

african arts

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First Word

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Source: *African Arts*, Vol. 25, No. 3, Special Issue: West African Textiles (Jul., 1992), pp. 1+8+10

Published by: [UCLA James S. Coleman African Studies Center](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3336985>

Accessed: 28-07-2015 02:19 UTC

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There are two principal reasons why graduate students make the decision to specialize in African art history. Some are moved by the extraordinary power of African art imagery and ideas through classes in the subject, work in museums with related objects, or personal ties to the field and its art. Others become interested in African art only after falling in love with the continent itself. I count myself among the latter, for while I did my undergraduate work in art history, I only turned my attention to African art after a tour in the Peace Corps and a two-year residence in the Yoruba town of Savè in the country then called Dahomey. As shocking as it may be to many (particularly those who know how prolific and accomplished the Yoruba are as art makers and users), during those two years, I saw no art *in situ* with the exception of a bush-cow masker accompanying a senior man returning from Mecca. Nonetheless, the few glimpses of art I got from traveling peddlers and my one trip north into Niger and Mali left an indelible impression.

It was around this time that I started thinking seriously about African art history as a profession, and about how much of what I had learned in my undergraduate Western art history classes had little real meaning in the context of the art and architecture I was seeing and experiencing. What I especially appreciated then (and still do now) about African art is the complexity and richness of the cultures that have given rise to it. When I go to a museum or see a private collection, I am always surprised at the beauty and power of these objects, surprised not because I expect otherwise, but rather because Africa—the place and intellectual wellspring—always has come first. The magnificence of the art is in a sense the icing on the cake. This may be an incredible thing for an art historian to admit, even though one of the more heated debates in art history these days is precisely that of the privileging of “Art with capital a” over its social context.

In this regard, the situation in African art is somewhat different than in Western art history. African-art scholars often have been as concerned with the common, everyday object as with the so-called masterpiece. And there are too many artworks and cultures in Africa to have led to the establishment of a *rigid* “canon” of “best” works. Nonetheless in African art the contrasting issues of object and social milieu have a particular poignancy, since we are specializing in a subject that has long been within the purview of anthropology. Accordingly there are few if any African-art historians who have not at some point been called anthropologists, sometimes but not always disparagingly. African-art historians are in a sense liminal characters, neither fish nor fowl, and if Mary Douglas is correct about the perception of things that break

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through accustomed boundaries, there may be a certain danger (and polluting quality) associated with us as well. I like that idea; I also like the freedom that it allows us to move widely across disciplines and discourse.

Two recent comments, ascertained second hand (hence acquiring the privileged status of academic gossip or hearsay), are of interest in this regard. The first, by a European doctoral student in African art in response to a question about his disinclination to do research in Africa: "I am an art historian, not an anthropologist; I study objects, not people in the field." The second, by an anthropologist from this country who specializes in African art: "Art historians working in African art are little more than third-rate anthropologists." If accurate in essence, these comments are at once illuminating and lamentable. Illuminating because any attack on what a discipline has come to accept as the *sine qua non* of respectable scholarship—here, in-depth research in Africa—is necessarily provocative and "serious"; lamentable for what the statement suggests about where the field stands and may be going. To the first person, field research is perceived to be irrelevant (if not in some way contaminating) because it detracts from the "art." To the second, even the best among us art historians cannot but fail to be dangerously third rate at the task of researching art in another (foreign) culture.

I do not know how to respond to the accusation that African art historians are third-rate anthropologists. In view of the fact that most of us do not consider ourselves to be anthropologists at all, this is a curious criticism (comparable perhaps to accusing apples of being third-rate oranges). Moreover, exact criteria for evaluating first-rate anthropological work often vary. I tried for a week to do a kinship diagram of one small Batammaliba village and realized that both the three village historians and I had a hard time keeping the names and filial relationships straight. If this is an indicator that I and the Batammaliba elders are poor anthropologists, I would have to agree. Surprising to some, I feel that the student's comments on fieldwork and art also have some pertinence, for research in Africa is often as much if not more about the people (societies, cultures) that frame works of art as it is about the objects themselves. And there is no doubt that the overwhelming and often contradictory data that we acquire in the field make one critical of any art theory that seeks to understand objects outside their cultural or social frame. Field research in a sense kills the "art" in art.


The points these two people have raised are provocative in other ways too. Should and can we continue to insist that graduate students in African art history do research in Africa? There are a number of factors militating against it. The Peace Corps, the means through which many of us acquired our first real knowledge of Africa, is no longer hiring many liberal arts students like me (and Chris Roy, Fred Lamp, Henry Drewal, Phil Peek, and Don Cosentino, to name but a few of the illus-

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trious alumni). The result is that far fewer people going into African art scholarship have the same experience of in-depth residence in Africa before research begins. Financing is also an increasing problem. The multiyear Foreign Area Research Fellowships are a thing of the past, and African research is becoming often prohibitively expensive. The situation is such that students often have to wait several years after finishing course work before a dissertation grant comes through.

Time is also a consideration. Many universities are under pressure to get students through the Ph.D. program in five to six years (down from the current nine or ten). In African art this is very difficult to do, particularly

when one insists on fieldwork, the need to learn an African language, and the time-consuming task of transcribing and translating a year's worth of interviews. In truth, some Ph.D. topics do not absolutely need fieldwork (analyses of travelers' accounts, early photography, perceptions of Westerners collecting African art), but these are few in number, and even then are greatly enhanced by some period of stay in Africa. To suggest to a doctoral student of Florentine art that she or he need not go to Italy would be anathema. Although the relevant works have mostly all been published, and some are even housed in nearby collections, it is generally acknowledged that scholars need to get a feel of the place, to dig around in the regional archives, and to meet the local scholars. Not to do so in European as well as African art could be construed as third-rate art history.

The accusations of third-rate anthropology are grounded in an even more complex set of concerns. I think the person who spoke these words had two things in mind. The first is methodological. If it is true that our art historical training teaches us how to "look" and how to evaluate written sources, it is also true that it generally has failed to train us in the unique methodological problems of fieldwork. In part this is because it is impossible to know how to do field research until one actually does it. Data collecting even in anthropology is more an art than a science. Many of us (in both art history and anthropology) also go to the field with a considerable degree of naiveté, accepting as fact the word of a single well-placed source. Just because someone reveals something (even or especially in a whisper) does not mean that it is accurate. In Africa, as anywhere (particularly in the context of controversial interpretations), one must look and ask for additional corroboration and evidence—whether in language, liturgy, or object locale. Not to do so is not only bad anthropology, it is also bad art history. Individuals sometimes lie; sometimes they frame things in ways that constitute untruths, whether because of personal or familial biases or because of partial or inaccurate knowledge. Often, in turn, it is we researchers who ask questions in such a way that we cannot help but get one-sided and erroneous or partially correct answers. In this

sense, the third-rate researcher, no matter what the discipline, should be questioned.

The second concern alluded to in the anthropologist's statement appears grounded in the belief that African-art historians are not doing what they are supposed to be doing as art historians. Although this is based no doubt on this person's assumptions and preconceptions about what our discipline is and what its scholars purportedly do or should do, the suggestion that African-art scholars have not been addressing key issues in the field of art history is in part true. Generally peripheralized within our own discipline, most of us in African art history have shown our frustration and anger by avoiding art history discourse altogether.

Our self-ostracism is borne out in our professional activities. While there are fifty-three members of the Arts Council of the African Studies Association (ACASA) who belong to the College Art Association (the professional grouping of artists and art historians in the U.S.), in recent years several African panels have had to be canceled because of a lack of participants; and this year not a single African art paper was submitted to the *Art Bulletin*, the in-house journal of the field. For those of us who still read art history and cite it in our writing, often we have focused on a single high-visibility scholar (Panofsky or Baxandall, for example) affirming or illustrating associated ideas within an African context. Far too few of us have used our data to argue against the principal tenets of the discipline, or to place ourselves in the center of related debates. Although we cannot be blamed for our marginalization, we could be using our data and potentially powerful (because liminal) positions at the periphery to make a significant imprint on the discipline of art history (though not, as the anthropologist implies, by melding into the fold).

This task, plus our responsibility to write accurately about African art on its own terms, is not an easy one. No matter the issues or perspectives, however, if we become convinced that it is necessary to forgo African field research in order to be more "art historical," both art history and African art history will feel the loss. □

Suzanne Preston Blier