

“Collecting Africa: The Legacy of African Art in Western Collections”
African Visual and Material Culture at the Housatonic Museum of Art

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Panel 1: What is art?

In the autumn of 1897, some three hundred brass plaques from the Kingdom of Benin, in what is now Nigeria, were displayed at the British Museum in London. The public was astonished. Never had Western audiences seen such skill and sophisticated workmanship in any African bronze. Art historians and anthropologists had long assumed that the arts of Africa were “primitive” and “inferior” as compared with the standards of European art, lacking naturalism and an equivalent degree of skill. At the time, racialized assumptions underpinned the categories and descriptive means used to classify collections of non-Western material culture. However, the Benin bronzes, as they came to be called, challenged the very frame of reference by which the term “art” was defined. Their appreciation within European museums at the turn-of-the-century changed the course of modern art.

Though it’s conventionally understood that art has always existed, the term “art” is modern, becoming prominent only after about 1750. Its definition is closely aligned with Western philosophies of aesthetics, which defined art as representing an excellence of skill, creativity, emotional expression and even beauty. Critics, like the nineteenth-century British writer John Ruskin, argued that “great art” was “lifelike,” derived from that which was most perfect in nature. Such definitions, consequently, marginalized the study of cultures outside of Europe, whose visual language and values differed significantly from those in the West.

While the exclusion of African visual and material culture from the canon of art history was problematic, its eventual inclusion also created challenges to our appreciation of these objects. As the art historian Susan Vogel explains, our impulse to display African art as we

do all other forms of European art strips vital cultural contexts from the work. “Masks are not relief sculpture, no matter how we install them,” she writes, “they were meant to be worn...we only see the work as incomplete.” Consequently, it’s important to remember that many of the works on display here were once functional.

Q. How do you define art? Is it important to recognize these works as art or do you think that term makes it harder for us to understand the original intentions of the work? Consider, particularly, how Western art invites more contemplative and passive appreciation, while African art and material culture demands a more experiential engagement.

Panel 2: Collecting Africa

In the mid-fifteenth century, significant developments in naval technology brought about the first global economy—and the first Europeans to Africa. Among the earliest to arrive were the Portuguese, whose enormous galleons generated unprecedented levels of trade in goods like gold, fabric, pepper and brass. Elaborately carved ivory saltcellars from Sierra Leone, and later from Benin, were just some of the many luxury goods acquired by the Portuguese as their taste for foreign cultures increased. These ivories, along with other large collections of assorted global “exotica,” became part of private “cabinets of curiosity,” markers of status, wealth, education and culture among the aristocratic classes.

In the nineteenth century, trade in goods grew to include the Transatlantic slave trade with disastrous consequences for the more than 3,000 distinct ethnic groups spread out across the continent. By 1914, nearly the entire continent was colonized by an occupying European force, generating unprecedented wealth for Europe. Colonized African communities, however, were faced with war, political instability and, for the first time, taxes, which they

paid with the proceeds of forced sales of their material heritage. Some objects, such as the Benin bronzes, were also stolen in punitive raids. As a result of this complex but unequal relationship, an estimated 90% of African material culture now resides in museum collections outside of Africa, in places like England's Pitt-Rivers Museum at the University of Oxford and in Paris's Musée du quai Branly.

Consequently, the legacy of such collections is fraught with ambiguity, as the legitimacy of colonial-era collecting practices have come under strict global scrutiny. Some scholars argue that museums, having functioned as "temples of empire," should be "decolonized" and their collections restituted, or returned to their country or culture of origin. Others, however, claim African visual and material culture is part of a shared global heritage, which ought to be accessible to all within universal collections, like the British Museum, where they can be properly conserved for future generations. The release of the Sarr-Savoy report in 2018, which investigated the restitution of African cultural heritage specifically, acknowledged that while it is ethically appropriate to return objects of questionable provenance, it would be difficult, if not impossible to do so in all cases. In fact, only a fraction of restitution requests has been honored to date, though talks remain ongoing.

Q. Critics of restitution worry that the work of art might be lost, stolen or destroyed if returned to countries that might be politically unstable. Is this reason enough for Western museums to hold onto these objects or do you think they should be returned regardless?

Panel 3: The Legacy of African Art in the West

In the spring of 1907, a young Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) was dining with the American collector Gertrude Stein when another guest, the renowned French master Henri Matisse (1869–1954), presented the party with a newly purchased African figurative sculpture. Taken with its novelty and beauty, Picasso reportedly wouldn't put it down. The rest, as they say, is history. Along with countless other early twentieth-century modernists like Matisse and Constantin Brâncuși (1876–1957), Picasso studied and appropriated the aesthetics of African art, rebelling against Western conceptions of art and beauty and reinventing figurative abstraction.

European modernism owes a great debt to African artistic excellence and ingenuity, but in the United States, African material culture also reinvigorated Black artists' search for heritage and expression. During the Harlem Renaissance, a period of artistic and intellectual excellence in the 1920s and '30s, many Black artists followed the teachings of Pan-African theorists like W.E.B. Dubois, exploring a collective Black history in their creative work. Merging interests in American abstraction, African sculpture and contemporary Black life, artists like Hale Woodruff (1900–80), Jacob Lawrence (1917–2000) and Romare Bearden (1911–88) generated works that vibrated with the energy of experience and imagination.

Most recently, Disney's 2018 blockbuster *The Black Panther* merged the rich visual legacy of African art with contemporary Afrofuturist influences. *Black Panther* was groundbreaking,

the first of its kind to feature an almost entirely Black cast. Most importantly, *Black Panther* mattered because it represented a profound shift in the visualization of the African continent as prosperous. According to the film's lead costume designer, Ruth Carter, one of the goals of the film was to celebrate the beauty of African forms and aesthetics. Carter's costuming was consequently attentive to scarification practices, hairstyles, jewelry and textiles from across the continent.

Q. Observe Romare Bearden's *The Conversation* (1979) on display here. Where do you see the influence of African art and material culture?

Panel 4: Aesthetic Systems: Understanding African Art

Within most African cultural groups, to be perceived as beautiful is to also possess a high moral character. Objects that are useful, reinforcing positive social values, are similarly understood as both beautiful and good, while objects that are fearsome or "ugly" may convey a powerful evil. Consequently, much African figurative sculpture celebrates healthy male and female bodies in the prime of their reproductive lives. For example, among the Baule people of Cote D'Ivoire, a strong muscular body with refined facial features, elaborate hair and intricate scarification patterns reflects a collective ideal of physical attractiveness. In Yoruban sculptural traditions, smooth surfaces, symmetrical compositions and a moderate degree of naturalism are highly prized. The Ife are known for a particularly high degree of naturalism in their stunning terra cotta portrait heads. However, resemblance is rarely the point, even where a commemorative portrait is intended. More commonly, forms are abstracted from direct observation of nature with degrees of expressive exaggeration and bold geometry varying by ethnic group and geographical area.

African cultures do not share the Western distinction between art and craft, recognizing and appreciating aesthetic experience but largely lacking an equivalent term for art in any of the continent's 2,000 languages. Nonetheless, beauty was important, functioning as a lure to spirits and ancestors. There are many African words that describe the qualities of artistry, like "embellished" or "beautified," and some that help distinguish between degrees of skill. Notably, most African artists and craftsmen are male, with some, like the Bamana blacksmiths of Mali, being of separate class status, while others make art only part-time. The artist is responsible for the continuity of the group's cultural and aesthetic traditions, forging an important link with history. Innovation in tradition is appreciated so long as the work meets with the expectations of its audience members. Nonetheless, for the client, it's the object, rather than its maker, that is most important.

Q. Do you have objects in your daily life that you consider to be both beautiful and useful? What are they and what about them is beautiful to you?

Panel 5: Material Culture in Context

African material culture, as both art and objects of daily or ritual use, has a layered history, which embodies within it many diverse and complex meanings. Traditionally, African sculpture was created with a purpose and audience already in mind. The meaning, consequently, was known only to those who understood the nuances of the work's visual language and cultural context. Whether worn, carried, caressed or enshrined, such objects were part of a richer range of sensorial experience than the current setting allows. Objects could summon ancestors, protect grain stores, petition spirits for guidance and mark

important “coming-of-age” rituals, among other applications. As in the history of Western art, objects like flywhisks, staffs, pipes and even cloth could also mark social status, legitimize power, and glorify a dynastic line.

With the impact of colonization and rise of Christian missionary activity, the practice of cultural rituals and artistic production declined at the turn-of-the-century. However, the confluence of African liberation movements, American Civil Rights protests and rising expressions of Pan-Africanism helped revitalize these practices in the post-colonial period. According to the Jamaican-born Black nationalist Marcus Garvey, a people without a history is like “a tree without roots.” When the first prime minister of independent Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, wore traditional Kente cloth to meet President Eisenhower in 1958, it sparked a fashion for the cloth throughout the African diaspora. Today, Kente remains a symbol of pride and an important link to heritage for many.

Tourism too has impacted and stimulated the production of African art, though the reception of this form of “airport art” is hotly contested. Tourism art, or art produced exclusively for a secondary market, has provided financial opportunities for new artists and ensured the continuity of African artistic traditions. Some scholars, however, have argued that such work is “inauthentic,” and consequently of a lesser value, because it has no history of use within African communities. To borrow a term from philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin, tourist art lacks “aura,” a certain kind of aesthetic presence that can only be acquired through its unique presence in time and space.

Q. What is “authenticity?” Do you think it’s an important attribute in our appreciation or understanding of African art?

Q. Can you tell the difference between a supposedly “authentic” object, and one created for the tourist market? If so, what is the evidence for your analysis?

Object Label 1.: Kente Cloth

Ca. 1960s

Woven silk and cotton threads

Housatonic Museum of Art Purchase

2020.07.01

Among the Ashanti of Ghana, the invention of Kente cloth is believed to have followed from a mythical encounter with the trickster Anansi the Spider, who taught the art of weaving in exchange for a series of favors. Its birth, however, more likely followed the arrival of French, Italian and Chinese silks to Ghana through European trade.

Whatever its precise origins, Kente was initially a marker of royal status, though it’s now worn throughout the African diaspora. Woven entirely by men, Kente’s various motifs and colors have symbolic significance. The example here represents the colors of the Ghanaian national flag.

Object Label 2.: Nkisi N’Kondi (Power Figures)

N.D.

Kongo Peoples, Democratic Republic of Congo, Africa

Wood, metal

Gift of Herman Copen

2002.09.16

2002.09.36

Commonly called “nail fetishes,” *Nkisi nkonde* are anthropomorphic figures whose powers act as agents of healing, justice, revenge and oath-taking. Whether positively or negatively “charged,” these magical figures are nearly always depicted armed, with one arm raised

aggressively, as if about to strike. To activate the magic, a blade, nail, pin, arrowhead or other sharp object was driven part-way into the figure and then wrapped with raffia twine to bind the agreement between the parties. The box or hole in the figure's abdomen represents the *mooyo*, or spiritual center, where medicinal herbs would be placed by a ritual specialist to facilitate the object's powers.

Object Label 3.: Bundu Helmet Mask

Mende People (Sierra Leone), Africa

Wood with black patina

1983.16.01

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Lester Johnson

While masking is quite common in boys' initiation rituals, the Sande Society of Sierra Leone is the only known cultural group that practices female masking. Here women are the patrons and performers of initiation dances, commissioning flamboyant masks according to individual tastes and societal expectations. Masking personifies concepts of beauty through iconography, costuming and choreography. For Mende, the eyes are equated with a woman's entire being. When the mask is worn, the dancer's eyes are joined with those of the mask and she is said to gain a "double vision." The mask's large forehead also signifies knowledge, while its small, delicate mouth reminds the wearer of the perils of gossip.

Object Label 4.: Plank Mask (Nwantantay)

Bwa peoples, Burkina Faso, West Africa

Wood, polychrome pigment

Gift of Mrs. Joan Peterdi

2004. 12.04

Among the Bwa peoples, plank masks appear at multiple occasions throughout the year where energetic dances honor the deceased, mark ritual initiations and cleanse villages of malevolent forces. Scholars have speculated about the many meanings associated with mask shapes and patterns. However, the contrast between dark and light colors, here represented by two “x” shapes, is widely accepted as the necessary separation of dualities, like good from evil, wise from stupid, and male from female. The hooked protrusion at the bottom is considered a nose by all Bwa. The crescent at the top represents the moon.

Object Label 5.: Shrine Figure and Headdress (A-tshol)

Baga Peoples, Guinea, West Africa

Wood

Gift of Mr. Herman Copen

2002.09.20

To ensure the good fortune of their families, the Baga used shrine objects, like this *elek*, as a kind of intermediary between the physical and spiritual world. *Elek* figures are dynamic, hybrid creatures, part man and part bird, with unmistakable pointed beaks. To activate the protection of the *elek*, it was placed in a family shrine, where it received periodic offerings of chicken blood and prayers, as well as the first grains of the annual rice harvest. The openings in the figure’s elongated skull also accommodated horns filled with magic powders and other substances, providing additional spiritual protection. The shrine figure was said to not only safeguard the family, but to also incarnate the life energy of one’s ancestry.

Object Label 6.: Chiwara Male Antelope Figure

Bamana People, Mali, West Africa

Wood, animal hair, brass plate, twine, cowrie shells

Gift of Joan Peterdi

2004.12.05

The antelope dance crest featured here, also known as a *segouni kun*, is all that remains of what would have been a much larger and more elaborate costume. At the beginning of each growing season, as the first fields are just cleared for planting, a pair of dancers leaps about in imitation of the antelope and its mate as part of a ritual ceremony to ensure a good harvest. The costume, which included a thick fibrous dress and two long sticks for forelegs, invoked the memory of the mythical *Ci Wara*, a wild farming animal who taught the Bamana to cultivate their land. In their invocation of the *Ci Wara*, male dancers acquired the beast's skill and zeal for husbandry, while simultaneously demonstrating their gratitude for its gifts.

Object Label 7.: Granary Door

Dogon People (Mali), Africa
Carved wood with brown patina
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Arthur Kahn
1981.23.01

Millet, a staple grain in the Dogon diet, is typically stored in large mud granaries, which ensured the family's survival against drought and starvation. The wooden door featured here would have covered the granary's entrance. Its lively, figurative relief carvings represent patrilineal ancestral forces that both protected and blessed the life-giving supply of food contained within, discouraging thieves from ungraciously helping themselves. The decorative herringbone pattern that frames the figures throughout may represent water or even vibrating rays of light. In Dogon cosmology, water was the source of primordial ancestral beings known as the *Nommos*.

Object Label 8: African Stools: Seats of Power and Purpose

Among the Asante, the golden stool (c. 1700), known as the *Sika dwa kofi*, was such an important symbol of the kingdom's sovereignty that King Prempeh I chose exile rather than the stool's surrender to the conquering British. To most Westerners, such a stool might appear to be little more than a golden throne, but among the Asante, it was the sacred repository of *sunsum*, the soul and energy of the people.

Throughout Africa, stools are closely associated with their owners and are rarely shared. Upon death, a stool may be inherited, but it may also accompany other objects to the gravesite as beloved symbols of the deceased. Stools are, naturally, as diverse as the

communities that produce them. The Bamum people of Cameroon, for example, favor a rounded pedestal style, carved from wood and figuratively ornamented with animals or ancestral pillars. The Lobi of Burkina Faso and Cote d'Ivoire gender their stools — a three-legged stool for men and a four-legged stool for women. Among the Chokwe, contact with European traders throughout seventeenth century produced a startling hybrid of European form and African aesthetic ingenuity. The Chokwe chair, the form of which resembles a high-backed side chair, transforms what might otherwise appear to be an ordinary household item into an object of prestige and commemoration.

Object Label 9: Twins: A Mixed Blessing

Many African societies consider multiple births, and twins particularly, as a cause for celebration and concern. Typically, infant multiples are more delicate than single-birth babies and they survive at comparatively lower rates. Among the Yoruba, who enjoy one of the highest rates of twin births globally, the death of a twin is marked with the carving of an *ere ibeji*, a carved infant figure that is carried, washed, and cared for as the living child would have been. The practice honors the spirits of the deceased but is also said to bring bereaved parents wealth and good luck.

In the Cameroon grasslands, twin births are perceived as lucky and parents of twins are honored with special titles and a superior status in the community. However, the joy of a twin birth is mitigated by the belief that twins have mercurial and mischievous personalities, which may make them “anti-social” or even dangerous, particularly to the mothers who face

death in their risky birth. Consequently, twins often receive favorable treatment as compared with other children. They're indulged and are rarely mistreated or punished.

Object Label 10: Passport Masks

When a member of the Dan people of Liberia travelled, it was often the case that a small mask, the miniature of a family performance mask, might accompany him on the journey. These "passport masks," as they've come to be called, are an important means of social identification and serve an apotropaic, or protective function. Passport masks are usually concealed, sewn into an article of clothing, kept in a leather pouch, or worn against the small of the back. The mask embodies the guardian spirits of its parent mask, receiving libations and even acting as witness in initiation ceremonies if called upon.

Object Label 11: Malinke Mask, in the style of Bamana N'tomo Mask needs tombstone details...

N'tomo, one of six initiation societies known collectively as the *jow*, is a children's association found among the Mandé peoples of Mali, including Bamana and their Malinke neighbors. The initiation is but one step along the route to adulthood, instilling discipline and good behavior in adolescents as they grow into their role as community members. The performance of masked initiation rituals is common throughout Africa and is most strongly associated with the passage into manhood. The Malinke mask featured here is in the style of the Bamana N'tomo mask, featuring hammered and engraved aluminum accents and horn-like protrusions that indicate the performer's gender. Females are represented by four

or eight horns and males are represented by three or six. The seven horns we see here suggest the androgyny of childhood.

Object Label 12: Jacqueline Fogel, *Tea for Two* (1973)

Jacqueline Fogel

American, 1928–2012

Tea for Two (1973)

Carved and painted wood

1985.21.01

Gift of Mario Ravagnan

Jacqueline Fogel's (1928–2012) *Tea for Two* (1973) might be described as “whimsical,” but its subject matter is anything but. Crafted from discarded furniture and other found objects, Fogel's polychromatic sculpture explores the history of the Transatlantic slave trade through a beloved British ritual—a shared cup of tea. Initially a luxury item, the British have been consuming tea since the mid-seventeenth century when Dutch traders first began exporting it from China. However, it was only in the early 1700s that tea, sweetened with a bit of sugar, became a national love affair.

Sugar drove the formation of the modern world. Accounting for up to a third of the European economy, sugar plantations also fueled the Transatlantic slave trade, displacing and enslaving somewhere between ten and twelve million Africans. The conditions of labor were brutal. Sugarcane field workers worked long hours planting, maintaining, and harvesting delicate sugarcane under hot and dangerous conditions. It's been estimated that a sugar plantation of about 100 enslaved persons would see its entire labor force dead of injury, maltreatment or tropical disease within twenty years. The production of Britain's “white gold” required – and killed – hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans.