PERSPECTIVES:
ANGLES ON AFRICAN ART

by

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I began to notice African art only after I came in contact with students in African art history and anthropology who worked with it. My whole interest was in social relations. I had done my course work almost entirely in social anthropology at universities without African Studies programs. As a result, my primary interest was in understanding systems of social relationships, and it still remains so. But if there’s no contact with disciplines that examine the material and aesthetic worlds in which social relationships are found, the result is research with an impoverished conception of life. This impoverishment is easily demonstrated in the lack of training given to anthropologists in material culture studies. It works both ways: the study of art or material culture by itself—without fitting it into the contexts of culture, society, or history—is equally impoverished.

Neither anthropologists nor art historians have thought about what they study and how their own cultural assumptions affect their research. I don’t think anyone really knows how to move from a discussion, say, of Baule heddle pulleys, to generalizations about African art, culture, or society. “Africa” is more a term of art than an effective descriptive category. Very often the things we say about Africa are what we could say about societies elsewhere as well. It is equally true that there is little that can be said about societies elsewhere as well. It is equally true that there is little that can be said about art and society in one part of Africa that holds for all of Africa.

Another problem is that the terms we use—like “Africa” or “art”—are taken from Western notions and are imposed on other worlds. They make sense to us, but in some African contexts, I find it very difficult to draw distinctions between “art objects” (classes of things subject to aesthetic evaluation) and non-art objects (like human bodies). In the African societies I know, these are both subject to aesthetic evaluation. The distinction between art and non-art just doesn’t work. I think most African societies have artistry but not art. Much of African “art” is not art to Africans, but rather considered as utilitarian objects or a part of ritual events. Even the conventional boundaries don’t hold. The design motifs found in so-called art objects, for example, can also be found in patterns of bodily scarification. We go to Africa and collect some things, studiously ignore others, place what we value most in our collections, and then pronounce on “African Art” assuming that our pronouncements reflect the way Africans organize their world.

It’s not just a question of whether the people in African societies divide the world the same way we do—human/non-human, art/non-art, etcetera. I think that in many African societies, the product is less important than the making of the thing itself. This is why we think of as behavior can be evaluated the same way as objects: dance is judged the same way as textiles, or masks and rituals and political meetings.

How something is made becomes very important in the way many African peoples think about and evaluate their things and their actions. This is why gender imagery and symbolism play such an important role in much of African and non-Western art. One thing that people “make” is other people; people are fashioned just as pottery is fashioned—the body is modified by, among other things, scarification. The act of fashioning also involves what I call “social inscription”: people are made members of society through the work that is done to them. This can involve modifying the body through circumcision or through learning and child-rearing, as well as through the very act of producing an object or a person. The sexual symbolism we find in much African art demonstrates this obsession with fashioning. Male and female experience is often represented as separate in order to show how necessary it is to bring them back together for social and physical reproduction.

Yet I don’t want to deny the aesthetic qualities of objects or the reactions we have to them. So much of African art is striking and compelling that I’m really torn between the arguments that are made for universal aesthetic criteria and the idea that we can only truly appreciate something from the point of view of the people for whom it was originally made—that aesthetics are “culture bound.”

The argument against the culture bound view—that you can only understand an object by examining it from the point of view of the culture itself—raises the question of whether outsiders can ever ever understand an object. If the aesthetics are unique to a culture, then there is no bridge, no translation possible between our aesthetic standards and theirs. But the other side has problems as well. The argument against universal aesthetics—that there’s some kind of elective affinity between us as receptors and the artistry involved—seems to me not to take into account that aesthetic appreciation is skilled work. Very often, the way these criteria are learned is not in an art context, but in an everyday context. People learn through schooling; they learn about means of fashioning things that they use in life, and that’s what allows the artist to create something for his audience. The artistic experience is shaped by both artist and audience.

I find fascinating the degree to which African art objects are substitutable for one another. What’s important is not that it be a great object, but that it stand for or symbolize something. I think that there are aspects of any work of art which reveal themselves to people who are prepared to do the work of appreciation. I think a work of great art must have some kind of balance, that it be a work of consummate skill—which was the ultimate Renaissance criterion of aesthetic appreciation. One thing that can make a work of great art appealing is the displayed experiences: the experience of aging, or the procreative themes—these are obviously something about which we can exercise an act of empathy and begin to penetrate into that world portrayed in art. On the other hand, there is the “beholder’s share,” the work we do in order to put back into art all the qualities which a work of art may symbolize—whether they be abstract principles or realistic, everyday events—and a lot of that is culturally specific. And a lot of that is inevitably lost when the audience lives in another culture.

What we are doing here, I think, is using African objects in various ways, just as they are used in various ways in African societies: as objects of symbolic condensation that stand for a whole lot of things. They are also mnemonic devices. This mnemonic process—that you are doing with every one of the curators—stimulates all of our memories. It is like Proust’s madeleine—recalling for me my reading in African ethnography and experience of life in African societies.

I’m trying to use my anthropological perspective as part of the process of selecting these ten objects. I want to find things that an anthropologist can discuss. This involves setting things in context—seeing them on the one hand as exemplifying cosmology, ideas about the nature of being, ideas about the nature of the world, society and actions, and their effects. On the other hand, this also involves looking at the contexts in which the objects are used, at how they emerge in performance, and so on.
I like this power object, this fetish, as it used to be called, because it exemplifies the elements involved in power; I like it didactically. And I also like it because of the collage element about it. It combines natural and seemingly non-natural sorts of things: grasses with man-made objects—tools, a drum, other sorts of things—it's got that commingling that power is associated with. It has a wonderful texture about it. Though I suspect it's the sort of thing that does not appeal to American and Western aesthetics at all. You don't see a lot of them in museums or private collections; they weren't collected so much. I'm not sure I'd want it in my living room. It's a puzzling form of craftsmanship to us. I don't know whether it reflects intentional artistry at all. But, boy, it does have that textured quality I like. And it intrigues me: I wonder if there are aesthetics associated with it; whether or not there's such a thing as doing a fetish object like that right, or whether or not in fact it's accidental. There is pattern in it. It has a round object in the center; it seems to focus us in on a center. And maybe it's that focusing quality that I like; this discursive, yet focusing quality that sort of brings you in on the thing.

I'm attracted to rough textures, no question about that. I like stucco houses—I grew up in one—rather than smooth sorts of things. I think it's texture more than material that appeals to me: my own sense of touch is an important element by which I appreciate things.
This is terrific. There’s an extraordinary way in which the shape of the bowl has been used to emphasize eyes and face in this pipe. There’s something going on with the eyes which I find really appealing, at the same time that I find it happening in a utilitarian object. It’s the hollowness of the eyes. We’re dealing purely with what I’m bringing to it; my sense of something penetrating into the soul. People fondle their pipes. The other thing—this is the reason that I picked this and the Shona neckrest—is that they are personal objects. They are not art in the sense of something set apart, but they’re objects which are functionally associated with the person; something you own, something you place your head on. They show a wonderful elaboration.

And the patina of use! By use, I don’t mean function. It’s not made to be preserved. Most African art is biodegradable, it’s meant to be used up and thrown away. For me, this patina glows; it’s very important in the way I judge things.
This is just utterly beautiful. This has nothing to do with me as an anthropologist; it has a lot to do with what appeals to me. It’s ivory, it has a sense of age, it’s got a patina about it—it has a color, an extraordinary warm color, and I like this because of its combination between convention and realism. There are obviously culturally specific conventions of portraying the angularity of Baule faces, differing from patterned Yoruba faces, or the symmetry of Luba faces. But if you took a Luba face and a Yoruba face and put them next to one another, you can’t tell me that these two people see human faces in the same way.

I also find the modification in conventions of portraiture—that particular style in which the convention is portrayed—very attractive. I think that what I like about it is the rounded quality that almost makes you want to reach out and touch it. The quality of symmetry, the placement of features in the face—I think is extraordinary. There’s a real tension between the cultural convention and the artistry of the face and also the posture which is just gorgeous. It strikes me as a kind of flowering, the highpoint of that particular set of conventions for portraying a human face. I like the proportion of head to body; the tension of the shoulders, the hands on the thighs. It really seems to me to have a very nice balance between body and head—not a realistic one. That combined with the patina makes it a beautiful piece of art for me.
I like it because it combines a number of elements. First of all, it represents animal symbolism in African art. There's a lot of anthropomorphizing of animals in folklore. This certainly has an anthropomorphic quality—the use of cloth—and so on. The other thing I like about it is the gesture of the hands and that inhuman head. It's got a very nice tension about it which I particularly like.

Monkeys are interesting, obtrusive animals: there's an almost human-like quality about them, yet they are not; they're almost non-rule-governed humans. There's a wonderful Iteso folk story about an illness that affects children, and a ritual that's performed. The ritual is called "washing the baboon." The story behind the ritual is that one day a woman was digging her fields, and digging defeated her. She said to her husband, "I can't do this anymore. Let's go off into the wood and live like baboons." That is, they would live by gathering, not by fashioning the world. Well, they went off, and pretty soon they became baboons, and this is the source of the illness because of the bad odor that emanates from them and is carried by the west wind into household and attacks children. In other words, the retreat from work, from fashioning—i.e., creativity in this sense—is continually threatening the world.

What do we mean by power? I live in Washington, D.C., so the way The Washington Post or politically oriented figures talk about power is rather different than what I think should be meant by naming some object a power figure in an African society.

I suppose that one reason they are called power figures is because whoever owns them has the capacity to do something to someone else. That power is th
control that we can exercise over people, objects, the environment. It may very well be that African societies are a little more subtle in their understanding about these things. In everything I have been told about fetishes, it is invariably pointed out that they have a certain ambiguous element. That fetishes are very dangerous and there is a very high chance that the whole thing will boomerang and that whatever you are trying to do will kill you off rather than someone else. This is a subtle understanding of the ambivalence of power expressed in the idea of a fetish.

Power means more than “power” in the sense of control. It means a whole range of things, from the control that we have over people; or that one may have over another person, or over a natural event, or over an object—to the energy necessary to make something happen and the capacity to bring something about, which is different for different people.

I find the use of nails really intriguing. Very often in West African societies metal is used to represent an abrupt movement. A transition that’s not the smooth sort of continuity associated with water so much as the abrupt discontinuity associated with radical change is expressed through knives, spears, and cutting. There’s an association with penetration, with violence. Iron is hard and enduring. That’s why it’s such a powerful symbol of authority.
This is like the top of a staff that is given to champion cultivators among the Senufo. It's an almost ideal manifestation of a very complex system of thought because of how it illustrates the interdependence of male and female in social and physical reproduction; the degree to which the world is produced by the labor of men and women and their necessary interdependence in the sexual act of procreation—is an important symbolic element in African belief systems and cosmology.

These staffs have female figures, and yet they're given to male champion cultivators. Anita Glaze (who did field work among the Senufo) is very clear about the serenity of the female in contrast with the frenzied activity of cultivation. What she doesn't say—and what may be a possibility here—is that represented in this staff, may also be differences in the roles that each sex plays in the sex act itself.

This also happens to be a beautiful example of the genre. Stylistically, there is an extreme emphasis on elongation. In one plane, you have the jutting stomach, the jutting breasts, and the jutting face. It's just a gorgeous example of artistry in a particular style.

What is very clear is that the posture of the woman, the emphasis on the breast, the belly—all have to do with her procreative potential and capacity. Her facility is to produce people and reproduce the world, just as in their way, men do in hoeing and cultivation. The female image of sexual procreation and the male activity of agricultural production are incorporated in this female emblem belonging to the male champion cultivator. It becomes an ideal physical instance of the way that African belief and ritual systems focus upon the different activities of the sexes, their images, and their emotional capacity in social and physical reproduction.
I like the tension of form between the straight line of the bridge and what I guess are the breasts underneath it. The tension comes from combining the rounded legs which complete an object that appears to be all angles. The tension between the straight line angle and the rounded quality of the parts makes for what my colleague Roy Sieber would call a ‘tasty object.’

I think it’s a rotten shame we can’t touch these things in museums. One understands all the practical reasons, the necessity for preserving the heritage and particularly for preserving it under conditions in which it will not be hurt. But there’s an ironic element to this: that we take these biodegradable things and we try to preserve them as much as possible, without touching them. Whereas I think the qualities they acquire, they acquire through their use. The patina appeals to me aesthetically, but it also appeals to me because it carries the history of the object. Maybe there’s some way we aesthetically respond to it that is also a kind of inchoate way of responding to its history; these are not historyless objects; they have a history of use, of involvement in people’s lives which enhances their appeal for me. In Africa, objects have histories, but in our own museums, we systematically deny that history. What makes these things “African” is not something innate, but how they’ve been made and what has been done with them. They have African history.
Now, this raises real possibilities about monstrousness. I'm fond of this. There is something in the ethos of anthropology—and a lot of anthropologists react against it—which leads to an evaluation of the exotic, but not necessarily the grotesque. My own taste has always been for the arts of irony, humor, satire, that sort of thing.

But I like it because it's truly monstrous. Not only do I like monstrousness and grotesque things, but it's got a lot of interest: it has the nails; it has that elongation of nose, the inappropriately placed horns; it has that kind of commingling of categories and violation of boundaries characteristic of liminal moments in life. Liminal is something that exists betwixt and between, when what's usually bounded is violated. Ritual is a movement, as in initiations, in which one moves from one status into another. That's where you find the breakdown and the creative commingling of categories associated with the grotesque. I use monstrous in quotes; it's a Western term. But it seems to me to be appropriate when you get monstrousness in this sort of thing: the animal and human combined and the grotesque enlargement, which I think is intentionally grotesque. A lot of African grotesques are either grotesque because they're portrayals of an illness, or they are intentionally grotesque for a purpose. I think this one is very, very interesting for just those reasons.
BAGA DANCE
HEADDRESS

I selected this because I really like Baga art. For one thing, the thing is so damn big—which is very unusual for Africa. I've never seen the dances in which they are used, but God! They must use an incredible amount of skill; they must weigh a ton. For me, this again is a personal (as opposed to disciplinary) response. It's almost like the art of caricature; it's got a lot of elements all brought together in one thing. You've got a very high elaboration of headdress, body, the woman's breasts, the caricature of face. It's just something that I find very, very, very appealing because of the almost playful element—the playing with the human form, the relationship of nose to face, the enlargement of the nose, the alteration of the breasts to conform to the frame that holds the headdress on. I like the lines and what they do with it. There's a kind of symmetry about the scarification that I like, which you find in general in African art.
One of the reasons I like them is because it's a wonderful combination of the useful and the decorative. First of all the shape—there's a wonderful balance here. But the other thing is the degree to which we have conventions of art and the elaboration of the head; it's about as extreme an example as you can find of the aesthetic elaboration of the utilitarian object. This is obviously very important both to the aesthetic sense, and the cultural sense.

It's typical of Baule faces: the hairdos, and a wonderful emphasis on heads. African art is also indicative of the notions of what a person is. And a person is composed of various elements and capacities. There's real tension in a lot of African views between head and body, between head and heart. I suspect that the modifications on the head—the hairdo is another way of modifying the body—have a lot to do with the notion of what makes someone a complete person. The Baule have developed this to a very high degree. I think that what's distinctive about them is how delicately carved they are. In the features, and the amount of attention paid to hairdo, to body ornament—I think that there is a lot more attention, care, and skill going into these than the general run of Baule, or Ivoirian heddle pulleys.