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0521457521 - African Art in Transit - Christopher B. Steiner

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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.

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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. Matty Alpert, "Decorating with Primitive Art" (1981)

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Unless indicated otherwise, all photographs are by the author.

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