

Introduction

The anthropology of African art in a transnational market

In the first decades of this century, the discipline of social anthropology defined its subject matter as the study of the inner workings of closed social systems which were isolated supposedly both from the external world and from one another. The choice for this unit of study was developed in part as a reaction against the conjectures of cultural diffusionism – a then current theory which stressed how cultural traits and material culture diffused around the world. Rather than look at the movement of peoples and things from one socio-economic context to the next, social anthropology – whose theories were to become grounded in its methods of localized and intensive ethnographic fieldwork – claimed as its focus of analysis the single tribe, the isolated community, and the remote village. “[E]ach society with its characteristic culture,” writes Eric Wolf, “[was] conceived as an integrated and bounded system, set off against other equally bounded systems” (1982: 4).

In the past twenty-five years or so, anthropology has reacted strongly against the fiction of “primitive” isolates – deconstructing the internal architecture of putatively autonomous and self-regulating systems. The critique has taken essentially two paths. First, at the local level, the definition of the “system” itself has been revised to include “process” (i.e., history, competition, and social change). Key words associated with the earlier model of society – homeostasis, cohesion, and balance – have been replaced by new concepts such as pluralism, heterogeneity, crisis, conflict, and transformation. Second, at the supra-local level, the model of “bounded systems” has been challenged by those who see the world itself as a transformative force defined by historical processes and, in particular, shaped by the conflicts and contradictions of a capitalist world economy. In this formulation, the vision of the world has returned, in a curious fashion, to one espoused by the early diffusionists – that is to say, the world as global matrix, with transnational contacts and macro-scale linkages.¹

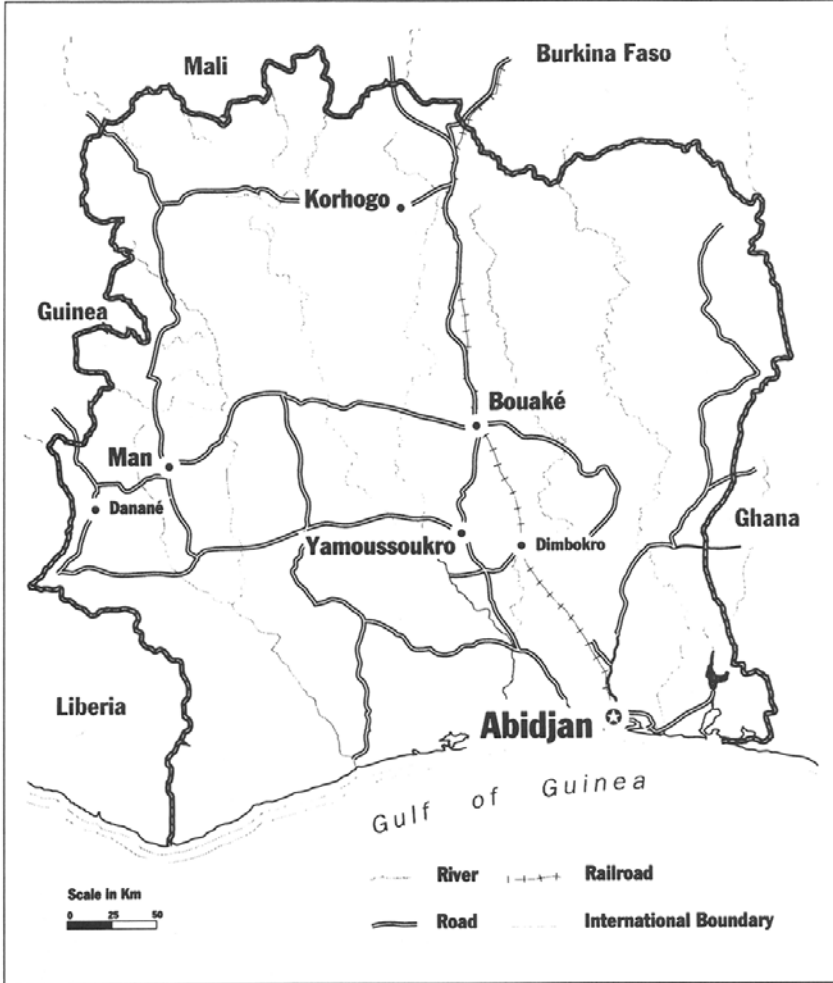
Drawing inspiration both from Immanuel Wallerstein’s research on the sociology of the modern world system (1974, 1979) and from Fernand Braudel’s research on the social history of global commerce (1973, 1982), anthropologists engaged in the formulation of this second revisionist model

2 African art in transit

have been turning their attention increasingly to the migration of persons and things in the transnational world economy. Expanding the focal range in the ethnographic lens, the subject of social anthropology has been pushed beyond the conventional community setting. Attention to global interdependence and cross-cultural exchange has revealed, as George Marcus and Michael Fischer have recently stated, an array of political and economic processes which “are registered in the activities of dispersed groups or individuals whose actions have mutual, often unintended, consequences for each other, as they are connected by markets and other major institutions that make the world a system” (1986: 91).

One way of constructing a “multilocale” ethnography within the boundaries of a single text is to trace the movement of particular commodities through space and time. Sidney Mintz, in *Sweetness and Power* (1985), tracks the history of sugar as a vehicle for analyzing the development of Afro-Caribbean slavery, the rise of Western capitalism, and the emergence of a transatlantic diaspora of mercantile accumulation. Eric Wolf, in *Europe and the People Without History* (1982), deals with the mobility of several commodities – reconstructing the major political and economic patterns of world history in order to shed light on the relationship among far-separated populations whose lives were entangled in a swirl of transglobal trade. And in *The Social Life of Things* (1986), a volume of collected essays edited by Arjun Appadurai, the contributors follow the circulation of objects (or groups of objects) as they move through specific cultural and historical milieus. Because a commodity does not always stay in the context for which it was intended, nor does it necessarily remain in the region within which it was produced, a commodity is said to have a “social life,” whose value, spirit, and meaning changes through time.

This book is about the trade in African art in Côte d’Ivoire, West Africa (Map 1).² It is about the circulation of art objects through local, national, and transnational economies, and it is about those whose lives are caught up in its supply, distribution, and exchange. The book takes as its unit of study a group of both itinerant and settled merchants who specialize in the commerce of African art – middlemen who link either village-level object-owners, or contemporary artists and artisans, to Western collectors, dealers, and tourists. The “community” of traders is made up of members from many different ethnic groups, and represents individuals from a whole range of social backgrounds and from various levels of economic success. Because the merchandise that the traders buy and sell is defined, classified, and evaluated largely in terms of Western concepts such as “art” and “authenticity,” the traders are not only moving a set of objects through the world economic system, they are also exchanging information – mediating, modifying, and commenting on a broad spectrum of cultural knowledge.



Map 1 Côte d'Ivoire.

Much of the fieldwork for this study was carried out in the market places of Abidjan – principally among art traders of Hausa, Mande, and Wolof ethnicity. Research was also undertaken in the markets of Yamoussoukro, Bouaké, Korhogo, and Man, as well as in several rural supply *entrepôts* including Danané in the west and Dimbokro in central Côte d'Ivoire. In addition, I spent part of my time in the field traveling through various districts of the country with Abidjan-based traders who purchase art from rural middlemen. Such travel was done both by public transportation and in a vehicle which I purchased at the beginning of the fieldwork. Documentary research in Côte d'Ivoire was undertaken in the Archives Nationales, the Université Nationale de Côte d'Ivoire, the Office National du Tourisme, and the Centre de Documentation at the Ministère de la Culture et de l'Information. Interviews were also conducted with Abidjan-based European and American dealers and collectors. The research was conducted largely in French (the language of intermediacy in the market place). A basic knowledge of Dioula helped, however, to gain access to rural traders.³ Interviews in the market place were mostly conducted without a tape recorder.⁴ The names of the traders which appear in the book have been changed in order to protect their identity. All conversions from local Ivoirian currency to American currency are based on an average exchange rate for 1987–88 of 300 CFA francs to one US dollar. Field data are referenced according to the date in which they were recorded in my notes, and dates are American style, i.e. month, day, year.

A history of the West African art trade

The art trade in West Africa began during the colonial period in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Since its inception, the principal *entrepôts* of international trade (in francophone West Africa) have been in the cities of Dakar and Abidjan – both of which were important administrative centers of French colonial rule. Although Senegalese merchants controlled much of the market in its formative period, the bulk of the African art trade has been distributed since the late 1950s among three major ethnic groups: Wolof of Senegal, Hausa of Niger and Nigeria, and Mande of Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire. All of these ethnic groups have historical links to the spread of mercantile capitalism in West Africa and, in particular, all of them have been responsible for the formation of cross-cultural trading diasporas throughout the region.

Two developments, which occurred at roughly the same time but in different parts of the world, are in large measure responsible for the formation of the art trade in West Africa. The first development was the “discovery” of African art at the turn of the century by European artists and intellectuals, such as Matisse, Picasso, Braque, Vlaminck, and Apollinaire. Their interest in

African forms and aesthetics stimulated a slowly rising demand for African art objects in Europe. At first, the demand was limited largely to the Cubists and their immediate entourage. But by the 1910–20s, the demand for African art in Europe had already spread to other sectors of the society. In particular, the end of the First World War brought about an atmosphere in France which was conducive to engaging the interest of a wider public in the appreciation and collection of African art (cf. W. Cohen 1980: 284–85). The disdain in which Africans had previously been held by the great majority of France’s population was replaced after the war “by a certain curiosity about the customs of these [African] people who had fought fiercely [against the Germans] and were now joyful partners in the victory celebrations” (Paudrat 1984: 157). The success of the African pavilion at the Exposition Coloniale de Vincennes in 1931 fueled even further the demand for African objects in France (Laude 1971: 20). Even after the Cubist movement had ended, and many of the artists themselves had lost all interest in African art, the *market* for African art, which they had inspired and helped organize, had already developed its own commercial structure and economic force – enabling it to continue and flourish without their support.⁵

While interest in African art was slowly emerging in Europe – spreading further and further outside the inner circle of modern primitivists – European presence in Africa was growing at a curious pace, as the scramble for the continent unfolded. By the 1920s, after most parts of West Africa had been conquered by and divided among the major European powers, colonial administrations were set into place, thereby securing commercial access to West Africa by metropole-based trading companies and expatriate firms.⁶ The colonial administration in Afrique Occidentale Française (AOF) granted special rights and privileges to some of their most “loyal” subjects. The Senegalese, in particular, who among other things were associated with the *tirailleurs sénégalais* (i.e., a group of armed forces who fought for France to conquer vast territories of West Africa) were protected by colonial rule and granted access to virtually all the territories in West Africa which were administered by the French (Manning 1988: 63–64).

This new form of transnational socio-political hierarchy, which emerged during the colonial period in West Africa, allowed for members of certain ethnic groups (such as the Wolof of Senegal) to displace themselves with increased security and greater facility (Challenor 1979; Echenberg 1991). Under protection of European colonial rule, these groups were able to travel across what had once been hostile and dangerous geo-political and ethnic frontiers. Increased access for commercial pursuits by both European and African entrepreneurs meant not only that Europeans had found new potential markets for the sale of their goods in the colonies (Steiner 1985), but it meant also that the colonies had found a new source of demand for their goods in

Europe. Although most of the exports which were made by colonial trading firms were of raw materials forged on the back of cheap labor, somewhere in the shadows of these vast commercial ventures one finds the small, tentative beginnings of an African art trade.

The career of one of the first professional African art dealers in Europe, Paul Guillaume, was launched accidentally by a curious intersection of these two historical developments.⁷ Guillaume's initial interest in African art was sparked in 1911 by the unanticipated visit of artist Joseph Brummer. "Informed by Apollinaire of the presence of an African object of quality in the window of an automobile appliance store," writes Jean-Louis Paudrat, "Brummer negotiated its purchase from the young clerk [Guillaume] and induced him to show him regularly the 'fetishes' received by the clerk's firm through its colonial rubber supplies" (Paudrat 1984: 152; cf. Donne 1978: 107). Within a year of Brummer's visit, Guillaume had quit his job at the automobile supply shop, and had begun actively to seek his own supply of African art. From 1912 to 1920, Guillaume continuously increased his shipments of art from rubber contractors in West Africa, and began to place advertisements in the colonial press for the purpose of extending the range of his stock (Paudrat 1984: 153). By the 1920s, Guillaume had opened his first gallery on rue La Boétie in Paris. He continued to search for new suppliers of African art by developing a network of contacts with colonial officials from AOF. At Le Bréhant, a Parisian café frequented by officials on leave from the colonies, Guillaume posted a sign which read: "Paul Guillaume pays high prices for all pieces and collections of African origin" (Paudrat 1984: 160).⁸

Although the historical record is decidedly silent about the role of the African middleman in supplying colonial agents with the artworks which were being exported to the metropole, it would not be imprudent to infer that the commercial exporters who were shipping African objects to European dealers, such as Paul Guillaume (as well as Carl Einstein, Charles Vignier, Pierre Verité, Charles Ratton, and others), were not collecting the art themselves from the remote rural villages from which the objects were being extracted. As in so many other modes of extraction which, at different moments in the African past, have supplied a variety of export commodities for shipment to the West – the most obvious case being the Atlantic slave trade – it was the African intermediary who provided the first and most vital link in the commercial chain.

From the 1920–30s onward, the trade in African art became increasingly structured and organized on the side of supply. By this time, African artists had already started reproducing objects expressly for the export market. Some of these pieces were being commissioned by local colonial administrators, either for their own collections or as gifts for their friends and family in the metropole. Others were already being marketed from stalls and storehouses owned

by African traders in French colonial capitals, such as Dakar and Abidjan. By the 1950s, African art traders from AOF were regularly making the journey to France to sell objects directly to European-based dealers.⁹ As the supply diminished of what the Western collector defines as the “classic” genres of African art – ideally, wooden face masks and ritual statuary (see Rubin 1984: 15–17) – traders expanded their inventory to include other categories of “art,” such as household or utilitarian items, furniture, textiles, etc.

From very early on in the trade, newly carved objects were being artificially aged – their patina, coloration, and surface wear being carefully altered – so that the objects could be marketed in the West as antique or “authentic” art. During the decades of the 1960–70s, the art market in West Africa had probably reached its boom. Not only had an extensive demand been created in Europe, but also by this time demand had reached the shores of America. “The Peace Corps, the civil-rights movement, African nationalism, and the beginning of mass tourism to West Africa,” writes Nicholas Lemann, “all increased American interest in African art” (1987: 26). In the late 1970s, most analysts would probably agree, the art market in West Africa had started to take a downward turn. Economic recessions in the West and diminishing supplies in Africa both contributed to a sluggish market and a deflationary spiral. While the market for the resale of African art from private collections was ignited by the economic bonfire of the 1980s – with record prices being set at one auction after another – the West African side of the trade smoldered, never returning to where it had been during the 1960–70s. Part of the reason for this is that many buyers had become convinced that all examples of “genuine” African art had already been taken out of the continent. The economic competition in the African art market had thus shifted from the site of original supply in Africa to the locus of the recirculation of previously owned objects in the West. While the market, in Côte d’Ivoire alone, still currently supports several hundred full-time African traders and middlemen, its scale has been significantly reduced by the combined negative forces of diminishing supply and dwindling demand. Although new traders keep entering the market each year, their economic returns keep going down and their future grows increasingly uncertain.

African art through the lens of commerce

The study of African art has tended to concentrate on the function or aesthetics of various forms of art within the context of a single, highly localized ethnographic setting.¹⁰ In order to describe a given art form in what is supposedly its most pristine or “authentic” state, scholars specializing in the study of African art have often isolated the unit of analysis without taking into account the effects of outside influence.¹¹ Such a mode of investigation is inevitably

artificial since it is arguable that at no time has African art existed in total cultural isolation. In recent years, studies of African art have begun to take more seriously the impact of outside forces on local artistic expression. Some recent works, for example, have taken into account: (1) the complexity of ethnic attribution in African arts (e.g., the movement of objects for ritual use across ethnic boundaries); (2) the impact of the world economic system on local artistic production (e.g., the manufacturing of so-called “tourist” or “airport” arts); (3) the articulation of Islam and other world religions with indigenous African beliefs in the creation of syncretic sacred arts; and (4) the incorporation of Western manufactured products (plastic dolls, factory-made cloth, industrial hardware, etc.) into so-called “traditional” contexts.

Although the field of vision has widened greatly in the past few years, one area of research which remains largely unexplored is the commercial aspect of African art and, in particular, the analysis of the specialized trading diasporas which are used to circulate art objects throughout the African continent and the rest of the world. There are several reasons, I believe, which account for the lack of interest among scholars in the African art trade. First, like the study of markets in general, the study of art markets may appear initially to be a daunting task – requiring the understanding of a complex system characterized by extensive verbal bargaining, complicated credit relations, and a nearly untraceable network of circulating goods and capital. The study of the African art trade by a *Westerner* is made even more problematic by the very fact that the investigator belongs by definition to the consumer class and, as a result, is often considered to be a potential buyer of art rather than simply a patron of ideas.¹²

Second, the study of the African art market poses many of the same problems as the study of an African secret society – with the added obstacle that most traders do not want the investigator to become an initiate. Trade secrets cover a broad spectrum of activities. Traders, for example, are reluctant to talk about their earnings (for fear that kin, friends, or other traders will want to borrow money); they will not speak readily of their commercial success (almost all traders returning to Africa from Europe or America will try to discourage others from going abroad by saying that business is generally bad); they will not display or reveal their entire stock (for they know that the fewer times an object is seen, the higher its potential value will remain);¹³ they will not easily reveal either the sources of their goods or their network of clients (for one of the key functions of traders is to maintain their status as middlemen, by keeping apart both village object-owners and producers from Western consumers); and, lastly, they will not divulge freely their techniques of artificial aging or mechanical patination (so as, understandably, to keep the buyers somewhat mystified).

Third, because the study of African art has developed largely in conjunction

with the collection of African art in the West, I would argue that those who study African art (especially those trained as art historians) have been disinclined to write about a system which makes of aesthetic objects temporary commodities in the “middle passage” from African village to Western vitrine. In the collection of African art by Westerners, the aesthetic value of an object is usually given more overt attention than its economic value.¹⁴ Moreover, since the collection of African art is often associated with an idealized Western vision of static “primitive” culture, most collectors, I believe, would prefer to read about the uses of African art in a putatively unchanging pre-colonial milieu than about the commoditization of African art in a post-colonial transnational economy.¹⁵

Finally, there has been a tendency among Western scholars and collectors alike to dismiss African art traders as “misinformed” or “ignorant,” and unable, therefore, to truly appreciate or recognize the aesthetic merit and ethnographic provenance of what they sell.¹⁶ Traders are often treated by Westerners with disrespect, and sometimes even with unbecoming disdain. Most of the traders who travel with their merchandise to Europe and America are described by Westerners as “runners,” while their Western counterparts who travel to Africa to purchase large volumes of art for export to the West are referred to by the far more genteel and prestigious term “dealers.” The implication of this semantic discrimination, I would argue, is closely related to a distinction which is commonly drawn between the African artist and the Western connoisseur. While the latter is said to be capable of judging aesthetic qualities and of ranking the relative “importance” of different works of African art, the former, it is said, simply produces his work spontaneously – oblivious somehow to the “genius” which guides his own hand (Price 1989: 87–89). The African art trader, in a similar tone, is often described as one who handles “masterpieces” without knowledge or care; he is portrayed as a blind supplier of raw materials (hence the word “runner”) whose goods are “transformed” by the Western dealer who, contrary to his African counterpart, is entirely capable of appreciating what he sells (cf. Taylor and Brooke 1969). When collectors of African art buy from Western dealers, they expect to be guided by the seller’s good taste and judgment. In general, they neither expect to be cheated by the dealer, nor to cheat the dealer themselves. When these same individuals buy the same sort of objects from an African “runner,” they expect only to encounter deceit – either to be misguided by the seller into buying a “fake,” or, conversely, to misguide the seller by buying something from him which is actually worth far more than the price at which he agrees to sell. As Lemann puts it, those who “patronize the runners [are] convinced that these people – usually illiterate and speaking only broken English – can’t possibly know what the stuff they’re selling is really worth” (1987: 28). The wife of a collector in New York told me once that her husband saw nearly every African “runner” that called him at his

Manhattan office. "He keeps hoping to find that one masterpiece, like a real Fang reliquary figure or something, buried somewhere in the junk that the runners usually sell" (12/20/89).

Hence, on the one hand, the economic quality of a trader's merchandise is ignored in order to draw attention away from the monetary value of the category "art." And, on the other hand, the artistic/cultural elements which make up the trader's craft are dismissed since it is believed that only the Western buyer or dealer is really capable of appreciating aesthetic worth. For all the reasons listed above, then, the African art trader has been relegated by silence to an invisible cog in the wheels of a complex transnational market – a market which functions because of, *not* in spite of, the African middleman.

Analysis of the African art trade not only sheds light on a "forgotten" people, it also illuminates an important facet of African art which has generally been neglected in the literature. By broadening the parameters of discernible influence, the study of the art trade integrates areas hitherto treated in relative isolation. Because traders move continually back-and-forth from local to global economy, a study of the art market sheds light on the impact of Western consumption on African art and aesthetics. Exogenous demand has not only encouraged traders to drain villages of their artistic wealth, but it has also led to the creation of new forms of material culture (hybrid styles, invented genres, replicas, and fakes) constructed, in James Clifford's apposite phrase, from the "debris of colonial culture contact" (1985: 166). Hence, the study of the African art trade uncovers not only a complex economic system with its own internal structure, logic, and rules, it reveals also an elaborate process of cross-cultural exchange in which the image of Africa and its arts are continually being negotiated and redefined by a plurality of market participants spread out across the world.

Paradigms in the study of African art

This book draws upon and contributes to several different bodies of literature, including those on the sociology of the market place, the linguistics of verbal bargaining, the structuring of ethnicity in cross-cultural trade, the political economy of commoditization, and the dynamics of cultural brokerage or the mediation of knowledge. Most components of these diverse bodies of literature are referenced and discussed in the places of the book where they are most relevant. In this section, therefore, I have chosen to restrict my discussion to the literature on African art, and, in particular, to locate this work within the history of scholarship on African art and material culture.

The study of African art developed largely in conjunction with the discipline of anthropology at the beginning of this century. Some of the earliest works on African art were written in order to further particular claims within a broader