



35th Annual Conference
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**Workshop: They Never Taught This in Library School:
African Art Bibliography**

Presented by

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The Robert Goldwater Library, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

PART 1

Slides 3-10

Is this African art?

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Why Africa? Why Art?

In his introduction "Why Africa? Why Art?" for the 1999 exhibition catalog "Africa: The Art of a Continent", philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah asks us to contemplate what it is we mean when we pair the words "African" and "art". His contention, in his words, is that "neither Africa nor art ... played a role as ideas in the creation of the objects" in the exhibition at hand. Yet, he asserts, "they are still African; they are still works of art."

It is an argument that might hold just as true for us here this afternoon, as we consider the "African arts" literature that addresses these objects. We would also do well to consider them, both individually and as they have been joined together. Let's take them singly to start.

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What then defines our conception of 'Africa'? It probably starts out as one based on geography: an enormous, undifferentiated continental land mass surrounded on all sides by water. Maybe it even includes ships and sea monsters off the coastline, like this late seventeenth-century example. I understand from those teaching African art at the undergraduate level that every course begins with the instruction that Africa is not a country.

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Or it might be based on abstract ideas of Africa's biogeography: lush tropical jungles, perhaps, a savannah rich in exotic wildlife, or the arid deserts.

A far stronger influence on our notional understanding of Africa derives from its indigenous cultures: 'Africa' defined by its inhabitants. This is made easier by the

legacy of the European colonial occupation, in which 'what is Africa' is cast by negative example; that is, 'not Europe', not 'us', or simply 'other'. And being 'not European', it doesn't really much matter who the inhabitants were, or how they differ one from another. "But the fact is," Appiah reminds us, "that the legacy of the old European way of thinking, is that what unites Africa is that it is the home of the Negro."

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Perhaps this map represents what has had the greatest and longest lasting impact, and what matters most, as far as the foundation literature of African art goes. It indicates the distribution of European colonial powers circa World War I. It not only hints where much of the cultural record was originally removed – Nigerian art to England, Congolese art to Belgium, the bulk of West African art to France – but also the languages in which most of the literature is still written today, where that literature is being published, and where scholarship is taking place.

As Julius Nyerere, later president of Tanzania, was quoted in 1960, "One need not go into the history of colonization of Africa, but that colonization had one significant result. A sentiment was created on the African continent – a sentiment of oneness." (quoted in Mazrui, A., 'On the concept of "We are all Africans"', *American Political Science Review*, 1963.)

More recently, and certainly since the African independence movement, the negative colonial model of 'African' has been replaced collectively by Pan-Africanism, reflecting the real desire for Africans to identify with other Africans (including Diaspora Africans) for beneficial social and political aims.

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Even so this construct leaves aside other equally 'African' populations, be they North Africans – 'Afrique blanche' in that staggeringly unapologetic French idiom – or those longstanding extra-continental immigrant populations, such as Afrikaners and other former Europeans, Indians, Asians and Americans (one need think here only of Liberia's nineteenth-century American immigrants).

[At the top, "Self Portrait or the Trinity" by the Algerian Zineb Sedira; on the lower left, an exhibition catalog of the contemporary South African painter Paul du Toit; on the right, the award-winning catalog on Sufi urban art of Senegal.]

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We here, this afternoon, could also seek to reunite the continent under the rubric 'Africa', covering the land mass from north to south. But we are constrained by this four-hour window. Instead we will accede to Appiah's conceit and draw an imaginary line in the sand – through the Sahara in fact – from east to west, and artificially take into consideration only the land mass falling south of that line to be Africa. As Appiah opines in speaking of the objects in the Africa exhibition, and we shall too for this workshop,

What unites these objects as African, in short, is not a shared nature, not the shared character of the cultures from which they came, but our ideas of Africa; ideas which, as I have said, have now come to be important for many Africans, and thus are now African ideas, too.

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*Why Africa? **Why Art?***

By now it's axiomatic and widely understood that many of the objects of material culture we are calling 'art' here today had, in the words of Appiah, "primary functions that were, by our Western standards, non-aesthetic, and would have been assessed, first and foremost, by their ability to achieve those ends." A canard persists that African languages have no word for 'art'; and, failing a word for it, have no sense of what that concept 'art' might mean. Yet it is we in the West who have chosen not only to call it, but see it so.

Please note that I said here "many of the objects." It would be disingenuous at best to suggest that these objects were created by an artist entirely uninformed, unable to appreciate or unmoved by the object's aesthetic qualities; nor, in fact, that the skill applied to its creation and consequent aesthetic properties might not also in fact contribute to its intrinsic effectiveness to achieve those non-aesthetic ends.

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... about this workshop ...

As Erika and I began planning the workshop, we divvied up what each of us would cover this afternoon. For the most part I have taken on the print resources and Erika the electronic ones. My area of responsibility covers, conservatively, the last 200 years and Erika's the last twenty. Over time mine many of mine have become benchmarks for scholarly discourse; Erika's works are often still in the business of proving their research value. I hope you'll find the two segments work well together to give a sense of continuity, in time and subject matter, across these various segments of the African art literature.

In two instances we have called upon other experts to highlight important areas and issues: Janet Stanley on the bibliography of contemporary African art; and Eileen Fry on issues of access to images of African art. Their presentations will be woven in to ours where appropriate.

Participants will not walk away with a 'silver bullet' list of the five most important or useful books or electronic resources on African art: We won't be passing along the best titles and web sites as much as representative ones or, sadly in some instances, the only ones. It reflects not incompetence or malfeasance on our part, but the sometimes inescapable realities of the literature, touching on questions of breadth and diversity of scope, depth (or shallowness) of treatment, and the vast amount of research yet to be done. African art is still very much a new and constantly evolving literature.

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African Art's Reflection in the Eye of the Beholder: The Biographies of African Art

The literature of African art – here meaning the body of information we call upon to appreciate and, one hopes, understand African art – is indeed vast and diverse. To understand the literature of African art, we have to acknowledge the numerous and diverse relationships between the object itself and its observer or more broadly for our purposes here, its 'class' of observer.

I am taking as my departure the attractive notion that each object in its own way is an active participant in its conceptual transformation from original creation to object of universal veneration. A sense of this is captured in The social life of things, edited by Arjun Appadurai (1986). Appadurai and his fellow essayists are engaged primarily with the moment of exchange itself, when an object -- and here the focus is far broader than an art object -- acquires its new meaning. Through these transactions and the ensuing appropriations of new cultural meaning, an object might be said to have not only a social life but a biography as well.

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In 1994 Mary Nooter Roberts specifically addresses the social life of African objects in her essay "Does an object have a life?" for the exhibition catalog "Exhibition-ism: Museums and African Art." In fact she refers throughout to the 'careers' of these objects. Her interest, as we will learn, is in the various 'careers' an object may have prior to Western export.

Boris Wastiau, in his 2000 "Exit Congo Museum," published in conjunction with an exhibition held at the Musée royal de l'Afrique centrale, has taken this one step further, tracing several objects currently held by the Tervuren museum from their origins, through collection, transport, storage and installation at the museum. "Objects," he says, "have lives of their own. Often, they seem to us lieux de memoire, places or sites of memory."

It is not enough to examine only the role of the art object in its original contexts, as productive and rewarding as this line of inquiry has proven. Similarly to seek to 'get into the mind' of the African artist alone as the key to unlocking our best understanding is only the first step. We must also to get into the mind of the early outside observers and collectors -- the explorer, the colonial agent, the missionary, and the tourist -- and all those whose hands have come between and since -- the gallery owner, the private collector, the curator, the museum visitor, the student and scholar.

Each 'player' has a distinct voice, heard through a distinct literature, with its own style of presentation, its own biases and conceits, its own peculiar venues and formats. It would not do to turn our back on all the players involved. By doing so we rob the object of its life story, as it were, as well as strip away the accreted layers of meaning which contribute to our ultimate understanding and, one hopes, appreciation of the object before us.

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African Art's Reflection in the Eye of the Beholder: Enduring Myths of African Art

Taking into account the complete range of voices found in the literature on African art sometimes calls for a certain 'special handling'. There are tendencies, preconceptions -- Suzanne Blier calls them 'enduring myths' -- that "frame both popular and scholarly approaches to the arts of Africa." They hold true from their first appearances even up to the present day. As myths they are more "a popular belief or tradition that has grown up around something or someone" than outright falsehood. Some enduring myths about African art are based on at least a partial or circumstantial truthfulness. Each myth provides a valuable caveat lector, Recognizing these myths will help you navigate the vast body of 'dated' literature. And in spite of the best intentions of undergraduate faculties, they do persist in colleges and universities today as well.

Some myths are more common to one kind of literature than another, a consequence of the time or place it was written, the beliefs or mindset of its author. Some are so pervasive that I will address them now. Others I will try to treat within the milieu in which they are most prevalent.

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The African Artist: From Proxy Documentation to Self-Documentation

I'd like to begin with the first of these voices, that of the artist.

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We often ask the art to speak on behalf of the artist. As a result, we risk falling into a particularly persistent fallacy, that of the communally-created object. Throughout the literature it is commonplace to attribute the object with an ethnic group – as if the object had been created collectively by the Dogon or the Yoruba. It even takes on an obsessive quality in the writing of some authors. One need only imagine a work of European art identified as 'Swedish' without any acknowledgment of how imprecise a generalization this is. And while this sort of partial truth is not only expedient but sometimes all we have to go on, it ultimately robs the artist of a hand in the intellectual and physical creation of the work. It suggests that the prevailing impulses for artistic creation are the need of the community; that "African art is ... responsive above all to community needs rather than to the needs or personal interests of individual artists, their patrons, and members of their public." (Blier, p. 30) And playing this out, as long as the object cleaved to the community's requirements, it might be executed by any sufficiently skilled craftsman. It also telescopes the development of style over time to a single point.

The takeaway here should be, 'One Dogon object does not an entire artistic heritage make.'

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No African art object is anonymous, merely un-attributed. The issue of "Authorship in African art" was addressed not long ago in two special issues of

African arts magazine for 1998 and 1999, guest edited by Alisa LaGamma, gathering together ten scholarly articles covering the philosophy and methodology of attribution as well as case studies.

In some instances stylistic analysis and field research have led to a collective 'anonymous' attribution of objects, such as those now attributed to the so-called Buli Master.

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African art literature has slowly been addressing the gaps in our knowledge about the artist and his/her milieu. Works like "The Yoruba Artist" can capitalize on a richly documented art producing tradition – documented, it is worth pointing out, by Yoruba themselves as well as European interlocutors – to address questions of the role of the artist in Yoruba society, creativity and the philosophy of aesthetics, the workshop or atelier (including teachers, pupils, and critics), and patronage. In this case it draws on a rich Yoruba oral tradition.

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Such research has led to not only the identification of individual artists but gathering together their work across the diaspora of the artist's oeuvre. The exhibition and accompanying catalog "Olowe of Ise" is a prime (and not coincidentally, Yoruba) example.

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But again, we're talking about the social life of African art objects. This means understanding the role the objects play to the wider community around the artist.

Mary Nooter Roberts' essay "Does an object have a life?" (Exhibition-ism: Museums and African Art, 1994) offers numerous examples of changing contexts of African objects even without their leaving the continent: Objects created by one ethnic group for another; objects traded among ethnic groups, leading (she contends) to stylistic regions; or the artists themselves move between groups, lending to the objects they make new contexts within a new community. Objects age, accumulate (in the case of Kongo nkisi figures), change meaning; they are repaired, desacralized, repurposed, destroyed or recycled. So even the simplified notion that a work of African art will have a single context during its 'African-ness' won't withstand scrutiny. As Susan Vogel points out, "The villagers who today watch a masquerade performance may perceive in it things the originators never foresaw." – Vogel, *Art/Artifact*, 15.

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Information about contemporary African artists, whether based on the continent or living abroad, can increasingly be found online. For better-known artists, their own sites or their galleries sites are usually a good source of information. For artists who have not yet achieved the same kind of international prominence, artist directories are another place to turn biographical information, images or links to examples of works, and occasionally contact information. The next few slides

contain examples of online artist directories which are representative of these kinds of resources.

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African Colours, active since 2002, is a site that strives to both promote artists based in Africa and provide a network for them to communicate with each other. Artists are able to post portfolios of their work, their CV's, and contact information – for a fee. The site also doubles as a kind of blog to promote art events and issues across the continent.

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The Contemporary African Database is a directory of people born in Africa or who have acquired African nationality and are “at the top of their disciplines and fields.” Hundreds of visual artists are found under the “arts” category, and names can also be located by browsing through categories, such as country and “Women in Arts.” There are also special lists of artists whose work has appeared in high profile exhibitions such as African Remix, Dak'Art, Documenta 11, Short Century, and the Venice Biennale.

Artists' exhibition histories are listed, and sometimes links to gallery sites and online exhibitions are also included. There is also the option to launch a Google search on the artist from each page.

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Stanford's Africa South of the Sahara portal is a valuable resource which will come up a few more times during this presentation. Their “African Art on the Internet” art on the Internet page contains a wealth of links to galleries and contemporary artist pages across a wide-spectrum. Since the list is arranged alphabetically, it's best to search for a particular word or name using the “find” function (CTRL + F, or from your browser: Edit → Find on this page)

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I am now going to turn the presentation over to Barbara Prior who will read Janet Stanley's paper on resources for contemporary African art ...