

COLLECTING AFRICAN AND OCEANIC ART DURING THE SECOND HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The story of the ascent of African and Oceanic objects from curiosities to artifacts to art during the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century has been told many times.¹ In Paris, in other major cities in Europe, and finally in the United States, objects from Africa and the Pacific first captivated artists, who were riveted by the extravagant and bold forms that broke with all conventions of Western academic art traditions. The artists' dialogue with these works and subsequent appropriation of non-Western art forms into their visual repertoires focused entirely on form, color, and line. They did not need nor did they desire to know how, by whom, and in which contexts these pieces were made and used. Following the lead of artists and other intellectuals, interest in African and Oceanic arts grew, exhibitions were organized, and publications began to appear. Objects gradually gained recognition for their aesthetic qualities, and their monetary value increased as they moved into the domain of art.

The continuation of this story in the second half of the twentieth century seems less familiar. This is rather astonishing because this

② C. Geary, *Material Journeys*...

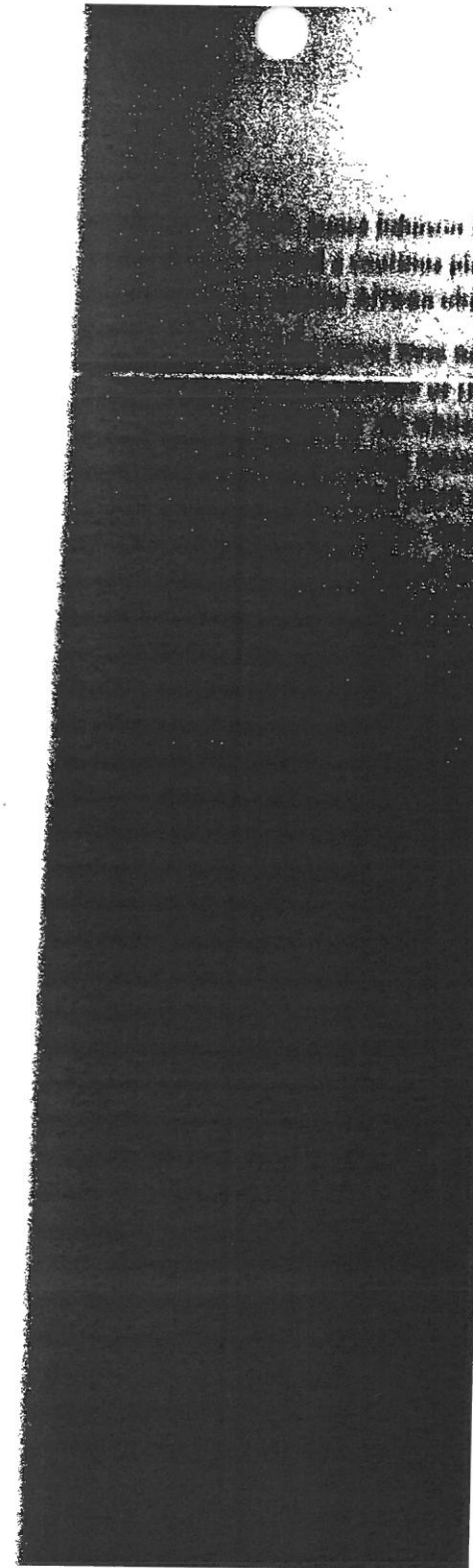
period was the heyday of collecting African and Oceanic "traditional" or "classical"² figurative sculpture and masks. After the Second World War, an astounding number and variety of works flowed from the global south to the North Atlantic countries and to Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa, commonly referred to as the West.³ Private and museum collections in the United States grew at a particularly rapid pace, while many major ethnographic museums and a distinguished group of collectors in Europe had already accumulated important holdings.⁴ The complex interactions that accompanied the journeys of objects from their places of origin into museums and private collections, and the debates engendered by these processes, are among the subjects addressed in this book.

Our starting point is a unique collection of African and Oceanic art in Cambridge, Massachusetts, which Geneviève McMillan has built and nurtured over the past sixty years. The collection contains more than one thousand five hundred objects, including works from the Native American realm, India, and other parts of the world along with paintings, prints, and photographs of McMillan's artist friends. In its entirety, the collection reveals the aesthetic vision and particular taste of an independent, enterprising, and free-spirited woman. More importantly, following the paths of the objects McMillan selected over the years, and the ways in which they arrived in Cambridge, illuminates their production, use, and meaning in different settings as well as changes in object trade and collectors' taste. Thus, the collection provides a perfect lens through which to discern not only the larger processes that influenced African and Oceanic art in the second half of the twentieth century but also the role the works themselves played in those developments.

As the book's title, *Material Journeys: Collecting African and Oceanic Art, 1945-2000*, suggests, we are following the

physical and conceptual voyages of these objects to Cambridge—their travels over time and space. Reconstructing the life histories or cultural biographies of objects is a common approach in art historical analyses and studies of collections because it reveals the way in which the objects' meanings are transformed as they move from setting to setting.⁵ There is another reason to speak of "journeys," for we are also referring to the voyages of collectors, dealers, and scholars. This emphasis on the movement and travels of collectors and objects from around the globe inspired our presentation of the works in this book, for when we describe the objects' journeys, we tend to think of sites or way stations, the hubs through which the objects were funneled, the places collectors visited. Monrovia, Bamako, Abidjan, Kinshasa, Angoram in the Sepik, Rabaul in New Britain, Paris, and finally Cambridge are among the locations in which the stories unfold. Objects moved along pathways to and through these sites, as did people from everywhere. These places in Africa and the Pacific have been "contact zones," to employ a term coined by Marie Louise Pratt in her insightful analysis of travel writing. They are "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination—like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today."⁶ But before we focus on these sites, we examine some of the issues and common perceptions and misperceptions that accompanied the collecting of African and Oceanic arts and the conceptualizations of objects throughout the second half of the twentieth century. They have their roots in earlier notions about Africa and the Pacific and have demonstrated tremendous staying power.

In 1935, the year of the seminal exhibition "African Negro Art" at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New



York, James Johnson Sweeney, the editor of its catalogue, painted a cautious picture of the art market and the supply of quality African objects for collectors and museums.

Fine pieces were no longer being produced due to the decadence of the natives following their exploitation by the whites. Soon the traders were reduced to employing natives to manufacture copies for the market. And when this in turn failed to satisfy the demand, white forgeries that soon outdistanced the native copies in "character" began to be turned out on a quantity production scale in Brussels and Paris. Today, save for some rare, hitherto unexploited regions, art as we have known it in its purest expression no longer comes out of Africa . . . we may say, the art of Africa is already an art of the past.⁷

This passage, in one of the most influential English texts of its time, contains elements that reverberate in many later writings about African and Oceanic art. We encounter the "decadent" or "degenerate" African or Pacific Islander who has lost his or her "traditional" way of life, the production-line maker of objects, the faker, and the unscrupulous middleman-dealer. Some of the debates about African and Oceanic art that unfolded in the second half of the twentieth century seem foreshadowed here, among them the notion that African and Oceanic cultures decline, questions of what constitutes an authentic object in its "purest" expression, and the belief that works of art in unexploited regions still await discovery.

Throughout the twentieth century, many art publications subscribed to the credo that the arts from Africa and Oceania have been in aesthetic decline, approaching the objects purely from the perspective of Western connoisseurship. Statements that these visual arts were doomed occur in writings and collectors' letters as early

as the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, often in combination with the belief that all the "good" objects in a region had been collected, so that the remaining or newly produced ones were stylistically inferior. "Style" loomed large in African and Oceanic art scholarship, for it was assumed that works with particular stylistic features originated within the well-delineated universes of an ethnic group, an island, or a region. Since many objects, when they finally arrived in Western collections, came with little information about their origins, analysis of their formal properties provided a tool for classifying them according to established criteria of style, thus creating a conceptual grid into which newly acquired work could fit.⁸

Stylistic and formal standards provided a framework for the appreciation of African and Oceanic arts based entirely on Western taste and divorced from notions of indigenous aesthetic judgments. As many studies have shown, the aesthetic preferences of Africans and Pacific Islanders may differ radically from those of Western collectors (see, for instance, the discussion of Dogon masks pp. 70-74). To this day, Western connoisseurs usually posit iconic works of art as their point of departure for assessments of an object's quality. In order to gauge the aesthetic merit of an object, specialists might compare a Kota reliquary figure (see cat. 2) with other known examples, preferably nineteenth century, in good condition, and/or with stellar provenance, meaning the record of a work's journey to and through collections in the West. In the case of Kota reliquary figures, the preferred pieces go back to early-twentieth-century collections in Paris, where these objects began arriving in the last decade of the nineteenth century. With this emphasis on familiar and unalterable styles, novelty and innovation seemed suspicious aberrations, since they did not conform to the rigid criteria of Western

connoisseurship. In other words, if more recent objects—even well-made ones—did not follow these criteria, they were judged mediocre, evidence that the arts had declined.

Sweeney also raised the question of authenticity, one of the most vexing problems for curators and collectors of African and Oceanic arts in the second half of the twentieth century. Ateliers that specialized in the production of objects for sale to foreigners often sprang up as soon as the first contact with these potential consumers of African and Oceanic art occurred. Others began to cater to both local and foreign patrons. In addition, outright fakes began to appear on the market, a new phenomenon in the African and Oceanic art worlds.⁹ Skilled forgers increasingly took advantage of the booming art business and replicated objects in their formal characteristics, applying faux patinas and simulating the appearance of age. In recent decades, they based their creations on photographs and illustrations in art books, which proliferated from the 1960s onward. While dealers, collectors, and curators initially recognized fakes, "improved" methods and collaboration between middlemen and fakers have made it much more difficult to spot forgeries nowadays. Most art dealers deplore these developments, pointing to the negative impact of fakes on their businesses and noting that increasingly skilled fakers have been able to deceive even the most careful of connoisseurs.¹⁰ In such situations, provenance becomes invaluable.

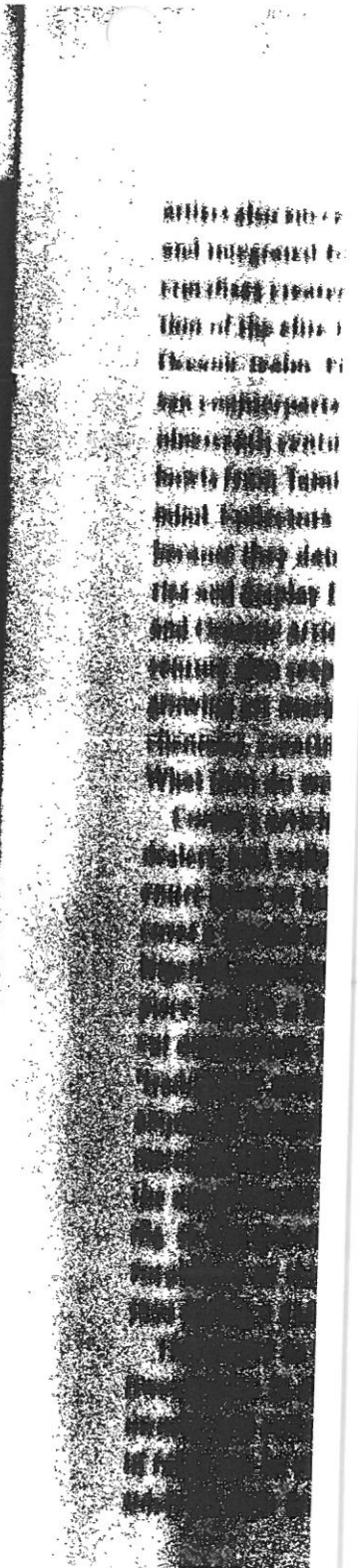
What then constitutes an authentic work? In 1975, exactly forty years after Sweeney's statement, the journal *African Arts* fired a first salvo in a reenergized debate about authenticity among scholars, collectors, and dealers in the United States and beyond when it published the article "African Art and Authenticity," by Joseph-Aurélien Cornet.¹¹ He posed the seemingly straightforward question "What are the criteria which differentiate the authentic object



FIG. 1 Ivory carver, French Congo (now Republic of the Congo), about 1890-1900

from the fake?"¹² In his view, a first level of distinction would be "certain qualities [of the authentic object] that speak to the heart," that is, its aesthetic impact. This idea of the object's impact most closely resembles the concept of the "aura" of a work, introduced by Walter Benjamin in his essay "The Work of Art in the Mechanical Age of Reproduction." For Benjamin, the aura is the transmittable essence of an authentic work of art, which withers with its reproduction.¹³ Cornet then postulates that "any object created for a traditional purpose and by a traditional artist may be considered authentic" (Cornet's italics).¹⁴

This rigid way of gauging authenticity raised a number of interesting questions with contradictory answers. Many works admitted into the canon of authentic art were produced for both local and foreign patrons, such as stone carvings (*ntadi*) from the lower Congo and, beginning in the eighteenth century, Loango ivory carvings (fig. 1). African



Artists also successfully appropriated Western visual forms and integrated foreign motifs, as in the case of bronze crucifixes created after the fifteenth-century Christianization of the elite in the ancient Kongo kingdom. In the Oceanic realm, Fijian clubs (see cats. 78, 79), their Marquesan counterparts *u'u* (which became an export article in the nineteenth century), and the beautifully incised wooden bowls from Tami Island off the New Guinea coast come to mind. Collectors perceive these objects as authentic mainly because they date to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and display familiar stylistic characteristics. African and Oceanic artists in the second half of the twentieth century also responded to economic opportunities in the growing art market and worked for both local and foreign clientele, creating new forms and copying older ones. What then do we make of their works?

Cornet's article fostered a lively debate among scholars, dealers, and collectors. In response, *African Arts* devoted an entire issue to authenticity, appropriately presenting on its cover a Yoruba masquerader with a plastic face mask of Nigerian manufacture. As an example of an African-made piece used in a Yoruba ritual, it challenges seemingly clear-cut distinctions, being a "non-traditional" object used in a "traditional" setting.¹⁵ Indeed, there are many similar examples of African and Oceanic peoples integrating foreign materials and items into their visual repertoires, such as the use of World War II gas masks by the Igbo in Nigeria (fig. 2). The gas-mask shapes fit perfectly into the visual vocabulary of this Igbo masquerade, which took place in 1959 during a yam festival in Ugwuoba village.

There were as many opinions as there were contributors (twenty-nine in all, including academics, curators, gallery owners, and collectors). One contributor wrote, "The issue of fakes can be avoided only if one acquires works of art solely on their aesthetic appeal. This is perfectly legitimate,

and, in the opinion of many, should be the first criterion, but at some point economic considerations begin to overshadow the aesthetic ones and a purchaser is paying for authenticity, age, and scarcity."¹⁶ As this debate continued into the 1980s and 1990s, the desire to establish some sort of order in the seemingly chaotic African art market led to the refinement of taxonomies of authenticity. Categories such as Authentic African Art, Correct Copies, Counterfeit African Art, and Tourist Art emerged.¹⁷ Among collectors, these categories resonate to this day.

Oceanic art, not collected on the same scale as African art, raised similar issues. Questions of authenticity and quality of objects loom large here, and the desire of museum professionals and collectors to categorize objects on



FIG. 2 Masked dancers in yam festival, "Onwasato," in Ugwuoba village, Igbo, Nigeria, 1959

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a sliding scale ranging from the authentic work to the fake inspired a 2004 book by Gerd Koch.¹⁸ Koch discusses deliberate fakes and also presents several early instances of arts created for sale to foreigners. He includes as evidence the reports of participants in the 1912–14 Kaiserin-Augusta-Fluss Expedition,¹⁹ who traveled up the Sepik River, bought many objects from the Iatmul, and then discovered newly carved “copies” of their acquisitions being offered to them on their way back.²⁰ Authenticity remained a thorny issue throughout the second half of the twentieth century, although it was never a helpful construct, as we explain in the following chapters.

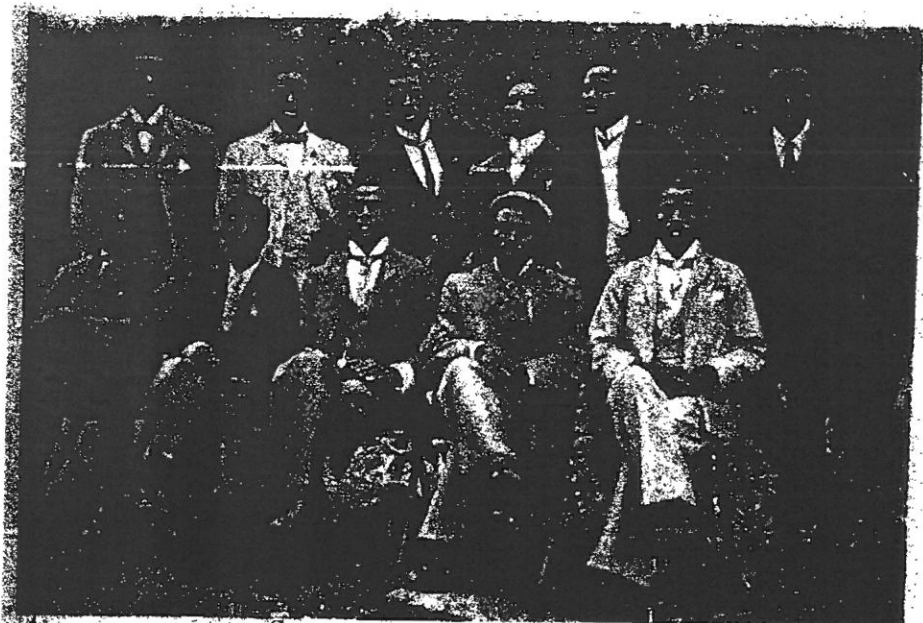
In his prescient remarks, Sweeney mentioned another important aspect that received much attention in later writings and was particularly significant in the Pacific because of the region’s history. When Sweeney referred to “rare, hitherto unexploited regions” that might still be sources for truly “traditional” works of art, he alluded to the idea of discovery: the opening up of unknown territories as reservoirs of objects for Western museums and collectors. Even in the second half of the twentieth century, many descriptions by collectors and dealers featured the notion of the discovery of “untouched” regions or overlooked sources of objects. In fact, the idea of discovering authentic works of art in flea markets and market stalls, in Africa and in the Western hubs of the trade, and even in one’s attic is an important component of the pleasures of collecting.²¹

The notion of discovery derived from the perception that peoples and regions in Africa and Oceania were (and still are) distant, isolated, and suspended in time. History tells us otherwise. One need only consult recent textbooks about African and Oceanic art to fully grasp the dynamic interactions between peoples over time and the impact these relationships had on the arts.²² By 1935, when Sweeney published his book, most of Africa and

Oceania had been absorbed into colonial empires and were economically exploited by their rulers. Riches flowed back to distant metropolises such as Paris, Brussels, London, Lisbon, Amsterdam, and Sydney, Australia, which developed into important hubs for the art trade. Both world wars deeply affected peoples in Africa and Oceania. The First World War saw African troops in combat on behalf of their colonial masters. Senegalese *tirailleurs* fought for France in both world wars, men in Dogon country in Mali were conscripted by the French, and the British sent Africans from Ghanaian, Nigerian, and Cameroonian villages to Burma during the Second World War. If these men were lucky, they returned to their villages or settled in larger towns. During the Second World War, many islands in the Pacific had military installations, were sites of major battles, and sent their men to fight alongside Allied troops. Islanders served in official and unofficial capacities as carriers, guides, and scouts and performed other less glamorous tasks. They also enrolled in infantry or support units such as the first Papuan Infantry Battalion in New Guinea, which consisted entirely of men from the Pacific. Their experiences, like those of conscripted Africans, are a largely untold story.

Since the nineteenth century—even earlier in some regions—the need for work and a desire for new experiences brought African men and women to the expanding cities. As plantations, mines, and factories grew, labor migration became a fact of life. These Africans began their own “discovery” of distant places, came in contact with foreigners, and developed new lifestyles. Men worked in the Firestone plantation in Liberia and labored in gold mines in Ghana’s Asante region, while various Belgian enterprises in the Congo Free State (later the Belgian Congo) drew African workers from as far away as Sierra Leone and Nigeria (fig. 3).

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Congo. Sierra Léonais employés au chemin de fer.

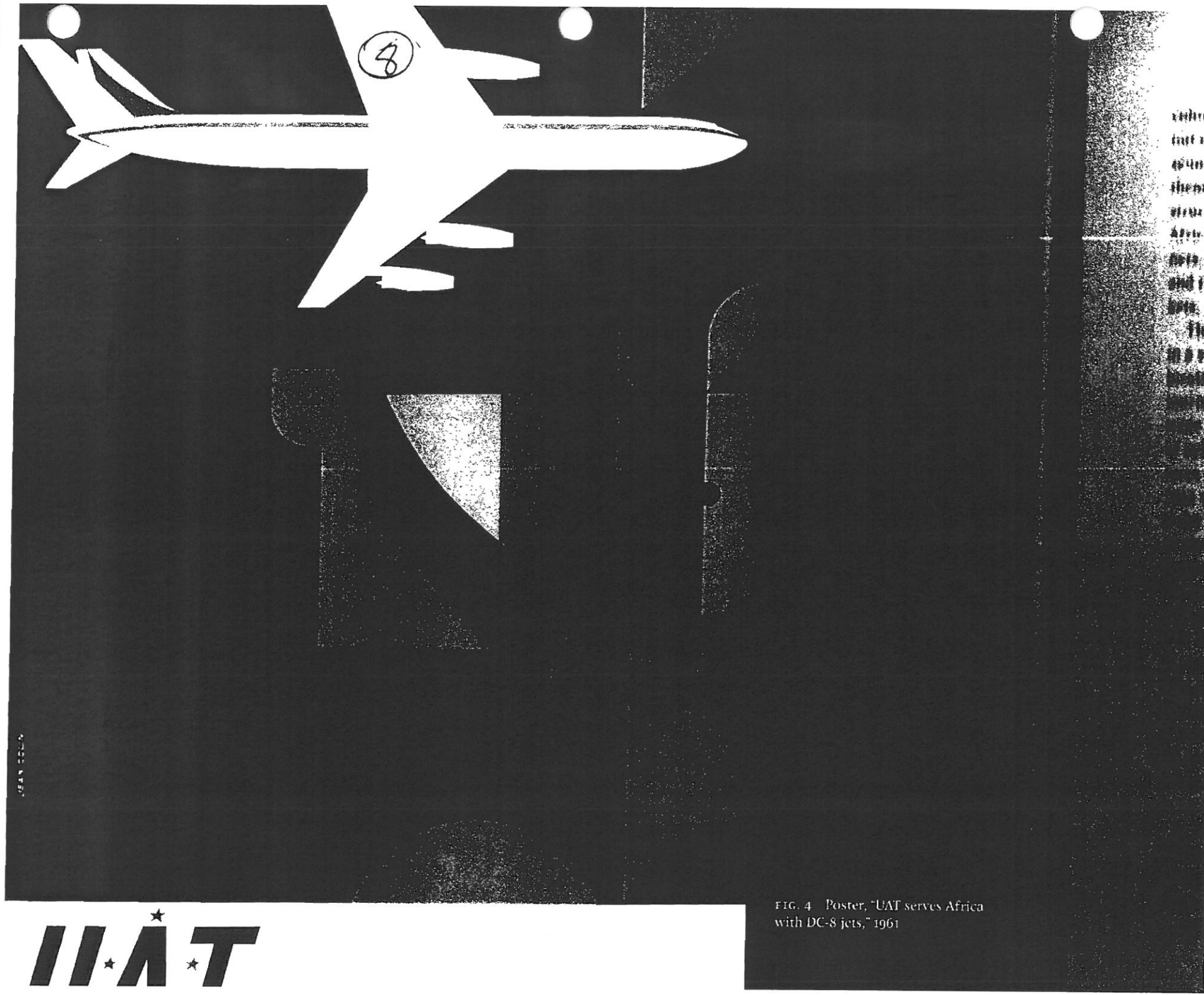
FIG. 3 Sierra Leonean railway employees in the Congo Free State (now Democratic Republic of the Congo), about 1900

Similar processes unfolded in the Pacific. Islanders, with traditions of seafaring and voyaging over huge distances, had always been in touch with one another. Regular contact with foreigners began with the arrival of European whalers and traders in the early nineteenth century. In those regions that came under colonial domination, new economic ventures required large workforces. In New Guinea and New Britain, for example, the Germans established plantations in the late nineteenth century, procuring laborers not only from these islands but also from places as far away as China, India, and what is now Indonesia.²³

Movements to free African and Oceanic colonies and protectorates from colonial rule began to gain momentum before the Second World War, and these regions became independent in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The cold war subsequently had an impact on the new countries that

emerged. Some maintained strong foreign military and civilian presences, and teachers, businessmen, missionaries, diplomats, and development experts worked in their capitals and rural areas. Anthropologists, members of a discipline that developed in the late nineteenth century and was intimately linked to the colonial period, and a new breed of experts, art historians trained in African and Oceanic art, conducted research. After President John F. Kennedy founded the Peace Corps in 1961, young volunteers from the United States sent overseas encountered African and Oceanic arts for the first time. It is not surprising that a whole generation of American art historians working in these regions started out as Peace Corps volunteers.

After the Second World War, professional art dealers began field collecting and increasingly replaced the expatriates who had brought most of the objects out of the



IATA

FIG. 4 Poster, "IATA serves Africa with DC-8 jets," 1961

colonies in the years before independence. Objects poured out of Africa and the Pacific realm into private and museum collections. Africans and Pacific Islanders established themselves as middlemen and dealers, creating trading structures to handle demand. Beginning in the late 1950s, African agents or merchants, known pejoratively as "runners," or *rabatteurs* in French, brought objects to Europe and the United States and became fixtures in the art markets, supplying gallery owners and private collectors.²⁴

These African merchants are positioned at a high level in a supply chain that begins in African rural areas with locals who gather objects in their villages. The objects then journey through large African cities to centers of the art trade such as New York and often directly to the doorsteps of collectors and museums. A quick glance at the structures in Côte d'Ivoire, as detailed in Christopher Steiner's 1994 study *African Art in Transit*, is instructive. In the hierarchy of African traders in and around Abidjan, owners of storehouses filled to the brim with objects were at the highest echelon, and clients would visit them regularly. Stallholders in the big central markets sold to tourists and sophisticated clients. Door-to-door traders, often associated with the large storehouses, visited the private homes of resident foreigners, becoming familiar with a client's level of knowledge and taste and catering to each one's particular wishes and needs. The lowest echelon consisted of street vendors, who set up shop at busy intersections or the beach and waited for patrons in front of hotels. Entrepreneurial men could move up in this hierarchy and make an excellent living.²⁵

In the second half of the twentieth century, collectors themselves began to travel to Africa and the Pacific, buying objects from local merchants and thus eliminating the middlemen. They were a small group among the growing number of tourists who frequented towns and interior

regions in Africa and Oceania from the late 1950s onward, when many countries sought to increase tourism and sold themselves as holiday destinations for Americans, Australians, and Europeans. Airlines such as Air Afrique, Ansett Australia, Pan American World Airways (PanAm) and UTA (Union des Transports Aériens) featured references to purchasing art in their advertisements and even depicted objects on their posters (fig. 4). A 1978 Air Afrique advertisement in *African Arts* referred to Abidjan in Côte d'Ivoire as the "Manhattan of Africa" and compared its open-air markets, where visitors could buy anything from sculpture to trinkets, to New York's largest department stores, Macy's and Gimbel's.²⁶ Ansett struck a similar chord in its 1970 brochure describing tours in Papua New Guinea: "Whilst on the Sepik River visits will be made into interesting and primitive villages where many opportunities present itself [sic] to purchase unusual native artifacts of this area."²⁷ During their journeys, visitors searched for works in villages, frequented the shops of local dealers, and attended festivals and performances of masquerades, where they often bought objects.

In his 1935 exhibition catalogue, Sweeney alluded to many issues that accompanied collecting throughout the second half of the twentieth century. There is, however, one aspect affecting the movement of objects that did not matter to collectors, museums, and governments until quite recently. Concerns of cultural property, patrimony, and repatriation constitute a complex arena at the crossroads of legal, ethical, historical, and cultural considerations, and there are many divergent opinions on how to resolve them.²⁸ Sweeney and his contemporaries, however, who collected and curated objects at the height of colonialism, had hardly any doubt that the spoils of such activities belong to those who rule, be it in the interests of discovery, science, or connoisseurship.

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Following the journeys of individual works in the McMillan Collection and exploring their uses and meanings in their original settings allow us to cast light on the issues and debates that accompanied the flow of African and Oceanic objects—many produced by African and Oceanic artists and workshops for both indigenous and foreign clientele or, in some instances, purely for the outside market²⁹—into Western collections and museums throughout the second half of the twentieth century.³⁰ We begin our exploration of journeys and sites in Paris, the Mecca of collectors and the European hub of the trade in African and Oceanic art to this day, and in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a center of learning adjacent to Boston, the so-called Athens of America: both are integral connections in Geneviève McMillan's life story and the history of her collection.

NOTES

1. See Rubin 1984a; Paudrat 1984 and Peltier 1984 present now classic overviews of African and Oceanic art in the West; for a more critical view, see Price 1989.
2. We are fully aware of the contested nature of these and similar terms but use them for want of better categorizations.
3. We use the terms "West" and "Westerners" to designate people from these regions, even though the terms are contested.
4. See Vogel 2005, 14, about African collections; Welsch 2005 about Oceanic collections; and Steiner 2002.
5. First suggested in Kopytoff 1986. Many scholars have used this heuristic device, including Arnoldi, Hardin, and Geary 1996, in the section "The Life History of Things"; Gosden and Marshall 1999; and Corbey 2000.
6. Pratt 1992, 4.
7. Sweeney 1935, 13.
8. On the conceptualization of style and its relation to so-called tribal groups for the African realm, see Kasfir 1984. This kind of critique has not been articulated as vigorously in Oceanic art, although the style paradigm was equally important in the 1950s and 1960s; see, for instance, Newton 1961.
9. There have always been outright fakes, objects deliberately made to deceive the buyer. The difference today is in the sheer quantity of fakes and the sophistication of the business.
10. Corbey 2000, an insightful study of Western taste and the art market, contains extensive information about these issues.
11. Brother Joseph-Aurélien Cornet was then the associate director-general of the Institute of National Museums of Zaire in Kinshasa.
12. Cornet 1975, 52.
13. Benjamin 1969 [1936], 221.
14. Cornet 1975, 52.
15. Photograph by Marilyn Hammersley Houlberg, June 1975. *African Arts*, v. 9, n. 3 (April 1976): cover.
16. Seligman 1976, 27. Thomas K. Seligman, then a curator at the de Young Museum in San Francisco, is now Freidenreich Director, Cantor Arts Center, at Stanford University.
17. Robbins and Nooter 1989, 13. One of the most insightful attempts to classify objects from Africa is Vogel 1991, 10–11. See also Steiner 1995 and Phillips and Steiner 1999 for a discussion of authenticity.
18. Koch 2004. The late Gerd Koch was an anthropologist and curator at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin.

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19. Kaiserin-Augusta-Fluss was the German designation for the Sepik River in New Guinea.
20. Koch 2004, 12-13.
21. Steiner 1994, 131-34. It should be noted here that the popular television program *Antiques Road Show* is based entirely on the idea of discovering works of art/commodities.
22. See, for instance, Visonà et al. 2001 and Thomas 1995.
23. Hiery 2001, 296.
24. See Rohner 2000.
25. Steiner 1994, 42-60.
26. *Air Afrique* 1978.
27. Ansett Airlines of Australia 1970.
28. See Appiah 2006, 115-35, for one of the more thoughtful treatises on this subject.
29. See Vogel 1988 for an important discussion of collecting.
30. In order to trace the history of certain African object types in the West, we frequently consulted five books that were crucial in moving artifacts into the art realm: Carl Einstein, *Negerplastik* (1915); Marius de Zayas, *African Negro Art: Its Influence on Modern Art* (1916); Paul Guillaume and Thomas Munro, *Primitive Negro Sculpture* (1926); Carl Kjerfve, *Centres de style de la sculpture nègre africaine* (1935-38); and James Sweeney, *African Negro Art* (1935). In the Oceanic realm, we examine the initial settings of several objects and their movements to some of the major cultural centers that sprang up in the area.

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