Discovering African Art...Again?

African art was the talk of the town in New York City this summer. The opening at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum of the blockbuster exhibition “Africa: The Art of a Continent,” which originated at the Royal Academy of Arts in London last year, sent the press and the public scurrying to discover a remarkable array of artworks from Africa and to disentangle the deep, dark mysteries that still appear to shroud the art of the continent.

Even before the exhibition’s American debut, some rather swanky publications (ones that don’t normally dabble in “primitive” art) featured extensive articles on different aspects of African art history and collecting. In May, for example, Departures, the magazine for American Express Platinum cardholders, ran an in-depth story on the Guggenheim show and on the history of African art connoisseurship and appreciation. In columns interspersed with glossy advertisements for Range Rover, Bottega Veneta, and the Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts, the author explains the difference between “ethnographic” and “aesthetic” approaches to the display of African art. While the former, we are told, draws upon the dry and humdrum disquisitions of science, the latter appeals to passion and the tender appetite of the senses. Perhaps not surprisingly, given the nature of the magazine’s readership, the article concludes with a discussion of how, where, and why to buy African art. Bargains, cardholders are assured, are still to be found in the as-yet largely untapped market for nonfigurative arts, and it is implied at least that for those outfitted with enough money and discrimination, investment returns can sometimes be very lucrative and worthwhile. The celebrated example of the sale of Harry Franklin’s Bangwa memorial figure for $3,410,000 at Sotheby’s in 1990 is offered as a stunning illustration of the kind of yield one can get on a $29,000 investment.

The connection between “Africa: The Art of a Continent” and the possible resurgence of a slumping African-art market is made even more apparent in Art & Auction’s May cover story titled “Out of Africa: A New Show at the Guggenheim Presents the Continent’s Creations as the Aesthetic Equals of Western Artworks.” Here, conversations with both dealers and collectors stress the importance of appreciating African works as objets d’art, not ethnographic specimens. In reflecting on the significance of the Guggenheim exhibition and its emphasis on “art” rather than “artifact,” art dealer Maureen Zaremba, director of New York’s Tambaran Gallery, remarks that “The show takes African art out of the curio cabinet and puts it in a museum where it belongs....People in America need to learn

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how to see African art as art” (Vincent 1996:125, emphasis in original). This “aesthetic” treatment of African objects, the author notes in passing, “has greatly pleased dealers like Zaremba,” who hope “that it will help stimulate the public’s appreciation of the vast riches of the continent” (p. 125).

One of the primary stated objectives of the Guggenheim exhibition is to separate African artifacts from their cultural context so that they can “be judged” simply as art. The theme is made particularly clear in an interview with its curator, artist Tom Phillips: “We’re not trying to beat people over the head with the idea of Africa...we’re simply inviting them to look at objects made on the continent as works of art equal in aesthetic quality to Western artwork” (Vincent 1996:122-24). “Ethnological museums may prize inferior quality,” Phillips goes on to say in another interview, “but we are the Royal Academy, an aesthetic institution. We show art” (Windsor 1996:68). Indeed, much of the discourse generated by exhibition organizers and media critics alike focuses on the notion that until now African art has largely been ignored by the art world and relegated to the “anti-aesthetic” netherworld of ethnographic representation.

To be sure, “Africa: The Art of a Continent” has been plagued by controversy, particularly over its excessively ambitious, and hence superficial, survey of the art of an entire continent—which includes, for the “first time” in an exhibition of African art, objects from Ancient Egypt and Islamic North Africa (Ryle 1995:19). In the last issue of African Arts, these (and other) criticisms were carefully spelled out by Roy Sieber, in his review of the Royal Academy installation, and Doran Ross, in his “First Word” reflections on some of the pitfalls and shortcomings of Britain’s africafest, the arts festival at which the exhibition was a part. While the popular press, for the most part, seem to have missed their opportunity to criticize the Royal Academy show—a point which Sieber illustrates very well in the savoury quotations he serves up from euphoric newspaper reviews—it appears that some critics of the New York installation have finally caught on to the exhibition’s fundamental flaws. Writing in The New York Times, for example, Holland Cotter manages to get beyond the media hype when he carps: “Radically and arrogantly undertold, it takes dozens of individual nations and cultures and jams them into a sprawling African anthology” (1996:81).

But in the final analysis, critics still seem to agree, the exhibition’s explicit emphasis on African art’s “aesthetic” merit outweighs any of the epistemological problems raised by its exceedingly ambitious scope. It is touted as having redressed the negative stereotypes of “primitive” African art, and in a kind of mass apologia begs pardon for the sins of previous generations. Indeed, concludes one reviewer, the show might well have been subtitled “Cecil Rhodes Atoned” (Solomon 1996:16).

In The Boston Globe, “Africa: The Art of a Continent” is described as “an overdue apology” for an art that “has been neglected, abused, or treated as automatically inferior ‘primitive’ work in the West.” It is characterized as “visually stunning” and exalted as “a compelling argument for the right to the presence of this work in a fine-art setting” (Temin 1995:18, 35-36). In an article for The New York Times titled “Primitive No More, African Art Finds A Proper Respect,” one critic commented: “Until now, African pottery, wooden carvings and textiles had been viewed essentially as handicraft because, it was argued, the religious, military, sexual or decorative functions of the works suggested that they had not been created as art, to be appreciated for their own sake” (Riding 1995:43). And writing in The Financial Times, William Packer declared jubilantly that “This is great art, all of it, and this is one of these rare exhibitions that change perception and understanding forever...We shall never look at African art in our old innocent, patronizing naivety again” (quoted in Riding 1995:43).

Quite aside from the obvious fact that these wildly enthusiastic evaluations of the Guggenheim show neglect with blissful ignorance the scores of exhibitions in past decades that have approached African art with equal, if not greater, sensitivity to “aesthetic” quality and worth, the reception bears an oddly familiar ring. Haven’t we heard this response to African art in New York before?

In 1935, over sixty years before the Guggenheim “benevolently” opened its doors to African art, James Johnson Sweeney, curator of the exhibition “African Negro Art” at the Museum of Modern Art, declared that “today the art of Africa has its place of respect among the aesthetic traditions of the world” (1935:3). In the same year, The New York Times reported that “An African spring in the galleries of New York...argues a considerable and increasing public interest in a contribution to the world’s store of art which, until recently, has been relegated principally to museums of anthropology and archaeology” (Brock 1935:23). Sound familiar yet? “Here is an art of major proportions,” wrote one critic in reaction to the 1935 MoMA exhibition, “an art which can stand comparison with the great sculpture of the past, Chinese, archaic Greek and Mayan” (Republican 1935:25). And in The American Magazine of Art, Alain Locke arrived at this conclusion: “The current exhibition of the Museum of Modern Art, aside from being the finest American showing of African art, reveals it for the first time in its own right as a mature and classic expression” (1935:271).

New York in 1935–36 was indeed swept away by African art, not only by the exhibition at MoMA but also by the display of Louis Cahn’s collection of Benin art at the Knoedler Gallery, the presentation of the Ratton collection at the Pierre Matisse Gallery, and an exhibition of “120 African sculptures in wood, ivory, and bronze” at the Jacques Seligmann Galleries. “There is a decided trend in the direction of African art which is apparent on...
the exhibition calendar this season” (The Art Digest 1936:5). Decades before Bloomingdale’s even thought of coordinating its merchandise displays with the theme of museum blockbuster shows, New York was already consuming the idea of Africa. “It’s smart to be primitive today,” reported the New York American in spring 1935. “Perhaps our homes and clothes have gone so far as possible in sophistication, and have begun all over again reverting to deepest Africa for ideas in fabrics, fashions, and decoration” (Hughes 1935:22). Fashion and art collecting were inextricably linked. “A vogue for African primative art...is sweeping the town,” observed one writer for the World-Telegram. “Helena Rubinstein collects African idols. This evening she is giving a primitive dinner in her apartment at 385 Park Avenue. The main dishes and refreshments will be carried out in a dark motif” (World-Telegram 1935:10).

But 1935 was neither the first nor (it should be quite apparent by now) the last year that African art would take New York by storm. African art was, for the “first time,” displayed as “art” at Robert Coudy’s Washington Square Gallery in the spring of 1914, and then at Alfred Stieglitz’s Photo-Secession Galleries in the winter The New York Times published a spirited review of the Stieglitz exhibit, heralding African art as “brilliantly barbaric” (1914:7).

In 1923 a review in the same newspaper, this time of Stewart Culin’s exhibition of African art at the Brooklyn Museum, bristled the exhilarating headline “Wide Vogue Gained by Art of Africa” (1923:16). Four years later, following an exhibition of Raoul Blondiau’s collection of Belgian Congo art at J.B. Neumann’s New Art Circle Galleries, New York critics declared that African art had “made it” in the art world. Again, The New York Times: “That the black people of ‘savage’ African produced sculpture and craftswork that place examples of their workmanship among the most prized creative treasures of the world’s art museums and collectors is no secret to those who have been initiated into the knowledge of their accomplishment in wood, ivory and metal” (Chenev 1927:7).

Two years later, in 1929, Marya Mannes wrote that “Now the interest in old African art has reached the proportions of a craze” (1929:55). And, as in the current “craze,” the link between exhibition and marketplace was quickly made apparent. “Collectors realize,” Mannes continued, “that here is a new and probably limited field, to be exploited and enjoyed before it sinks into the inevitable oblivion of all collecting fads” (1929:55).

Every decade, apparently, New Yorkers manage somehow to rediscover African art yet again. In reviewing some of the published reactions to exhibitions of African art in New York City from about 1914 to the present, I am amazed to see how many times it has been declared that African art has finally “made it,” and how often it has been validated by its exhibition at a major cultural institution. In 1927 it was said that “The founding of special museums of negro art in several European art centres and the opening of African wings in some of the less conservative museums elsewhere have finally added official recognition after a decade or more of personal discovery and appreciation” (Chenev 1927:7). And in 1996 we read again that “The most important aspect about the arrival of Africa at the Guggenheim is the fact that African art is actually appearing as art in a major museum” (Vincent 1996:127, emphasis in original).

This passage from Martin Friedman’s review of “The Traditional Art of Africa’s New Nations” at the Museum of Primitive Art in New York, might easily have been culled from the press clippings of this summer: “Certainly the vital art of [Africa] has now gained universal recognition. There is no longer a question of having to argue for its aesthetic existence” (1961:131). But over three decades later, like the indefatigable Energizer Bunny, the argument just keeps going and going and going. Some might blame this repetitive cycle on the ignorance and cultural insensitivity of the American public. Until museum-goers can drop their racist blinders and accept African art as great art, so the argument goes, there will be a need to (over)emphasize
“aesthetic” merit, hyperbolize universal validity, and generally claim moral superiority over past interpretations.

Sure, there is some truth to this reasoning, but more interestingly, I would suggest, the need to validate exhibitions of African art by disparaging previous efforts hinges on a certain element of “discovery” which has always been integral to the reception and appreciation of African art (see Steiner 1994:131-34). Like Africa itself, obscured in the Western imagination by the enigmas of the dark continent, the art of Africa has been validated in museum exhibitions by its association with mystery and the unknown. Too much information, such as the “tedium of ethnographic details” contained in some exhibition labels, is said to interfere with the public’s “authentic” communion with the soul of African aesthetic expression. Appreciation of African art, according to this point of view, is based not on knowledge and understanding but rather on the “discovery” of the unexplored—which, by definition, can only emerge out of the intellectual void created by cycles of collective amnesia.

The excitement felt in New York in 1935 was based on the public’s genuine “discovery” of something foreign and new. Never before had an African art exhibition of such major proportions been mounted in a New York museum. But once the deed is done, novelty has to be artificially remanufactured. History must be rewritten, memories must be erased, and Livingstone must again lose his way so that Stanley can once more discover him in the depths of Africa’s darkest jungles.

In his writings on the cultures of collecting, James Clifford has argued that those who first “discovered” primitive art in the remote enclaves of distant ethnographic shores claimed to have arrived on the scene just in the nick of time—salvaging the very last “authentic” objects on the eve of colo- nialism, missionary conversion, and acculturation. In making his argument, Clifford invokes the famous phrase from the reign of Louis XV: “Après moi le déluge!” It collecting African art in the field has been premised on the assumption that everything that came afterward was tainted by change and contact, then one might say that the display of African art, beginning in the early years of this century, has been premised on the assumption that everything that came before was insensitive and disparaging. Until this exhibition, the argument goes, African art remained unappreciated (or even worse, maligned) by Westerners—an art form relegated to the “dusty bins” of ethnographic storerooms. But now, through great personal insight, exceptional conviction of taste, and leaps of cultural relativity, the art of Africa has been assigned its proper place amid the world’s great art traditions. In this case, to rephrase the words of the ancien régime, one might say that the philosophy behind many African art exhibitions of this century has been: Avant moi la dérision!

The problem is that most of the objects in exhibits such as “Africa: The Art of Continent” are the same ones that were featured in earlier shows. Some of the works of art which began their tour in London last fall for this exhibit, for example, had already traveled to New York in 1935, and many have been on the road ever since. For me, walking the galleries of both the Royal Academy of Art and the Guggenheim installations was like visiting with old friends. Trying to recall in which exhibitions I previously had seen the pieces became a pleasant diversion. Because the canon of African art, with its emphatic focus on ritual objects of precol- onial manufacture, is so restricted in scope (even when you include Ancient Egypt and North Africa), the pool of qualifying works that can be featured in a major exhibition is exceedingly small (see Steiner 1996). As a result, old objects have to be reclothed in the fashion of new interpretive trends. Until the canon of African art in Western institutions expands more widely to admit contemporary works, unconventional media, and new forms of experimentation (a process which, as readers of this magazine well know, is already under way in some museums and institutions), the strategy for exhibiting African art will remain largely the same. In sum, “primitive no more” is a claim we will probably be hearing again and again—well into the next century.

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Despite these criticisms, one is immensely grateful that these analyses have been constructed by Conte-Morgan, and that he made the effort to provide valuable historical or cultural contexts. One appreciates particularly his attention to recent theatrical endeavors in Togo, Benin, and Côte d'Ivoire, where experimentation and political theater have had such exciting developments. One regrets the absence of such a focus on the exciting socio-comic theater that had such a rich life in Cameroon—the inclusion of Oyono-Mbia notwithstanding—and the absence of such a major voice as the late Sony Labou Tansi. Yet, despite these omissions, one must recognize the overall value of Theatre and Drama in Francophone Africa as providing a broad understanding of the work of many major African playwrights, and of the influences that shaped the meaning of those works.

notes
STEINER. References cited, from page 8


LEWIS-WILLIAMS. Notes. from page 41

This article was accepted for publication in June 1995.

1. The following are among the publications of the Rock Art Research Unit:


2. Unfortunately, the annual grants to the Unit from the University of the Witwatersrand (funded through the Science Development are tied to the person of the present director. On his (44) retirement the future of this funding will be uncertain. At the University does recognize the need to continue rock art research.

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1. The Gods Must Be Crazy was produced in 1980 in Botswana and directed by South African Jamie Uys. Although this film, tongue-in-cheek, cinematic, "documentary" on the colonialist encounter enjoyed widespread popularity in American theaters (and supported a sequel, The Gods Must Be Crazy II, a few years later), it has been met with critical social scientists and anthropologists for its distorted representation of the South African "Bushmen" and their encounter with the West.

2. In his recent book Animals in African Art (1995), Allen F. Roberts discusses the proliferation of the popular and the ethnic term "Bushman." He correctly notes that it has been used in South Africa and elsewhere (including the documentary-satire diagnosed here as a derogatory racial epithet), but that alternative terms (such as Kung and San) chosen to avoid such connotations have their own internal complications. Roberts follows the lead of anthropologists David Thomas and Kevin Dowson (1989), who have decided to use "Bushman" with a sensitive explanation of what they mean by the term.

3. This title-Feb is Latin for "unnamed or foreign conquerors or products (from Cortez to Captain Cook) for a mythical visit from their gods—which has been perpetuated by Western scholars and collectors, and is a recent debate between noted anthropologists Marshall Sahlins (1995) and Gananath Obeyesekere (1994) on cultural difference and historical constructions.


5. While the appearance of "Recycling" has been made an early— and in some sense arbitrary—decision to include in the exhibition only those objects which had been transformed from discarded, industrial discards (as distinct, for example, from new objects re-created from natural materials such as shells, grasses, bones, and the like), an effort was made to avoid imposing a simplistic nature or character of what is considered "waste." For example, an entire section of the exhibition, subtitled "Recycling on the Body," includes some ingeniously crafted pieces, headbands, and...