African Art in Transit by Christopher B. Steiner

Review by: Philip L. Ravenhill

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In this important book Christopher Steiner seeks to understand how art objects—a locu-
tion that, in terms of his research, seems far more appropriate than “works of art”—circu-
late in “local, national, and transnational economies.” He is particularly concerned about “those whose lives are caught up” in this commerce in West Africa and more specifi-
cally in Côte d’Ivoire. This is an interesting ethnography: the descriptions are informative, the data rich, the anecdotes intriguing, and the author’s empathy for those he studied is apparent.

In the first half of the book Steiner details the economic aspects of the trade in art objects as it takes place in Côte d’Ivoire. He describes the organization of the market, the outlets for art commodities, the basic classification of goods, the division of labor, and the social production of value. These data and analyses make possible the second half, which is devoted to “the trade in cultural information and the mediation of knowledge.” Much of Steiner’s material is new, and his documentation of the art trade in Côte d’Ivoire enriches the literature on African art. He makes perceptive points, as when he points out the differences between African traders outside Africa being referred to as “runners,” while European or American traders who go to Africa to buy are called “dealers.” His discussion of the local classification of art objects into the tripartite scheme of antiquités, copies, and n’goum–n’goum is elucidating, although issues of “quality” within these categories go largely unaddressed.

Steiner’s fascination with the bargaining process that occurs between African vendors and foreign tourists leads him to focus on the “economy of words” that adds value to each artifact being sold. He argues that traders are involved in the “mediation of knowledge,” but as euphonious as this concept may sound to our academically conditioned ears, it somehow seems ultimately inadequate to deal fully with the motivations of buyers. The tourist—who assumes an almost archetypal, if not stereotypical, status in the book—after all purchases a thing. Whether “authentic” or copy, old or new, traditional or modern in its style, the object exists prior to and subsequent to the words in which it may be enveloped by its seller. The buyer does not purchase (or even, for that matter, write down) the seller’s words; often, in fact, he or she may not “buy into” any bit of the putative history or fanciful story being offered as the “wrapping” of the object. Steiner seems overly eager to assume that the sale is conditional on the seller’s words and the buyer’s credulity, and at the same time he seems unwilling to admit that a buyer or a collector might choose to ignore the speech totally and instead “read” the object directly in its own terms or in terms of aesthetic, or other, notions that he or she independently brings to its appreciation.

I would argue that both buyer and seller are often, in fact, acutely aware of the roles that they are acting out, as well as their respective parts in a socially scripted performance; for both there is frequently an assumption that the “sincerity condition” of normal communicative interaction is lacking and that therefore speech is “discounted.” Is their dialogue really undertaken to commu-
nicate propositional “truths,” or is it simply an activity that Malinowski would have called “phatic communion”?

Given his overemphasis on the importance and determinative role of words, Steiner sees all objects as equivalent in their status as commodity. Yet it could be argued that while some objects are acquired as souvenirs to provide a prop for the narrative that will later be offered up by the tourist at home, other objects may in fact be acquired because they have an autonomy that allows for nonverbal appreciation. Notions of relative worth or quality seem to escape Steiner’s attention; it is as though there were no difference between art objects in their aesthetic appeal or the degree to which they are accomplished works of craft or art. Yet surely objects in the market are weighed against each other, with some objects winning out over others and being purchased on the basis of some idea of quality.

Straddling the disciplines of anthropology and art history, Steiner creates an interesting interdisciplinary framework for his inquiries. His work, however, is bedeviled by the way he deals with two topics which have been perennially problematic in anthropology: time and tribe. Although he puts forth some interesting ideas on “situational ethnic identity” (pp. 89-90) and provides an extended and interesting anecdote about a “Hausa trader” and a “Senufo carver,” Steiner, in my opinion, pays undue attention to Muslim identity and religious belief as a way of explaining Muslim involvement in the art trade. The majority of art traders in Côte d’Ivoire are Muslim, but is this due to Islamic religious beliefs, or are there other, historical, reasons that may explain this observed fact? Is the reason, for example, simply that art traders are a specialized subset of all the petty traders in Côte d’Ivoire who earn their living as intermediaries in both export and import commerce and who are in an overwhelming majority Muslim? Are there not historical reasons that placed the Muslim trader as the officially favored “agent de diffusion de la civilisation” and trader in the early colonial period?

In the absence of a thorough historical analysis, Steiner resorts to a somewhat essen-
tialist argument in which Islamic aniconic attitudes are seen as creating a proclivity in Muslim traders to deal in objects that embody animism. Stressing differences between animistic religion and Islam, he avoids areas of convergence in these belief systems, such as the similarity between animistic beliefs in genres and Islamic ideas concerning the djinn, or the shared belief in the efficacy of amulets. The unfortunate result is a certain stereotyp-
ing of the social actors that Steiner describes, and all too often, otherwise recognizable indi-
viduals are made into generic actors, such as the “Hausa trader” (cf. ill. 16, p. 67).
Steiner’s focus is on an “ethnographic present” of the late 1980s, and the past, when it is treated, is seen through the lens of today. The result is that a certain anachronism creeps into his work, as when he uses the words “art trade” to refer not only to the commerce of “art objects” in the 1980s but also to the exportation of indigenous artifacts in the early part of this century, or when he self-confidently assumes the art-ness of artifacts: “In the second half of the nineteenth century...the status of African art [sic] was elevated from artificial curiosity to ethnographic artifact” (p. 108).

Usually sensitive to the social construction of ideas, Steiner at times falls victim to his own ethnocentrism. Can one really argue that “the importance of ethnicity on the classification of art objects in the market is largely the result of the dissemination of Western scholarship and its particular vision of African art” (p. 92, emphasis added)? Should not one see the trader, the collector, and the naïve Africanist art historian as all engaged in independent, yet parallel, activities based on essentialist nineteenth-century notions of the tribe, or, as we now call this phenomenon, ethnicity?

I do not mean to be unduly harsh in my criticism of Steiner’s ground-breaking work. Within the parameters that define his research, he does well. My lament is that as good as his analysis might be, it is unfortunately quite incomplete. The book is fascinating when Steiner deals with the Abidjan marketplace or the art trade in Côte d’Ivoire; it is frustrating when he moves to more global issues and makes sweeping generalizations that may make one cringe. The specific scene he describes is not the entire production. The drama is entertaining, yet one wonders in the final analysis whether Steiner as critic has not chosen to focus his attention and bring into the limelight the bit players of trader and tourist, with their interestingly constructed dialogue, and to extrapolate his observations to other scenes, acts, and actors in the same play. Missing is the African artist; missing, too, is the sensitive collector or connoisseur. Unanswered is the question of the power of an African work of art to do something for the original owner(s) that fills a need that otherwise cannot be met.

Then, too, there is the question of the art object’s autonomous power to engage foreign viewers. It should be admitted, it seems to me, that the creative genius of African artists has produced works of art which can transcend their origins and speak to us in our common humanity. Is there a need to objectify experience in a thing, or a work of art? And if we are not artists, and cannot create it ourselves, can we not attempt to incorporate it into our environment by purchase? It is easy to reduce art to commodity. It is a much harder task to address the issue of how art itself can communicate. As seductive as words may be, they do not replace the confrontational, independently concrete object that is desired, purchased, and possessed.

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24 knots to make a gipatsi? To answer it, students must think about how a basketmaker conceives of the design of any one basket as a whole, and in so doing they come to understand the basic structures upon which all gipatsi designs are built.

In the next section, “Symmetries and Classification,” Gerdes takes it one step further by isolating the various types of symmetry shown as frieze patterns in any gipatsi design (i.e., vertical or horizontal axial, glide-over and reflect, or rotational symmetry). Not surprisingly he comes up with seven frieze types, which, according to the laws of geometry, is the total number that can exist. Gerdes expects students to discover this for themselves by assigning them the task of identifying the various types of symmetry in the patterns illustrated in the previous chapter.

The last section of the chapter, “Enumeration,” challenges students to determine the combinations of patterns that occur in any one gipatsi basket. It also asks them to count the total frequency with which certain patterns appear more than others. Again, the answers are predictable.

Gerdes and Bulalo are not the first to have studied the geometry and symmetry of African woven forms. In her book Africa Counts (Weber & Schmidt, 1973), Claudia Zaslavsky analyzed the symmetry of African woven designs in textiles and baskets with similar results. But Zaslavsky’s exercise in symmetry was part of a larger study of African number and pattern systems and was never intended as a geometry textbook. By contrast, Gerdes and Bulalo’s study of gipatsi patterning is aimed at teaching Mozambican students the basic principles of geometry with gipatsi as its point of departure. At the same time, the authors are making them aware that indigenous basketry traditions can be relevant to the study of a Western-introduced science—mathematics.

Yet, as an artist historian, I felt that Gerdes and Bulalo’s book left questions unanswered, including an important one having to do with the history of gipatsi. Although we do learn that urbanization has allowed men to take up a tradition once practiced only by women, we are told nothing of the origins of gipatsi or of the artist’s system for selecting designs. Do all basketmakers know how to weave the entire range of designs, or is each limited to only a handful of the 115 collected? How are the designs learned from one generation to the next? What accounts for the vast range of patterns and what are their names, if any?

Understandably, such questions were not asked, as they had little to do with the pedagogical intent of this book. Such gaps not withstanding, I applaud their intentions. Gerdes and Bulalo have succeeded in offering us a good, detailed description of the basic structure of one African basketry type and the range of designs it can generate based, in part, on the laws of nature.

The book can be useful both for scholars interested in studying basketry construction and for geometrists interested in the study of symmetry.

notes

RAVENHILL: Notes, from page 17

A. la Susan Stewart, On Longing: Narrative of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection, Baltimore, 1984.

STROHER: Notes, from page 33

[This article was accepted for publication in December 1994.]

This paper is a response to a request in 1993 from Dialogue Editor Patrick McNaughton for a column on the theme "What new directions would you like to see in Africanist art history?" It is adapted from my dissertation, "Inventing Masks" (Yale University, 1992). Because photos were included, the piece ended up as an article submission, but it retains the more open structure of a Dialogues column.

Part of this material was presented as the paper "Who Invents Masks Anyway? A Case Study from the Pende of Zaire" at the 34th Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association, St. Louis, November 26, 1991.

The research on which this essay rests was conducted with the support of three Fulbright-Hays dissertation grants, from 1987 to 1989, in Zaire. I particularly wish to thank museum director Khoshi Mahumbu for shepherding the project.

See Barber's overview (1987).
2. Filmmakers have long attempted to use techniques to recapitulate some of the geometric (or sometimes Western-introduced) characteristics (or playwrights like August Wilson) to respond to audience reaction. Lawrence Levine recounts several examples of acclimated directors who felt the need to respond to the Peruvian panic of the preview (1993:316-17). In a famous recent example, initial preview disappointment was responsible for a drastic rewriting of Leningrad Cowboys' Pretty Woman.
3. Allen F. Roberts analyzes in depth a related witticism, "Systeme D," which also refers to the creativity and necessity of hustling in a chaotic economy (Roberts, forthcoming 1996). I am grateful to the author for sharing his manuscript.
4. I am not arguing that Central Pende marquesiners "influence" painters, or that Central Pende basketry is based on practices existing from a shared cultural matrix. Susan Vogel has come to a similar conclusion: "Like nineteenth-century traditional art, virtually all styles of African art are customer driven... Today, the interaction between African artist and patron in general continues the traditional relationship between artist and client, and between the artist and the work" (1991:20-21).

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