

WHAT IS AFRICAN ART?  
SUPPORT NOTES FOR TEACHERS



Commemorative head of a Queen Mother  
From Benin, Nigeria, early 16th century AD

## Introduction

What is African art? If the answer seems self-evident, this is probably because the concept rests on assumptions which we seldom think to question. This booklet aims to provide both background information on the range of artwork created in Africa and also address some of the issues and questions which arise from any attempt to define African art.

The booklet begins by considering what is meant by 'African', goes on to look at some of the things Africans actually do and make, and then asks how such things reflect upon activities which the West understands as 'Art'.

The booklet is designed as a resource to support the teaching of art at all Key Stages. It takes a cross-curricular approach which looks at the historical and cultural context of art in Africa, and what it means to the West.

Examples of some of the African objects on display at the British Museum can be found on COMPASS - the British Museum's web-based collections. This be accessed either via the main British Museum website [www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk](http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk) or directly at [www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/compass](http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/compass)

Information about visiting the British Museum to view the African galleries can be found on the main Museum website.

Ben Burt  
Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas  
The British Museum

## 1 What is African?

We might begin by considering what, or who, is African? Is it just a matter of geography, of living in the continent of Africa? If so, should African include the peoples from other continents who have migrated there over centuries? Europeans have been settling in southern Africa since the 17th century. Some of these people do indeed call themselves 'Afrikaans', but they have clung to a cultural identity very different from those who were there before them, and their artefacts are certainly not represented in museum collections and books on African art. Going further back, there are the peoples of north Africa whose ancestors brought the culture and religion of Islam from the southwest Asia (Europe's 'Middle East') in the 7th century. And long before that, people were coming across the Mediterranean under the Roman Empire in the first century BC, and with the Greek and Phoenician traders and colonisers several hundred years earlier. The Mediterranean was a highway for the spread of cultures between Africa, Asia and Europe. Perhaps this is why museum curators and art historians have tended to group North African cultures of various periods with classical Europe, Islamic and oriental civilisations.

If cultures are to be identified by their place of origin, should the people of Madagascar be regarded as African, when they have ancestors from Indonesia, India and Arabia who began trading, migrating and intermarrying along the east African coasts at least 1,500 years ago? And what of the cultural traditions which people already in Africa have adopted from visitors and invaders from overseas, such as the Christian and Muslim religions, as long established in Africa as in most parts of Asia and Europe? Africa has had wide-ranging historical and cultural links with other continents since ancient times. But what about the civilisation which originated in Africa more than 5,000 years ago and flourished there continuously for 3,000 years? Objects from ancient Egypt fill countless museum cases; should they not also feature in exhibitions and books of African art? Is Africa really a cultural entity at all?

## 2 Who defines Africa?

And then there are the people of African ancestry who have moved to live elsewhere. The greatest emigration from Africa came about with the age of European expansion which has transformed the world during the last 500

years. It was the trans-Atlantic export trade in African slave-labour, promoting the economic development of Europe and the countries settled by people from that continent, which established the commercial economies of the Americas and their black populations. Generations later, descendants of these forced migrants have migrated again, many to Europe, in their own search for the prosperity founded upon that trade and the industrial development which succeeded it. With such a recent history, it has not been easy for people of this African diaspora to hold on to a culture which is distinctly African. Many have long sought to regain or reconstruct a culture and identity for their own time and place, deriving more from Africa and less from the European culture they have had to share on unequal terms for so long. Who is to say how African their culture is?

As far as culture and art is concerned, 'African' so often seems to be defined by people who are not African, including museum curators and art historians who identify themselves and their own cultural heritage as unambiguously European. This includes people from far beyond Europe, and some of the finest collections, publications and scholars of African art are to be found in North America. Peoples and cultures do indeed travel, and that continent now shares a Western cultural and artistic tradition which traces its origins to Europe. Considering how many North Americans have African ancestry, we might also consider whether the artists among them are creating African art. If they are, maybe being African is more than just a matter of geography. If they are not, this may have something to tell us about the way Europeans and Africans have influenced not only each other's culture, but also their definitions of cultural identity.

Africa is a diverse continent of many cultures, but one experience shared by the vast majority of its people and emigrants, is life under political and economic systems developed by Europeans and still dominated by them. For many of them, identifying with Africa has been a way of uniting to assert the right to self determination. So whoever is defined by, can African identity, African culture and African art avoid reflecting Africa's relationship with the West?

### 3 Where does African Art come from?

Insofar as Africa has been defined by its relationship to the West, so has its art, and we can begin by looking at how Western art historians and museum curators came to identify African art. It is now 500 years since European voyages around the world began to bring home goods and information from other continents. 250 years ago some of the artefacts they obtained in Africa were being included among the 'artificial curiosities' in the developing collections of the newly formed British Museum. But it was not until the late 19th century that Europeans, especially anthropologists, began to treat some of these things as 'art'.

Scholars then were interested particularly in trying to explain how they cultures of the world had developed and spread to produce what they regarded as the pinnacle of human achievement, the European culture of their day. Among the other peoples of world, some, including most inhabitants of Africa, were taken to represent 'savage' or 'primitive' stages of cultural development, and insofar as their artefacts seemed to be versions of the arts which were a mark of so-called 'civilisation', these became 'primitive art'.

In American museums these cultures were often classified with 'natural history', but in the British Museum they came under the loose heading of 'ethnography'. In either case this distinguished them from the civilisations of Europe, Asia and parts of Africa such as Egypt and the Arab states of North Africa. Later generations of Europeans, more cautious about insulting people by calling them 'primitive', have adopted words like 'tribal' or 'ethnic'. How far this represents a change of attitude is another question, especially when so many writers feel the need to fall back on expressions like 'so-called primitive'.

As the colonial conquest of Africa proceeded during the 19th century, more and more African artefacts appeared in the museums and art markets of Europe. The idea of African art received a big boost in the 1890s when hundreds of fine brass sculptures, looted during the British conquest of Benin City in Nigeria, were sold on the open market, and many found their way into the British Museum.

Later colonial adventurers continued to bring new surprises as they shipped back to Europe large collections of exotic artefacts in styles which

Europeans had never seen before. Some of this was also loot from military expeditions, but much more was purchased from people who prized the wealth and exotic goods of Europe more than their familiar local products. Some African artefacts were presented to colonial administrators, missionaries and residents. Some were purchased, with detailed documentation by anthropologists, other by expatriate residents, collectors and art dealers. Such people have all contributed to the collections of the British Museum.

#### **4 What does the West see in African Art?**

For a long time African artefacts in Europe, unlike European and Asian 'works of art', were of more interest to anthropologists than to art historians. Then in the 1900s the avant garde art movement in Paris began to take an interest in sculpture from West and Central Africa, which came to the notice of art historians through its influence on their work. What was its appeal? Artists described their perceptions of remarkable formal qualities quite different from those in their own cultural tradition. They read into them the kinds of symbolic meanings they were seeking to express in their own work, promoting the view that Africans could create art, but of a very particular kind. To those struggling against the constraints of the naturalistic artistic tradition of Europe, such African art offered a refreshing and potent vision of the creativity of 'natural man', which scholars had already compared to the work of children or psychotics. This was particularly appealing to those seeking creative inspiration from impulses which their own culture defined as psychologically deep, intuitive and primitive. But such interpretations were founded on a myth of 'primitive man' which explains more about the Western culture which created it than the other cultures it has been applied to.

Myths of the primitive serve as imagined alternatives which may both justify and challenge Western culture, or 'civilisation' as it is often defined. In various times and places these myths have employed either demonic images of childlike but bestial savages and ignorant, backward peasants, or utopian visions of noble savages and primal, tribal peoples living in harmony with nature. The more unpleasant stereotypes have supported self-serving historical theories about Western domination. These have ranged from the 'manifest destiny' and 'survival of the fittest' which justified European conquest of other continents, to the 'civilising mission'

of the colonial period and the 'economic development' policies which now seek to integrate everyone within the global economy.

More benevolent images, supporting arguments in defence of the victims of these brutal philosophies, are often ineffective and paternalistic. For Africa, the issues in this one-sided Western debate with other cultures have moved from the export of Africans as slaves to the conquest of their lands, more recently to the formation of nation states, and now to the promotion of capitalist economies through aid and development programmes. For the West, 'Darkest Africa' became and remains a powerful symbol of the primitive, and as far as art is concerned, 'primitive' often seems to be an criterion for defining what is 'African'.

## Some Comments on 'Primitive Art' by Artists and Art Historians

*... these cultures show developments more closely allied to the fundamental, basic and essential drives of life that have not been buried under a multitude of parasitical, non-essential desires.*

From: Wingert, *Primitive Art* (Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 7

*The increasing knowledge of the thinking of so-called primitive peoples, during the last fifty years, has contributed a great deal to the change [in modern cultures] – especially the acquaintance with works of art made by these people... It may be refinement, celebrations, depth of mind, are on their side, not ours. Personally, I believe very much in values of 'savagery'; I mean: instinct, passion, mood, violence, madness.*

From: Jean Dubuffet, quoted (with parenthesis) in "Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal with the Modern. (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1985)

*Picasso responded with intense emotion to a magical force he sensed in the ["Tribal art"] objects he encountered in the Trocadero Museum. He regretted that the Western tradition lost touch with the primordial sense of image-making as a magic operation. Tribal art led him back to such origins.*

From: "Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal with the Modern. (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1985), p. 17

Henry Moore writes of the inspiration he drew from exhibits in the British Museum, now in the Museum of Mankind:

*I was particularly interested in the African and Pacific sculptures and felt that 'primitive' was a misleading description of them, suggesting crudeness and incompetence. It was obvious to me that these artists were not trying – and failing – to represent the human form naturalistically, but that they had definite traditions of their own.*

From: Henry Moore at the British Museum (British Museum Publications, 1981), p. 11

## 5 African Art or Western Exhibit?

Until the late 20th century, geographical and cultural barriers gave most Westerners little opportunity to find out what people in Africa themselves thought of the artefacts they made and used. But this has not been a problem for those Western artists and art critics who maintain that such objects can 'speak for themselves'. To give their subjective impressions an apparently objective value, some even proclaim universal standards of art criticism and good taste. However, few art critics would deny that the appreciation of art in the Western tradition is enhanced by knowledge of classical mythology, medieval Christianity or 19th century European culture. So why do they not draw upon African history and culture in the same way when they make aesthetic assessments of African art? Would their artistic judgements about African artefacts be confirmed by the people who made or used them? Or have the objects viewed by art critics been changed by their changing contexts, altering their significance, even their appearance? As presented in books and museums, African artefacts often produce a peculiarly Western kind of artistic experience: the art exhibit.

We can see this most clearly in the kind of African artefact first recognised as both 'African' and as 'Art'. Since Renaissance times Europeans have placed a special value on sculpture, which may explain why figurative carvings and castings from such evocative Western symbols of African culture, sometimes treated as if they outweighed all other African contributions to human development. Such objects still dominate Western books and exhibitions of African art and command the highest prices in the art salesrooms of Europe and America. But is African sculpture really the kind of art which Europeans take it to be?

When we visit a museum we are accustomed to see African carvings in glass cases, standing on plinths, hanging from walls, much as they appear in studio photos, carefully posed and lit. But in viewing such things in this way, are we not indulging peculiarly Western fantasies of African art and culture?

Certainly we are looking at African sculpture in a very different light from that intended by its makers and original users. Are Westerners actually more interested in creating their own fantasies about other people's cultures from the people who bear them? The comments of Western

critics often 'speak for themselves' more eloquently than any African art exhibit.

Malcolm McLeod writes, *To [Paolozzi] these societies [of "the native peoples of America, Africa and the Pacific"] are 'Lost Magic Kingdoms', potent realms of the imagination. The world he has imagined is not one which can be found in the prosaic accounts of geographers or art historians. It is one which combines the modern and the archaic, the prosaic and the fantastic, and which interpenetrates his own experiences.*

From: *Lost Magic Kingdoms* (British Museum Publications, 1985), page 5

Sally Price reflects on... *the plight of objects from around the world that – in some ways like the Africans who were captured and transported to unknown lands during the slave trade – have been discovered, seized, commoditized, stripped of their social ties, redefined in new settings, and reconceptualized to fit into the economic, cultural, and ideological needs of people from different societies.*

From: *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (University of Chicago Press, 1989), page 5

### Some More Reflections from the Art Historians

A view from an eminent scholar of African art, Frank Willet:

*The greatest contribution Africa has made so far to the cultural heritage of mankind is its richly varied sculpture.*

From: *African Art* (Thames & Hudson, 1971/1993), page 27

Susan Vogel comments on museum displays:

*In their original African setting most works of art... were literally viewed differently from the way we see them. Masks were seen as part of costumed figures moving in performance, or not seen at all. Figures often stood in dark shrines visible only to a few persons, and then under conditions of heightened sensibility. Other objects were seen only swathed in cloth, surrounded by music, covered with offerings or obscured by attachments. Most sculpture could be seen only on rare occasions... the primacy of the visual sense over all others is particular to our culture: African objects were made to belong to a broader realm of experience. If we take them out of the dark, still their movement, quiet the music, and strip them of additions, we make them accessible to our visual culture, but we render them accessible to our visual culture, but we render them unrecognizable or meaningless to the cultures they come from.*

From: *African Art in Anthropology*, (the Centre for African Art, 1988)

## 6 Woodcarving

Western sculpture has indeed found inspiration from some very distinctive styles of African figurative wood-carving. But such sculpture is most developed only in certain regions of Africa, particularly in West and Central Africa where people still follow local religions rather than Islam or Christianity and, predictably enough, where there are plenty of trees. As far as art is concerned, these areas seem to be particularly African, perhaps because the contrast between European and African forms is so striking that it confirms the image of Africa as exotic and primitive. It may not be a coincidence that these were also the principle areas from which Africans were once exported as slaves in a trade which justified itself by accusing its victims of savagery.

African carving develops from woodworking skills common to most men in rural communities, who make many of the things they need in daily life. Most carvings are cut from a single piece of wood using an adze, then finished with a knife or chisel, and pieces are seldom joined, in contrast to Western carpentry techniques. But although every man (seldom women) may know how to handle the tools, the most elaborate carving requires special aptitude and practice. Where there is a highly developed tradition of figurative sculpture this may involve a long apprenticeship. Only by first finishing work for an established master-carver, then imitating it, will the apprentice become proficient enough to develop his own distinctive style from the local sculptural conventions. He may also seek spiritual support for his work through prayers and offerings to ensure its success.

When making things for their own communities, skilled sculptors usually work to commissions, whether they are fashioning decorated utensils and tools for everyday use, ceremonial objects or architectural features to enhance the status of chiefs or kings, or images and masks to embody invisible gods or spirits or to contain magical forces. The things they make, and the styles in which they work are often as distinctive and varied as the language and customs which distinguish each ethnic group from its neighbours. Yet people may also make or use certain kinds of objects in styles used by other ethnic groups, and the local origin or appearance of an object may be less important than the purpose it serves. Indeed, this purpose does not always depend on the appearance of the object at all, and some sculptures are not even seen when in use. When the appearance of a carving does matter, local people will judge it by what they already

understand about its purpose and the symbolic meanings it conveys, as art historians do with Western art.

Further reading: Frank Willet, *African Art* (Thames & Hudson, 1971/1993), chapters 5 and 6.

## 7 Masks

Some of the artefacts most evocative of African art for Europeans are masks, or at least the things Europeans recognise as masks; usually sculptures designed to represent and transform the human face. But what they mean to those who make, wear and view them is another matter.

To begin with, masks in Africa are not just sculptures, and often they are not sculptural at all. There are many reasons for disguising or transforming a person's appearance. In some parts of Africa men (and it is seldom women) may dress to impersonate the spirits, male and female, whom they wish to involve in human society, or to give these spirits a form they can inhabit by possessing the wearer; or they may wish to repel hostile spiritual forces. But of course the human-but-not-quite-human presence is also designed to impress a human audience, usually with a dramatic show which will stir emotions of awe, amusement, fear or excitement, sometimes all at once, in a way that even the most imaginative sculpture cannot do when mounted, disembodied, in a museum case. The whole person must be transformed, usually with a fantastic costume to conceal the body, and with the face covered by a carving, or by a piece of cloth with a carving on tip of the head, or just cloth or fibre with no carving at all. Then the figure needs to move, usually dancing to music in an atmosphere which evokes the emotions of the audience, of the masker and maybe of the spirits too.

Such scenes would have been hard to imagine for audiences in Europe and America when little more than sculptures and traveller's writings reached their museums and galleries. Today we have the benefits of photography, film and video, even travelling performers and musicians, to demonstrate the artistic power of masks and masquerading. Africans in other continents have developed masquerades for new purposes, usually more entertaining than religious, under the influence of rather different festival traditions originating from Europe. What are we missing when we gaze at African masks in glass exhibition cases?

## 8 Costume

Anthropologists have long treated African costume as 'art', and it is often included in art books and museum collections. In some parts of the continent, in the past and sometimes today, people actually wore very little, and that was mostly what Europeans would recognise as 'ornaments' rather than 'clothing'. Some painted their bodies in elaborate designs, or marked them with permanent ornamental scars. Some plaited or sculpted their hair into elaborate patterns or shapes. Some wore ornaments of strung or woven glass beads, or shell, wire and other materials, local or imported. And in the regions which have the longest history of migration from Asia and Europe, people also wore more concealing garments of cloth, especially in the Muslim areas of North Africa.

With the increase of European colonial trade, which reached all but the remotest communities of Africa by the late 19th century, fabrics from other parts of the world became more available, and so eventually did Western styles of dress and manufactured clothing. The new colonial countries were increasingly dominated by European and Asian immigrants who proclaimed their own conventions of dress as marks of civilisation while they sought out markets for cloth and clothing. What began as exotic luxury goods for people who needed few clothes became necessities, often adapted to new African styles of dress. Today, with every part of Africa linked to these international markets, local costumes are often kept only for special occasions, particularly when they involve more expensive, hand-made, local crafts. Africans have been adopting, and adapting, imported costume materials for centuries. Exactly when and how do their exotic, traditional costume 'arts' become just plain 'clothing'?

## 9 Textiles

Many parts of Africa have rich traditions for making and decorating cloth which compare with textile arts from other parts of the world, with which they are indeed interwoven. In many areas people once made bark cloth, a kind of felt beaten from the bark of suitable trees, which is widespread in tropical regions around the world. Woven cloth was being made in Egypt 5,000 years ago, and there are much more recent local weaving traditions

in most regions of Africa, particularly where a settled farming way of life enabled people to develop the specialised skills required. Being labour-intensive to make, most local cloth was valuable, used particularly by the rich or kept for special occasions, and decorated in a range of techniques and styles. Being durable and portable too, cloth has long been traded within Africa and beyond.

The textile trade promoted by European colonisation introduced cloth to new areas and provided new materials for local textile arts. African technology changed, adopting industrial yarns and dyestuffs, machine sewing, embroidery and appliqué in cheap and colourful imported cloth. Many of the new styles and fashions which developed could only be satisfied by industrial production, mostly in Europe. But although manufactured cloth undermined some markets for handloom weaving, it also stimulated new ones, and there may now be more hand-woven cloth produced in Africa than ever before. Textile printing has developed too, as a result of intercontinental textile trade going back to the 17th century. Imported Indonesian batiks were imitated by the factories of England and Holland during the 19th century, making colourful cotton prints for export to West Africa, where factories now produce similar designs.

Although much of the cloth now worn in Africa is made industrially in other continents, African textile arts continue to flourish. Some cloth is woven, and more is printed, in factories in Africa, and most people can afford to buy more clothes than ever before. In some areas this still gives scope for the creativity of African textile workers as they adapt to new materials and changing local fashions.

Further reading:

African Textiles by John Picton and John Mack  
(British Museum Publications, 1979/1991)

North African Textiles by Chris Spring and Julie Hudson  
(British Museum Press, 1995)

## 10 Weapons

Art historians would not consider the majority of weapons used in Africa today to be particularly artistic or indeed African (although there is a modern arms industry in South Africa). As in the arms trade today, the hand weapons which Africans produced in the past were also as lethal as their technology allowed, and indeed the most sophisticated local metal technology was often devoted to weaponry, as it is in the West. But these artefacts also gave scope for the creative imaginations of the African craftsmen. During the colonial period this was recognised by the Europeans who mounted African weapons as exotic wall displays, and now they appear in saleroom catalogues as African art. The virtuosity of blacksmiths in parts of central Africa in particular produced spectacular parade weapons in elaborate shapes, and stimulated European fantasies of the savage purposes these might have served.

But the arms trade to Africa is far older than the colonial period. From medieval times the kingdoms of North Africa and the savannah region south of the Sahara depended on large supplies of edged weapons from the metalworking centres of Europe and southwest Asia. Further south, weapons production depended more on local blacksmiths, who usually inherited the secrets of an esoteric craft which kept them apart from the communities they served. With the development of the trans-Atlantic slave trade from the 16th century, many parts of southern and western Africa became increasingly militarised, as trading communities and kingdoms purchased guns from Europe to gain prosperity from the sale of slaves.

But it was not until breech-loading, and later, repeating rifles became available in the 19th century that guns began to give a decisive military advantage over African hand weapons. Locally made weapons remained important, if not for fighting, then as valuable possessions and appropriate symbols of political authority. Ceremonial weapons enhanced the status of rulers and officials, military officers or simply the young men who defended their own communities. Defensive weapons such as shields and body armour, also less effective against guns, have scope for decorative designs to identify their bearers or intimidate their adversaries, and so did the protective charms and amulets which often adorned military uniforms.

The kinds of African weapons which form such a large part of museum collections are still used ceremonially in some parts of Africa, even more so than archaic weapons in the state ceremonials of Europe. Some are still used in anger when no more effective weapons are to hand, but their power was eclipsed long ago by the arms trade with the industrial countries of the north.

Further reading:

African Arms and Armour by Chris Spring (British Museum Press, 1993)

## 11 Pottery

Clay is a material with special artistic potential, not only because its versatile plasticity, but also because, in Africa, it is mainly worked by women. Only in the urban centres of North Africa, culturally close to the rest of the Mediterranean, is there a longstanding tradition of making pots on the wheel as a men's craft. Elsewhere, wheel-turned and industrially produced ceramics imported from Europe and Asia have long been a desirable alternative to local pottery, as metal and plastic utensils are today. In some countries, such as Nigeria, and in areas of European immigration such as South Africa, these things are also manufactured industrially.

Even so, hand-built African pottery is so cheap and practical to use that it continues to be the essential equipment of households throughout the continent. It is nearly always locally made by women, who often inherit their skills within families in which the men work as blacksmiths. Their work has not usually been regarded as very prestigious by Africans or of great aesthetic interest by Western art historians. But local technology and domestic requirements enable simple pots to take on regular and elegant forms, often enhanced by surface decoration, and gives them a strong tactile as well as visual appeal.

Such pots are usually made by pulling and coiling the basic shape, spreading the clay by pressing and hammering. This requires only the simplest of tools such as pieces of potshard, pebbles and sticks. The clay is mixed with a high proportion of sand or organic matter as fill, and fired at a low temperature in a bonfire. This produces a coarse ceramic, resilient enough to cook in on the hearth and ideal for holding water, which cools by

evaporation from the surface of the pot. It may be finished with pressed, incised, or modelled patterns, to aid grip and evaporation as well as for decoration. Or, it may be more or less sealed, not by glazing but by burnishing while leather hard, or coating with oil or vegetable liquor while still hot from firing.

Since women are the main users of pots as well as their makers, the kind of household post used for water and cooking are often treated as symbols of women's roles, of their bodies, and identities as wives and mothers. But for special ceremonial or religious purposes, post may be modelled in relief or in the round. The most elaborate, bearing human and animal sculptures are not really pots at all. As such, they may be made by men or by women past menopause. Clay is used for all sorts of other purposes too, from lamps and braziers to tobacco pipes and drums, all of which depend on the same basic pottery technology.

Further reading:

Smashing Pots: Feats of Clay from Africa by Nigel Barley  
(British Museum Press, 1994)

*Pottery is seen as dramatically endangered. It is probably more than a coincidence that it is this 'disappearing' pottery that is the latest African artefact to enter the Western art market. The beauty, elegance and ingenuity of African pottery are beginning to gain wider appreciation just as the sales catalogues announce its imminent extinction.*

From: Nigel Barley, Smashing Pots (British Museum Press, 1994), p. 9

## 12 Art for What?

Since Europeans discovered 'African art', the notion seems to have gradually expanded to from figurative sculpture to include more and more types of African artefacts. However, the distinction between 'art', 'craft' or other kinds of artefact would not have made much sense to most of the African artists whose work now graces Western museums. This is not to say that Africans do not have well-considered aesthetic judgements and criticisms to make of each other's work. Certain objects were intended to have visual impact, to be aesthetically pleasing or disturbing and to convey

symbolic meanings, and they were assessed in these terms. But they were seldom made just to be looked at 'for arts' sake' as we say.

Most of the people who made the objects now regarded as 'African art' were skilled artisans working for a particular kind of clientele. Some everyday utensils and textiles, tools and weapons, may have been made for trade, exchanged for other goods or money with whoever needed them. Some things, often special versions of utilitarian objects, were in demand as valuables, to be given for particular ceremonial purposes such as marriage or funeral gifts. Some objects, including some of the most elaborate and expressive works were commissioned from their makers by religious and political organisations for use in rituals and ceremonies, both public and private. Some could only be made for titled community leaders, chiefs or kings, to symbolise or celebrate their high status and political power. And some things were made for Western markets.

The idea of 'art' as a particular field of activity is a peculiarly modern European one, which even Europeans have problems defining, especially when applying it to other cultures. But if Africans seldom created things for the sake of art, does this really make them so different from the West? We know that most of the older European pieces now in art galleries were made to decorate palaces and shrines, to glorify the people who commissioned them and their deities, while providing a living for the artists, and we can read many of their symbolic messages about power, status, religion and morality. Creating things for display in galleries and the other public and private places governed by art experts is quite a recent phenomenon, even in the West.

Is art for the gallery really less 'applied' to the social purposes of its time than earlier traditions of African or European art? In the West at the end of the 20th century, art serves some very particular purposes, not the least of which is to provide commodities which can be bought and sold, sometimes for very large sums. This monetary value, reflecting judgements on authenticity as well as aesthetic and symbolic values, plays an essential part in the role of art objects as status symbols for individuals or public institutions, and there is a massive international business around the exchange, reproduction and publication of such things. It is hardly surprising to find Africans too creating art with an eye to this market. We may debate the aesthetic and symbolic value of so-called 'tourist art' which Africans mass-produce mainly for sale to Western buyers, but is it any less

a part of the art world than Western artists' reproductions of 'limited editions', or copies of famous Western works of art?

### 13 Galleries and Markets

Africans have been making things for sale abroad for hundreds of years, but during the 20th century the African art market, governed by Western artistic and commercial values, has had an increasing influence on African products. On the one hand, large local craft industries have developed, mass-producing the kind of objects that appeal to Western notions of African culture as exotic, primitive and sometimes beautiful but often crude, to be bought and sold as commodities for a Western market of tourists and curio shoppers. At the same time, in Western societies where manufactured objects are industrially mass-produced as commodities, the uniqueness of personal creativity has itself become a commodity. In this market, objects made for local use may acquire a commercial value out of all proportion to their local economic value, often tempting African peasants to sell personal and community heirlooms, their own or other people's, to dealers who pass them on at great profit to overseas collectors. The market in status symbols and investments for Westerners attaches a special value to things which are old, well used and hence apparently authentically African. Faithful copies, however well made, are liable to be denigrated as 'fakes', and are indeed often made to deceive those seeking 'authentic' African art.

Art historians acknowledge that an appreciation of art is enhanced by understanding the purposes for which things were made and used and the social and cultural contexts which give them their aesthetic and symbolic value. For Western art we might want to go beyond the values which the artists themselves proclaim to consider, also the social role of the galleries and other places where it is displayed. And in a world now dominated by the values of the market, perhaps we should also acknowledge the market value which plays such an important part in our judgments of African as well as Western art.

Africans also work as artists within this Western art market. Since the colonial period an increasing number of Africans, often educated in the art colleges of Europe and America, have been drawing upon their experience of Western as well as African culture to develop new, often very individual,

styles and forms of objects as works of art. Like many of the educated urban middle-class of Africa, they seem to find the relation between the two traditions both enriching and full of troublesome contradictions, which may be expressed in their work. They bring African forms and imagery to an artistic purpose originating in the west; in the search for a new African art which can hold its own in terms of Western artistic values without losing its African identity. But the identity of the educated and cosmopolitan African elite is rather different to that of rural villagers or town craftsmen working within local artistic traditions. Now that so many Africans work as artists in the Western sense within an increasingly homogenous global culture, the next question may be, 'What is so African about African art?'

More than twenty years ago the historian of African art Frank Willet asked;

*What then is happening to art in Africa today? It is changing with the times as it has always done, but whereas the traditional artist drew on traditional forms to serve the needs of the community in which he lived – and this still continues in many areas – the Western-trained artist has the whole world on which to draw, and has still to find an adequate patronage within Africa... the Western trained artists may well remain part of the cosmopolitan world of art.*

From: African Art by Frank Willet, (Thames & Hudson, 1971/1993)