African art in transit is an absorbing account of the commodification and circulation of African objects in the international art market today. Based on extensive field research among art traders in Côte d’Ivoire, Christopher Steiner analyzes the role of the African middleman in linking those who produce and supply works of art in Africa with those who buy and collect so-called “primitive” art in Europe and America. Moving easily from ethnographic vignette to social theory, Steiner provides a lucid interpretation which reveals not only a complex economic network with its own internal logic and rules, but also an elaborate process of transcultural valuation and exchange. By focusing directly on the intermediaries in the African art trade, he unveils a critical new perspective on how symbolic codes and economic values are produced and mediated in the context of shifting geographic and cultural domains. He calls into question conventional definitions of authenticity in African art, demonstrating how the categories “authentic” and “traditional” are continually negotiated and redefined by a plurality of market participants spread out across the globe.
African art in transit
African art in transit

Christopher B. Steiner

*Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County*
For my parents and Kathy
with love and gratitude
Because no idea and no object can exist in isolation from its cultural context, it is impossible to sever mechanically an item from one culture and place it in another.

Bronislaw Malinowski, “The Life of Culture” (1927)

A collector we know has placed his primitive art in niches with palm-tree backgrounds. This may be all right for a Lord and Taylor window, but it just doesn’t work in a home.  Mary Alpert, “Decorating with Primitive Art” (1981)
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>List of illustrations</th>
<th>page x</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>xiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction: The anthropology of African art in a transnational market</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Commodity outlets and the classification of goods</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 The division of labor and the management of capital</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 An economy of words: bargaining and the social production of value</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 The political economy of ethnicity in a plural market</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 The quest for authenticity and the invention of African art</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Cultural brokerage and the mediation of knowledge</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion: African art and the discourses of value</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ix
Illustrations

Maps
1 Map of Côte d’Ivoire.  page 3
2 Map of Abidjan.  22
3 Plan of Plateau market place, Abidjan.  24

Plates
1 Young boys at Plateau market place polishing Senufo masks with paste wax. Abidjan, April 1988.  17
2 Market-place stall. Bouaké, December 1987.  20
3 Traders at their stalls in front of Le Mont Korhogo Hotel. Korhogo, August 1988.  21
4 Partial view of the inside of an original concrete-frame stall at the Plateau market place. Abidjan, June 1988.  23
5 Wooden-frame stall built in the 1970s at the Plateau market place. Abidjan, June 1988.  25
6 Storehouse with proprietors. Treichville quarter, Abidjan, November 1987.  27
7 Hausa storehouse-owners with children. Treichville quarter, Abidjan, July 1988.  29
8 “Marchand d’Objets d’Arts Africains” art gallery and souvenir shop outside Hotel Les Cascades. Man, June 1988.  31
9 “Galerie Bassamoise” roadside stall. Near Grand Bassam, October 1987.  33
10 Artisanal workshop. Port de Carena, Abidjan, June 1988.  37
11 Dan doll with painted wooden face and costume made of cotton cloth, raphia fibers, feathers, wool yarn, and fur. Private collection. Photograph by Richard Meier.  43
12 Interior view of an art storehouse. Treichville quarter, Abidjan, November 1987.  45
13 Market-place stallholder with his stock of merchandise. Man, June 1988.  47
List of illustrations

14 European tourists negotiating a sale with Wolof traders at Plateau market place. Abidjan, December 1987.
15 Hausa trader examining a Senufo statue before offering a price to an itinerant supplier. Aoussabougou, Korhogo, December 1987.
23 Broken Baule statue “transformed” into a slingshot by replacing the broken legs with a forked pinnacle. Abidjan, July 1988.
27 Young Hausa trader with a display of trade beads at his market-place stall. Treichville quarter, Abidjan, July 1988.
28 Hausa trader at his stall in the front of the Plateau market place. Abidjan, November 1988.
29 Hausa trader with wooden trunk in the back section of the Plateau market place. Abidjan, May 1988.
31 A carver repairing the arm on an Asante female figure. Plateau market place, Abidjan, January 1988.
33 Small Akan brass boxes stained with potassium permanganate to dull the surface finish. Plateau market place, Abidjan, July 1988.
xii List of illustrations

34 Dan wooden face masks covered with kola nut compound to imitate the surface texture of a mask that had received “traditional” sacrifices. Man, June 1988. 144
35 Asante combs splattered with a kola nut residue. Plateau market place, Abidjan, March 1988. 145
36 Baule figure with beaded waistband and necklace. Reproduced by permission of the Peabody Museum, Harvard University. Photograph by Hillel Burger. 146
37 Baule figure with cotton loin-cloth affixed around its waist. Reproduced by permission of the Musée de l’Homme, Paris. Photograph by Charles Lemzaouda. 147
38 Baule figure showing partially removed wooden “loin-cloth.” Private collection. Photograph by Hillel Burger. 149
39 Baule “colonial” figure wearing Western-style cap, shirt, shorts, sandals, and wristwatch. Private collection. Photograph by C. B. Steiner. 150
40 Guinean workshop artist with “colonial” figures. Port de Carena, Abidjan, June 1988. 151
41 Workshop apprentice painting “colonial” figures. Bouaké, December 1988. 152
42 Dioula trader sanding down the paint from a lot of newly arrived “colonial” figures. Plateau market place, Abidjan, June 1988. 153

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