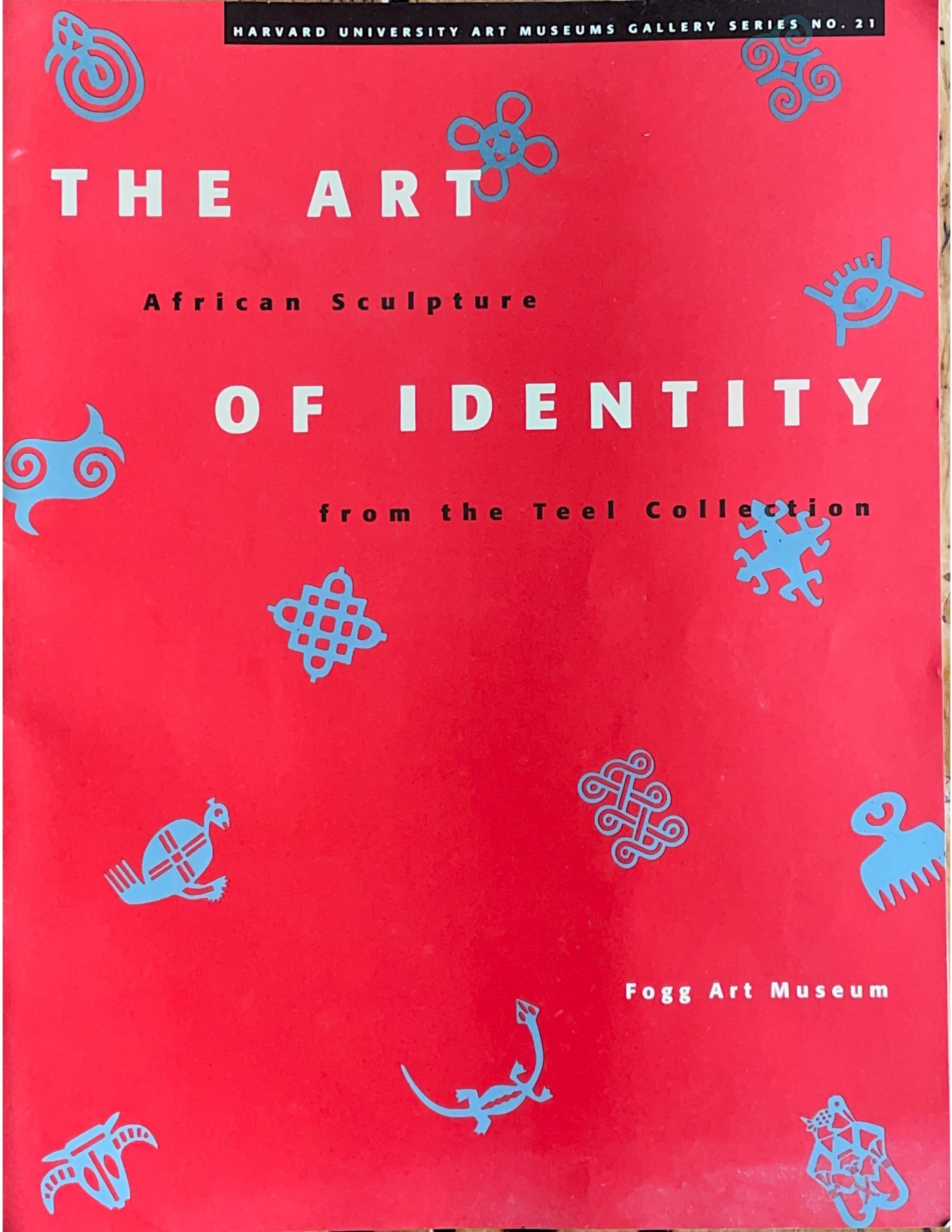
HARVARD UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUMS GALLERY SERIES NO. 21
THE ART
African Sculpture
OF IDENTITY
from the Teel Collection
Fogg Art Museum

A F R I C A

The Art of Identity and the Power of Objects

Aimée Bessire

Objects do not speak. We speak for them through text and explications in a polyphonic chorus of interpretations and intentions.[1]

Rachel Hoffman

In Africa as well as elsewhere, objects are ascribed meaning not only through the maker's intent but also through the viewer's interpretation. In this way, objects serve as markers of the many distinctive voices that articulate identity. *The Art of Identity: African Sculpture from the Teel Collection* illustrates the complexity of art traditions in Africa and offers the opportunity to examine these arts with respect to central aspects of selfhood, community, and nation that inform and reflect identity.

Through their varied aesthetics, symbolism, performance contexts, and ceremonial use, African arts stimulate a multiplicity of responses concerning individuality and definitions of community. The exhibition's themes—Masking, Gender, Community, Royalty and Politics, and Religion—all provide insight into some of the many facets of African art. In selecting the categories to illustrate different lenses of identity, we considered the ways in which meaning is encoded in objects, and how this meaning is then variously interpreted by individuals. The categories are not intended to limit the interpretations of the works, but rather to suggest some of the aspects of identity that can be recognized in a single art work. Any given object will "absorb" multiple narratives—a testimony to its ability to create a "polyphonic chorus of interpretations and intentions" for different people or cultures.[2]

Figure 1
Plank mask, Bwa, Burkina Faso
19th or 20th century
Wood, pigments
54 x 12 in.
Teel Collection

Masking

The personal articulation of the self is a lifelong process, always building on memory and the history of life events. We identify selfhood as much through recognition of who we are not as of who we are, by defining self in relation to other. Masking conceals the self (the performer) and presents another identity (the mask). This anonymity allows the masquerader to transcend individual identity by becoming another character. Masks portray identity in a variety of public and private contexts, including ceremonies to educate the audience about cultural history, tradition, and moral codes, to deflect community concerns, or to celebrate events related to membership associations. In Burkina Faso, for example, the distinctive public and private identities of a Bwa initiate are revealed through the complex aesthetic program of plank masks (fig. 1). Youths learn how the masks' patterns and shapes not only signify aspects of their cultural history, but also encode moral and social concerns. For the Bwa initiates, the masks represent part of their personal history and their acceptance into a larger community; they serve as a reminder of group identity as well as of the circumstances of transformation from the uninitiated ranks to full members. For those who are not members, the Bwa plank masks represent the privatized knowledge of the association, defining the initiate as an insider and reinforcing the outsider's position as external to the secret knowledge. Similarly for the Lega in Zaire, distinctive masks of the male and female Bwami association form part of the regalia that relates to the society's hierarchicy of membership (fig. 2). Each rank is connected with levels of knowledge and social con-

1. Rachel Hoffman, "Objects and Acts," *African Arts* 28, 3 (1995): 59.
2. Ibid.

cerns within the community. The Bwami mask associated with the Yananio, the second highest tier of the Bwami association, is worn during performances to symbolize the link between the living and the ancestors. This creates the identity of the performance, an identity that can be interpreted in various ways according to the privileges of knowledge within the association.

Identity within the Community

A deeper understanding of the community identity that is manifest in the arts of Africa distinguishes cross-cultural contact, history, and the presentation of self in relation to the community. It also reveals the communicative powers of the arts, which can be used as vehicles to project community concerns. Many arts are performed for the benefit of the community or for the education of uninitiated association members. Some performance arts are directly related to the education of new members and also serve to reinforce the identities of older members. Such arts are linked with knowledge within the community association and are considered powerful icons of membership status. In some cases an art object is regarded as a physical embodiment of the society's knowledge. For example, in speaking of Dogon masks such as the *Satimbe*, Rachel Hoffman asserted that "elders implied that in simply donning the carvings, the younger men would acquire power; they would absorb knowledge stored in the masks."[3] In this case, the masks themselves are believed to contain the wisdom of the society. In much the same way, Mmwo masks of the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria are worn in masquerades to celebrate and communicate community concerns such as motherhood, agriculture, and fertility. Intricate coiffures and iconographic elements as well as the complex appliquéd costumes are central to Mmwo masquerades that represent at once maiden spirits, the honored dead, and ideal physical and moral character. Such masquerades are said to reinforce community cohesion through the performance of shared concerns and beliefs.

FIGURE 2
Mask, Lega, Zaire
19th or 20th Century
Wood, kaolin, fiber
18 x 9 x 2 1/2 in.
Teel Collection

Gender Identity

Gender and gender difference are expressed through various African arts, such as masks, performance arts, and sculpture. Performances may display gender attributes to teach and entertain audiences; figural sculptures often emphasize gender in the course of honoring respected male or female ancestors or divinities. Male and female identity also are defined through membership in local and regional associations, such as the men's Poro association of the Senufo in Côte d'Ivoire and the women's Sande society in Sierra Leone and Liberia.

Women are often honored for their roles as mothers and supporters of life. The several Yoruba and Kongo mother and child figures in the exhibition exemplify this theme, an important metaphor for the central role of women as lineage founders and mothers of rulers. Female beauty is also idealized in certain art traditions, such as the Asante *Akua-ba* (fig. 3), with its ringed neck (denoting prosperity) and high, broad forehead, and Sande *sowei* masks with their sculptural expression of the ideal woman. For Mende and Vai women in Sierra Leone and Liberia, membership within the Sande association is an integral part of acceptance as a woman in society. The movement of the *sowei* performance exacts the grace and composure regarded as desirable in women, and the *sowei* mask represents female perfection and suggests to young initiates their role as women in society.[4] The mask displays such ideal features as a ringed neck, a small, pointed chin, a broad, high forehead, elaborate coiffure, and a deep blackness of color. In other arts, male identity and status are suggested not only through physical attributes, but also through scarification marks and symbolic references to male occupations such as hunting or the military. Leading Igbo community elders in Nigeria often purchased the rights to titles and wore distinctive *ichi* scarification marks on their forehead, as displayed in the standing Igbo figure and Ikenga sculpture in the Teel Collection. Such facial

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3. Ibid.

4. Ruth B. Phillips, *Representing Woman: Sande Masquerades of the Mende of Sierra Leone* (Los Angeles, 1996), 77.

FIGURE 3
Akua-ba figure, Asante, Ghana
19th or 20th century
Wood, beads
16 1/2 in.
Teel Collection

markings served as a status symbol and mark of identity among senior men within the community.

Royal and Political Identity

Royal and political arts reinforce hegemonic power and help to unify the populace under symbols of ruling authority. The arts associated with such power often emphasize royal identity through links to previous generations of kings, or status based on the symbolic and physical separation of the populace. Asante kings stored gold dust, gifts, and offerings for royal ancestors in vessels called *kuduo* (fig. 4). These were often kept near royal ancestral stools, reflecting their ritual importance, and were created by highly specialized artists who decorated the vessels with complex designs and proverbs relating to the kingdom. The *kuduo* in the exhibition is surmounted by a figural representation of a leopard attacking a goat, a reference to the power differences both within the kingdom (between the ruler and his subjects) and outside the kingdom (between the Asante and other kingdoms). The *kuduo* served as an important signifier of royalty and also had luxury status as the distinctive property of the king and ruling elite.

Many African arts also reflect political identity through references to colonialism and post-colonial life. The influence of early missionaries, traders, explorers, and colonial governments has had a lasting effect on the identity of African art. Response to colonial contact can be seen not only in style transformations and use of nonindigenous materials, but also through the appropriation of new symbols within indigenous art forms. The Yoruba veranda posts carved by Obembe Alaiye for the palace at Efon-Alaiye are emblematic of such a response. Posts were used to support the veranda roof of the palace and were visible to visitors to the inner courtyard. On one of these a woman with prominent breasts stands on top of a mother and child figure which, in turn, is positioned on top of a standing male figure with a rifle. Although some Yoruba palace veranda posts depict colonial figures with pith helmets, this figure's link to colonialism is his rifle, a powerful symbol of European contact and its consequences.

Religious Identity

The arts associated with Africa's various religious beliefs—with Christianity, Islam, and indigenous religious systems, all widely practiced—are as diverse as the voices of their practitioners. Individuals are reminded of their religious commitment and identity through arts that honor specific gods, spirits, or the memory of deceased relatives. For the Baule of Côte d'Ivoire, a *blolo bla* figure may be carved to honor one's spouse in the spirit world. If a person experiences problems, a diviner or traditional doctor may diagnose the cause to be the discontent of the spirit spouse. A figural representation of the spirit spouse is then carved in order to appease him or her and alleviate the trouble.

Power objects, so called because of their ability to empower and protect, are another genre of African art with religious significance. Within the historic belief systems of many African cultures (the Fon, Kongo, Songye, Teke, and Suku, to name a few), it is believed that one can be treated for an illness or protected from potential harm by using a figure that has been imbued with potent substances. For example, the Kongo culture of Zaire uses *Nkisi nkondi* figures in a variety of contexts—for treating illnesses, as protection against danger, as arbiters in judicial cases, and to seal agreements or pacts. Iron blades or nails are inserted into the *Nkisi nkondi* to activate the figure's power. Such figures, like those of the Songye, Teke, Suku, and Fon in the exhibition, are also used for healing and protection, and often include the insertion of herbal medicines and wrapping or

Figure 4
Kuduo vessel, Asante, Ghana
19th or 20th Century
Brass
9 1/2 x 5 3/4 x 5 3/4 in.
Teel Collection

binding with cloth, fibers, or other substances to increase the figure's power.

Many Voices, One Object

The categories of Masking, Gender, Community, Royalty and Politics, and Religion all help to define aspects of identity that are engendered in the African arts in the exhibition. However, these categories are neither rigid nor all-encompassing; rather, they are intended to suggest how African arts convey multivalency and evoke many possible interpretations. The Yoruba *edan* staffs of the Ogboni (Oshugbo) society provide an example of the way in which the various categories of identity overlap and are thoroughly interwoven (fig. 5). The *edan* staffs symbolize membership in the Ogboni (Oshugbo) association, a group of male and female elders (*ogbon* means "wisdom" in Yoruba) who are court ministers, judicial authorities, and religious practitioners, and who act as a counterbalance to the king's power. The society controls royal succession and funerary rites and can even dethrone the king. The *edan* staffs used by members represent the society's authority and reflect both royal and political identity. They are also worn or inserted into the ground to give protection and to aid in healing practices, and thus reflect a religious identity. The male and female pair connected by an iron chain on the staffs represent the gendered identities and shared authority of the society's elders. The figures' hands are held left fist over right, with thumbs hidden. This gesture is said to represent the prayer "may you live long and prosper," and may also reflect the importance of ritual power (left) over physical power (right), given the role of the Ogboni (Oshugbo) elders in balancing the interests of the king.[5]

The edan staffs and all the art objects on view provoke a multiplicity of responses and bear multiple meanings. Those meanings are specific to the works' original context, where viewers might interpret them in a variety of ways according to their status, gender, position within the community, and religious affiliation. When the works are placed in the museum setting, it is even more important to recognize their significance in their original context. This exhibition is intended to provide information about that context.

Of course, in our own context as museum visitors we each bring interpretations to the objects, whether it be an aesthetic response, a cultural understanding, religious or gender identification, or even memory of travel to Africa. These parts of our identity shape our response to the objects and determine how we interpret the arts of Africa in this exhibition.

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5. Henry John Drewal and John Pemberton III with Rowland Abiodun, *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought*, exh. cat., The Center for African Art, Allen Wardwell, ed. (New York, 1989), 140.

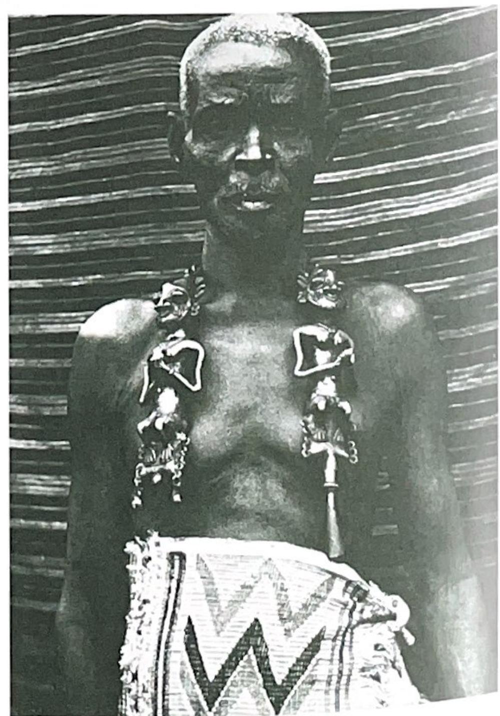

Figure 5
An official of the Ogboni (Oshugbo) society wearing an *edan* staff pair.
Photograph by William Fagg, 1950. Courtesy of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland.

Perceptions and Misperceptions: The Identity of African Art

Suzanne Preston Blier

The art of identity, specifically as it relates to African art, is a subject of critical importance with respect both to the artists and audiences who first created and viewed these arts and to the specific context of their current exhibition. In the same way that who or what is represented in African art (and how, when, where, and why) has long challenged scholars and admirers of these works, so too have larger taxonomic issues of African art's identity with respect to other world arts. Historically African art found its way into natural history or science museums in Europe and America long before it was regarded as acceptable to collect and exhibit these works in museums dedicated to art. Indeed, until recently, often the best (and in some settings the only) collections of African art open to public were those specializing in anthropological and natural science collections.

How we see these arts, indeed, is defined as much by their perceived identity as "art" versus artifact as by the unique aesthetic qualities of the work themselves. Similar classificatory concerns and terminologies also influence the ways African arts are positioned within the discipline of art history more generally. The acceptance of African art as "art" (as works of creative individuals and complex civilizations with ongoing art histories) is a critical step in the changing identity of these works as art.

Mythic Identity: The Enduring Trope (Misnomer/Misconception) of the "Primitive"

Like the question of African art's position in "fine arts" versus "natural history" museums, the label "primitive art" (which until all too recently was often incorrectly employed for African art) is also a modern invention with fundamentally problematic significance for African art identity. Derived from the latin *primus*, meaning "first" or "prior," the term "primitive" has been used historically to define things that are either early or ancient, or which possess characteristics of simplicity or roughness associated with earlier forms. General usage often equates things defined as "primitive" with being inferior and/or archaic, as in primitive housing, plumbing, or motor skills.

If in the nineteenth century the term "primitive art" referred primarily to arts of earlier European eras—Flemish and Italian most prominently—it was because these works did not conform to the established Renaissance aesthetic canons. At the turn of the century, the label "primitive art" was expanded to also encompass a host of other European and non-European traditions, including Romanesque, Byzantine, Iberian, folk, Persian, Egyptian, Pre-Columbian, Cambodian, Peruvian, Japanese, Oceanic, African, and Native American, to name a few.

The only unifying thread between these disparate arts was their perceived deviance from Western Renaissance values. Accordingly, as these areas or periods gained stature and defenders, each was removed from the "primitive art" typology. By the 1920s, the term "primitive art" 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. However, the pejorative sense of the term remained, and to some extent became even stronger, for by this time the category of "primitive art" also was seen to include the arts of children and the mentally ill.

Form versus Function: Dichotomizing Artistic Aims

Today we tend to classify/define "art" as something of beauty, or at least visual power, devoid of function. We should nonetheless bear in mind that early as well as later European religious and political arts—to say nothing of modern architectural works expressing the value that "form should follow function"—would have to be expunged from a strict "arts for art's sake" canon by this definition. In examining this issue it is important to also look at earlier European notions of art where, up until the fifteenth century, the term "art" referred primarily to the idea of practical skill.

Before the Renaissance in Europe, there were no qualitative, functional, or material distinctions made between art and craft. The Latin root *ars* has its source in the word *artus*, meaning to join or fit together. Both the Italian word *arte* and the German *kunst* were associated with the idea of practical activity, trade, and know-how (*kunst* has its etymological source in the verb *konnen*, "to know"). Hierarchies in the arts—defined often by seemingly arbitrary qualities such as the perceived lack of function—only came into prominence in the West in the later period. In Africa as in pre-Renaissance Europe, 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

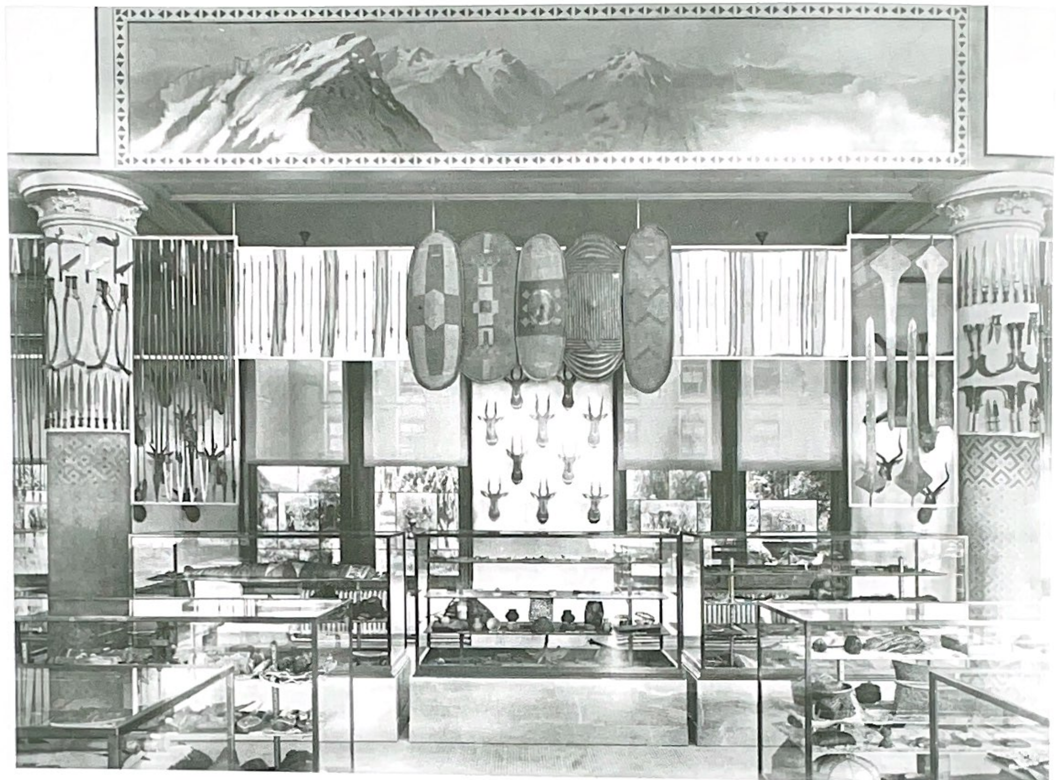

FIGURE 6
Installation photograph of African Hall, American Museum of Natural History, New York, 1910. The display was organized geographically and mixed ethnographic objects with zoological examples. Courtesy American Museum of Natural History.

inherent characteristics. The Fon of the Republic of Benin use the word *alonuzo* ("something made by hand") to designate art. The nearby Ewe of Togo use *adanu* (from the term for accomplishment, skill, and value) to denote at once art, technique, and ornamentation.

Definitions of Africa from the Outside

Linked to related emphasis on the purported "tribal" roots of African art are a range of problematic assumptions about African art as timeless, traditional, and more socially bounded than individually oriented. Notions of identity in this context also influence the way African art is categorized and "fit" into the larger corpus of works within the continent.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, European writings described Africa as a place of powerful kings and lavish courts. At the brink of the colonial period in the second half of the nineteenth century, however, the continent came to be looked on far less favorably. At the conclusion of the colonial conquest period, in maps, scholarly texts, and exhibitions, Africa was redefined as a place primarily of discrete "tribal" entities who were assumed to lack sophisticated political and economic institutions. Works of African art were generally categorized as "tribal" artifacts. If today scholars no longer use the term "tribe" in discussions of Africa's cultures and arts, this is so not only because it is a highly negative term, which one would not use in Western contexts (today one would not speak of the Scottish or Irish as members of a tribe, for example), but also because the notion of tribe carries with it ideas of hermetically sealed stylistic borders within which little, if anything, changes over time. This notion of each culture having its own distinctive (and monolithic) style runs counter to scholarly views of Africa, its cultures, its histories, and its arts.

In the course of the various discussions and displays of African art in the West, these works have been reframed in ways that lie outside of their African contexts. Scholarship in recent years has attempted to correct some of these misunderstandings. This exhibition represents one such reevaluation, by examining the diverse identities of the works.

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The Museum, Art History, and The Collection

Mark H. C. Bessire

We can once again declare that the Museum makes its "mark," imposes its "frame" (physical and moral) on everything that is exhibited in it, in a deep and indelible way.

Daniel Buren
contemporary artist
Function of the Museum, 1970

This exhibition marks an important moment for the Fogg Museum and parallels a recent shift in the place of African art in academic art history and in museums. Even as African art is finally being acknowledged and accepted into the canons of art history, its inclusion in art museums is expanding museum audiences and transforming the museum's very identity. The growth of this mutual influence of the art and the context in which it is presented can be traced by looking at the history of the Fogg's involvement with African art, and at the development of the presentation of African art in American and European art museums (fig. 6).

African Art at the Fogg Museum and in the 1930s

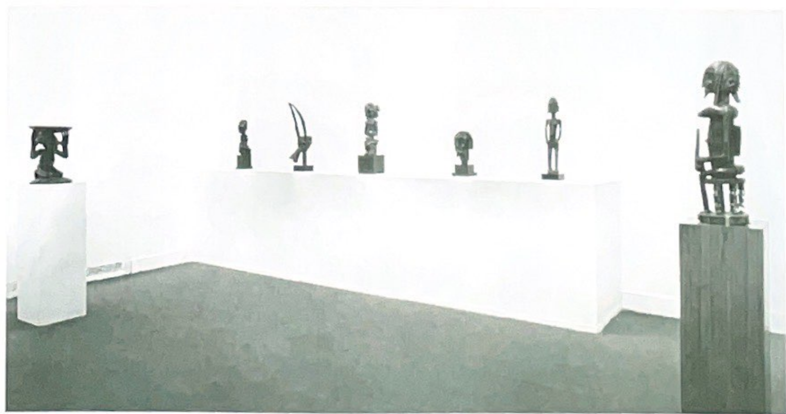
African art was first displayed at the Fogg Museum in 1934, in an exhibition of African and Oceanic works from the collection of Harvard's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. Two Harvard graduate students in fine arts (art history) organized the exhibition under the auspices of Professor and Fogg Associate Director Paul Sachs's famous "Museum Course," along with two Museum staff members. Under Sachs's guidance many Harvard graduate students learned the arts of connoisseurship and curating. Today, however, the preeminence of connoisseurship within museum studies and art history has waned in favor of broader, more theoretical and contextual approaches exemplified in the current exhibition *The Art of Identity: African Sculpture from the Teel Collection*. Thus the fact that the 1934 exhibition took place in the Fogg and not the Peabody Museum—which collected African works—was especially noteworthy. The objects were removed from public view in the Peabody to accommodate the Fogg exhibition, a decision that influenced the work's reception and helped to define the sharp delineations between the academic and aesthetic goals of Harvard's museum of archaeology and ethnology and its art museum. The exhibit was a curatorial exercise in connoisseurship, and the budding fine art connoisseurs chose objects for their artistic qualities, not for their importance as objects of African origin. In explanation of their curatorial aims, members of Sachs's class wrote:

> In preparing this exhibition the objects have been selected primarily on the basis of aesthetic merit. At the same time we have included in what is primarily an art exhibition the maps, photographs and brief ethnological sketches of the cultures represented by the objects, for it is only in observing the objects in a proper sequence and surrounded by the other expressions of the spirit which produced them that we can reach a real comprehension of the aims and aspirations of these workmen ... in dealing with the arts of African and Oceanic tribes we must admit that we are facing great cultural streams possessed of their own canons and aesthetic standards which we can not honestly introduce into our alien life as cult, but fairly judge as the separate manifestation of a separate way of life which we will be richer for having understood.[1]

There is no doubt that, as the exhibition's title—*Oceanic and African Art*—indicates, these progressive students considered the works to be "fine art," at least during their Fogg venue. The curators often used ethnological as well as Western-conceived terms like *primitivism* in formulating their discussion of African art around qualities of connoisseurship such as aesthetics, rareness, and materials. The early controversy over whether African art was indeed art, was part of that discussion:

> African art in particular has been the victim of diverse circumstances. It has never had critical consideration of its artistic excellence combined with a solid background of ethnological knowledge, which is the true basis for the deepest artistic understanding.[2]

FIGURE 7
Installation photograph of *African Negro Art*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1935.Courtesy of Museum of Modern Art, New York



1. Harriet Hammond, Jean Reid, Frederick Grace, and Frederick R. Pleasants, *Oceanic and African Art*, exh. cat., Fogg Museum of Art (Cambridge, 1934), 5.
2. Ibid.

FIGURE 8
Installation photograph of *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, Museum of Modern Art, 19 September 1984 – 15 January 1985. Courtesy Museum of Modern Art, New York.

The audience could perceive the objects as art because the curators were willing to expand their definitions of art and presented the objects with background materials to support their entrance into the unfamiliar territory of the art museum.

The Fogg exhibit preceded by a year the first major exhibition of African art in the United States, *African Negro Art*, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (fig. 7). The museum's director, James Sweeney, took a stronger connoisseur and "art for art's sake" position when he wrote in the catalogue introduction, "The art of Negro Africa is a sculptor's art. As a sculptural tradition in the last century it has no rival. It is as sculpture we should approach it."[3] In contrast, history and context, which Sweeney dismissed in favor of a fine art approach, had been embraced by the students of Paul Sachs as integral to the full identity and aesthetic of African art.

In 1937 the Fogg sponsored its second African art exhibition, *Sculpture from the Kingdom of Benin, West Africa* (fig. 8). Thirty-four works loaned from the collection of Dr. Louis Carre and twelve from the Peabody were complemented by works from the collections of Mr. Edsel B. Ford, Mrs. Alfred Tozzer, Mrs. Edward S. Harkness, the Albright Art Gallery (Buffalo), and the Fogg Museum (a 1937 gift of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr.). Quoted in a contemporary review, Roger Gilman, editor of the Museum's *Bulletin*, said of Benin art: "This is an intelligible art. It is secular, in contrast to the mystical fetishes and symbols of other African regions. Its conventions are simple, in contrast to the wild distortions and uncompromising angles of what is usually exhibited as 'negro art.'"[4] This "intelligibility" and an attraction to bronze caused early European and American collectors of African art to gravitate toward the art of the Kingdom of Benin. These works were also readily available in the art market, as the British sold many bronzes taken during their 1897 Punitive Expedition against the kingdom. The only work from the 1937 exhibition to enter the Fogg collection was the bronze *Portrait Head of a Princess* (1937.38), donated by Mrs. Rockefeller just before the exhibition opened.

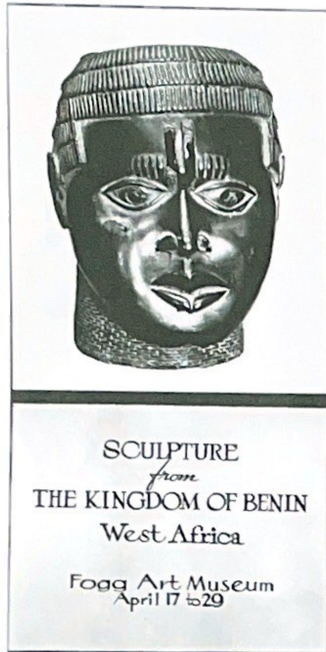
The 1930s were an active decade in general for the display and exposure of African art, beginning with the influential and now controversial African Pavilions of the Paris Exposition Coloniale, organized by the French colonial governments in 1931 and 1932. In different ways the Fogg Museum and the Museum of Modern Art in New York acknowledged the artistic quality of the arts of Africa and helped initiate the shift from displaying objects in the non-art setting of the museum of natural history to showing them in the Western art-historical context of the art museums. Yet university art history departments did not follow the art museums' lead, which is partly why, sixty years later, the arts of Africa are still unfamiliar to many American audiences and art historians. It could also explain why there are few private collections of African art as important as the Teel Collection, which is destined to become a key component of the great encyclopedic permanent collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Museum Politics and Contextualization

If the discussion of where and how African art fits into academic art history and museum practice had a pivotal moment, it was probably the Museum of Modern Art in New York's 1984 exhibition *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, regarded today as a watershed of museological discourse. The exhibition and the critical response it provoked has influenced museum display and illuminated the intellectual cost of cultural imperialism.[5] In *The Predicament of Culture* (1988), James Clifford questioned "collecting and

3. James Johnson Sweeney, ed., *African Negro Art*, exh. cat., Museum of Modern Art (New York, 1935), 21.4. *Boston Sunday Post*, 17 April 1937.

4. *Boston Sunday Post*, 17 April 1937.



authenticating practices in contemporary settings" and cited the example of the controversy surrounding the Museum of Modern Art over the relations between "tribal" and "modern" art (fig. 9).[6] Critics of the exhibition questioned the curatorial manipulation of African objects to justify a modernist reading of the influence of "tribal" art on such early modernist artists as Pablo Picasso and Alberto Giacometti. Although the curators included educational material on the European and American works in the exhibition, they provided minimal information on the African art, which thus appeared to play only a subordinate chronological and aesthetic role. This overaestheticized, decontextualized approach negated the history, context, and identity of the African objects.

Another significant exhibition, *Art/artifact*, was presented in 1988 by Susan Vogel and the Center for African Art, now the Museum for African Art, New York. By making the museum display of art its focus, this exhibition attempted to show how display can affect a viewer's museum experience of and contact with objects from another culture. The Center recreated examples of display settings that have been used since the mid-nineteenth century for African art in European and American private collections and institutions, including the curio cabinet, the commercial gallery, the early ethnographic museum, and the modern art museum. This concrete, physical presentation exposed the crucial role of display, and the way in which its style can influence the viewer's relationship to the exhibited object.

In its focus on the history of display, *Art/artifact* also highlighted differing exhibition agendas of art museums, museums of natural history, private collections, and commercial galleries. For example, many natural history museum exhibitions have begun to examine the problematic relationships between imperialism, colonialism, and collecting African art, but they have not had to face the issue of *fine art*, which is a basic consideration for an art museum such as the Fogg. A recent exhibition sponsored by London's Royal Academy of Art, *Africa: The Art of a Continent*, demonstrated that questions of how to exhibit art from African or "other" cultures in Western art museums are still far from being resolved. The curators' aim was to produce a blockbuster show, organized according to geography, that emphasized the aesthetic diversity of African art. Providing only minimal wall labels, the exhibition offered viewers an aesthetic experience in the hopes of positing the objects as genuine works of art "equal in aesthetic quality to Western artwork[s]."[7] Not only does seeking to assert the African works' "equality" appear patronizing, but depriving them of the historical and cultural context that gives them meaning puts them at a disadvantage in the unfamiliar setting of the Western art museum.

FIGURE 9
Invitation to Fogg Museum exhibition *Sculpture from the Kingdom of Benin, West Africa*, 1937. Photo: Harvard University Art Museums Archives.

FIGURE 10
Installation photograph of *The Art of Identity: African Sculpture from the Teel Collection*, 1997. Comparison of a Luba and Songye Kifwebe association mask. Photo by Carolann Barrett.

5. The objects themselves were in part overshadowed by the art community's criticism. The exhibition was also a missed opportunity to use such a powerful collection to discuss critical issues concerning contextualization and early modernist appropriation. However, by showing the works in a modern or "high" art museum, the exhibition substantially expanded the reach of African art.

6. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), 12.

7. Tom Phillips, curator of the exhibition, quoted in Steven Vincent, "Out of Africa," *Art & Auction* (May 1996): 123.

African Art Returns to the Fogg Museum

For the *Art of Identity* exhibition we chose the theme of identity and made curatorial decisions based on aesthetics and on the relationship of the works of art to the theme (fig. 10).[8] The categories of Masking, Gender, Community, Royalty and Politics, and Religion were then gleaned from the objects chosen from the Teel Collection, giving depth to the many manifestations of identity within the collection. The gallery was designed to offer information (content and context) on the art, including, when possible, in situ photographs of like objects. In this way we acknowledge the complementary relationship between context, content, and aesthetics which recognizes that the museum is not the arena originally intended for the objects. This methodology and exhibition style attempts to identify the consequences of shifting the display from natural history museums to art museums. Thus *The Art of Identity* demonstrates that an art museum presents African art most effectively when it acknowledges the multiple identities of the art and does not attempt to veil the subjective curatorial voice through art museum constructs. The exhibition also relates to the Fogg's long-standing identity as a teaching museum; in fact, the Museum was partly inspired to exhibit African art by the appointment of Suzanne Blier as the first historian of African art in Harvard's Department of Fine Arts, which will soon graduate its first Ph.D. in African art history.

The art historian Benjamin Buchloh has described the art museum as a "social institution that transforms the primary language of art into the secondary language of culture."[9] In choosing the Fogg Art Museum as the venue for the Teel Collection exhibition—rather than the Peabody Museum, where African art has historically been collected and displayed at Harvard—we change the culture of the exhibition. The Fogg setting sanctions the collection as important art; at the same time, the collection legitimizes the Museum's acceptance of African cultural objects as art, and claims the place of African art in the canons of art history.

Mark H. C. Bessire was a 1996 Fulbright Fellow in Tanzania, where he researched African museums and indigenous collections of objects.

8. This is not the first African art exhibition at Harvard based on a scholarly theme. In 1982 Monni Adams, who taught African art in conjunction with a shared appointment with the Fine Arts and Anthropology Departments, broke new ground at Harvard's Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts with the exhibition *Design for Living: Symbolic Communications in African Art.*
9. A.A. Bronson and Peggy Gale, "The Museum Fictions of Marcel Broadthaers," *Museums by Artists*, ed. Benjamin Buchloh (Toronto, 1983), 48

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SYMBOLS FROM THE EXHIBITION

For the Asante culture, this emblem symbolizes aspects of the universe. It is said to combine the rays of the sun, the double crescent moon and the Asante stool, an icon of the chiefdom.

Called *duafe* in the Akan language (Ghana), this symbol is said to represent the qualities of women and ideal beauty.

The chameleon is regarded in many African cultures as having special powers because of its ability to transform itself to conform to different environments.

This symbol, called *dweninimu aben* in the Akan language, recalls the horns of a ram and the proverb, "The ram, while slow to anger, is unstoppable when riled up."

The coiled snake is said to represent the python, an iconically powerful snake in Benin culture (Nigeria) because of its ability to move between earthly realms, from water to land.

This symbol is called *gyawn atiko* in the Akan language and is said to be a sign of courage and determination.

This Akan emblem represents two crocodiles sharing the same stomach, a symbol of unity among individuals and communities.

This symbol has been interpreted as a visual representation of *sunsun* or "soul" in the Akan language (Ghana). In Akan belief systems, the soul is regarded as the inner life force of an individual.

Certain birds are regarded as symbolic of the powers of diviners and sorcerers to see into another realm. The Yoruba (Nigeria) word for mystically powerful women is *eleye*, which can be translated as "owners of birds."

The ram is a symbol of leadership in many African cultures. The ram's ability to fight bravely and to defend himself makes this a powerful figure.

There are many interlace designs in Africa found on objects associated with leaders. Such designs have been interpreted variously as the intertwined snake, the twisting and turning of two forces, and the interrelationship of two individuals or communities.

This image of a man with fish-form legs is seen often in Yoruba and Benin arts and has been interpreted as the image of a king.

Interlace designs in Africa have been interpreted as having many different meanings but are often associated with figures of political authority.

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