



Article: From delicious to not quite right: Subtleties in discerning the authenticity of African art

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FROM DELICIOUS TO NOT QUITE RIGHT: SUBTLETIES IN DISCERNING THE AUTHENTICITY OF AFRICAN ART

Stephen Mellor

Abstract

The nature of African art – its intended use, its intrinsic value within its culture of manufacture, its interpretation as ‘genuine’ by Western definitions, its route from maker, through runner and dealer, to collector, the impact of colonialism – can make declarations of authenticity complex. “Made and used within a traditional cultural group” and “void of the intent to deceive” are long-standing parameters for authenticity. However, nuances in form and condition that reflect cultural dynamics and collection history need to be considered, as well.

This paper discusses the formation of collections that can be referenced for provenance and pedigree information, reviews, by example, the limitations of traditional definitions of authenticity, and presents categories of conditions that are assessed to aid in determining the location of an African object on the authenticity continuum.

Introduction

The general subject of authenticity of African art is infrequently addressed, just as the subject of connoisseurship of African art is frequently avoided in museum exhibitions. One exception is the recent exhibition *Object lessons: Authenticity in African Art* (October 26, 2006 – June 3, 2007) at the Kent State University Museum. Innovative exhibitions such as *ART/Artifact* (January 27 – April 17, 1988) at the Museum for African Art in New York present a variety of ways to interpret African art, from perspectives ranging from that of the art historian to that of the anthropologist, which can affect the perception of authenticity (Vogel 1988). In addition, current authors challenge the oversimplification of theories of authenticity as presented in earlier literature (Kasfir 1992; Steiner 1994). Articles relaying the results of scientific analysis can be found in the literature, including studies that pertain to individual icons of African art, such as the Ife Olokun head (Fagg and Underwood 1949); corpuses of African material culture that exemplify the aesthetic and early technological sophistication of art production in Africa, such as Benin bronzes (Willet and Sayre 2006; Hornbeck 1998); and those that aid in the validation of authenticity for highly valued, yet unscientifically excavated archaeological objects such as Nok terracottas (Rasmussen 2006).

This avoidance of the general subject of the authenticity of African art is understandable considering the complexity and subjectivity of the topic, as well as the difficulty inherent in distilling a topic ripe with nuances, conflicting interpretations and vast amounts of scholarly research into a manageable presentation to the general public.

Determining the authenticity of African art is a particular challenge because much of the material is without clear provenance, cultural association, or collection history. In addition, the material

can be foreign except to fieldworkers and even then, external influences and the changes in cultural systems that likely influence art production may be undocumented. Associatively, a clear definition of authenticity is elusive due to the functional nature of African art and material culture, the use of diverse and newly acquirable materials, and the pervasive influences of market demand. And, of course, a thriving industry based on deliberate deception of the unwary consumer exacerbates the authenticity challenges.

Instead, the curator is more likely to formulate an exhibition which tells a unique and thoroughly researched story about indigenous aesthetics, authority and social control, religion, cultural change and dynamics or the like, and the exhibition highlights significant objects that are relevant to that story. The viewer is then free to assume that the objects on exhibition are authentic, garner pertinent data, maybe even a ‘circa’ date of manufacture, from the label copy and go about digesting a story about humankind as told through art.

This assumption of authenticity is not unreasonable because it is likely that curators, conservators, and scientists have already pooled considerable knowledge and resources to make that determination. In fact, the topic of authenticity of African art is considered, virtually on a daily basis, in institutions that acquire and exhibit this material. Of course decisions may change, the interpretation of formal characteristics or condition may evolve, and new historical information may come to light, but the following facts and types of information are to be considered when exploring the broad subject of the authenticity of African art.

Known Provenance and Collecting History

Colonialism left an indelible mark on Africa; however, this period produced the world’s great repositories of African art and material culture. These institutions include: the Royal Museum for Central Africa (Fig. 1) in Tervuren , Belgium, founded in 1897. Its collections contain material from the Kongo, Kuba, Chokwe and other cultural groups in what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo; the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden, Netherlands, initially established when King Willem I’s Cabinet of Curiosities was combined with the von Siebold collection and shown to the public in 1830 (Dongen 1987). Its collections include material from both West and Central Africa; and the Musée du Quai Branly which opened in Paris in 2006 and combines the extensive ethnographic collections of the Musée de l’Homme and the Musée des Arts d’Afrique et d’Océanien. Its collections contain material from North Africa, much of sub-Saharan Africa and Madagascar. Some of these early establishments began acquiring objects of curiosity from Africa to promote what were touted as trade and economic opportunities. They later evolved into scientific institutions which aggressively acquired African material to support comparative studies in anthropology and the natural sciences; they remain as research centers today (Verswijver 1995).



Figure 1. Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium. Photograph by Steve Mellor.

Objects in these early repositories are frequently accompanied by extensive written and photographic documentation regarding provenance, cultural use, and method of collecting, all of which can help to illuminate an indigenous perspective on form, aesthetic canons, use patterns, and importance of the object itself. These collections are frequently used as a database both for identifying objects and addressing authenticity issues for African objects that do not have clear cultural associations. It is common for museum curators to reference known pieces in these collections when considering the acquisition of a similar piece.

Similarly, early collections formed by ethnographers and missionaries contain objects that can be used for comparative purposes when addressing authenticity questions for unprovenanced material. For example, the Congo Expedition of 1909, sponsored by the American Museum of Natural History, was led by Herbert Lang and James Chapin. In 1915, they returned to New York with 4000 objects and 10,000 photographs from what was then known as the Belgian Congo, providing evidence of the breadth of art and technology in Africa. This material was exhibited and published for the first time in 1990 (Schildkrout and Keim 1990). Emil Torday, the Hungarian ethnologist, can be seen as a pioneer in the establishment of anthropology as a viable discipline. Rather than promoting the Victorian conceits of social evolution, Torday's collection, made in the first decade of the 20th century, was intended to create an objective and documentary record of the people in the Congo State. His collection of over 3,000 objects in the British Museum is unparalleled (Mack 1990).

Missionaries in Africa are often credited with the wanton destruction of indigenous religious sculptures in their attempts to convert Africans to Christianity. However, confiscated material was, on occasion, sent to missionary headquarters (Fig. 2). A recent article in *African Arts* (Hart 2006), notes a missionary's use of collected 'idols' to reinforce the importance of missionary work in Africa.



Figure 2. Initiation wall panels, Nkanu peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo (NMAfA 99-2-1). Originally collected by the White Fathers Missionary Society, Belgium. Photo by Franko Khoury.

In addition, as in any field of art, there are benchmarks in western collecting history that provide a certain kind of pedigree for some African objects and thus answer some questions of authenticity. Often cited is the landmark 1935 exhibition *African Negro Art* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (Sweeney 1935; Fig. 3). This is not the first time that African material was exhibited in the United States; however, it is the first time that it was exhibited without context and in a major art museum – beginning exhibition controversies that continue to this day. From pre-installation photographs and the associated portfolio of 477 individual images created by the photographer, Walker Evans, a corpus of objects considered both genuine and significant for the period can be identified (Evans 1935). The pedigree of many objects in this exhibition is further substantiated by the fact that many were on loan from the influential European dealers Charles Ratton and Paul Guillaume Rubin 1984. Some objects known to have been in the collections of these dealers and from other collections in Paris in the 1920's and 1930's still retain mounts presumably made by a Japanese mount maker, called Inagaki. Inagaki's work is undocumented, though his chop mark on the bottom of mounts has been identified by collectors and referenced in auction catalogues for decades contributing an acknowledged, but curiously unsubstantiated pedigree.



Figure 3. Exhibition catalog, African Negro Art exhibition, Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York 1935.

Established private collections can also give context to African art objects. For example, Helena Rubinstein, of cosmetic fame, began collecting African art before World War I and her collection was dispersed at auction in 1966 (Parke-Bernet 1966). Objects that Madame Rubinstein purchased for modest sums in the early 20th century continue to set auction records today (Fig. 4). Katherine White, the sewing machine heiress, formed one of the finest collections of African art in the United States, second only to the Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection at the Metropolitan Museum in New York (Newton 1978). She donated her collection to the Seattle Art Museum in 1981 (Seattle Art Museum 1984). Paul Tishman, a New York realtor, formed an authoritative collection of African art which was acquired by the Walt Disney Corporation in 1984 (Vogel 1981). Disney intended to install the Tishman collection in an Africa pavilion at Epcot Center in Florida. However, the pavilion was never built and the Disney-Tishman collection was donated to the National Museum of African Art in 2005 (Fig. 5; Kreamer 2007).



Figure 4. Heddle pulley, Baule peoples, Côte d'Ivoire (NMAfA 96-7-1). Ex-coll. Helena Rubinstein. Photograph by Franko Khoury.



Figure 5. *African Vision: The Walt Disney-Tishman African Art Collection*. Exhibition at the National Museum of African Art, Washington, D.C., 2-15-07 to 9-8-08. Photograph by Franko Khoury.

These kinds of exhibitions and collections were assembled under the knowledgeable advice of prevailing scholars of the times, and consequently contain objects that are considered icons of African art and authenticity. Objects in these collections, and the information about them garnered by researchers from a wide variety of sources, are frequently used for comparative purposes to elucidate the authenticity of similar pieces. One such scholar, Dr. Roy Sieber, received the first PhD in African art history in 1954 from the University of Iowa and subsequently trained generations of African art historians. Dr. Sieber would on occasion refer to a piece with unquestionable characteristics as ‘delicious’ (Sieber 1989).

Literature and Definitions

The subject of authenticity in African art is discussed comprehensively in a 1976 article in *African Arts* magazine (*African Arts* 1976). In this article, more than two dozen scholars discuss their perspective on the subject and many cite work by Joseph Cornet, originally published as *Critique d’Authenticité et Art Nègre* (Cornet 1974), in which the author identifies three criteria for establishing the authenticity of African art. Naturally, in light of ensuing scholarship, Cornet’s work can be considered both dated and oversimplified. However, this work should be valued both as a culmination of the philosophy of collecting that preceded it and as a foundation to present the real complexities inherent in the authenticity of African art.



Cornet proposes that an object may be considered authentic when: it is created by a traditional artist; conforms to traditional forms, that is, exhibits meaningful canons that are recognized and accepted by individuals within a culture; and that it was created for a traditional purpose, or culturally used. From this definition one can proceed in a seemingly straightforward manner to look for the physical properties of authenticity: Is a Dogon figure modeled with the required reverent pose and iconography, and appropriately patinated indicating use on a shrine (Fig. 6)? Has a Kongo *nkisi* been sufficiently angered by the nails driven into his torso or provided with sufficient amulets to enforce a community based oath (Fig. 7)? Does the wear and multiple repaintings on an Olojo-Foforo mask indicate acceptance and continuous use among the Yoruba people (Fig. 8)?

Figure 6. Female figure, Dogon peoples, Mali (NMAfA 2005-6-41). Photograph by Franko Khoury.



Figure 7. Male *nkisi* figure, Kongo peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo (NMAfA 91-22-1). Photograph by Franko Khoury.



Figure 8. Oloju foforo mask, Yoruba peoples, Nigeria (NMAfA 94-12-1). Photograph by Franko Khoury.

Today, it can be seen that Cornet's criteria provide a limited number of easily understood, but frequently difficult to identify, elements that may satisfy the layperson's inquiry regarding the authenticity of an African work of art. However, even a novice student of African art can immediately conjure images of objects that do not fit these criteria. One might ask: what about an object made by an artist in one cultural group but used by members of another group (Fig. 9); or an object made by an artist following accepted cultural canons, but sold before it is actually used (Fig. 10); or an object made after independence by a traditional artist using traditional methods but poorly manufactured to satisfy a Western perception of African technology (Fig. 11); or an object made in a traditional form and material but with European iconography specifically for European consumption (Fig. 12); or an object that was neither made within a cultural group, nor of traditional materials but is used and revered in a traditional context (Fig. 13); or an object, whose form is western but whose meaning has been transformed so that it becomes incorporated into a traditional culture (Fig. 14); or an object with clear cross-cultural attributes (Fig. 15)?



Figure 9. Throwing knife, Mangbetu peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo (NMAfA 80-21-35). Made by the Zande peoples. Significant to the Mangbetu both in its acquisition and the act of eventually gifting it away. Photograph by Franko Khoury.



Figure 10. Beer vessel, Chewa peoples, Malawi (NMAfA 87-2-1). The pristine post fired resin decoration indicates that the vessel was never used. Photograph by Franko Khoury.



Figure 11. Rooster (back), Benin Kingdom, Nigeria. Before 1914, when the brass casting guilds were under the authority of the Oba of Benin, poor castings would have been unacceptable; this post 1914 casting is offered to a Western market (www.Ebay.com).



Figure 12. Hunting horn, Bullom or Temne peoples, Sierra Leone (NMAfA 2005-6-9). Commissioned of traditional craftsmen by Prince Manuel I of Portugal as a royal gift to King Ferdinand V of Castile and Aragon, 15th century. Photograph by Franko Khoury.



Figure 13. Plastic Ibeji, Yoruba peoples, Nigeria. The traditional carved wooden Ibeji represents a deceased twin sibling and is fed, bathed, and cared for to placate the spirit. This plastic doll is a modern replacement (Cameron 1996). Photograph by Eliot Elisofon. Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, NMAfA.



Figure 14. Crucifix, Kongo peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo (NMAfA 2005-6-106). The Kongo people have adapted Christian iconography to represent the meeting of their physical and spirit worlds. Photograph by Franko Khoury.

Figure 15. Man's ensemble, Yoruba/Benin Kingdom, Nigeria (NMAfA 2004-10-34). Fabricated from traditional strip-woven cloth by the Yoruba, the red and white stripes are characteristic of Benin royal regalia. This ensemble was a gift from Queen Ohan Akanzua intended for a wedding in New York City. Photograph by Franko Khoury.



The objects illustrated exemplify this dizzying array of possible attribute permutations and similar examples have been found in the early ‘cabinets of curiosities’ formed by European royalty in the 17th century to actively growing collections in today’s institutions. In addition, the parameters for attributes that are to be considered when assessing authenticity can indeed shift, depending on the assessor’s perspective: an anthropologist might be looking at objects as evidence of cultural change, an art historian might be looking at objects as evidence of artistic creativity within culturally accepted canons, or a collector might be looking at an object as a sound investment.

In consequence, it is customary for scholars to view the authenticity of African art as a continuum. It might be said that those objects with clear and documented provenance, that easily fit Cornet’s criteria, even though particular tangible attributes are as yet unexplained and even non-tangible attributes are likely undeterminable, fall at one end of this continuum; that objects made, manipulated, or presented with the deliberate intention to deceive, though the actual inception of this intent may be difficult to identify, fall at the opposite end of the continuum; the bulk of the continuum remains for those objects that may carry additional indigenous, Western, cross-cultural, personal, social, or temporal information.

Other Considerations

To aid in placing an object in its rightful place along the authenticity continuum, or help determine when an object is, as the National Museum of African Art’s curator, Bryna Freyer would say: “...not quite right,” (Freyer 2005) there are object categories, conditions, and information that need to be considered. The conservator’s keen sense of observation and potential use of analytical techniques can be beneficial in these areas. Many of these topics are familiar to the conservator and have been addressed in greater detail in other forums. They are presented here both as a reminder and to acknowledge some potential pitfalls in the interpretation of available data.

Tourist art is a category that is usually dismissed by many collectors; however, recent scholarship addresses it in the context of contemporary art production (Vogel 1991). It has its place on the continuum. These objects are found at the airport gift shop, along the road between African villages, and at the local ethnic art shop. From an authenticity perspective, these objects are likely mass produced, in workshops far from their presumed place of origin, solely for the tourist trade.

As examples, in Fig. 16 the figure on the left exhibits the pose, hairstyle and culturally accepted canons of a Luba shrine figure; her companion has the facial characteristics, distended belly and un-formed lower section of a traditional Songye power figure. Though formally correct, they were purchased at a local flea market and lack additional details, as noted below, that allow them to be placed further along toward the authentic end of the continuum.



Figure 16. Examples of tourist art. Photograph by Franko Khoury.

In the absence of documented provenance information, objects are sometimes accompanied by adjectives or unsubstantiated associations that imply a false pedigree. ‘Rare’, ‘unique’, ‘imbued with ritual importance’, and ‘made for royal patronage’ are some buzz words that should trigger concern. The fact that the visual form of many African objects belies their true cultural function (a fly whisk might denote authority, a textile bundle might be used as currency) coupled with the collector’s unfamiliarity with such a wide range of object types and social customs make these false associations seem plausible. As an illustration, many African blacksmiths occupy a unique cultural niche due to the transformative nature of their work. Their products, even a simple hoe, can contain spiritual significance. Such simple, but significant hoes are used to fashion ceremonial staffs dedicated to the Yoruba deity, Orisha Oko (Picton in Vogel 1981 p.96; Fig. 17). However, in other circumstances, a hoe is simply an agricultural implement.



Figure 17. Staff and Sheath, Yoruba peoples, Nigeria (NMAfA 2005-6-71.1-2) Fabricated from agricultural hoes. Photograph by Franko Khoury.

The category of materials and techniques of manufacture presents numerous examples to assess authenticity. A straightforward example can be seen in the Dogon primordial ancestor figure. The Dogon are undoubtedly the most studied and written about people in Africa (Ezra 1988). Their traditional, wood funerary sculptures have historical and anthropological precedent and are familiar to Western audiences; a wood sculpture would be considered 'quite right.' Though similar in form, the ivory sculpture in Figure 18 is a cultural anomaly and should be considered a fake. Virtually all African objects made of wood, are monoxylous – that is, made from a single piece of wood. A Yaka figure appears 'quite right' in form and surface, but x-radiography (Fig. 19) reveals its joined construction; this culturally aberrant technique implies a fake. Materials analysis can be useful, but it is not always conclusive. The stone figure in the NMAfA collection shown in Figure 20, is reported to be from the site of Great Zimbabwe. It has been determined that the stone is a metamorphic garnet serpentinite which could have formed along the Great Rift Valley in East Africa, but the material is not the same soapstone used to fabricate the famous Great Zimbabwe birds which are of known provenance.



Figure 18. Dogon figure for sale on internet auction site (www.Ebay.com).

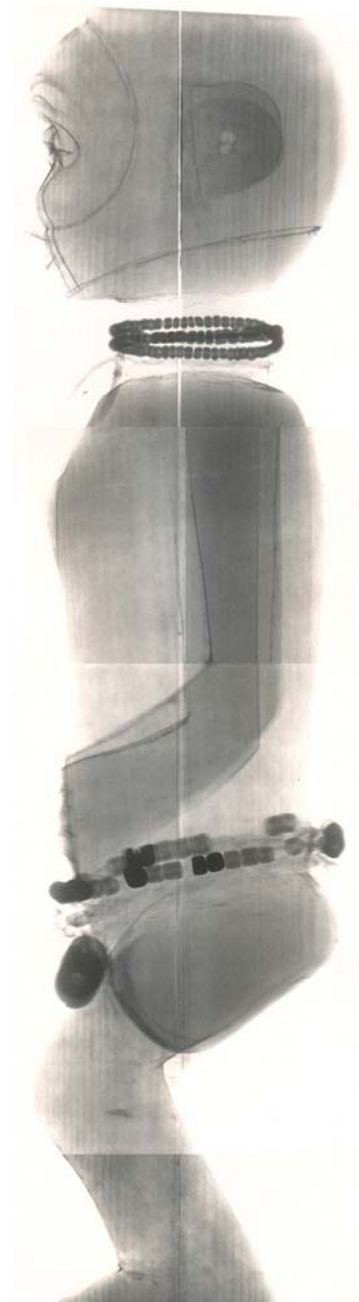


Figure 19. X-radiograph showing joined construction (NMAfA 90-1989-1). Photograph by Steve Mellor.



Figure 20. Figure, possibly Shona peoples, Zimbabwe (NMAfA 2005-6-119). Photograph by Franko Khoury.

Objects with formal characteristics that are anomalous to culturally accepted canons and aesthetics form a category that can be considered inauthentic: size and proportion are common mistakes. An informed stroll through any market selling African art will provide numerous examples. On figurative sculpture which has been deliberately faked, the wrong hairstyle, accessories that have been reversed from left to right, or distorted proportions may indicate that the object has been copied from a photograph of an authentic object. For example, it is likely that the *oshe Shango* in Figure 21 was copied from a photograph of the very well known object collected by Leon Underwood in Ogbomosh, Nigeria, in 1944 (Smithsonian Institution 1999) (Fig. 22). However, when looking at form, one has to be careful not to dismiss objects that are variants such that they still relay cultural information and are culturally accepted. Looking again at Yoruba dance staffs relating to Shango, the god of thunder, the staffs, with or without figures, are characteristically carved with two opposing triangles on the top. These triangles, made to look like Neolithic stone axes, represent lightning bolts hurled by Shango to indicate his anger toward wrongdoers. Shango is both aggressive and benevolent and he rewards the Yoruba with a high incident of twin births. In Figure 23, the triangular lightning bolt motifs have been supplemented with two heads representing twins. Referring back to Figure 22, the lightning bolts are stylistically represented as a distinctive hairstyle that also refers to Shango. On these two staffs, and other staff variations, the artists have selectively incorporated a variety of appropriate iconographic elements and produced authentic works.



Figure 21. *Oshe Shango* for sale on internet auction site (www.Ebay.com).

Figure 22. *Oshe Shango*, Yoruba peoples, Nigeria (NMAfA 88-1-1). Photograph by Franko Khoury.



Figure 23. *Oshe Shango*, Yoruba peoples, Nigeria (NMAfA 2005-6-67). Photograph by Franko Khoury.

Evidence of age and use and the resultant patination on African objects is integral to both scholarly research and aesthetic appreciation, and critically influential in determining authenticity. However, the accurate interpretation of this evidence is frequently complicated and ambiguous. Anecdotal stories abound about techniques that have been used to artificially age an object: burying it in a dung heap or termite hill, treating it with milk, motor oil, battery acid, or potassium permanganate. These stories challenge the conservator and make the scholar leery, but the assessor also needs to be informed of object specific details where evidence of age should be considered suspect. As examples, a *pumbu* mask, used to enforce authority, is valued by the Eastern Pende for its newness (Fig. 24); the famous Kuba king figures were used since the 18th century to maintain the royal lineage; however, copies, commissioned by several Kuba kings in the early 20th century as gifts to visiting dignitaries (Cornet 1975), would likely show less evidence of age.



Figure 24. *Pumbu* mask, Eastern Pende peoples, Democratic Republic of the Congo (NMAfA 2005-6-476). Photograph by Franko Khoury.

Use and wear patterns must be appropriate to the anticipated use of an object. Headrests (Fig. 25) that have been ‘rocked’ into a comfortable position by the user may show preferential wear to the legs. Equal or random wear, and obviously, evidence of spurious tool marks, sandpaper or metal files, leave an object open to question. Of course, not all evidence of use is indigenous and creative latitude in the interpretation of this evidence may be necessary. For example, numerous, unanticipated breaks and mends to a figurative sculpture from the northeastern region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo were explained when information came to light that it was the favorite toy for the daughter of a colonial officer. An Ashante stool from the Helena Rubinstein collection that is currently being used as a plant stand will likely show evidence of this non-indigenous use.



Figure 25. Headrest, Tsonga peoples, South Africa (NMAfA 91-14-1). Photograph by Franko Khoury.

When assessing the patination on African objects questions should include the following: is it congruous with the object's manufacture, presumed age, and anticipated use, and analytically related to that on objects with known provenance? In addition, one should ask: could it reflect the known post-collection history of similar objects, that is, exhibit a 'colonial patination?' It is not uncommon to see objects from Belgian collections that have been refinished like fine furniture, or objects from French collections that have been waxed and buffed to a high sheen (Fig. 26). Some of these objects may have been originally painted, encrusted with indigenous materials, or simply worn in ways that likely offended a Western taste, and thus were consequently 'improved.' Similarly, metal objects are frequently subject to 'colonial patination'. Benin bronzes present classic examples of objects that have been repatinated, painted, coated with pigmented wax, or treated with motor oil to saturate or even out the surface, or act as a preservative (Fig. 27). These surfaces do not necessarily, though they might, expose an outright fraud. However, they do exhibit a shift from complete authenticity and allow these objects to find a location on the continuum.



Figure 26 (left). Female figure with child, Punu peoples, Gabon (NMAfA 96-9-1). Photograph by Franko Khoury.

Figure 27 (right). Plaque, Edo peoples, Nigeria (NMAfA 85-19-13) Ex-coll. General Pitt-Rivers, who purportedly treated it with neatsfoot oil (Fagg n.d.) Photograph by Franko Khoury.

African objects that have been altered or dismantled to suit a particular aesthetic, remove damage, or increase marketability create a category for authenticity considerations. Objects are frequently adorned, either during manufacture or use, with a wide variety of materials. A Wee mask (Fig. 28) is rare in its completeness: the pigment represents face paint worn by women at ceremonial events; the tacks suggest scarification; hair, bells, and metal teeth give it an imposing presence.



Figure 28. Female spirit mask, Wee peoples, Côte d'Ivoire (NMAfA 2005-6-57). Photograph by Franko Khoury.

Knowing what is appropriate, inappropriate, or absent can aid in determining authenticity. The egregious dismantling of wooden objects occurs, for example, with chairs and staffs so that the small carved figures can then be distributed individually (Fig. 29, 30). Ivory and metal pieces are not exempt from this kind of alteration. The exquisitely carved ivory tusk from the Loango coast, in Figure 31, retains its mother and nursing child finial. A similar, spiral carved tusk in Figure 32, from the same region, tells the story of birth, life, and the return to the home of the ancestors but the message is incomplete since the finial has been removed; the detached finial likely sits on a fireplace mantel somewhere. Individual figures from elaborately cast copper alloy figural groups, particularly from the Kingdom of Benin, are found in museum collections. This is a particular authenticity issue where the object is real but not as originally intended and these objects have their place on the continuum. And of course, this leaves open the possibility for the deliberate forgery of one of these small, highly collectible objects for which there is no known indigenous precedent.



Figure 29. Chair, Senufo peoples, Côte d'Ivoire (NMAfA 67-5-2). Photograph by Franko Khoury.



Figure 30. Figure, Senufo peoples, Côte d'Ivoire (NMAfA 73-7-117). Photograph by Franko Khoury.



Figure 31 (left). Tusk, Kongo peoples, Angola (NMAfA 96-28-1). Photograph by Franko Khoury.



Figure 32 (right). Tusk, Kongo peoples, Angola (NMAfA 68-23-53). Photograph by Franko Khoury.

Conclusion

No general, universally applicable definition of authenticity for African art can exist. Instead, each object must be viewed with an eye on cultural context, dynamics and change, as well as history, condition and aesthetics. In addition, these factors cannot be isolated from each other, but instead, must be viewed synergistically, simply because the understanding of one is likely to be affected by the interpretation of another. One certainly has an easier task of dismissing an

object as inauthentic, particularly when a clear cut case can be made that there has been a deliberate intention to deceive. Conservators can surely devise an appropriate treatment for an object in their care, but an additional challenge, working in concert with the curator, is to identify a place on the continuum for the myriad of products that result from African thought and creativity. Then we can say that we have directed our complete attention to discerning the “sacred truth” (*African Arts* 1976; 73, comment by Lehuard) of African objects.

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