

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF AFRICAN ART

Africa was known to the ancient world for the power, wealth, and artistic magnificence of Egypt's monarchies and was a place of thriving art production during much of Europe's "dark ages." Great inland art centers, such as Zimbabwe and Ile-Ife, were flourishing at this time and have left behind striking evidence of the aesthetic and cultural complexity of powerful indigenous political systems. Africa has also been host to larger artistic encounters. Early on, Nubia, and later Ethiopia, became important global sites of Christianity, with local rulers commissioning handsome works of painting, sculpture, and architecture, cojoining the new liturgical concerns with indigenous African aesthetic vibrancy. Africa also played a crucial role in the development and expansion of Islam. Timbuktu (in present-day Mali) became the home to one of the world's most important universities, its large library specializing in law. The kings of Mali, who controlled much of the world's gold trade at this time, were wealthy beyond compare. In addition to the gold-ornamented horse trappings and other decorative arts, made in Mali, court builders created magnificent multistoried architectural projects using local earth. During this period (eleventh to fifteenth centuries), east coast cities such as Zanzibar were said to be among the most handsome in the world, both for their inhabitants' elegant fashions of dress and for their unique traditions of decorative coral architecture. Asian merchants sought out these rich east African ports and interior markets, leaving behind large quantities of export ceramics and other materials that have been important for the dating of sites.

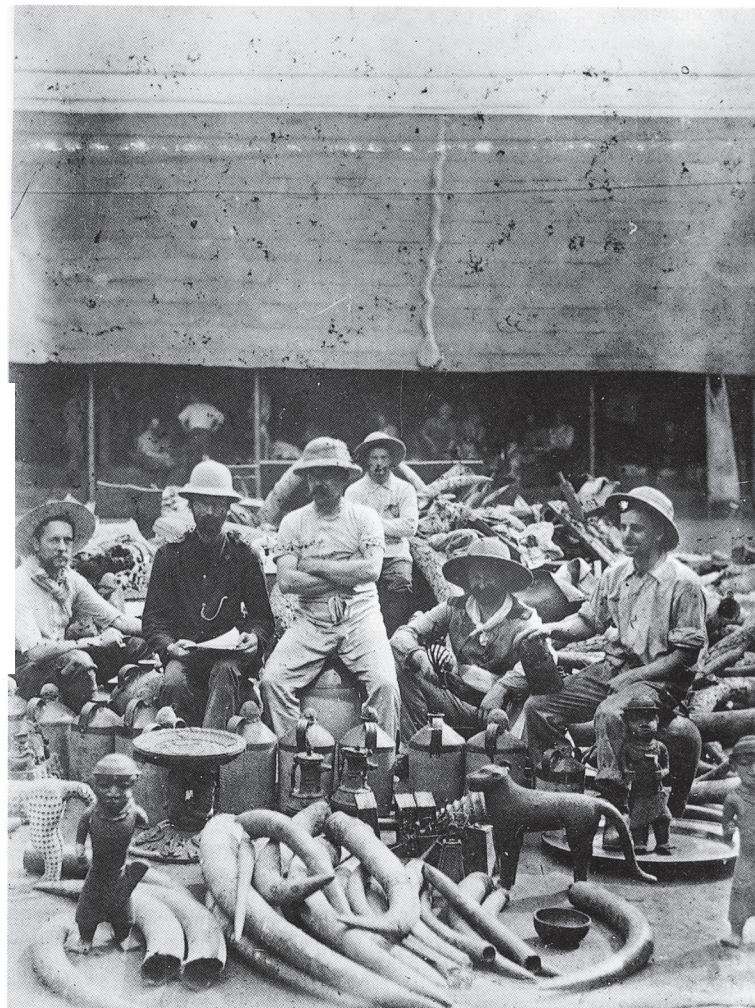
In the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, Africa continued to be known as a place of powerful kings and lavish courts. In this era of broad-based sea exploration, many European travelers to Africa compared the continent's court architecture and thriving cities favorably with the best of Europe. They also brought home ivories, textiles, and other art works that eventually found their way into the collections of the most distinguished art patrons and artists of Europe, such as the Medici family and Albrecht Dürer. Even during the horrors of the slave trade, which resulted

in inconceivable personal suffering, massive political instability in much of Africa, and the transportation of a significant proportion of Africa's own essential labor force to the Americas to provide for the West's industrialization drive—outside observers continued to hold highly favorable views of Africa and its arts.

These generally positive images of Africa changed dramatically in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Western desire for greater control over Africa's trade partners, religious beliefs, and political engagements led to an era of widespread colonial expansion. Consistent with the aims of nineteenth-century colonialism, Africa was then frequently described in published accounts as a place of barbaric cultural practices and heinous rulers. If art was mentioned at all, it tended to be in negative terms. Charles Darwin's theories of biological evolution also had a negative impact and were used to support popular parallel theories of social evolution that falsely maintained that African societies (as well as those of other "minority" peoples such as American Indians, Indonesians, Irish, and peasants more generally) represented a lower level of humanity, indeed an earlier prototype within the human evolutionary sequence.

Arts and other contributions of these societies were similarly disparaged as lacking in rational foundation, true innovation, and sustained cultural accomplishment. For example, when the great archaeological finds at Ile-Ife (in present-day Nigeria) were discovered at the beginning of the twentieth century, it was wrongly assumed that a group of lost Europeans was responsible for these technically and aesthetically sophisticated sculptures.

With the growth of colonial interests in Africa, writing about the social fabric of its arts also changed. Africa was described primarily as a place of separate (and fixed) "tribal" entities which lacked sophisticated political and economic institutions as well as broad-based authority. This was also the period when many major European collections of African art were started. Wealthy state treasuries of kingdoms such as Benin, Asante, and Dahomey (and their accumulated arts) were taken to Europe as war booty following the defeat of their rulers by European forces (fig. xvii) and formed the basis for the rich collections of newly founded ethnographic muse-



xvii. MEMBERS OF THE BRITISH PUNITIVE EXPEDITION IN THE BENIN PALACE WITH THE TREASURY OF ROYAL IVORY, BRASS, AND OTHER ARTS WHICH WERE REMOVED TO LONDON. 1897

ums. In the literature of the time, the broad regional influences of these kingdoms were often played down in favor of narrow ethnic identities. Regional dialects of larger language groups in turn became erroneously identified as distinct fixed languages, each supposedly unique to a separate "tribe" and artistic "style." "Tribalism" became the predominant framework within which the continent's art production was discussed, and to some extent this model of the distinctive ethnic group ("tribe") survives today. The great dynastic arts of Egypt (fig. xviii) were an exception that proved the rule, for by that time Egypt had largely been removed from consideration as an African civilization and was instead positioned culturally with the Near East. The Christian arts of Nubia and Ethiopia were rarely, if ever, discussed alongside other African works. Earlier maps highlighting Africa's impressive royal capitals, inland cities, and material resources were largely replaced with new maps showing small-scale rigidly fixed cultural boundaries (each "unique" to one "tribe" and one art "style") which

were again falsely presumed to have existed for much of history. What was mistakenly called a distinct "tribal style" in the early twentieth century was often the result of the iconographic requirements of a particular image type. Today, we also know that a number of art works were created in one place (and culture) yet used in another. Many "Mangbetu" works were made by Azande artists; a significant number of "Bamun" artists were from other grasslands cultures; some of the most important "Dahomey" artists were of Yoruba or Mahi origin; and many Bushoong/Kuba and Asante art genres also have foreign origins.

The longstanding and problematic label of "tribal art" has had a negative impact on the field African art and meant that until recently little academic interest was shown in the

historical dimensions of these arts or the names of individual artists. This in part explains why far fewer dates and artist attributions are available to us than is the case in other comparable art surveys.

Other problematic views by colonial authorities influenced the early classification of African art within the larger context of world art history. In keeping with now long-disproven social evolutionary theories, early social scientists identified African art as a form of “primitive art,” indicating that African art works, regardless of age, were necessarily primeval. Textbooks of the early twentieth century presented all African arts as conceptually similar to prehistoric works or to the arts of children. Even early modern artists, such as Picasso, assumed that African art was based upon intuitive, “primal” impulses. They did not realize that African art is as intellectual and intentional as *Western* own nor did they appreciate the degree to which African artists were grappling with the art historical traditions of their culture as well as with new, imported ideas and art forms.

Partly as a result of African art’s “primitive” label—and even though today most art historians acknowledge its importance to the development of European modernism—too few African artists are credited for their understanding of the unique intellectual and formal possibilities of abstraction or for utilizing the vital aesthetic power of collage and assemblage, both of which were so central to the development of Western Cubism. Thus, whereas many twentieth-century art works in Western museums bear the label “abstract art,” the comparable (and much earlier) abstract works made by African artists generally are not so labeled. It is assumed, wrongly, that Western abstract works alone are intellectualized and intentional, while abstract works by African artists are intuitive and/or the result of errors in trying to copy from nature. Comparable misunderstandings have also been frustrating for contemporary African artists seeking to gain wider acceptance for their art because their use of abstraction and similar “modern” idioms is seen by some critics as derivative of the West. African artists who seek to address contemporary issues or subject matter in their works face similar problems.

AFRICAN ART AS ART

Despite European modernism’s universally acknowledged debt to African art, some art historians still ask: “Is African art really ‘art’?” If today we tend to see art as something of beauty or visual power, but as something devoid of function, we would need to acknowledge that European religious and political arts—to say nothing of modern architectural works guided by the value that “form should follow function”—would have to be purged from a strict “art for art’s sake” canon. In Africa, as in Europe for most of its history, a number of words for “art” and “artist” exist, but they are not those used by contemporary critics; they address questions of skill, know-how, and inherent visual characteristics.

“Something made by hand” (*alonuzo*) is how the Fon of Benin designate art. The nearby Ewe of Togo use a similar term, *adanu* (meaning “accomplishment, skill, and value”) to refer at once to art, handwriting techniques, and ornamentation. For the Bamana of Mali, the word for sculpture is translated as “things to look at.” In linking “art” to “skill,” African words for art are similar to those used in late medieval Germany, or in Renaissance Italy. The Latin root for “art,” *ars*, has its source in the word *artus* (meaning to join or fit together). Both the Italian word *arte* and the German word for art, *Kunst*, were linked to the idea of practical activity, trade, and know-how (*Kunst* has its etymological source in the verb *können*, “to know”). African words for art not only help us to further pry open the definition of the word “art,” but also to reposition African art within its broader historical conceptualization. Recent debates in art history have caused the breakdown of modern categories dividing “high” art from “low” art, and “fine arts” from “crafts.” These discussions have encouraged researchers in African art to study objects of beauty such as ceramics, or ornamented gourds (fig. xix), even when these works are made by women, and even when they form part of daily life. Contemporary Western art forms, such as performance projects and installations, also have parallel African conceptualizations—the masquerade (versus the mask) and the altar complex (versus the shrine figure).

As with all art forms, the market, collection history, and museum display also have an impact on whether or not Western observers can understand African art as “art.” When works of African art are exhibited on special mounts under bright spotlights and behind the antiseptic barriers of glass vitrines in fine arts museums as “high art,” or under fluorescent lights and in large display cases in natural history museums as “artifacts,” they take on qualities more accurately attributed to the viewing than to the creating culture. Removed from their local contexts they look very different from how they were seen by local viewers. This is equally true for other arts too, of course, such as ancient Greek and Roman art, medieval art, and Renaissance Christian art, suggesting not that African art is “different” from these other arts (and must be displayed in different ways) but rather that museums need to be more creative in thinking about displaying all art forms.

In beautifully produced books such as this one, certain ways of isolating, lighting and photographing, and labeling objects also signal “art” to viewers, the camera lavishing a form of attention on the object that substitutes for the attention we would bestow in person. With works of African art, the tendency at one time was to photograph them using backgrounds, lighting sources, or angles that made them look mysterious or sometimes even sinister. This fortunately has changed. One of the noteworthy features of this book is the significant number of contextual photographs that help to remind us that, like other arts, African art works are (or were) a part of living cultures, and that the study of art history shares a close bond with anthropology—especially so in the case of Africa. How the anthropological study of art in Africa has differed from the art historical is not an easy question to answer. There has been excellent (and less good) research done on African art in both fields. Anthropology, a field within the social sciences, historically has focused on the broader contexts of visual experience; art history, a discipline within the humanities (which also includes literature, foreign languages, philosophy, music, and theater), has traditionally been interested in the history and symbolism of visual forms. Methodologies used for studying African art

necessarily draw on the best features of both disciplines, as is done in the pages that follow.

Let us briefly examine one particularly beautiful, refined sculpture, a regal head once worn by a female leader in a masquerade (fig. iv). In this photograph, we are able to appreciate the aesthetic qualities of the carved image. While the artist and the owner of this work would also have been able to view it in such splendid isolation, everyone else in the region would have experienced it as fleeting part of an exciting performance, one feature in a ceremony such as that illustrated in figure 6-1. Both views of this type of sculpted mask are “true,” even though only one may conform to the modern museum or gallery experience of art.

The importance of including the whole continent of Africa and the long history of its arts (including contemporary forms) within a survey such as this one is in part the result of the specific contexts in which Africa and its arts have been problematized in the past. By including Egypt, the authors of this book seek to bring back this art-rich civilization to the continent of Africa as one of its own. By incorporating African Islamic and Christian art traditions, the importance of Africa in the formulation and creative vibrancy of these religious arts is also emphasized. The inclusion of contemporary art from Africa makes the point that art in Africa is not dead, that African artists are continuing to make important contributions to both Africa and to global contemporary art movements. The addition of works by artists of the Diaspora, who were (or are) of African descent but who lived (or live) far from its shores, stresses the ongoing importance of Africa to world art.