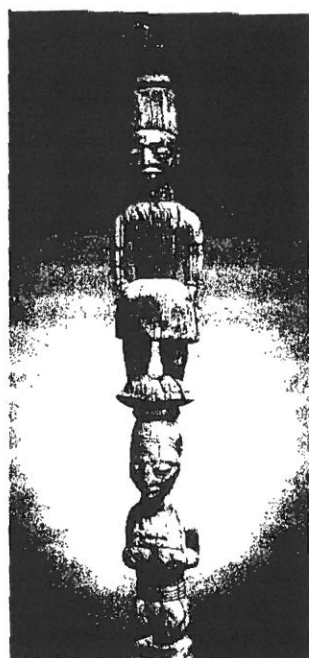
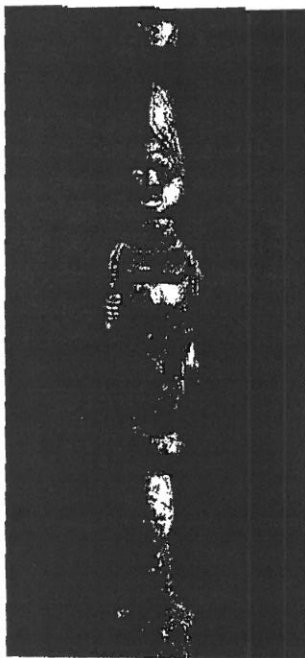


African Aesthetics

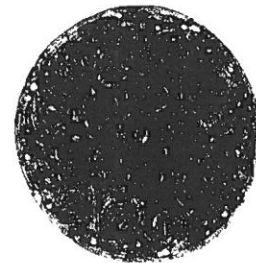
The objects presented in this book have been selected above all for their aesthetic qualities. Any choice of things considered the most beautiful necessarily raises the question of the standards that are being applied. What are the criteria for evaluating African art? Who establishes them? What are they based on? Are they the same as those of the artists who created the works, or of their patrons? Clearly the criteria we use are our own, formed by a late twentieth-century sensibility and informed by the study of African art. We would, however, like to think that the works we most admire are those that best fulfilled the artists' intentions, those that, when they were made, were considered excellent. We shall attempt here to explore the aesthetic criteria African art objects were meant to satisfy in the societies from which they came.

The works themselves suggest the first answers to these questions. Because important commissions generally went to the most admired artists, we can assume that ambitious works and large artistic programs represent the prevailing ideal. Such a case is the great series of figurative pillars carved for the Efon Alaye palace courtyard, destroyed by fire in 1912 and entirely rebuilt by Agbonbiofe Adeshina and his family (Nos. 64, 66, 69). We would agree with the king's choice of Adeshina over his rival, the lesser artist Obembe Alaye (No. 67). Another large program was the Omo Ukwu temple containing twenty-one nearly life-size figures (No. 84). It, too, was commissioned from one artist after a disastrous fire. Although this isolated sculpture cannot itself be considered a masterpiece, it must have been magnificent as it appeared in the temple, painted and flanked by other figures. We can consider the chosen artist's style a standard of excellence against which the efforts of other artists from the region must be measured.



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In other cases, the exceptional elaboration of a work suggests that it once was the focal point of its original setting. A small number of complex Dogon figures, including No. 6, and the Seated Couple in the Barnes Foundation, Merion, Pennsylvania (Guillaume and Munro 1929, pl. 40), all of them unusual in size, iconography, and elaboration, appear to be the work of a single workshop or artist. Again, only artists whose skill was recognized as remarkable would have been selected for such important commissions.



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But how were artists selected, and by whom? Patrons of the arts were usually the leaders of society, and their aesthetic choices expressed collective values. When an artist was paid, payment was commensurate with his reputation and with the size of the undertaking. Thus the largest and most elaborate works were commissioned by the most powerful and wealthy individuals or groups. In the small, unified communities that originally owned these objects, everybody shared similar values and life styles; like most artists before the nineteenth century, the African artist celebrated the values of his culture. An artist critical of his society or a rich eccentric were both virtual impossibilities.

Works in rich materials, like those of extravagant size, can also tell us something about aesthetic criteria because such materials belonged to the powerful and the wealthy, those who could obtain the services of any artist they chose. The standard of craftsmanship in gold is accordingly high because only experienced casters were likely to work with it. Furthermore, pieces with casting flaws were normally melted down and recast so that imperfections were eliminated. Compare the two Akan cast-gold pendants (No. 55) with the two weights cast in bronze (Nos. 53, 54). Fine craftsmanship is particularly evident in objects containing a great amount of gold; the two repoussé disks (Nos. 57, 58) that contain much less gold than the cast objects are, not surprisingly, less finely worked. Ivory is another precious material that was seldom squandered on an unskilled hand. The Benin ivory bracelets (Nos. 79-81) are virtuoso carvings of the highest order, their abundant detail rendered with great delicacy in very low relief.

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Large artistic programs, important works, and objects in precious materials display fine workmanship, delicacy, smoothness of finish, and complexity of design, from which we can conclude that these were attributes esteemed by the patrons who commissioned the works, and thus by the community as a whole.



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is a device that energizes the skin and suggests vitality; the rough cuts – almost gashes – in the wood of the Cameroon leopard (No. 91) express not only the violence and menace of the beast but the power and decisiveness of the artist's hand. Irregular and varied patterns are admired (No. 128). An Igbo man discussing Mbari wall paintings said: "You have to make many patterns; this one with several different patches – it is good. If you make just one design form it is not good. It would not be good having them all resemble each other. If you have a light pattern here, put a dark one next to it. If first a tall person, then a short one. If ten people are in the road, are they all equal in height? There must be variation" (Cole 1982, p. 177).



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Artists also use irregularity and asymmetry to produce satirical or grotesque effects in sculptures intended to ridicule, threaten, or intimidate. Certain works are meant to be conventionally ugly or distorted in order to inspire fear, horror, or revulsion in the onlooker. Some ward off intruders, some exact fines and punishments, while others show the consequences of breaking the rules. Masks used for policing, for example, may be given a form that deliberately breaks the accepted canons of beauty to awe and intimidate the beholder. While some masks (No. 93) look as if they were wildly hacked and violently cut, this is of course a carefully calculated effect. Some of these "ugly" sculptures are colored dull black, or are made to look dirty. The artist's skill in creating these works is judged by local critics who apply criteria specific to them (Cole 1982, p. 181; Borgatti 1982, p. 8).

An artist who commands good workmanship has obviously mastered adequate representation – his work will look like others of its category, and its parts will be recognizable. Jacob Epstein (1932, p. 87) made an astute

Evenness and fineness were, however, not the only qualities that were highly regarded. Because African artists had complete mastery of their tools and materials, we may assume that their work looks just as they intended, and that irregularity and roughness were intentional. As in Japanese or modern art, these are means of artistic expression. The tool-flecked surface of the Senufo figure (No. 17)

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observation about the representational intent of most African art: "It is a great mistake to lose sight of the naturalism. In much of the work there is great anatomical truth to be found, extremely simplified, and often expressed architecturally." He goes on to propose that African art should influence artists by suggesting new ways of interpreting nature.

African artists rarely depict nature in Epstein's sense; they seldom portray real people or real animals, but rather ideas about reality that are expressed through references to the visible world. Physical features of humans and animals are sometimes combined to make statements about the nature of spirits (Nos. 32, 33). A Bamana artist explained: "The Komo mask is made to look like an animal, but it is not an animal. It is a secret" (McNaughton 1979, p. iii). Few human figures or masks are portraits, or even idealized likenesses of living people. Figures are more likely to represent a concept or cluster of concepts about womanhood, increase, leadership, or power, for example. It would be a mistake to see these images as literal attempts to imitate nature. Sculptures may stand for immaterial spirits or, even less specifically, serve merely as abodes for spirits, without corresponding to their appearance. African sculpture is thus the result of a highly intellectual and abstract process of translating ideas, concepts, and values into physical form.

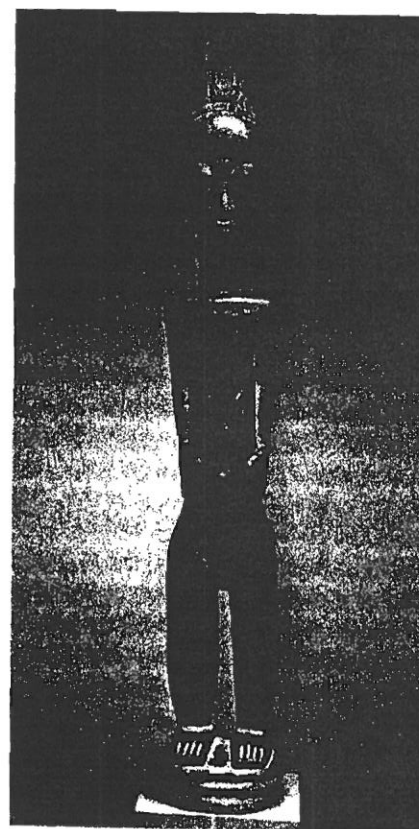
Beyond good workmanship, which is taken for granted in works of high quality, what other characteristics were important to the artists and their patrons? Field studies of the aesthetic criteria applied to works of art have been conducted in many parts of Africa. A wealth of data has come to light, gathered from, among other things, evaluations of individual works both by those who created them and those who used them. Broad similarities in the findings suggest that there is a shared basis for aesthetic judgments (Vogel 1979). The studies focused on single ethnic groups and did not explore similarities among them; my emphasis here, however, is on those very similarities, because they point the way toward the definition of an African aesthetic.

The moral basis of African aesthetics is fundamental, a point the researcher may learn quickly and with dismay when he or she discovers that one word – and this is the case in many languages – means both beautiful and good. This word usually means well made, beautiful, pleasing to the senses, virtuous, useful, correct, appropriate, and conforming to custom and expectations, and stands in contrast to the word meaning evil, ugly, bad, vicious, useless, ill-made, unsuitable. The art literature alone records a striking number of languages that fuse the concepts of good and beautiful, evil and ugly, in this way.¹

The moral basis of art is not peculiar to Africa – quite the contrary. Most cultures in history have shared this view. In

classical Greek a single word, *kalogatheia*, from *kalos*, the beautiful, and *agatheia*, the good, combined these two concepts. In Africa the researcher may at first perceive this fusing of good and beautiful as a lack of necessary distinctions, an obstacle to understanding, and may try, as I did, to separate appraisals of works of art based on "aesthetic" appeal, or visual beauty, from those based on subject or content. It becomes clear, however, that a real understanding of African art and African value systems lies in the very recognition that the two concepts overlap.

It is entirely consistent with the use and meaning of art in Africa that it should be both beautiful and good, because art not only provides pleasure but, more significantly, it upholds moral values. Among the Lega, for example, small ivory sculptures presented with aphorisms are used to teach initiates ethical behavior (Nos. 132, 133). Some sculptures teach about the moral universe by illustrating a hierarchy of values (No. 14) or by delineating an ideal of human potential; a Baule adult might, for example, aspire to the perfection of body and character that he or she sees in a figure (No. 48).



Good/beautiful expresses two sources of African aesthetic pleasure: the *aesthetic form* of a work (its external

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appearance) and its *aesthetic content* (the signification of something good). Form and content must intimately correspond with one another to elicit full aesthetic pleasure. When they do the form becomes what T. S. Eliot (1950, p. 124) called the "objective correlative" of the meaning – form that does not merely transmit content but in itself expresses content. Hence the Akan require that designs for joyful occasions have bright colors and straight lines and that those associated with war or mourning have dark or intense colors and curved, crossed, or broken lines (Warren and Andrews 1977, p. 10). The Songye figure (No. 129), though it is not conventionally attractive, is an aesthetically satisfying object because its awesome form perfectly expresses its aggressive content. Aesthetic pleasure is thus spiritual and visual, intellectual and sensuous.

The moral basis of much African art may explain why, as in Greek art, the principal subject is the human figure – to the almost total exclusion of nature in the form of landscape, or plant motifs. The moral world is the world of human behavior; accordingly, animals appear primarily in relation to people (No. 77) or as metaphors for human behavior. The leopard, for example, is often equated with the king (No. 160) because both are dangerous and powerful; both can kill, and both rule over their respective kingdoms.



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During my first field inquiry on Baule aesthetics, artists and patrons would repeatedly say of the figure they preferred, "It looks like a human being." While initially this seemed only a simple observation, the phrase took on weight with repetition, and because it appeared frequently

in other studies on aesthetics, it acquired a significance greater than any single study suggested. Biebuyck (1971) reports that the Lega refer to their masks as "semblance of a man"; the Bamana, the Yoruba, and the Igbo, like the Baule, express aesthetic approval by saying that a figure



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"looks like a human being" (McNaughton 1979; Thompson 1973a, p. 21; Cole 1982, p. 180; Vogel 1980a). Just as our expression "every inch a man" implies more than maleness, the African expression seems to allude to the idea of being human in the fullest sense, as a physical and moral ideal.

The field studies consistently find that standards of physical beauty applied to sculpture are the same as those applied to people. Firm, rounded breasts and buttocks, universally regarded with pleasure, frequently appear in art (Nos. 52, 64). The Mende and other peoples for whom a ringed neck is an object of beauty tend to emphasize this feature in their sculpture (No. 28). Luxuriant hair is coveted by both men and women in Africa, and this too is an attribute elaborated in art (No. 102). The Akan admire long graceful necks, and their sculpture is noted for this feature (No. 51). The lustrously smooth surface of most African sculpture, often embellished with scarification, is an indication of beautifully shining, healthy skin.

Social attributes also have a moral dimension. Wealth, which is usually shared in these small communities, is always highly regarded and carries the connotation of nobility of character. Because there was virtually no labor for hire, it was almost impossible for an individual to accumulate wealth without the willing cooperation of many people in the household and in the community. Signs of wealth in African art thus indicate personal charisma, fairness, and generosity, since the labor needed to acquire wealth in the first place could be procured only by one who showed these qualities. Wealth is also a sign of power and prestige. An ivory staff once carried by a Kongo chief (No.

116) shows a figure wearing expensive clothes. Costly objects may be used to honor spirits, much as in the Catholic Church statues of saints are adorned with opulent garments. Hence even sculptures made for spirits or to represent idealized abstractions, such as Nos. 82 and 83, may include rich ornaments.

The state of being composed, often noted in the field studies, is an ethical/aesthetic quality nearly always portrayed in figural sculpture. The person who is composed behaves in a measured and rational way; he or she is controlled, proud, dignified, and cool. An essential quality in a ruler, composure is particularly evident in images of kings, such as the Cameroon seated figure (No. 96). Powerful or comical masks, however, may violate this principle (Nos. 93, 94), showing a mouth gaping wide or snaggletoothed, or a face that is twisted and contorted. Compare the grinning masks to the figure of the king (No. 96). Where the masks look wild and hysterical, the king is the very image of serene control; he has been carved to exemplify rationality, they to project arbitrary, unreasoning power.

Illness and deformity seldom appear in African

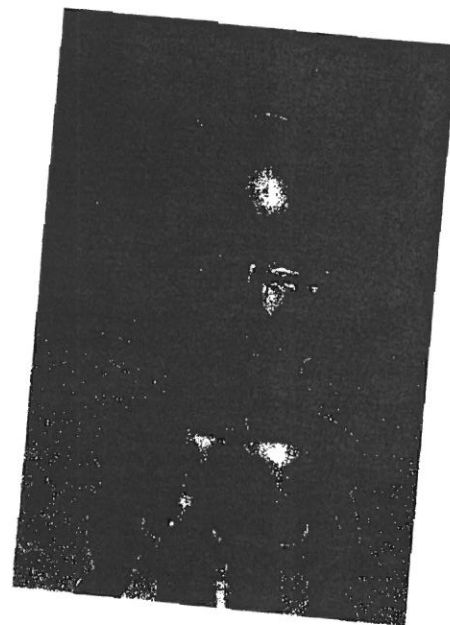
the large heads of infants and the muscular bodies of mature adults (No. 101). These figures embody an unattainable moral and physical ideal. They refer to the fact that children are close to the ancestors, for the Fang believe the unborn live in the world of the ancestors and are only gradually weaned away to human status. Closeness with the ancestors, retainers of wisdom and upholders of the moral order, is shown in a body that is neither childlike nor old.



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art — not only because they are realistic but because they are signs of evil. Suffering has no redemptive purpose; it is punishment for an infraction, or evidence of having been attacked by witches or spirits. These beliefs lead artists to avoid depicting the abnormal unless it is with some objective in mind: to teach a moral lesson (No. 123) or to chastise by mockery. Some Kongo figures (No. 112), for example, used for both offensive and defensive magic, show afflicted persons perhaps in order to cast similar ills upon enemies known and unknown.

The defects of age are also seldom depicted by African artists, though they often combine the spiritual or intellectual attributes of age with the physical perfection of youth to suggest an ideal which combines wisdom and strength. Qualities never fused in nature are seen in Fang figures (Fernandez 1971, pp. 365-66) that are carved with

Health is an attribute almost always represented in African figures both because a healthy person is in harmony with the spirits and because to be healthy is a cultural

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ideal. Health connotes vigor, productiveness, fertility, and an ability to labor. In these small agricultural societies chiefs, elders, women, artists, children – virtually everybody works in the fields: people who are unproductive are undesirable. In figure sculpture a strong neck is a reference to the ability to carry heavy loads, which is essential in a society where everything moves by head portage (No. 74). Firm, round calf and pectoral muscles similarly attest to the ability to work hard (No. 48).

But the fertility implied by youth and health is unquestionably the most desirable of all attributes. The many images of pregnant women and women with children express the ultimate cultural ideal. Because the purpose of most African art and ritual is to promote increase of the family and community, women and children are fitting images for ritual sculpture. Drewal (1977) suggests that some female figures may have a further meaning: nursing mothers and pregnant women are not menstruating and thus attain a state akin to that of female elders. Menstrual blood is considered potent, dangerous to men and many shrines, and, according to the Yoruba, the loss of menstrual blood saps a woman's vital spiritual force. Images of pregnant and lactating women thus become "much more than symbols of fertility. They communicate sexual abstinence, female force, and spirituality" (Drewal 1977, p. 5). This ideal of women's potency and purity is probably manifested by many Yoruba sculptures (Nos. 61, 73) and by works from other regions as well. The Luba figure with her hands to her breasts (No. 125) and the Dogon mother with her full, round breasts (No. 1) perhaps express this idea.



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Field studies of aesthetics tend to elicit much discussion about scarification and coiffure, probably for two reasons. To some degree, scarification and coiffure are ways of transforming the body into a work of art, so a

discussion of what is beautiful is likely to bring them to mind. Second, the belief expressed by these seemingly cosmetic features is that they are signs of civilization. Although in Africa today extensive scarification and elaborate traditional coiffures (especially for men) are no longer common, and although artists like to modernize their works, artists continue to carve traditional scarification and coiffure. The persistence of these features in art, when other seemingly analogous conventions such as nudity have been abandoned, draws attention to their fundamental importance.

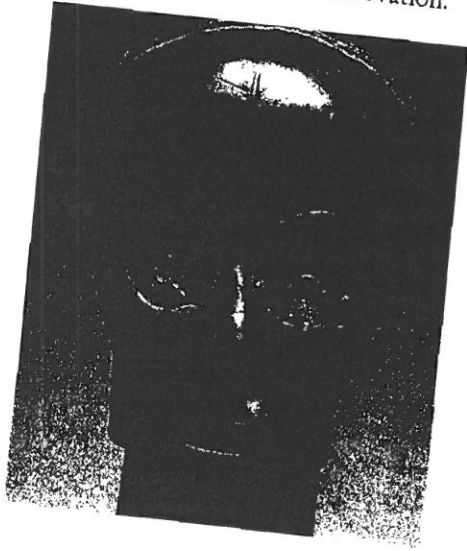
Scarification and other forms of body decoration were traditionally considered marks of civilization. They distinguished the civilized, socialized human body from the body in its natural state and from animals. The Chokwe say that teeth not filed to points are like the teeth of animals (Crowley 1973, p. 247). Scarification is performed mainly during adolescence, often at rituals that celebrate the accession to adulthood; it serves to demarcate progressive stages of social integration and standing, such as parenthood, and it marks one as a member of one's group. Where scarification was the norm, those who lacked it – mainly strangers, outcasts, and children – were not considered full members. Scarification is not only beautiful to look at and arousing to touch but it is also proof of stamina and courage, characteristics necessary to undergo the painful operation.

Coiffure similarly suggests more than attention to appearance: it connotes self-esteem, the respect of the community, and social integration. Normally done by a friend or relative, an elaborate coiffure (No. 125) could take up to forty hours to complete. Scarification and coiffure also are the means for ethnic identification, distinctions that are important in aesthetic evaluations.

When the beautiful and the good overlap as they do in African belief, the *aesthetic content* of a work of art (the signification of something good) may be a source of aesthetic pleasure although this pleasure is not primarily visual. Many sculptures suggest states of supernatural protection or of awareness heightened by spiritual aid; the perception of these states provides aesthetic pleasure for the believer. The Janus headdress (No. 87), its two naturalistic faces looking in opposite directions, suggests clairvoyance. The bright, all-seeing eyes of the Kota and Fang reliquary figures (Nos. 98, 108) represent the vigilance and protection of the ancestors. As Fernandez (1973, p. 205) suggests, the Fang derive aesthetic pleasure from the spiritual relief they experience in the presence of their reliquary guardians.

African appraisals of the *aesthetic content* of sculpture can be distinguished from African judgments of *aesthetic form*. The field reports reveal that African aesthetic criteria are consistent from one ethnic group to another, although local differences exist and local styles are always preferred. Good craftsmanship – the ability to make a work beautiful – is the primary and all-embracing requirement. The qualities that make a work beautiful are many: fineness; careful

finish or polishing; regularity of form and pattern, or evenness; uprightness or straightness; balance; symmetry; a discreet use of pattern to enliven surface (much as scarification is used to embellish the body); completeness; intactness (not marred by splits or breaks); definition of each part and of each detail so that it is recognizable; newness, associated with youth and vigor; variety and innovation.



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But it is moderation that emerges as the cardinal principle of African aesthetics. This principle forbidding excess governs all others. The words for moderation often imply balance, appropriateness, uniformity, and being in the middle. African artists and patrons discussed other features in terms of moderation: the head should be not too large, not too small, scarification should be not too fancy, not too plain, and so forth. Even qualities normally admired, such as decoration, naturalism, and stylization, were criticized if taken too far.

Excess is determined by the parameters of a given style. What the Dogon would consider excessive scarification (No. 1) would be far less extensive than what is considered normal by the Luba (No. 125). The degree of geometrization permitted an Mbunda artist (No. 136) is far greater than that allowed a Dan artist (Nos. 30, 31). Because much African art is extremely stylized compared to Western realism, African art has been regarded as expressionistic and exaggerated. The central principle, moderation, has scarcely been recognized.

The dictionary defines expressionism as the search for expressiveness of style by means of exaggeration and distortion of line and color; it defines classical art as characterized by order, conformity to tradition, and the suppression of radical innovation and personal expression. The latter definition describes African art far better than the former.

Since African artists do not try to portray the visible world but rather the world of ideas and beliefs, they cannot be said to exaggerate the forms of nature. Although

the Komo mask may look like a distorted animal to us, as the Bamana artist said, "It is not an animal. It is a secret" (McNaughton 1979, p. iii). African art, like other classical art, imitates art more than it imitates nature. The artist's concern with moderation, controlled emotion, restraint, balance, and proportion places African art firmly within a classical – as opposed to an expressionistic – tradition.

But what does all this tell us about how successful a particular work of art is when measured by the aesthetic criteria it was made to satisfy? To summarize: We have seen that art is expected to express moral values and that its beauty lies partly in expressing them through appropriate forms. Skilled workmanship includes the ability to make the work formally beautiful by means of artistic devices such as fineness of finish, balance, evenness, and recognizability. Most essential, all aspects of the work are expected to reflect the cardinal value of moderation, which underlies all African aesthetic systems. Innovation and invention are also prized within the parameters of style and iconography that the African artist must respect.

Westerners, after looking at numerous African sculptures in a given style, come to recognize the genius who can sing the same song in a new key. Applying African aesthetic principles to African sculpture and testing the work against related African works – rather than against an idea we have formed about African art – we find that our judgments usually coincide with the preferences of those for whom the works were originally created. Where Westerners and Africans disagree in aesthetic judgments, it is probably because the *aesthetic content* has been misread, or because different values are attached to the content. For example, Westerners may see a work as expressing unintended emotion, or may admire the roughness of a work that is merely incompetent. Africans generally perceive newness as a positive value signifying vigor, and admire new works that Westerners would rank low. Newness of a work of art is not an intrinsic good in Western culture, which accords greater respect to age. By and large, though, we admire and enjoy the works that were valued when they were made. Approaching from our very different perspectives, we all arrive at the same conclusions. As the Yoruba say: Anyone who meets beauty and does not look at it will soon be poor.

1. For the Senjfo, Glaze 1978, p. 63; for the Lobi, Meyer 1980; for the Baule, Vogel 1980a, p. 8; for the Bini, Ben-Amos 1976, pp. 250, 252; for the northern Edo, Borgatti 1979, p. 19; for the Igbo, Cole 1982, p. 175; for the Ibibio, Messenger 1973, p. 219; for the Chokwe, Crowley 1966, p. 522; for the Songye, Merriam 1973, p. 279; for the Lega, Biebuyck 1973, pp. 129, 177-78. Warren and Andrews (1977) do not articulate this conclusion, though their data on the Akan otherwise conform closely to my findings on the Baule.