenth centuries), east coast cities such as Zanzibar were said to be among the most handsome in the world, both for their inhabitants' elegant fashions of dress and for their unique traditions of decorative coral architecture. Asian merchants sought out these rich east African ports and interior markets, leaving behind large quantities of export ceramics and other materials that have been important for the dating of sites.

In the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, Africa continued to be known as a place of powerful kings and lavish courts. In this era of broad-based sea exploration, many European travelers to Africa compared the continent's court architecture and thriving cities favorably with the best of Europe. They also brought home ivories, textiles, and other art works that eventually found their way into the collections of the most distinguished art patrons and artists of Europe, such as the Medici family and Albrecht Dürer. Even during the horrors of the slave trade, which resulted in inconceivable personal suffering, massive political instability in much of Africa, and the transportation of a significant proportion of Africa's own essential labor force to the Americas to provide for the West's industrialization drive—outside observers continued to hold highly favorable views of Africa and its arts.

These generally positive images of Africa changed dramatically in the late nineteenth and early twentieth



xvii. MEMBERS OF THE BRITISH PUNITIVE EXPEDITION IN THE BENIN PALACE WITH THE TREASURY OF ROYAL IVORY, BRASS, AND OTHER ARTS WHICH WERE REMOVED TO LONDON, 1897

centuries. Western desire for greater control over Africa's trade partners, religious beliefs, and political engagements led to an era of widespread colonial expansion. Consistent with the aims of nineteenth-century colonialism, Africa was then frequently described in published accounts as a place of barbaric cultural practices and

heinous rulers. If art was mentioned at all, it tended to be in negative terms. Charles Darwin's theories of biological evolution also had a negative impact and were used to support popular parallel theories of social evolution that falsely maintained that African societies (as well as those of other "minority" peoples such as American

Indians, Indonesians, Irish, and peasants more generally) represented a lower level of humanity, indeed an earlier prototype within the human evolutionary sequence.

Arts and other contributions of these societies were similarly disparaged as lacking in rational foundation, true innovation, and sustained cultural accomplishment. For example, when the great archaeological finds at Ile-Ife (in present-day Nigeria) were discovered at the beginning of the twentieth century, it was wrongly assumed that a group of lost Europeans was responsible for these technically and aesthetically sophisticated sculptures.

With the growth of colonial interests in Africa, writing about the social fabric of its arts also changed. Africa was described primarily as a place of separate (and fixed) "tribal" entities which lacked sophisticated political and economic institutions as well as broad-based authority. This was also the period when many major European collections of African art were started. Wealthy state treasuries of kingdoms such as Benin, Asante, and Dahomey (and their accumulated arts) were taken to Europe as war booty following the defeat of their rulers by European forces (fig. xvii) and formed the basis for the rich collections of newly founded ethnographic museums. In the literature of the time, the broad regional influences of these kingdoms were often played down in favor of narrow ethnic identities. Regional dialects of larger language groups in turn became erroneously identified as distinct fixed languages, each supposedly unique to a separate "tribe" and artistic "style." "Tribalism" became the predominant framework within which the continent's art

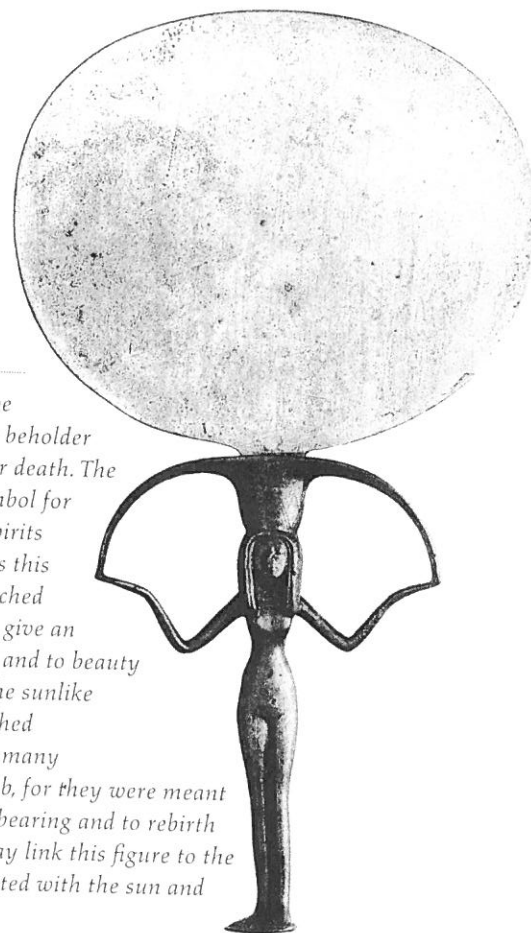
production was discussed, and to some extent this model of the distinctive ethnic group ("tribe") survives today. The great dynastic arts of Egypt (fig. xviii) were an exception that proved the rule, for by that time Egypt had largely been removed from consideration as an African civilization and was instead positioned culturally with the Near East. The Christian arts of Nubia and Ethiopia were rarely, if ever, discussed alongside other African works. Earlier maps highlighting Africa's impressive royal capitals, inland cities, and material resources were largely replaced with new maps showing small-scale rigidly fixed cultural boundaries (each "unique" to one "tribe" and one art "style") which were again falsely presumed to have existed for much of history. What was mistakenly called a distinct "tribal

style" in the early twentieth century was often the result of the iconographic requirements of a particular image type. Today, we also know that a number of art works were created in one place (and culture) yet used in another. Many "Mangbetu" works were made by Azande artists; a significant number of "Bamun" artists were from other grasslands cultures; some of the most important "Dahomey" artists were of Yoruba or Mahi origin; and many Bushoong/Kuba and Asante art genres also have foreign origins.

The longstanding and problematic label of "tribal art" has had a negative impact on the field African art and meant that until recently little academic interest was shown in the

xviii. MIRROR WITH FEMALE FIGURE AS A HANDLE. EGYPT. DYNASTY 18, C. 1479-1352 BC. BRONZE, HEIGHT 9 1/4" (24.6 CM). BROOKLYN MUSEUM, NEW YORK. CHARLES EDWIN WILBOUR FUND

The varied uses of this African object revolve around its ability to reflect the image of the beholder during life and its presence in the tomb after death. The shape resembles the ankh, the Egyptian symbol for spiritual life. Egyptians portrayed human spirits with wings, and the female figure that forms this mirror's handle is posed so that her outstretched arms connect with the object on her head to give an impression of wings. These references to life and to beauty were enhanced by the reflective surface of the sunlike disk, an image of the life-giving sun. Unclothed young women such as this were depicted on many works destined for the bedroom and the tomb, for they were meant to evoke the sexuality leading to both child-bearing and to rebirth of the soul in the afterlife. The heavy wig may link this figure to the wigged Hathor, a primordial goddess associated with the sun and with female sexuality.



historical dimensions of these arts or the names of individual artists. This in part explains why far fewer dates and artist attributions are available to us than is the case in other comparable art surveys.

Other problematic views by colonial authorities influenced the early classification of African art within the larger context of world art history. In keeping with now long-disproven social evolutionary theories, early social scientists identified African art as a form of "primitive art," indicating that African art works, regardless of age, were necessarily primeval. Textbooks of the early twentieth century presented all African arts as conceptually similar to prehistoric works or to the arts of children. Even early modern artists, such as Picasso, assumed that African art was based upon intuitive, "primal" impulses. They did not realize that African art is as intellectual and intentional as Western art nor did they appreciate the degree to which African artists were grappling with the art historical traditions of their culture as well as with new, imported ideas and art forms.

Partly as a result of African art's "primitive" label—and even though today most art historians acknowledge its importance to the development of European modernism—too few African artists are credited for their understanding of the unique intellectual and formal possibilities of abstraction or for utilizing the vital aesthetic power of collage and assemblage, both of which were so central to the development of Western Cubism. Thus, whereas many twentieth-century art works in Western museums bear the label "abstract

art," the comparable (and much earlier) abstract works made by African artists generally are not so labeled. It is assumed, wrongly, that Western abstract works alone are intellectualized and intentional, while abstract works by African artists are intuitive and/or the result of errors in trying to copy from nature. Comparable misunderstandings have also been frustrating for contemporary African artists seeking to gain wider acceptance for their art because their use of abstraction and similar "modern" idioms is seen by some critics as derivative of the West. African artists who seek to address contemporary issues or subject matter in their works face similar problems.

AFRICAN ART AS ART

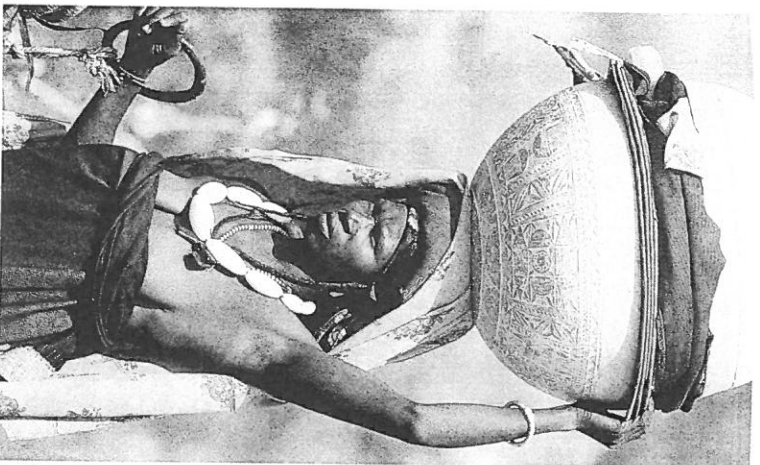
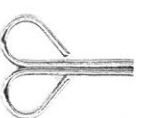
Despite European modernism's universally acknowledged debt to African art, some art historians still ask: "Is African art really 'art'?" If today we tend to see art as something of beauty or visual power, but as something devoid of function, we would need to acknowledge that European religious and political arts—to say nothing of modern architectural works guided by the value that "form should follow function"—would have to be purged from a strict "art for art's sake" canon. In Africa, as in Europe for most of its history, a number of words for "art" and "artist" exist, but they are not those used by contemporary critics; they address questions of skill, know-how, and inherent visual characteristics.

"Something made by hand" (*alonnuzo*) is how the Fon of Benin designate art. The nearby Ewe of Togo use a similar term, *adanu* (meaning

"accomplishment, skill, and value") to refer at once to art, handwriting techniques, and ornamentation. For the Bamana of Mali, the word for sculpture is translated as "things to look at." In linking "art" to "skill," African words for art are similar to those used in late medieval Germany, or in Renaissance Italy: The Latin root for "art," *ars*, has its source in the word *artus* (meaning to join or fit together). Both the Italian word *arte* and the German word for art, *Kunst*, were linked to the idea of practical activity, trade, and know-how (*Kunst* has its etymological source in the verb *können*, "to know"). African words for art not only help us to further pry open the definition of the word "art," but also to reposition African art within its broader historical conceptualization.

Recent debates in art history have caused the breakdown of modern categories dividing "high" art from "low" art, and "fine arts" from "crafts." These discussions have encouraged researchers in African art to study objects of beauty such as ceramics, or ornamented gourds (fig. xix), even when these works are made by women, and even when they form part of daily life. Contemporary Western art forms, such as performance projects and installations, also have parallel African conceptualizations—the masquerade (versus the mask) and the altar complex (versus the shrine figure).

As with all art forms, the market, collection history, and museum display also have an impact on whether or not Western observers can understand African art as "art." When works of African art are exhibited on special mounts under bright spotlights and behind the antiseptic barriers of glass



XIX. FULANI WOMAN CARRYING
INTRICATELY CARVED CALABASH, NIGERIA

vitrines in fine arts museums as “high art,” or under fluorescent lights and in large display cases in natural history museums as “artifacts,” they take on qualities more accurately attributed to the viewing than to the creating culture. Removed from their local contexts they look very different from how they were seen by local viewers. This is equally true for other arts too, of course, such as ancient Greek and Roman art, medieval art, and Renaissance Christian art, suggesting not that African art is “different” from these other arts (and must be displayed in different ways) but rather that museums need to be more creative in thinking about displaying all art forms.

In beautifully produced books such as this one, certain ways of isolating, lighting and photographing, and labeling objects also signal “art” to viewers, the camera lavishing a form of attention on the object that substitutes for the attention we would bestow in person. With works of African art, the tendency at one time was to photograph them using backgrounds, lighting sources, or angles that made them look mysterious or sometimes even sinister. This fortunately has changed. One of the noteworthy features of this book is the significant number of contextual photographs that help to remind us that, like other arts, African art works are (or were) a part of living cultures, and that the study of art history shares a close bond with anthropology—especially so in the case of Africa. How the anthropological study of art in Africa has differed from the art historical is not an easy question to answer. There has been excellent (and less good) research done on African art in both fields. Anthropology, a field within the social sciences, historically has focused on the broader contexts of visual experience; art history, a discipline within the humanities (which also includes literature, foreign languages, philosophy, music, and theater), has traditionally been interested in the history and symbolism of visual forms. Methodologies used for studying African art necessarily draw on the best features of both disciplines, as is done in the pages that follow.

Let us briefly examine one particularly beautiful, refined sculpture, a regal head once worn by a female

leader in a masquerade (fig. iv). In this photograph, we are able to appreciate the aesthetic qualities of the carved image. While the artist and the owner of this work would also have been able to view it in such splendid isolation, everyone else in the region would have experienced it as fleeting part of an exciting performance, one feature in a ceremony such as that illustrated in figure 6-1. Both views of this type of sculpted mask are “true,” even though only one may conform to the modern museum or gallery experience of art.

The importance of including the whole continent of Africa and the long history of its arts (including contemporary forms) within a survey such as this one is in part the result of the specific contexts in which Africa and its arts have been problematized in the past. By including Egypt, the authors of this book seek to bring back this art-rich civilization to the continent of Africa as one of its own. By incorporating African Islamic and Christian art traditions, the importance of Africa in the formulation and creative vibrancy of these religious arts is also emphasized. The inclusion of contemporary art from Africa makes the point that art in Africa is not dead, that African artists are continuing to make important contributions to both Africa and to global contemporary art movements. The addition of works by artists of the Diaspora, who were (or are) of African descent but who lived (or live) far from its shores, stresses the ongoing importance of Africa to world art.

