aesthetic with a "saturating material culture" approach [p. 47]. I hope that when "African Reflections" moves to the High Museum in Atlanta she will note how we demolished this particular dichotomy in the exhibition (4). Worst of all, Kasfir continues to accept the idea that Westerners "own" the ideas of art and authenticity. She says "That from an African perspective, these objects are not art in the current Western sense is too well known to discuss here" [p. 47]. This is one of the canonical assumptions she should be questioning. There is a large body of scholarship exemplified in museum exhibitions such as the ones referred to above, and for many years in the pages of this journal, showing that Africans understand and appreciate the artistic merit of their work. They are fully aware of how to manipulate the canon.

Kasfir talks about "subverting the issue of authenticity" [p. 47]. This implies there is an unsubverted authenticity. Why not just reject the notion, as many curators and scholars have done? Most of us have the liberty to ignore the market and/or redefine the terms of the debate about authenticity. I don't think this article has done that. Kasfir's analysis of Kamba and Maconde carving implicitly accepts the canon and boils down to a plea for a rise in the prices of Kamba and Maconde art.

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"Fake Masks and Faux Modernity: The Crisis of Misrepresentation"

Sidney Kasfir's article represents an important new direction in the study of authenticity. In the past, discussions about the authenticity of African art have typically been concerned with producing and reproducing appropriate criteria for the evaluation of African objects. Though often framed in a language of dispassionate reasoning, most "studies" on this subject have been informed by nothing more than the economic rationale of the art market. In deconstructing the notion of authenticity, Kasfir shifts the goal of analysis from one that aspires to refine ad nauseam the taxonomic parameters of "real" African art to one that aims at unpacking the cumbersome economic, political, and cultural baggage with which the study of authenticity has too often been accompanied.

Reformulating the theory of authenticity in African art history is a project closely parallel to the rethinking of the concept of culture that is now taking place in many of the social sciences. The discipline of anthropology, for example, was founded on the misguided assumption that culture was an immutable and cumulative product of history. Models of human society were constructed in such a way that culture was assumed to be a measurable variable—societies with the most "culture" were ranked at the top of the evolutionary scale, and those with the least were placed at the bottom. Culture was envisioned simply as a preexisting structure (more or less complex) into which individuals were born, lived, and died. Challenging this fundamental premise in the interpretation of culture, anthropologists have come to recognize that culture is neither fixed nor quantifiable. Although it may appear to most of those who live in it and to some of those who study it, as an enduring reality, culture is always in a state of flux—malleable, fluid, and processual.

Lessons learned in recent analyses of culture are germane to the study of authenticity. Like culture in the social sciences, authenticity in art history has long been viewed as a consensual, self-evident, and self-reproducing reality. Yet in rethinking authenticity, as Kasfir has done, we come to realize that it too does not exist in advance of human history, thought, or action. Most important, we learn that authenticity is the product of art historical evaluation, not its determinant.

One reason, perhaps, why the concept of authenticity in African art history is now coming under critical review is that doubtless we are more aware than ever that almost all objects of African art are deeply enmeshed in the political economy of the postmodern world system—a matrix of global exchange in which the quest for authenticity has become universal. The domain of authenticity is no longer limited to Western judgments about the cultural products of other peoples, but has come to include also other people's
judgments about Western products. An example from my own ethnographic research on the art markets of Côte d’Ivoire may serve to illustrate the point.

In one of the principal art marketplaces in Abidjan, I once witnessed the following exchange between a Hausa art trader and a young European tourist. The tourist wanted to buy a Dan face mask, which he had selected from the trader’s stock. He had little money, he said, and was trying to barter for the mask by exchanging his Seiko wristwatch. In his interaction with the trader, he often expressed his concern about whether or not the mask was “genuine.” Several times during the bargaining, for example, the buyer asked the seller, “Is it really old?” and “Has it been worn?” As the tourist questioned the trader about the authenticity of the mask, the trader, in turn, questioned the tourist about the authenticity of his watch. “Is this the real kind of Seiko,” he asked, “or is it a copy?” As the tourist examined the mask—turning it over and over again looking for the worn and weathered effects of time—the trader scrutinized the watch, passing it to other traders to get their opinion on its authenticity.

Although, on one level, the dialogue between tourist and trader may seem a bit absurd, it points to a deeper problem in modern transnational commerce: an anxiety over authenticity and a crisis of misrepresentation. While the shelves in one section of the Abidjan marketplace are lined with replicas of so-called “traditional” artistic forms, the shelves in another part of the marketplace—just on the other side of the street—are stocked with imperfect imitations of modernity: counterfeit Levi jeans, fake Christian Dior belts, and pirated scratchy recordings of Michael Jackson and Madonna. Just as the Western buyer looks to Africa for authentic symbols of a “primitive” lifestyle, the African buyer looks to the West for authentic symbols of a modern lifestyle. In both of their searches for the “genuine” in the other’s culture, the African trader and the Western tourist often find only mere approximations of “the real thing”—portions of authenticity that stand for the riches of an imagined reality.

Viewed in the context of a global dialectic, the international consumer’s search for authenticity underscores Kasfir’s assertion that faraway collectors reinvent their objects of desire. While Western notions about the authenticity of African art are constructed by privileging aesthetic forms imagined to have existed in the past—worlds that never were but should have been—African beliefs about Western authenticity are projected into the future—worlds that aren’t yet but someday could be. Whether they are expressed through reference to the past or to the future, visions of authenticity are always products of mental accrual: canonical scripts, as Kasfir so rightly intimates, which, through constant revision, cast an ever longer shadow.

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A View from an Art Museum

Sidney Kasfir has two agendas in her article. One is to point out the shortcomings in the way African art is exhibited and collected, both by museums and private individuals. The second is to defend tourist art, particularly Maconde carvings, as legitimate and authentic. Although I agree with her on many points, I was not convinced by her arguments concerning tourist art.

In her discussion of the failings of museums and collectors, Kasfir hauls out horses that have long been put to rest and beats them again. She criticizes many of the old tenets of African art studies, such as the homogeneity of ethnic styles, the anonymity of the artist, the purity of precolonial society, and the timeless, ahistorical quality of the art. The vast majority of scholars recognize the flaws in these ideas, and even if some private collectors continue to hold them as sacred truths, their opinions do not define our discipline. It is unfair to judge the field on the basis of what scholars thought three decades ago or even on what a few (not all) collectors think today.

Kasfir seems to blame curators and collectors for the evils she perceives in the field of African art. Curiously, she leaves out the art historians, anthropologists, historians, and other scholars who teach and write about the subject. Those of us who work in museums do not see such a great distinction between ourselves and our university colleagues. We have similar training, have done equivalent fieldwork in Africa, and are concerned with the same issues. More and more, those who primarily work in academic settings are presenting their research in the form of exhibitions, because of their potential to reach a wider audience and the greater possibilities for publishing. We talk to each other, read each other’s work, exchange ideas. The present state of exhibitions on African art reflects this collaboration and is not the result of curators working in isolation from or opposition to other scholars.

Kasfir sees an “omniscient curatorial authority” in all exhibitions of African art, and does not seem to recognize differences between them. For her they are “dominated either by a Modernist aesthetic...or by a potentially deadening ‘material culture’ approach” (p. 47). I personally see a greater diversity than this in recent presentations, and feel that both art museums and natural history museums can convey the complexity of African thought and culture as well as its aesthetic qualities. As Kasfir implies, perhaps no exhibition can completely display the full range of meanings embodied in African art, but neither can any single book or article. And neither can exhibitions of other types of art. Exhibitions of medieval European art or nineteenth-century Japanese art are just as much constructions of our age as are those of African art; with any luck they improve over time. A more pragmatic approach than Kasfir’s is to try to achieve as much as possible in an exhibition, while recognizing its inevitable limitations. Another is to recognize that, like individuals, museums also have personalities and proclivities. Exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Fowler Museum of Cultural History in Los Angeles, and the Musée National du Mali in Bamako, for example, will probably never follow the same pattern, nor should they.

Kasfir seems to disregard, even have contempt for, the issue of quality. To her all objects are equally valid, and any attempt to distinguish between them is the result of Western aesthetic biases and our desire to recreate African art according to our own image of Africa. To me this is dangerous, because it denies the existence of aesthetic standards and judgments of quality within African cultures, and also because it removes African art from the ranks of the world’s other great art traditions. Broader knowledge, appreciation, and acceptance of African art are dependent upon viewing it within this framework, and that requires judgments of quality, whether in terms of form, meaning, or context.

Kasfir tries to point out the contradictions in how we assign authenticity to African art, and hopes that the force of this awareness will open the doors of museums and private collections to tourist art. To me the difficulties posed by the logical inconsistencies discussed by Kasfir are not as onerous as those we face if we disregard the intention of the artist and context for which he or she produces work.