

African Borderland Sculpture

PATRICK R. McNAUGHTON

The preceding five articles were presented as a panel called "African Borderland Sculpture: Liminal Space in the Study of Style," which I organized for the February 1987 meetings of the College Art Association in Boston. My original call for papers will give an idea of what we had in mind: "Studies of African sculpture style are most fruitful when they include explorations of cultural change and artists' motivations. Politics, commerce, the stature of sculptors, and the relationships between sculptors and clients have all been shown to shape style, and a growing body of research demonstrates that it is no longer possible to view the shape of African art as dictated by hermetically sealed geographic, ethnic, or traditional boundaries. Proclamations of pristine tribal morphologies hold little interest for scholars who now view style as a fluid component in modes of expression that are dynamic and almost always synergistic.

"A most interesting space for the study of style occurs at the borders between ethnic groups and between the regional populations that compose them. These cutting edges harbor genres of sculpture that teach a great deal about style development and its relationship to a society's modes of thought. Current research is beginning to show that even our ideas about some ethnic groups' regional styles must now be revised. The goal of this panel is to strengthen our understanding of African sculpture styles by looking at their manifestations in these borderlands."

Thus the panel intended to explore aspects of the ideas set forth originally in 1968, when Roy Sieber and Arnold Rubin published *Sculpture of Black Africa: The Paul Tishman Collection*. The message of those authors was deceptively simple and immensely influential. While telling us, innocently enough, that African art was more than the machinations of ethnicity, they destabilize several old notions — like those of the anonymous artist, of the blind following of conventions, and of a continent devoid of art history and full of art traditions too fragile to survive the West or Islam.

Meanwhile, Warren d'Azevedo and Robert Farris Thompson were busy demonstrating the existence of sophisticated art forms that function as com-

plex vehicles of contemplation and action in most realms of social enterprise. Insightfully early, in 1958, d'Azevedo had made it clear that the Gola applied refined aesthetic attitudes to their art and artists. Thompson (1968, 1973) then showed that the Yoruba also maintained refined aesthetic attitudes and put them to work in several important social and spiritual arenas. So it began to appear that aesthetic consciousness might be a rule rather than an exception in Africa. If that proved true, we might find artists and clients ready to use the manipulation of style as a resource in several expressive and symbolic arenas.

Shortly thereafter René Bravmann published two works that dramatically expanded our understanding of style. His *Islam and Tribal Art in West Africa* (1974) was a landmark exploration of both African Islam and traditional sculptural forms that demonstrated just how flexible and dynamic both could be. His *Open Frontiers* (1973) took up the theme set forth by Sieber and Rubin and demonstrated its viability in no uncertain terms. He began by deploring the tired but tenacious notion that ethnic groups possess immutable ethnic styles. He then quoted Simon Ottenberg (1971), who had artfully equated the ideas of tribe and tribal style with a pronounced ethnocentric interest in cultural morphology that does not lead to fruitful understanding. Finally, Bravmann developed his position quite convincingly by examining the cultural, political, and economic histories of two areas. Indeed he made it clear that fluidity of style in the borderlands between ethnic groups was a vital and defining characteristic of African art. Thus in the space of five years, from *Sculpture of Black Africa* to *Open Frontiers*, the horizons for research opened up immensely for African-art historians.

Recently Christopher Roy took another important step in the effort to understand the relationship between ethnicity and style. In *Art and Life in Africa: Selections from the Stanley Collection* (1985), he explores the phenomenon of style centers in Africa, where artists produce traditional works for several ethnic groups at the same time, sculpting eclectically in a variety of styles while contributing significantly to the history of style development in the areas to which

the works are traded. Families, clans, or workshops of artists can be involved; in the center that Roy addresses specifically, a family of sculptors works for five different ethnic groups.

This is significant information because it highlights the indigenous marketability of art and the often pronounced enterprise of artists. It suggests, for example, a parallel between the production of art and the manufacture of iron, which was smelted at precolonial industrial centers and traded extensively along the networks of commerce that have long been so very important in African history (Goucher 1981, especially pp. 182-83). It thus becomes possible to view art forms as commodities, as Arjun Appadurai (1986) and Igor Kopytoff (1986) have recently defined them.¹ Such a view in no way diminishes them as art. Rather, it allows us to perceive more readily the facility that African artists have for placing their wares in patterns of trade, and it allows us to perceive artworks more emphatically as objects of tangible value, because of their forms and their potential for meaning.²

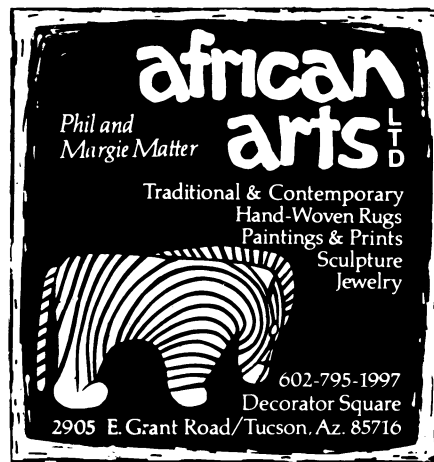
The prominence and clout of art in Africa have long been recognized by us. Its forms can be compelling. Its presentation in orchestrated multimedia events can be seductive. Its harnessing of spiritual powers can be overwhelming. And its manipulation of ideas can engage people in myriad influential ways. It is an element of culture primed for communication, predisposed to carry thought and emotion between people. But it is so full of repetition, layered meanings, and ambiguity that it is remarkably malleable in the hands of individuals or institutions. Thus art becomes a logical arena for the kinds of negotiations by which institutions seek authority and individuals seek personal and social identities. The fact that art, as a phenomenon possessed of so many vital characteristics, behaves in many instances as a commodity among cultures that have placed the highest value on commerce is testimony to its perceived capacities and powers.

The authors I have mentioned here are by no means the only ones who have examined ethnicity and style over the past two decades. An excursion through the back issues of *African Arts*, for example, reveals many more, and all of them make it clear that African art has never been a slave to ethnicity, and that ethnicity itself is a most fluid and supple designation. We see, for example, that clans are at least as important and often much more instrumental than ethnic groups in the development of styles. We see too that commerce and entrepreneurship are major ingredients in an art stew that seems consistently to place

premiums on the vitality and excitement of change while nevertheless managing to keep the flavor true, which is to say "traditional." But "traditional," like "tribe," "primitive," and "witchcraft," is a term quite ripe for energetic reevaluation. "Traditional" does not imply frozen in time, or invoke the cliché about doing things as the ancestors did. Obviously, for example, tradition and change are not mutually exclusive, although at certain times in certain places they generate tension between each other that becomes a kind of dialectic. Clearly, too, tradition is something negotiated and renegotiated constantly, much to the benefit of art, and the perplexed delight of art historians. Finally, as if there could be an end to all this reevaluation, models of African style geography that suggest pure cores and vagabond peripheries must be considered simplistic, at least in an enormous number of instances. In spite of the focus of my call for papers, what I call borderlands and Bravmann calls frontiers can be best understood as a frame of mind possible anywhere, from an ethnic group's edge to its center. It is a conceptual space where forms and ideas of diverse origins are contemplated and rearranged, where creativity is at a premium and its enactment results in lively history.

In a variety of ways the articles by Barbara E. Frank, Kathryn L. Green, Carol Ann Lorenz, Robin Poyner, and Christopher D. Roy, along with the introduction by Monica Blackmun Visonà, based on her remarks as the CAA panel's commentator, contribute to our deeper understanding of style. They show how both the happenstances of history and the quick wittedness of artists and clients constantly generate stylistic transformations. They demonstrate the pliability that characterizes the mixture of components — form, style, and symbolism on the one hand, and the beliefs and practices of individuals, institutions, and ethnic groups on the other — that help determine the nature of artworks. In short, they make it obvious, I think, that African art history is becoming an ever more exciting area for research in spite of many handicaps.

I would like to end with brief references to two of those handicaps. The first involves the nature of history in our enterprise. Art historians, along with researchers in several other disciplines, have long been involved in gathering oral traditions and personal reminiscences. A growing literature now questions the meaning of oral lore as well as the means by which it is collected.³ That literature focuses on the discipline of history, but it is of great relevance to us as art historians because it bears on how we define sound field methodologies and



how the people to whom we talk actually interpret and employ in their own social lives the lore we so frequently request of them and then use in our work as sources for alleged histories.

In addressing the pitfalls and complexities of doing oral history, this literature also clarifies its strengths and usefulness, and that is a contribution of great importance to us. As Africanists we often encounter difficulty with our colleagues who work on Western culture and claim to reap the benefits of written documentation. But reading the contemporary literature on oral tradition sheds light by extension on the written word's potential for unreliability. The motivations of Western scribes and chroniclers are as open to question as the motivations of people who speak from memory. It is, after all, as easy to write a lie as it is to tell one, and easy to miss a broader view or foster misapprehensions in either case.

Difficulty with scholars of Western culture regarding the nature of historical interpretation is part of a much larger problem. A horrifyingly large number of Western-art enthusiasts, be they scholars, critics, or students, still cling with an almost ferocious dedication to the notion that things African are things primitive and simple. Indeed it goes well beyond Africa. Publications and exhibitions that emphasize the bloodiness of other cultures enjoy tremendous success, for all the wrong reasons. Sieber wrote in the introduction to *Sculpture of Black Africa* that "far from primitive, African sculpture represents a series of complex and often highly developed traditions whose meanings and histories are beginning to emerge" (Sieber & Rubin 1968:10). Two decades later a great many of those meanings and histories have most certainly emerged, but remain largely ignored beyond the confines of our own subdiscipline. It seems to me that our audience should be much larger than the students in our classrooms and the readers of *African Arts*. I think we

need to reach more of those who persist in being fascinated by notions we jettisoned long ago, notions that drag art down by denying its relationship to thought and actual social practices.

We can apply this point to several realms, and we should because each makes the others more serious and systematic. So let me conclude with a reference to African literature. Camara Laye, born in 1924 in Guinea to parents who had belonged to a clan that excelled in sorcery, blacksmithing, and sculpting, became one of the best-known and greatest West African authors. He lived for many years in Paris, served as an ambassador to Ghana and in Sékou Toure's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and then spent many years in exile. He was anything but a simple man. And yet the translator of his last work wrote that Laye captured in his books "the instinctive poetry of the native African and the observation and imagination, as well as the scholarship, of a lively Western mind" (Laye 1980). Surely our research in the African humanities has brought us further than this. Clearly we have much further to go. □

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Primitive Art

6. Classification can be tricky and sometimes leads to errors. One type of image identified as an Ishan "panel ikenga" (Vogel 1974:11) is now known through Boston's work on Igbo and Igala cult of the hand images (1977:78) to be an *uvo*, or attachment for an Igbo *ikenga* used to mark a special achievement of its owner. The style and imagery of the examples illustrated in Vogel's work, which are now in the British Museum, are typically Igbo, but it is not impossible that they were collected in Ishan territory.

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POYNOR, notes, from page 61

1. I discuss the introduction of various styles and object types in "Edo Influence on the Arts of Owo" (1976).
2. For specific influences refer to Poyntor 1976.
3. Oshogboye, the sixteenth Olowo, was said to have been trained in the court of Benin. Was he there because the two royal families were related, as Owo tradition states, or was he there as a royal hostage, as Benin tradition suggests? Beyond the oral traditions, the structure of the Owo court is modeled after that of Benin. Great numbers of chieftaincy titles obviously have Benin origins. See Poyntor 1976 for specifics.
4. A number of Owo titles seem to derive directly from Benin, as suggested by the Benin *Edaiken* and the Owo *Idaniken*. Other sets of titles include the Ezomo of Uzebu/the Ojomo of Ujebu; Oliha/Olisa; Uwangwe/Unwagwe; Ologboshere/Ologboshere; Ero/Ero; Eriyo/Ariyo; Eribo/Aribo.
5. Oshogboye was said to be a sword bearer to the Oba of Benin in the sixteenth century, before he left to be crowned the sixteenth Olowo. Elewuokun reigned during the eighteenth century and was very much a "Beninizer" of the Owo court. He introduced Benin-style court garments and changed the names of several chieftaincies to Benin-derived names.
6. Egharevba 1960:154. According to Benin sources, the war chief Iken had to recapture Owo, and for a period of time Benin forces were repelled. Iken was eventually killed by Owo forces.
7. I discuss Owo masking traditions in "The Egungun of Owo" (1978).
8. I discuss this cloth briefly in "Traditional Textiles in Owo, Nigeria" (1980).
9. Frank Willett recently (1986) published a tribute to Akeredolu. An earlier reference to Akeredolu is "Thorn Carving by Native Nigerian Artist" (1947).

ing by Native Nigerian Artist" (1947).

10. I discussed these topics with Akeredolu occasionally during my stay in Owo in 1973. Notes of October, 1973, indicate that Akeredolu's evolution of thorn carving began in the early 1930s.
11. Willett 1986:50. Willett's article provides photographs of thorn carvings produced in the 1930s.
12. Justus Akeredolu, personal communication, May 1973.
13. The figure is carved during a lengthy ceremony lasting seventeen days. In the past, these were apparently as stylized as any other Owo art form. In the twentieth century they became quite naturalistic and have been compared by Owo informants to photographs of the deceased. The *ako* figures and ritual are discussed in Willett 1966, Abiodun 1976, and Poyntor 1978.
14. Willett took a photograph of this *ako* in 1958. I photographed the object myself in 1973. The upper part of the figure was stolen from the Department of Antiquities Building on the palace grounds in Owo in August 1973.
15. The Sashere *ako* was also photographed by Frank Willett in 1958, when he and William Fagg were allowed to see the pieces of the disconnected figure stored in the attic of the Sashere compound. I found a slide of a photograph of what appears to be the same figure in ritual context in the slide collection at the University of Iowa. William Fagg told me this was a photograph of the Sashere *ako* he was shown in Owo.
16. I came upon a photograph of the *ako* that was used in the ceremony in Owo in 1973. I was not able to purchase a copy, but I was allowed to photograph it. The image I got was extremely fuzzy, but it does reveal that the piece that was actually used was more like the Sashere object in style, and much less naturalistic than the Lamuren figure that was preserved.
17. Celia Barclay, personal communication, December 1973.
18. Carol Ann Lorenz, personal communication, December 2, 1973.

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MCNAUGHTON, notes, from page 77

1. I am not at all convinced that Appadurai's relegation of sacred or aesthetic objects to realms beyond commerce is valid for most African societies. See pp. 22, 23 of his introduction and Davenport 1986.
2. McNaughton 1986. Carol Ann Lorenz and Mary Moran, the organizers of the symposium at which this paper was presented, intend to publish the papers as an edited volume.
3. A great many enlightening articles can be read in three edited volumes: Bernardi, Poni & Triulzi (in which Terence D. Ranger, for example, has published an excellent article titled "Personal Reminiscence and the Experience of the People in East Central Africa"); Miller 1980; and Brown & Roberts 1980. In addition the reader may consult d'Azevedo 1962; MacGaffey 1978; Peel 1984; Strobel 1977; Tonkin 1982, 1986; Willis 1976; and Vansina 1985.

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GREEN, notes, from page 69

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this recent period of research.

- Lo and Do are both used in the literature, as the *l* and *d* in Mande languages are frequently interchanged and easily comprehensible to native speakers. Do is used in Kong. Lo is used among the Dyula of the Korhogo region in Ivory Coast. See below for further discussion of these terms.
- Ravenhill 1984:1. I would like to thank Philip Ravenhill for his quick response to my plea across the sea for a copy of his paper.
- Interview with Balagazani Diabagate, in Kong, June 15, 1986. I owe Balagazani Diabagate, the *tutigi* of Kong, a particular debt of gratitude for his openness and patience in the face of my often ignorant questions. I would also like to express my gratitude to Bouraba Diabagate, my invaluable research assistant.
- In Bazin's (1906) dictionary under *do* the reader is directed to see *dyo* for a verb meaning "to stop." However, *dyo* as a noun is defined in a first meaning as "*confrérie fétichiste*" and in a second meaning as "*fétiche (nom d'un)*."
- The common plural marker for Mandekan languages is *w*. Binger's spelling of *dou* is most likely the plural form, using a *u* rather than a *w* for the plural marker. See Tauxier 1932:74, n., where he relates that "Do" is the singular and "Do-ou" is the plural.
- I would like to thank Philip Ravenhill for this reference.
- Interviews with Balagazani Diabagate, Kong, June 15, July 22-24, and August 8, 1986.
- Interview with Bafaga Diane and Sourou Milogo, Kotedougou, October 26, 1980.
- See Glaze 1981:131-32 for a discussion of *kodöli* as a wide concept of mask.
- Unless otherwise stated my information on Do and Domoso in Kong comes from interviews with the *tutigi* of Kong, Balagazani Diabagate.
- I witnessed no such funeral dances during any of my fieldwork.
- See Prouteaux 1925:624-27 for a description of the *lomisi's* first night out after the Ramadan fasting month. When I witnessed the *lomisi's* announcement of the masks in June, 1986, I did not see the Kondali mask accompanying it as Prouteaux describes. It is interesting that Vogel also indicates a close connection between a drum and the Do among the Baule.
- See Kpelie mask photos and discussion in Richter 1979:67, 72.
- Ellen Suthers, personal communication, November 19, 1986. In this context the "Jimini" mask collected by Austin Freeman in the nineteenth century and discussed at length by Bravmann, who questions its provenance, could very well have been collected among the Djimini. It need not necessarily have come from Satama Sokoura or any other Mande settlement, contrary to what Bravmann suggests. See Bravmann 1974:147-52 for his discussion of the Freeman piece. Satama Sokoura is actually in Djamala and not Djimini, as he declares.
- See Bernus 1961:284-90 for a discussion of the supposed Kong origins of the Senufo Tiembara founders of Korhogo. This story of the Kong origins of the Senufo Tiembara founders of Korhogo has lately been questioned by Tiona Ouattara (1977).
- See Bravmann 1977:46-52 for a masking tradition among the Islamized Zara that gives form to an Islamic spirit.
- Ellen Suthers, personal communication, November 19, 1986.

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