

A HISTORY OF
ART IN
AFRICA

SECOND EDITION

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Introduction

AFRICA, A CONTINENT OF STRIKING cultural richness and ecological diversity, is distinguished by the visual power and creativity of its arts. This book examines the full corpus of these arts. It includes ancient art from Egypt and northern Africa as well as rock art from southern Africa and archaeological artifacts from western Africa. It surveys architecture and arts of daily life, in addition to contemporary works by African artists and artists of African descent. The book's overarching focus is on Africa's many diverse peoples and regions, the artistic developments of each region, the broader cross-cultural traits that link them, and the different local and regional responses to historical concerns. This can be seen, for example, in the blending of Islam and Christianity into existing social and aesthetic structures, the creation of art in the context first of the slave trade and then colonial rule, and the rich, creative impact of recent post-nationalist and international art movements. Accordingly, this volume presents the arts of many different "Africas": not only those of distinct regions, historical periods, and religious beliefs (varied local forms as well as Islamic and Christian) but also arts representing a diversity of social and political situations (dynastic and plebeian, urban and rural, nomadic and settled, outwardly focused and inwardly defined).

At the risk of promoting an inaccurate sense of Africa as a place of unified or monolithic artistic practice, the question of what, if anything, is

distinctively "African" about African art is an intriguing and interesting one to address as a preface to the survey that follows. The answers to this question are subtly different with regard to specific areas of the continent and periods of its history. Among the formal features which stand out across the broad sweep of Africa are the following (not in order of priority):

Innovation of form. The impressive diversity of art traditions across Africa offers evidence of a larger continent-wide concern with artistic innovation and creativity. This can be seen not only in the variety of forms within a relatively small area (a single culture, a city or town, an individual artist) but also through history. Innovation has been widely promoted by local art patrons and cultural institutions, as in the imperative that kings coming to the throne must create a new palace and capital for themselves along with a range of new art forms or textile designs that will distinguish their reigns. African artists have long looked outside their own communities for sources of inspiration, not only in other cultural areas of Africa but also in Europe, Asia, and, recently, America.

Visual abstraction. There is a preference in much of Africa for varied forms of visual abstraction or conventionalization: that is to say, art works which in bold and subtle ways lie outside more naturalistic renderings of form. It was indeed these features of near-abstraction and visual boldness that in part led European artists at the beginning of the twentieth century to turn to African art in rethinking form

more generally. The importance placed on abstraction in African art is evidenced across media—sculpture, architectural facade paintings, textile design, and other forms. In some cases, this non-realistic stylization is fairly subtle. In other works, only minimal suggestions tie the forms to the human. Complementing the importance of abstraction is an emphasis on visual boldness. Many African works are particularly forceful in their visual impact while many others are inventive departures from any animal or human form.

Parallel asymmetries. African artists often reveal a fundamental concern with a visual combination of balanced composition and vital asymmetries. This gives even a relatively static form a sense of vitality and movement. Parallel asymmetries are also evidenced in profile and back views of the same figure and in the push/pull of negative and positive spaces. The overall painting of the symmetrical features of the body is frequently distinguished by asymmetry, as in the lines and shapes painted on the human body by the men of a Nuba group in southern Sudan (see fig. 13-48). Similarly, bold asymmetries characterize African architectural design, particularly when one looks at these works alongside the rigidly symmetrical architectural traditions of other parts of the world. In African sculpture and textiles, as in architecture, broken or undulating lines are generally preferred to rigidly straight lines. Varied pattern elements and intentional breaks or shifts in a pat-

tern are also emphasized over exact replication.

Sculptural primacy. Most art in Africa is carved, molded, or constructed into three-dimensional forms, even though important traditions of two-dimensional painted, engraved, or raised designs also exist. In many cases, even two-dimensional art forms are meant to be seen and admired primarily three-dimensionally, as when wall paintings (such as those mentioned above) wrap around building surfaces in ways that enhance their sculptural effects. Flat textiles become three-dimensional when used as tents or enclosures; they become four-dimensional (spanning time as well as height, breadth, and depth) when they move through space on the human body, as in the astounding variety of performed masquerades. Earthen and stone architecture also has a sculptural tradition that distinguishes African Islamic and Christian examples from those of other areas.

Performance. Many of the visual art forms surveyed in this volume were first seen in performance contexts. Indeed, it may well be that for African peoples, performance, which always implies music and dance, is the primary art form. Elaborate personal decoration, for example, nearly always involves public display and very often invokes gesture, dance, and other stylized forms of behavior: in short, performance. Many groups of people both perform *with* art (such as sculptures, masks, and dance wands) and, in their collectivities, often *become* art. Statuary that resides in a shrine for most of its "life" may be ceremonially carried to the site in a "festival of images." The ultimate performance

genre is the festival—with events invoking visual, aural, and kinetic forms of great variety and richness. These events are all orchestrated toward a large communal or state purpose, be it a proper funereal "send-off" for a prominent person, an initiation of youths, or a New Year's or First Fruits ceremony. Masquerades—in both prevalence and astonishing variety—are among the most complex and prominent of African arts.

Humanism/Anthropomorphism. Home to the first humans, Africa is remarkable for the emphasis its patrons and artists have historically placed on the adornment, and often transformation, of the human body. This use of the human skin as canvas can be seen in images painted in rock shelters of the Sahara more than seven thousand years ago, which seem to depict humans in elaborate paint and beadwork. African art also focuses on representations of the human body, human spirit, and human society, and most sculptural traditions in Africa incorporate human beings as their primary subjects. Even portrayals of animals in masquerades and other arts often include human-derived elements, such as jewelry or elaborate coiffures. Virtually all art and architecture on the continent (with the exception of ancient Egypt) has been conceived on a human scale. Anthropomorphism also features prominently in African architecture, with the naming of particular construction elements to represent parts of the human anatomy, or the decoration of building facades to suggest textile patterns or body scarification.

Ensemble/Assemblage. An isolated statue or other African work is rare

and exceptional. Varied works are usually assembled together, as in a shrine or multicharacter masquerade. And many individual works are themselves composite, having been made from diverse meaningful materials. Power figures from Mali to Benin and Nigeria and on to the Congo make this point with particular force, as the purposes of these images *derive* from their varied materials, just as their visual character is dependent upon them. Thus the ensemble—the collection of works or the assembling of composite materials in a single work—is a vital trait of visual arts all over Africa. The idea is driven home by the elaborate assemblages of personal decorations featured for ceremonies nearly everywhere—scarification or tattoo, coiffure, jewelry, cloth, and sometimes body or face painting—and by the combination of varied arts, including music and dance, in festivals. It follows, then, that these art works and ensembles—in part because they comprise many materials and forms—will have many meanings.

Multiplicity of meaning. Like a telephone line that carries multiple messages simultaneously, African art is characterized by its multiplicity of meanings and intellectual complexity. As in the varied rhythms and competing melodies of jazz, these differential meanings exist concurrently and harmoniously within the same work, giving it an even larger (broader) sense of symbolic and intellectual grounding than it otherwise might have. In African art a single form is often intended to mean different things to different members of society, depending on age, level of knowledge, and level of initiation. A Dogon *kanaga* mask form (see fig.

5-19) signifies at once a variety of beings, such as a bird, a crocodile, or a primordial being. Another example of this multiplicity of meanings is that of an Asante goldweight depicting a bird scratching its back with its beak or looking backwards. "Pick it up if it falls behind" is one common translation. This can refer to the "wisdom of hindsight"—how one can learn from one's mistakes—or it can indicate more literally that one needs to clean up things left behind, such as an incomplete task or a mess. Thus there are many possible meanings for an apparently simple image depending on the circumstances of its occurrence or use, as well as each viewer's experience, knowledge of proverbs, and wisdom. This multi-referential quality in African art makes research into art symbolism both challenging and rewarding; artists and users frequently offer different interpretations to the meanings of a single given form.

CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF AFRICAN ART

Africa was known to the ancient world for the power, wealth, and artistic magnificence of Egypt 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. Christianity thrived in many African regions, and in Ethiopia works of painting, sculpture, and architecture still draw upon one of the world's oldest Christian traditions. Africa also

played a crucial role in the development and expansion of Islam. Mosques in Egypt and Tunisia are over a thousand years old. 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), cities of the East African coast such as Kilwa 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 nineteenth century. 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 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. State treasuries of kingdoms such as Benin, Asante, and Dahomey were taken to Europe as war booty following the defeat of their rulers by European forces and formed the basis for the rich collections of newly founded ethnographic museums. 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 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, 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, or European Renaissance 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.

Let us briefly examine one particularly beautiful, refined sculpture, a regal head once worn by a female leader in a masquerade (fig. 6-17). 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 a 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.

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.

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 both to 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.