ART SYSTEMS AND SEMIOTICS: THE QUESTION OF ART, CRAFT, AND COLONIAL TAXONOMIES IN AFRICA

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Michel Foucault begins his 1970 *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* with a citation from Jorge Louis Borges, the Argentinan master of invention, concerning a passage from a "certain Chinese Encyclopedia" describing Chinese animal taxonomy. According to this invented text, animals in China are divided into the following categories:

> (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) suckling pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies. (xv)

What is so remarkable in this taxonomic system is not so much its

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diversity of animal types as its unique typological rationales. This system of classification, like other taxonomies, is an invention of the mind; it is thus as insightful in what it reveals about its formulator as it is about those things it seeks to classify. As in the exploration of other sign systems and their foundations, the grammatical rules of organization are of critical importance.

Art, a term of fundamental classificatory signification, is a subject with rich potential for exploration in terms of taxonomic rationales. From the eighteenth century up until the present day, aestheticians have been concerned with two main questions concerning art: its definition and boundaries and the nature of beauty.[1] In the course of time, art hierarchies were established by these various writers based on diverse (and in some cases contradictory) values ranging from function, to feeling, to expressive attributes.[2] Craft and art were duly separated in the process.[3]

Today, as in the past, the question of what is art and what is not is of considerable social and economic significance. In 1981, in part with this in mind, a special NEA–NEH conference was held on the issue of art and craft. This symposium, which was organized by Rose Slivka, the editor of *Craft International* magazine, brought together nine panelists from various art related—and unrelated—fields, including a designer, a museum curator of design, a sociologist, the editor of a contemporary arts magazine, the president of a well known art school, a scientist concerned with the nature of form a professor of communications, a performance artist, and an art historian.[4] The assembled audience was comprised primarily of craftspersons of various types and writers about these works. Each of the speakers addressed the question of art and craft from the perspective of his or her distinctive background. The audience listened politely but is soon became clear that these makers of crafts had an agenda that was very different from that of the assembled specialists. Simply stated, the craft makers' concern was that crafts were not taken seriously enough. These individuals considered themselves to be artists (many indeed were professionals), yet they felt frustrated by what they viewed as their secondary treatment by the existing art world. Their works and the works of others like them were not presented in the fine arts museums of this country; their creations were not discussed in art history class rooms; their objects were not treated in contemporary art magazines. A gender component could be discerned in the argument as well. Many of these craftspersons were women and many worked in "soft" materials (textiles, clay) rather than in the "hard" media traditionally identified with artists who are men (stone, bronze, concrete, and stretched canvas).[5] In the above

division, the most arbitrary nature of signifier and signified with respect to soft/hard qualities of material is clearly in evidence.

What struck me as I explored the taxonomic distinction between art and craft signifiers for this conference was the relatively recent invention of the division between the two and the fact that this division is one which is distinctly Western. In Europe, up until the fifteenth century, the term "art" referred primarily to the idea of practical skill. The Latin, *ars* has its source in the word *artus* meaning to join or fit together. Both the Italian word *arte* and the German term *Kunst* were linked to the idea of practical activity, trade, and know-how (*Kunst* has its etymological source in the verb *konnen* "to know"). Dante in the fifteenth century still called any craft worker an artist (Argan 1959: 769).[6] Up until the Renaissance in Europe, in other words, art and craft were in many respects synonymous. There were no qualitative, functional, or material distinctions made between them. Hierarchy in the arts—defined often by seemingly arbitrary qualities such as averted function—came into prominence in the West only in the later periods.[7] If word histories can be said to be of significance as taxonomic arbiters, then Classical, Medieval, and Germanic art traditions all share the same etymological grounding as craft. Like the invented Chinese animal encyclopedia reference cited above, the taxonomic division between art and craft signifiers is an inventive fabrication of a particular time, place, and perspective. That many non-Western cultures—Peruvian and Indonesian, for example—value the soft arts (textiles, pottery) as highly as or above those that are hard serves to make the point all the more valid. Within the larger system of taxonomic signifiers identified with art and craft one thus sees considerable vacillation.

The question of what constitutes art is an important taxonomic one for African art as well. In certain contexts, these works are grouped under the label of craft (Etienne-Nugue 1982). The "missing" word for art in African languages (and in many languages outside of Europe) has been frequently noted (Fraser 1962: 13; Biebuyck 1969: 6; d'Azevedo 1973: 7; Vogel 1987). None of these scholars however has questioned the existence of art—indeed lots of it—in African civilizations of present and past eras. The fact is that in Africa, a number of words for art exist; but, like the Latin, early Italian, and German languages, these terms are less concerned with quality than with the question of skill, know-how, and inherent characteristics. The Fon of Benin Republic use the word *alonuzo* to designate art.[8] It signifies literally "something made by hand" (*alo*:hand; *nu*:thing; *zo*:work). The nearby Ewe of Togo employ the term *adanu* to mean at once art, technique, ornamentation, and

suggestion. As Roberto Pazzi points out (1976: 214) the Ewe phrase *E do adanu* signifies variously "he is skilled (in the accomplishment of a work), he gives sage advice, and he produces a work of value". The Bamana of Mali use another type of linguistic signifier for sculpture, *mafile fenw, laje fenw*, meaning "things to look at" (Ezra 1986: 7).

Artistic taxonomies and the question of their ultimate grounding in the intellectual traditions of particular periods and places come up again in terms of larger period and area nomenclatures within art history. An important example of this is the category "Primitive art". From the Latin, *primus*, meaning first or prior, primitive historically has been used to define things that are either early, ancient, or possessing characteristics of simplicity or roughness associated with early forms. General usage of the word primitive often equates it with inferiority and/or archaism (as in primitive housing or plumbing). Scholarly associations are similar. In biology, primitive signifies species that have evolved little from earlier types; in geometry, it is used to designate a form from which others have derived; in psychology the term refers to base emotions and uncontrolled acts; in engineering it connotes something that is at once archaic and rude. In art history, "primitive" has been employed primarily as a semantic marker for three types of art: (1) arts assumed to be in the early stages of development within a long tradition (as in Italian or Flemish primitives); (2) arts associated with persons without formal schooling (American primitives); and (3) arts generally of African, Oceanic, and Native American people living in societies which are assumed to be simpler.

Each use of the term "primitive" as a signification label in the context of art in its own way presents problems with respect to definition. In the first case it assumes that the earlier Italian or Flemish arts are first and foremost defined as reaching towards the Renaissance rather than having aims and orientations distinctively their own. The assumption in the second case is that lack of formal training carries with it an inherent lack of maturity of style or purpose. In the third case, primitive conveys the idea that the most distinguishing feature of these arts is their identity with societies and intellectual backgrounds that have characteristically similar features (generally perceived as simpler and inferior to those of the West) and that these assumed similarities are more significant than the vast historical, religious, societal, and stylistic differences of the associated peoples and arts. As L. Adams has observed with respect to the label of primitive art, it is

> their mere foreignness in form and content [that] serves to link them together in our mind for the purposes of art criticism. The link, however, is extraneous to the works themselves. It depends on us and our attitude to them. (1940: 30)

Interestingly, in many respects there are closer ties between African and European art traditions and cultural values than between African art and either Oceanic art or Native American art. Within the primitive art semantic system, however, the similarities between the two traditions could never be acknowledged.

Here too the arbitrary nature of the sign system categories is clear. There are in turn serious problems with any taxonomy that attempts to link African, Oceanic, and Native American art together as a complementary or art historically viable unit. Like the Chinese animal encyclopedia, this linking represents little more than imaginative musings. And, like the distinction between art and craft, the label Primitive art is one of very recent invention. In the nineteenth century the term referred primarily to the works of earlier European eras—Flemish and Italian most importantly. At the turn of the century, however, the label Primitive art was expanded to encompass these works and a host of other European and non-European traditions, including among others: Romanesque, Byzantine, Iberian, folk, Persian, Egyptian, Pre-Columbian, Javanese, Cambodian, Peruvian, Japanese, Oceanic, African, and Native American among others.[9]

What ties these arts together? Very little indeed. The only unifying thread is that which I would call the factor of *not*. It is because of what these arts are *not*, in other words, that they are grouped together. They all represent traditions that lie outside the dominant Classical–Renaissance–Neo-Classical line of European artistic expression. Their common bond is their perceived deviance from an assumed artistic norm. Accordingly, as these areas or periods have gained stature and defenders, each in turn has been wrenched from the over-embracing arms of the primitive typology. By the 1920s, the term Primitive art thus no longer included Romanesque, Byzantine, Egyptian, Japanese, and other European and Eastern traditions and was used instead almost exclusively for the arts of Africa, Oceania, and Native America.[10] The pejorative and deviant sense of the term none the less remained—and to some extent became even stronger—for by this time the category of Primitive art also included the arts of children and the insane. The *not* factor in this way has continued to have an impact on African art taxonomic signification.

Related taxonomic questions with respect to sign system categories of art also come up with regard to the establishment of the museum collections of African art.[11] Historically African art found its way into natural history museums in Europe and America long before it was seen to be acceptable to collect and exhibit these works in fine arts museums. Still today, often the best (and in some countries and cities, the only public) collections of African art are those of

anthropological and natural science museums. The Museum of Mankind in London, the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, the diverse Museums für Volkerkunde in Germany, and the various cultural history museums in this country all have important African art collections. In this light, it is of historical interest that the recently opened National Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C. has its primary affiliation with the Smithsonian Institution (a natural history museum). Conceptually this reinforces the distinction which has been made historically between African arts which are assumed to be materially oriented (i.e., as artifacts) and European arts which as seen to be manifestations of the mind.

Sign system taxonomies foreign to the African art works themselves not only play an important role in terms of where these objects are housed, but also with respect to how they are catalogued.[12] Foreign taxonomies also define the way that African art is categorized and "fit" into the larger corpus of works within the continent itself. In African art, the question of the taxonomic base is an especially important one, for lacking an underlying historical frame with which to structure the vast corpus of art (not because of the lack of history in Africa but because of its breadth) one has been compelled to look elsewhere—by and large outside the works—for a means of organization.

To a considerable extent scholars of African art have turned to methodologies developed in the natural sciences. Here taxonomies based on careful description and analysis have long been employed for the organization of fauna, flora, and geological matter. It was towards this end that Eckart von Sydow first created the classification "pole style" (*Pfahl Steil*) in 1923 for the arts of certain African cultures. Hermann Baumann later suggested a relationship between "pole style" sculpture and patriarchal "Old Nigritic" societies and between round sculpture and the matriarchal Bantu (in Leuzinger 1960: 55). Lavachery (1954) also defined two primary styles in African art. According to him, however, these works were either predominantly concave or convex.

It was the task of Carl Kjersmeier (1935–38), M. Olbrechts (1946), and their followers, Elsy Leuzinger (1960), Paul Wingert (1962), and others to develop and promote a system of formal analysis through which one could intelligently separate and systematically evaluate the formal qualities of a sculpture so as to ascribe it to particular art genus, class, and broader cultural species. M. Olbrechts' influential *Plastiek van Congo* (1946: 64), which took a scientific look at questions of style, was particularly important in this regard. In many respects these formal analyses can be said to be modeled on earlier taxonomic

studies of the natural sciences. Paul Wingert's formal analysis of a Baule figure is typical.

> Multiple small planes define these shapes and contribute to their expression of roundness, while clearly articulated joints act as points of differentiation between them. Typical of the Baule style is the remarkable organic and emphatic naturalism prevailing in the treatment of the body parts. As usual in these figures, the head is disproportionately enlarged and manifests a carefully detailed treatment of such elements as facial features, scarification marks, and hairdress. The stress given the elaborate hairdress, and the clean and precise rendering of the scarification marks combine to give the figure a marked elegance; a dignity and calm aloofness, in keeping with the sanctity of and reverence for an ancestor, is established by the half-closed eyes and the pose . . . . The forehead, with its protruding full planes, subtly flattens out below the eyes to form a concave facial area. (Wingert 1962: 84)

So similar is this approach to that of the natural sciences that one could easily have been studying a fern or orchid. As Michel Foucault notes for such studies,

> It is sufficient, but indispensable, to enumerate the stamens and pistils (or to regard their absence, according to the case), to define the form they assume, according to what geometrical figure they are distributed in the flower (circle, hexagon, triangle), and what their size is in relation to the other organs. (1970: 134)

The assumption in Wingert's Baule description above (and in others like it) is that, much like natural history descriptions, in the words of Foucault:

> [when] confronted with the same individual entity everyone will be able to give the same description; and inversely, given such a description everyone will be able to recognize the individual entities that correspond to it. In this fundamental articulation of the visible, the first confrontation of language and things can now be established in a manner that excludes all uncertainty. (1970: 134)

The early African formalists clearly saw themselves creating a visual system that would allow for the identification and classification of the arts of various African cultures. But has this system of classification worked? Not knowing the identity of the above-described Baule figure at the outset, would we have been able to discern the fact that this was the work being discussed? I think not. Science and art share little in common. Even within a single culture, try as we might, art styles often refuse to fall neatly into genus and class. Cultural and art taxonomies instead reflect the divergences of

the associated traditions and the differing ways that related data are "read" by persons both inside and outside the culture.

This question of sign system taxonomy also is important in terms of how African art texts and collections historically have been structured. The African art system of classification which is now generally accepted as standard in the field "begins" in the Western Sudan, passes through the Guinea Coast, descends and crosses through Central Africa, and finally "terminates" in East and Southern Africa. In the course of the last forty years it is this order that has served as the primary organizing principle for African art in everything from catalogue writings, to exhibitions, to libraries, and even to some extent, to African art positioning in private collections. This order is for historic and other reasons an intriguing one.

The roots of this sign system taxonomy are firmly planted in the first major survey of African art, Eckart von Sydow's *Handbuch der afrikanischen Plastik* of 1930. This survey of African sculpture begins in Senegambia and moves on through Bissago, the southern coast (Baga etc.), Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ivory Coast, Gold Coast, and so forth to Cameroon, French Equatorial Africa, Belgian Congo, and Angola. One follows in von Sydow's text the same travel itinerary of the early Portuguese explorers, sailing around the continent from Europe to the Far East, stopping in at various ports of call, and never really penetrating into the interior, at least not for very long. In the slightly later surveys of James J. Sweeney (1935) and Carl Kjersmeier (1935) the same organizing principles are at play. Like the text of von Sydow, both Sweeney and Kjersmeier follow an order which is clearly Europe proxemic and colonially defined. Sweeney begins his classification in French Sudan, then moves to French Guinea, through each of the Guinea Coast colonies, then on to Gabon, French Congo, Belgian Congo, Angola, and British East Africa. Kjersmeier's division is also defined by colonial boundaries. His Volume I includes Soudan, Guinée, Côte d'Ivoire; Volume II addresses Guinée Portugaise, Sierra Leone/Liberia, Gold Coast, Nigeria, Dahomey, and Togo; Volume III includes the Belgian Congo. Both Sweeney and Kjersmeier in this way define each culture vis-à-vis its appropriate "colonizer".

For most African art historians today, this taxonomic system is used because it is there and it has come to be accepted. One knows that in any given text, Baule (in Ivory Coast) will follow Mende (in Sierra Leone) and precede Asante (in Ghana) as one follows an assumed eastward movement along the Guinea Coast. Variations of this Europe proxemic ordering of African art are employed in nearly every non-topically organized African art survey from the relatively

early work of Trowell (1954), Leuzinger (1960), Himmelheber (1960), Bascom (1967), and Fagg (1968), to the more recent studies of Bravmann (1970), Delange (1974), Bastin (1984), Roy (1985), and Vogel (1986).

Whatever the orientations of this and similar African art taxonomies, and despite their clearly non-African origins, in the course of time (and probably due largely to the factor of precedence) this order has come to be identified as delimiting viable style and culture areas. Through the years, accordingly, formal qualities have been attributed to the works of the various "style regions". While similarities do exist among some of the style areas, differences often are just as striking. In addition, the few similarities that do exist have encouraged many to reaffirm style area divisions even where they are not solidly grounded. In those cases (the Guinea Coast style area, for example) where the differences are greater than the similarities, the issue of a firm stylistic basis for this classification system is brought into serious question.

Art systems, as we have seen in this brief overview of African art taxonomies, show striking similarities with other systems of signs. One of the important issues of such taxonomies is that of indexical relationships inside and outside the classification frame; positioning, in other words, is key. Nelson Goodman in turn has astutely pointed out (1978: 57–70) with respect to twentieth–century art that it is not the question of "what" is art that is important but rather the real issue is "*when*" is art. As Goodman (1978) argues, the digging and filling in of a hold ordinarily is not considered to be an art–associated action, but *when* this action is prescribed by an artist (Claus Oldenberg, for example) to take place on a particular day behind the Metropolitan Museum, the nature of this act fundamentally changes and becomes one of artistic process. From the perspective of African art taxonomy it is apparent that an equally vital question is that of what art is *not*. How African art is defined (and not defined) vis-à-vis larger sign system taxonomies of art versus craft, primitive versus non-primitive labeling, presentation in natural history versus fine arts museums, and colonial definitions of internal style boundaries is fundamental to one's perception of these works. Such larger taxonomic questions with respect to African arts indeed are as important to how they are seen by Western viewers as are lighting, wall position, background color hues, label captions, and other material factors of their exposition. Only by seriously considering the *not* factor within sign system taxonomies can the underlying rationales of such classification forms be fully understood and evaluated.

NOTES

[1] See among others, Kant (1951), Hegel (1975), Tolstoy (1930), Dewey (1934), Collingwood (1938), Langer (1953), Merleau-Ponty (1964), and Danto (1964).

[2] Hierarchies in art were also delimited early on by Borghini (1584: I, 48) in Arghan (1959: 767).

[3] As Argan points out (1959: 768), "The final transition of *Kunst* from the idea of 'trade,' or *ars* in the Latin sense, to the modern meaning took place in the eighteenth century with Winckelmann, Lessing, Herder, and Goethe." For a more recent discussion of the distinction between craft and art see Collingwood (1938).

[4] Some of the comments of these various panelists are published in the summer of 1981 issue of *Craft International Magazine*. The participants included, in addition to myself, David Anton, Howard S. Becker, Tran Van Dinh, Lee Hall, James Houston, J. Stewart Johnson, and Cyril Stanley Smith.

[5] Interestingly, whereas in the social sciences, the term "hard" data is generally employed in reference to those things which are quantifiable, and the word "soft" designates qualitative forms of the same, for art it is the hard works that assume the *a priori* qualitative label. Standardly the soft arts are given the less prestigious quantitative tag (i.e., as craft). With respect to the issues of soft and hard, signifier and signified clearly have little cross-disciplinary consistency.

[6] See Argan (1959) for a further discussion of the etymological grounding of the term "art" in Europe and the changes in its meaning which have occurred in the course of time.

[7] For a discussion of the problems of hierarchy in iconographical studies see Blier [1988].

[8] The Batammaliba (Tamberma) Togo and Benin Republic employ the word *otammali* to mean architect. It means literally, "someone who constructed well out of earth" (Blier 1987: 19).

[9] For a fuller discussion of this subject see the articles of Rubin (1984) and Varnedoe (1984).

[10] See Rubin (1984) and Varnedoe (1984).

[11] Part of this section has been published previously in Blier (1987a).

[12] For a discussion of internal taxonomic systems see Blier (1987), especially Chapter III and the Conclusions.

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