AFRICAN ART IN TRANSIT

C.B. Steiner

_African art in transit_
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"There are more African "objects" outside Africa than in their original contexts... the actual contexts for African art have increasingly become the museum's plexiglass vitrine and the collector's home - places as conceptually distant from performative pasts as they are physically remote from the continent of Africa."

This observation by Susan Vogel, executive director of the Museum for African Art in New York provides an appropriate framework for the study of the market in African art by Christopher Steiner. He contributes to our understanding of the process of incorporation or appropriation of art from non-western countries focused on the contemporary situation in his case study of the Ivory Coast. Steiner considers the agencies, institutions and roles played by specific social actors in mediating between the objects and the western art world by the forces of the art market. As a 'multilocal ethnography' he adopts a global analysis that is altogether fitting for the subject. In the process, he analyzes the discourses through which art works are being inserted into western cultural categories, among which some of the most interesting concern definitions of authenticity.

As a curator of anthropology at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, and art historian on the faculty of the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), Steiner analyzes how academics and dealers define authenticity. Many of the criteria they use are similar to those we recognize for any aesthetic objects. They combine elements of the object's 'condition and history of use, intended audience, aesthetic merit, rarity, and estimated age.' In some respects, however, these elements differ from conventional western art. If it is African, a work of sculpture should be made by 'an artist of a primitive tribe and destined for the use of this tribe in a ritual or functional way' (Steiner p. 100) Moreover, there should not be an 'intention of economic gain on the part of the artist.' (p. 101). Its language should be derived not only from a 'formal truth, but also... from
a sacred truth.' It should be fairly old, made of traditional materials, and not thought of as saleable beyond its own people's uses. Some academics and dealers, he notes, have gone so far as to require that the objects actually have been used.

But there is more to the idea of authenticity than these criteria. The works are not simply 'there' - that is, created in a vacuum by carvers who are unaware of their clientele. As Steiner shows, from the standpoint of the trader, authenticity inheres in the works that are now in Europe, distant in space, and therefore contemporary. This is the opposite of the Westerner's idea that authentic African art existed only in the past, before European contact (p. 102). Nonetheless, if Europeans prefer it that way, then traders will make it their business to obtain 'old' works. In light of the fragility of wood under tropical conditions, the works are 'made to order' for the trade! Newly carved figures are buried in dirt to enhance the patina of age. Authenticity in this context, after all, is a European construction following the principles of making 'fakes' of old masterworks.

The reception of African Art

By way of background to his study, which this book provides in too sketchy a manner, it is important to bear in mind that the creations of African sculptors have had a variable reception history in the West, that has been contingent upon how Africa was considered more generally. Largely an object of exploitation, a pawn in strategic games of international jockeying for power, consisting of people who needed transforming, the continent has been of relatively little interest for its own sake to the more prosperous countries of the world. At the turn of the nineteenth century Black Africa was represented as the epitome of the primitive - 'the other' - a passive entity to be appropriated by European imperialists or Islamic conquest. These interests have affected the manner in which its works have been treated. In the West many African 'artifacts' of daily or special ritual use entered Western consciousness by being displayed in ethnographic collections. In recent decades, however, sometimes similar or even the same objects have become part of art museum collections.

Historically in the west the aesthetic realm has come to be constructed as a domain in itself; as Pierre Bourdieu puts it, paraphrasing Kant, une finalité sans fin. Pure aestheticism involves scholarly understanding that hierarchizes works in terms of the relations to other genres rather than to their social context. According to Bourdieu, the more detached and autonomous, the more highly regarded the art form. Art has to stand alone, rather than be used, not to be subordinated to one's interieur - a part of a decorating scheme. In order to gain legitimacy, a body of art requires the qualities of the 'purely aesthetic' validated in the form of discourses in the domains of history and philosophy.

In addition to detaching art from any function, western aesthetic autonomy includes the idea that this autonomy is exercised through the action of the individual artist. Based on the Renaissance tradition, he should be an artist of genius recognized by his peers and patrons. Alternatively, since the mid-nineteenth century, with the rise of the modern academic system and art market, while the recognized successful artist continued to dominate the 'establishment' image, a genius unappreciated by the lay public might take a counterfactual stance, as in the French conception of the artiste (or poète) maudit, and in the long run gain even greater fame for being at odds with his society. But in the case of traditional African works, there is little tradition of the former, and none of the latter that anyone has yet turned up. These are largely Western ideas that are barely recognizable in cultures elsewhere.

The Western emphasis on the autonomous object meant that if African works, largely functional objects in their origin, were to be represented as works of art, they had to be re-read in aesthetic terms. An aesthetic discourse was itself in process of being invented (or adapted) from the new art forms that had begun appearing in the late nineteenth-century. As such, it paid considerable attention to formal qualities, ignoring content and social referents. In that sense, African works were treated as art by avant-garde.

This outlook, however, be seen as the other great African works: as the contempt known creators. Accordiing art is supposed to resemble a violation of the West, it needs the nineteenth and early r of imperialism, as the Enl Hobson called it, in ad works of 'high civilization' (pire, India. Andean Americas), many of the colonizers: the South Seas, and North works of materials precise did, these works tended to and sixteenth century objects. Indeed, this lack of the reasons aduced to tive.

But the idea of 'primitivism', the chief one of the collective nature of the positive standpoint, they actually, essentialism might be speculation, in which the is distinct from others. This is a Western art, which when 'f', and other agents of govern often not identified with a. Rather than the Renaissance sign their works, and the E forced the idea of individu: realm, with collectivist ide: works were treated as the impulse. The power of this even if the maker was know traditions foreign to, or pri were often treated as if the This was often the case dur Gothic revival. Significant notes, when the French art
sense, African works were decontextualized, and treated as art by avant-garde artists.

This outlook, however, conflicts with what may be seen as the other great tradition of thinking about African works: the contextualized product of unknown creators. According to this discourse, African art is supposed to resemble a 'tribal style'. Since this idea constitutes a violation of the canon of uniqueness of the West, it needs some comment. During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the 'age of imperialism', as the English historian, Eric Hobsbawm called it, in addition to the covered works of 'high civilizations' (China, Ottoman Empire, India, Andean America, Mexico, among others), many of the colonized peoples of black Africa, the South Seas, and North America rarely had made works of materials precious to Europeans, or if they did, these works tended to suffer the fate of fifteenth and sixteenth century objects, by being melted down. Indeed, this lack of precious materials was one of the reasons adduced to their designation as 'primitive'.

But the idea of 'primitive' had a number of other elements, the chief one of which was an emphasis on the collective nature of these human beings. From a positive standpoint, they assumed that problematically essentialism might be construed as a pseudospeciation, in which the 'races of man' or a 'volk' was distinct from others. This fitted the case of non-western art, which when 'found' by western explorers and other agents of government or missionaries, was often not identified with an individual maker. Rather than the Renaissance, when artists began to sign their works, and the Enlightenment that reinforced the idea of individualism in the political realm, with collective ideas of folk creation. African works were treated as the product of a collective folk impulse. The power of this conception was such that even if the maker was known, works that represented traditions foreign to, or prior to the Renaissance were often treated as if the creator was unknown.

This was often the case during the nineteenth-century Gothic revival. Significantly, as the critic Jack Flam notes, when the French art historian, Elie Faure, wrote his influential book on medieval art in 1912, he included Africa, perhaps for the first time in a general art history.

The collectivist attribute resonated with certain artistic movements, such as the Nazarenes in Germany, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and the English designer and theorist, William Morris. Splitting over into the anti-academic stance of successive avant-gardists, in the context of fin-de-siècle ideas about the exhaustion of civilization, the 'licked' or finished character of academic paintings was opposed by the retention of the visibility of the process of work, a certain apparent directness, spontaneity, and even crudeness. Converging with a modernist premise of fidelity to the integrity of materials, primitivism was one of the foundations of avant-garde art's movement, such as Gauguin, German Expressionism and Die Brücke.

The anonymity and ahistoricism of nonwestern people made it simpler to appropriate the works or their elements out of context. Both European artists and those who wrote about art could be freely inventive, using the objects themselves as inspiration or as a projection of stimuli in ways that have little to do with the role of art in the societies for which they were made. Instead, these works were redefined according to European ideas or wishes, either positively or pejoratively. Some nineteenth-century collectors found the freedom and, sometimes, prominence given to genitalia by some African sculptors as signs of enhanced sexuality. This might be considered a mark of the infamy or sexual degeneracy of the 'primitives' that could be used as a rationalization for imposing European hegemony on such 'others'; thus the White man's burden of the English and the 'mission civilisatrice' of the French. Whereas some defined sexuality narrowly, sometimes prudishly, others embraced a broader conception, seeking multiple indigenous (or universal) meanings of genitalia, as representation of fertility, plenitude, and creation.

To cater to collectors who equated overt sexuality with primitivism in negative terms, dealers might go so far as to cover up or break off the genitals of African wood carvings, a practice often used in clas-
sical Greek, Roman or Renaissance works until recently. This does not mean that collectors always rejected overt sexuality since alongside prudery, there existed an underground erotic - even pornographic - industry. For this clientele, dealers actually commissioned carvers to emphasize genitalia, or remove coverings that were usually made as part of statuettes (p. 143).

Questions about authenticity

Steiner notes that most West African art dealers are moslem (Hausa or Diorla), for whom these objects are of little significance either aesthetically or religiously: they are primitive idols, whose only value is as sales goods - commodities. But he may be exaggerating the purely economic motives of the dealers to the exclusion of any consideration of the works' original significance. The Islam practiced by many Black African Moslems is quite syncretic, combining animistic beliefs that continue to be powerful in Africa, and which are represented in many carvings. Nevertheless, since the trade goods are actually made for the purpose of trade and not really for religious purposes, his interpretation has a certain plausibility.

African art in transit supports the view of the anthropologist. Although we have come to understand that works by native creators placed in museums are, thereby, made into art (p. 4), this appropriation is not a one-way process. 'Native' artists have not been passive in the face of possible sales to outsiders, but have appropriated western forms and rationales for their own artistic purposes (p. 3). Adopting a market orientation similar to that of western creators, many produce works for the tourist market, often under the influence of government administrators, intermediary dealers, or even anthropologists.4 Beside making works of a relatively traditional character, many also have been open to new forms of creativity that are foreign to their traditions, such as drawings and prints by the Canadian Inuit. Not only are these forms artistic innovations, but frequently they are made by women, who are able to deal with this medium with more facility than with the hard stone carvings that men may make. Moreover, some native creators now sign their works in response to the idea that signed works have greater value because they are viewed as art in the western sense.

An important consideration about authenticity is the relation of 'collectors' tastes' to the scorn for what is usually referred to as tourist or airport art. Steiner helps clarify why 'connoisseurs' hate tourist art: it is primarily and overly market driven, unresistant to commodification, and often mediocre technically. On the other hand, 'traditional' works are often like this too, yet no one thinks that they're bad because of these factors. Art for tourists is associated with 'ebony' sculpture; its rejection corresponds to snob appeal. Rarely is it seen in art museum collections, but urban, nontraditional art suffers rejection by western collectors, unless it fits into the 'canon' as constructed by Picasso and others.

Steiner reminds us that today all African art is 'market driven'. Whereas previously, the market was dominated by chiefs and age grades, it has come to depend upon an urbanized and tourist trade with new criteria. They prefer that it has the aura of 'tradition' but without grasping the constructed nature of tradition. A major part of that tradition is informed by resemblance to versions of the works that so impressed Picasso, Braque, Matisse and the German Expressionists, and that continue to wield power by being used (or 'appropriated') as national symbols, legitimized museum exhibits, and on artists inside and outside of Africa. Steiner's revelatory and demystificatory project challenges ideas that deny the complex interplay of interests among the agents, and reveals 'the commodification and circulation of an object in the international economy' (p. 164)

Vera L. Zolberg, Department of Sociology
New School for Social Research, New York City

Notes
2. V.L. Zolberg, Art on the edge: political aspects of aestheticizing the primity
1992, nr. 14, december, p
3. P. Bourdieu. Distin
5. V.L. Zolberg, 'Art on aestheticizing the primity
1992, nr. 14, december, p
6. J. Flam. 'A continuing

EEN ONGEV

A. Hoogenboom
De stand des kunsten
Leiden: Primavera Pers
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De sociaal-econom
de beeldende kunst

Het onderzoek naar de schiedenis van het beeld
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reeds aan het begin van
en sociaal-economisch
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de econoom John Mic
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beeld boedelsinventarist:
de conclusies over de
tie van zestiende- en z
kunstenaars en het fun
EEN ONGEWONE VERSCHIJNING

A. Hoogenboom
De stand des kunstenaars: de positie van kunstbidders in Nederland in de eerste helft van de negentiende eeuw
Leiden: Primavera Pers. 1993
ISBN 90-74310-08-7 Prijs f 45,-

De sociaal-economiche geschiedenis van de beeldende kunsten

Het onderzoek naar de sociale en economische geschiedenis van de beeldende kunsten staat de laatste decennia weer volop in de belangstelling. Hoewel reeds aan het begin van deze eeuw cultuurhistorische en sociaal-economische vraagstellingen in het onderzoek naar de geschiedenis van de Nederlandse kunst werden betrokken, zijn vooral de boeiende publikaties van de kunsthistoricus Hans Miedema en de econoom John Michael Mentis uit de jaren tachtig verantwoordelijk voor een hernieuwde belangstelling. Op basis van toegezonden naschriften door kunsthistorici geraapte boedel en archieven, kwamen zij tot opmerkelijke conclusies over de sociale en economische positie van zestiende- en zeventiende-eeuwse Hollandse kunstenaars en het functioneren van de kunstmarkt in die tijd. Vooral de zeventiende-eeuwse Hollandse schilderkunst was onderwerp van onderzoek. Met de publicatie van de handschrifteditie van Annemieke Hoogenbooms dissertatie De stand des kunstenaars is aan deze weliswaar begrijpelijke, maar ook eenzijdige belangstelling een einde gekomen. Zij richtte haar blik op een tijdperk uit de Nederlandse kunstgeschiedenis dat, zoals zij zelf schrijft, lange tijd als stiefkind werd behandeld: de eerste helft van de negentiende eeuw. Dat het stiefkind echter meer te bieden heeft dan de met hem geassocieerde sfeer tijdgeest wordt in deze studie overtuigend naar voren gebracht.

Toenemende belangstelling voor beeldende kunst

In haar studie schept Hoogenboom de veranderde positie van Nederlandse kunstbidders in de periode...