AFRICAN ART IN MOVEMENT: TRADERS, NETWORKS, AND OBJECTS IN THE WEST AFRICAN ART MARKET

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Classical studies of African art have tended to concentrate on the function and aesthetics of art in a single localized setting. In an effort to describe a given art form in what is supposedly its most pristine state, students of African art have very often isolated the unit of study without taking into account the effects of outside influence.[1] This sort of analytical technique is inevitably artificial, since it is arguable that at no time has African art existed in cultural isolation. In the past several years, studies of African art have begun to take more seriously the impact of outside forces on local artistic expression. Some recent works, for example, have taken into account (1) the complexity of ethnic attribution in African arts (e.g. the movement of objects for ritual use across ethnic boundaries), (2) the impact of the world economic system on local artistic production (e.g. the manufacturing of so-called "tourist" arts), (3) the articulation of Islam and indigenous African religions in the creation of syncretic sacred arts, and (4) the incorporation of Western products (plastic dolls, factory-made cloth, etc.) into "traditional" contexts.

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[1] The justification for the study of African art in the context of a single village community artificially suspended in time is similar to the motivation of so-called "salvage ethnography" in the anthropological study of American Indians at the turn of the century. "If work is not begun immediately to record the cultural contexts in which traditional art is used," wrote Daniel Crowley in 1974, "most of the forms we so admire will remain enigmas" (1974:59).

Although the field of vision has greatly widened, one area of research which remains wholly unexplored is the commercial aspect of African art and in particular the analysis of specialized trade diasporas used to circulate art objects through Africa and the world.[2] The reasons, I believe, which account for the lack of scholarly interest in the African art trade are several. First, like the study of marketplaces in general, the study of art markets is difficult. "To walk into a marketplace," anthropologist Sidney Mintz once observed, "is to wonder how one can really go about studying it. The marketplace itself is often large and amorphous . . . the products are probably mostly unfamiliar . . . the process of exchange may either be so rapid as to be almost incomprehensible, or very slow, but with little to clarify the rationale of negotiation" (1964:4). The study of the African art trade by a Westerner is made even more problematic by the fact that the investigator belongs by definition to the consumer class and, as a result, is often considered to be a potential buyer of art rather than a patron of ideas.[3] Second, the study of the African art market poses many of the same problems as the study of an African secret society, with the added obstacle that most traders do not want the investigator to become an initiate. Trade secrets cover a broad spectrum of activities. Traders are reluctant to talk about their

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[2] In the most extensive published bibliography on the topic of the African art market (Stanley 1987) there is not a single source dealing specifically with the African trade in art. In fact, to my knowledge, the only account of the trade which currently exists is a short piece by Hans Himmelheber which is based largely on interviews with dealers in the market at Man, Côte d'Ivoire (1975).

[3] Journalist Nicholas Lemann encountered this problem when he conducted an investigation for an article in *The Atlantic* on African art dealers in New York. "Because I found that it was impossible to gain access to the runners as a reporter, I began buying art from them earlier this year" (1987:28).

earnings (for fear that kinsmen or friends will want a loan); they will not speak of their success (e.g. almost all traders returning to Africa from Europe or the United States will try to discourage others from going abroad by saying that business is no good); they will not display or reveal their entire stock (for they believe that the less times an object is seen, the higher its value will remain); they will not easily reveal the sources of their goods (for one of the key functions of traders is to maintain their status as middlemen, keeping apart village object-owners and producers from Western consumers); and they will not readily divulge their techniques of artificial aging or patination (so as understandably to keep the buyers mystified).

Finally, because the study of African art has developed largely in conjunction with the collection of African art, I would argue that scholars have been disinclined to write about a system which makes of aesthetic objects temporary commodities in the "middle passage"[4] from village to display case. In the collection of African art by Westerners, the aesthetic value of an object is given more overt attention than its economic value. Moreover, since the collection of African art is associated with the idealized Western vision of static "primitive" culture, most collectors, I believe, would prefer to read about the uses of African art in a putatively unchanging pre-colonial milieu than about the abuses of African art in the post-colonial world economy.[5]

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[4] My use here of the vocabulary of the Atlantic slave trade is not inadvertent. Interesting systemic parallels exist between the art trade and slave trade and should be further explored.

[5] This point is particularly well illustrated in the following passage from *The Art of Collecting African Art:*

As one Abidjan-based European collector warned me: "We don't want the world to know how we get these things, nor do we want everybody to know how little we pay."

Analysis of the African art trade integrates areas hitherto treated in relative isolation. Because traders continually move from local to world economy, a study of the art market illuminates the impact of Western consumption on local material culture. Exogenous demand has not only encouraged traders to drain villages of artistic wealth, but has also led to the creation of new forms of material culture (hybrid styles and replicas). This paper offers a brief sketch of the structure of the art market in Côte d'Ivoire, followed by some case studies which illustrate the internal response of traders to two different instances of changing external demand.

The Structure of the Market

Scattered among different neighborhoods of Abidjan, the largest city and principal port of trade in Côte d'Ivoire, are three marketplaces in which art is displayed for sale (the markets of Treichville, Cocody, and Plateau). The oldest marketplace is located in the central business district called Plateau. Built in the middle of a public garden by the French during the colonial period, the Plateau marketplace originally consisted of six large concrete canopies under which traders displayed their goods on concrete ledges and shelves. From 1920 until over a

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This first experience with African art reveals a touch of the romantic nature that Mr. Leyden feels goes hand in hand with his collecting. Further evidence of this can be heard in the reasons he gives for feeling that going to Africa is not necessary to his collecting. He views his objects, he says, as being conceived in the pre-colonial aesthetic that he admires. He adds that "if Addidas sneakers and Sony Walkmen were absent from the Ivory Coast, I might reconsider my position, but, at present, my romantic vision of pre-colonial Ivory Coast is too fragile to tamper with" (Vogel 1988:58).

decade after independence, the market was dominated by Wolof dealers (and, for this reason, it is still often called the "marché Sénégalais").[6]

About fifteen years ago, the government of Côte d'Ivoire became concerned with the high concentration of Senegalese traders in the art market. In an effort both to break the Wolof monopoly and encourage Ivoirians to participate in and benefit from the sale of art, the market was divided among traders representing a coalition of six francophone African nations (Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Mali, Guinée, Niger, and Senegal). Added to the original concrete canopies were wooden frame structures with wooden display shelves covered with vinyl fabric. Like many post-colonial African cities, the market accommodated its new arrivals by expanding around a decaying colonial structure.

While most tourists and itinerant Western collectors purchase art from the three marketplaces in Abidjân, the markets represent only one aspect of the art market in Côte d'Ivoire. Within Abidjan itself there is a section in a residential neighborhood which is controlled by Hausa traders belonging to several extended families. These families operate small shops which are used as storehouses for objects sold in the markets. Many of these families own stalls in one or more of the marketplaces, and most have, as one trader called it, "a small army" of young men who sell art door-to-door to French, American, and other expatriates. Traders are linked by family and

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[6] In 1970, Daniel Crowley reported that the dealers in the market of Abidjan were "almost always Wolof Muslims from Senegal, plus an occasional Mandingo or a local protege for nationalist 'window dressing'" (1970:45).

ethnic ties to other traders in both Côte d'Ivoire and West Africa as a whole. Each trader has his own network of supply and distribution.

Following a Western definition of African art, traders classify the art they sell into two broad categories: replica and authentic. The first class of objects refers to contemporary workshop pieces carved solely for the trade. Workshops, consisting of two to twenty carvers, exist in Abidjan as well as other regions of Côte d'Ivoire. The largest workshop, which is located on the edge of a coastal timber port, supplies a sizeable portion of the art sold in the marketplaces of Abidjan. The second class of objects refers to those that have been used or that are owned by people in villages. These objects are introduced into the market in three principal ways.

First, an object can be brought directly to the marketplace by the owner or another villager.[7] Objects (that are either stolen or bought in a community) often arrive in the hands of high school or university students returning to Abidjan from school vacations spent in their village. Sellers such as these have no idea what an object is worth, and when the piece is brought into the marketplace traders will invariably criticize it saying that it is neither good nor old. After much critique the object is usually purchased by a dealer for a minimal price. Second, an object can be obtained in a village by a local carver. Aware of the economic value of an old mask or statue, artists sometimes offer to carve a replica in exchange for the original.

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[7] Sometimes objects are brought to the city with specific economic targets in mind. One day I saw a young man bring to the market an ivory trumpet which he said was given to him by his father in order to buy his mother a wax-print outfit.

These pieces are sold to traders in the larger towns who transport them to Abidjan.

Finally, most objects are collected by professional traders who wander on foot or bicycle from village to village searching for art. Objects collected in this manner are obtained through barter–exchanged for imported enamelware basins, machetes, oil lamps, sugar, and cloth. Some of the more common items acquired by traders in villages include combs, goldweights, masks; statues, jewelry, weapons, weaving implements, and musical instruments. Traders will, however, collect anything they feel has potential resale value.[8] Some of the more unusual items which I have seen brought back from villages include European military helmets and gas masks. European-made furniture hardware (some of which may have been used as goldweights; see Garrard 1983), a pair of brass factory-made Buddha figures, and an Oriental wooden sculpture of a Chinese peasant encrusted with sacrificial blood and feathers (collected by a Hausa trader among the Lobi).

In their search for art in villages and in their patronage of workshop carvers, traders are continually influencing contemporary aspects of material culture. When they purchase objects in villages they are translating external demands to the local level. New meaning brought on by the valuation of art challenge other meanings an object may have had. The following synopses of cases illustrate the transaction of knowledge and the relationship between local supply and Western demand.

Potomo Waka and the Commoditization of Slingshots

In November 1987 an illustrated book entitled *Potomo Waka* appeared on display shelves in Abidjan bookstores (see Steiner 1988a). The book contains about 120 color photographs of different sculpted slingshots from the private collection of one of the book's coauthors, Giovanni Franco Scanzi. An Italian entrepreneur specializing in the sale of overstocked European promotional items (ashtrays, pens, and cigarette lighters blazoned with company logos), Scanzi has been doing business in Africa for over twenty years. He only began collecting slingshots, however, about four years ago when he was encouraged to do so by his friend Antoine Ferrari, a longtime Abidjan-based African art collector (*Guido* 1987b:78).

Because slingshots had never before appealed to Western collectors, few were available on the market. Dealers confirm that before Scanzi's interest in slingshots, none of the itinerant Hausa or Dioula traders, who collect art in rural areas for resale in Abidjan, brought back such items for sale. Over a period of three years, Scanzi collected more than 1,000 slingshots purchased from about twenty different traders. Any trader who arrived in Abidjan knew that he could either sell his slingshots directly to the Italian collector or to a middleman who would take them to him.

In the preface to *Potomo Waka*, the authors take great pain to emphasize that wooden slingshots are not products of the colonial era but pre-date the advent of European contact.

> Some people refuse to accept Baule catapults [*sic*] as authentic African works of art because they

> incorporate rubber strips of European manufacture. Even though it is not possible to be certain that Africans used local rubber for the catapults they made in West Africa at the beginning of the 20th century, before the advent of the motor car and its rubber inner tube, it is more or less certain – according to an investigation carried out by Mr. Scanzi· – that the Dogon tribe used large catapults powered by animal gut in pre-colonial times. The theory that catapults have only made their appearance since the use of rubber from European sources is [therefore] difficult to sustain [1987:9].

The reason the authors are so concerned with proving that slingshots originated in the pre-colonial era is that the market generally defines African art as "authentic" only if the style was conceived in an environment untainted by European influence. Not only does Scanzi attempt carefully to construct a pre-colonial past of African slingshots, but when he started his collection of slingshots he refused to purchase those that had been painted.[9] As a result, all painted slingshots were sanded down and re-stained with potassium permanganate[10] before being presented for sale at his home.

With the appearance of *Potomo Waka*, tourists and collectors have been eager to purchase slingshots. In marketplaces, the price of a slingshot has jumped from a range of about $5-20 in early 1987 to $15-150 in late 1988. Because the value of slingshots increased so dramatically, traders responded quickly and in several ways. First,

traders in Abidjan commissioned slingshots from local carvers. Most were purchased unfinished from the artists and either stained or painted by the traders. Second, because they generally follow the shape of a branch and are fairly easy to carve, traders with entrepreneurship, and some artistic ability, began to manufacture slingshots as they sat in the marketplace waiting for clients. Third, traders began to convert broken wooden artifacts into slingshots. A small Baule statue with broken legs, for example, was transformed into a slingshot by substituting a forked pinnacle for the absent legs. The creator of the object explained that "These days there is a better chance of selling a slingshot than a broken statue."[11]

The Response of African Traders to the Rising Popularity of "Colonial Figures"

Wooden carvings of so-called "colonial figures" (representing either Europeans or Africans in Western attire) are found in societies throughout West Africa (Lohse 1980). Though bearing elements of European design (clothing, posture, and various accoutrements) these statues were not originally conceived for the market but for indigenous use. Among the Baule, according to Ravenhill, statues in fashionable dress were used in the same manner as other wooden statues to represent a person's "spirit lover" in the other world. "A Baule statue in modern garb," he writes, "is neither a replica of a European nor the expression of a wish for a European other-world lover, but rather a desire that the 'Baule' other-world lover exhibit signs of success or status that characterize a White-oriented or-dominated world" (1980:10).

During the colonial period, modern polychrome statues, such as Baule spirit mates clothed in European dress, were not sold in the African art market. A Wolof trader, who has been marketing art in Baule country for over forty years, recounts the following:

> My father began as an art dealer in Senegal in 1940. In 1945 we moved to Côte d'Ivoire and set ourselves up in the town of Bouaké. At the time, *colon* statues had no value whatsoever in the art market. In the region of Bouaké, where there were many such carvings, we called them 'painted wood' and would give them as gifts to customers who purchased large quantities of other merchandise. . . . But some clients even refused to take them for free (Werewere-Liking 1987:15).

In the late 1950s, toward the end of the colonial period in Côte d'Ivoire, foreign administrators, soldiers, and other expatriates began commissioning portraits of colonial agents. These statues were called *photos africaines* and represented, for example, Europeans being carried by African porters (Werewere-Liking 1987:17). The sale of these carvings marks the first interest by Europeans consumers in painted African statues. "*Photos africaines*," however, were not the same as the statues being used by Africans themselves.

Only in the past several years have painted statues similar to those that are used for ritual purposes been in demand in the markets of Côte d'Ivoire. Following a series of recent publicized auctions in London and Paris in which the value of "colonial figures" increased

significantly, the price of authentic *colons* in Côte d'Ivoire (mainly Baule and Guro) has been dramatically inflated and the production of replicas has swelled (*Guido* 1987a:42-46). In addition, the publication of a book entitled *Statues colons* by an Abidjan-based writer and gallery owner, Werewere-Liking, on the topic of "colonial figures" from Côte d'Ivoire has further increased the demand for such carvings by European expatriates and tourists alike (see Steiner 1988b).

When traders commission *colon* statues from workshops they often specify the style they want. One trader in the "Plateau" market, for example, sold a fairly old equestrian colonial-style figure for a considerable profit. A few days later he sent word to a workshop in Bouak that he wanted to order six *colons* on horseback with riders wearing military helmets. When carvings such as these are purchased from the artists, they are always painted in lustrous colors. Traders have found, however, that brightly painted objects do not sell as well as faded, older-looking ones. Thus, when a trader purchases a *colon* figure from a workshop he will remove a layer of paint with sandpaper, and stain the object with permanganate. This treatment of the object produces a darkened surface which can often be marketed as antique.

The commoditization of *colon* figures has altered the discourse of their meaning. As they move from African village society to Western urban society, the messages they convey are changed. Originally conceived as icons signifying the new status represented by imported materials, these statues now symbolize the impact of colonialism in Africa. Unlike most African art which is made to stand for the exotic nature of a non-Western Other, *colon* figures stand for

the Other's relationship to the West. In its new context the statue is still a symbol of status not, however, because it represents the appropriation of the West, but because its very ownership signifies the reappropriation of Africa.

Conclusion

The role of traders is contradictory in the sense that while their enterprise brings local economies into the world system, they have a vested interest in constructing and maintaining boundaries between these two domains: suppliers are not told much about the market for which their goods are destined, consumers have little understanding of where the goods come from (cf. Appadurai 1986:41-47). In the African art market, sellers, traders, and buyers must all operate, therefore, with incomplete knowledge of how the total system works. In every exchange, participants use to their advantage the gaps in knowledge and cultural ignorance of others.[12]

Traders in African art must navigate through a complex web of economic and cultural interactions. Traders are linked to the transformation of African material culture in several ways. They react to changes at the local level by creating markets for new items, they initiate change by influencing local supply and production, and they adapt to change by satisfying new external demands. Of all the outside forces which have had an impact on African art, the trade in African art is perhaps one of the most significant and yet one of the least well studied. By turning attention to the market we can begin to understand patterns of local transformation in light of broader global changes.

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Errata

The following footnotes were inadvertently omitted from this paper:

[8]Itinerant traders who search in villages for art are also involved in collecting old colonial paper money. Such currencies are sold either to art dealers in Abidjan or directly to European numismatologists.

[9]In a sample of about 500 slingshots seen over the course of one year in the stock of several traders, over 50 percent were painted.

[10]Potassium permanganate is used extensively by traders both to stain wood and darken brass. It is purchased in pharmacies in the form of a dark purple crystalline compound which is then mixed with water and applied with a small brush.

[11]In the transportation of objects along the trade networks of the market for African art, pieces are continually being broken. Traders are skilled at repairing broken objects with scraps of wood and glue. In the Plateau market in Abidjan, two carvers made a living by repairing broken objects for traders.

[12]One of the ironies of studying the African art trade from village to global economy, is that in some ways I came to have a more complete vision of the whole market system than any trader at a particular level in the structure.