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ONE

Objects and agendas: re-collecting the Congo

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When the papers in this volume were presented at the American Museum of Natural History late in 1990, a discussant commented that “one of the nice things about studying African art is that we are all so ill at ease doing it.”¹ People who study Florentine art, or French Impressionism, he said, seem to have such enormous certainty about what they are doing and what it all means, whereas among the Africanists, “there is so much angst in the air with people who are studying something that appears alien to them. This helps get at more fundamental questions.”

The papers in this volume are about some of the issues that cause this angst, in particular with respect to one body of African material culture: art from the Congo collected around the turn of the century, most of which has found its way into Western museums and private collections. We start with the premise that although African objects belong to, and derive meaning from, their use in Africa, once collected they enter into the repertoire of Western material culture. In the last decade such transformations in the meaning of things have been discussed from many points of view, most often in terms of processes of appropriation, commoditization, and recontextualization. Many of these discussions have summarized and outlined general processes in which artifacts become art; objects of use become objects of desire; cultures have been constructed and imagined through objects; and objects have been used to “speak for” or stifle the voices of various classes of culture bearers.² These issues frame much of the discussion that follows as well as the papers in this book, even though many critical essays on these subjects have been written since these papers were first presented. All the authors in this

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book have revised their papers, but some with only minimal changes, mainly because the case studies presented here exemplify and provide texture for many of the more general discussions that have taken place. In this introduction, we attempt to relate the subject matter of these Congo case studies to the theoretical concerns mentioned above, as well as to sketch out the relevant history of what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo (hereafter Congo) and what was, at the time these collecting expeditions took place, the Congo Free State or the Belgian Congo.

On the simplest level, the angst is the result of attempts by Westerners to understand the art of Africa. This is not a straightforward project, since Western ideas about the nature of art have changed over the past century with the advent of photography and the move from naturalism and realism to expressionism, abstract expressionism, modernism, post-modernism and so on. Even at the turn of the century when the scramble for curios, scientific specimens, and much of what we now declare to be art took place, there was no consensus about the status of these objects. Material things, as the papers in this volume will show, have been crucial to Western understanding of Africa, but there has been a century of debate about how African objects fit into Western descriptive categories. Fabian, in his contribution here, speaks of “commodities of distinction” – a phrase that has many apt connotations, but most importantly suggests that these collectibles helped people think about other people. They were essential to the project of describing, defining, and apprehending Africa.

Defining the nature of art has always been important in relation to categorizing the status of collected objects (and their creators) since it brings us directly into the debate about which peoples do and do not have art. This argument, of course, is really about everyone’s relative status in some sort of global inventory of societies and cultures, arranged more or less hierarchically depending on when and where the discussion is taking place. At the time the collections discussed in this book were made, it was assumed that art was a product of civilization. Realism, naturalism, and the ability to make symmetrical objects were still dominant ideas at that time. Asian societies were grudgingly recognized in the West as having antiquity and art but the door remained closed to the rest of the world. Nor had these concepts of art yet been moved aside by the nascent avant garde in Europe itself.

Thus the ideas brought to the Congo by late nineteenth- and early

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twentieth-century collectors in Africa reflected not only assumptions about the nature of art but also theories about the relationship between certain forms of art and civilization and theories of racial and cultural hierarchy. Most travelers could not conceive of Africans producing art nor, indeed, of having history. Naturalism, when it was found in Africa, was assumed to have exogenous origins, while symmetry was thought possibly to come from Egypt or even Atlantis. Nevertheless, from the earliest encounters with certain kinds of objects – the Kuba king figures, for example, or Mangbetu ivories – some collectors, whether traders, scientists, missionaries or explorers, began to question their own descriptive categories.

While African objects had been displayed as curios in the homes of the wealthy for centuries, they first began to go on public display in Western museum settings at the end of the nineteenth century, not coincidentally just when the collections discussed in this book were made. While conventions of display have changed a great deal during the past century, and recent exhibitions like the Royal Academy of Art's traveling exhibition, "Africa: Art of a Continent" suggest that African art has been incorporated into the West's expanding catalogue of world cultural heritage, there is still reason to think that many people remain ill at ease with the display of non-Western objects.³ After almost a century of exhibitions, ranging from curio cabinets to ethnology displays to fine art exhibits, and considerable scholarly research in the field of African art, collectors, scholars, the press, and the public are still pondering on how to deal with context – how much, what kind, and in whose voice it should be stated. Context includes questions about the historical and ethical circumstances of collecting, the social and cultural world in which objects were first created and used, and the transformations in meaning as objects travel about on the global stage and are finally "digested by" (Vogel 1991) the West and incorporated into changing aesthetic categories and exhibition formats.

Collecting is fascinating, not only because of the way in which it speaks to an inner, psychological drive in so many people (see Elsner and Cardinal 1994), but also because its study provides some insight into the interactions and transactions that shaped history and defined the relationship between the West and Africa, not only the colonial relationship, but also the proto-colonial relationship with all its intellectual baggage of

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imperialism and racism, and the post-colonial situation. Many recent discussions about collecting offer important insights into the way collecting created and defined Africa as well as contributed to various epistemological paradigms, for instance anthropology as an academic discipline (Coombes 1994), African studies in general (Mudimbe 1988) or the genre of travel writing (Pratt 1992). This growing literature shows how objects have been used economically, politically, and cognitively in the encounter between the West and colonized peoples. However, the history of collecting, like that of representation, is complicated and cannot easily be summed up using words like “pillage” or “appropriation” or even “commodification”. As valid as these descriptors may be in certain situations, the transactions were often complicated and multifaceted. This book offers a set of case studies which fill in parts of the picture outlined in these discussions and, in some instances, raise questions about the general paradigms.

From a late twentieth-century perspective, the collectors discussed in this book were engaged in a hasty and somewhat indiscriminate scramble for Central African objects. With the exception of Herbert Ward (see chapter 8) most of them were not particularly interested in art, and even Ward did not think of his African objects as art. These collectors’ agendas had to do with saving souls, opening up markets, gathering commodities to sell, and gathering scientific specimens to fill in evidentiary blanks in various theories that were meant to explain Africa and carve out an intellectual space for it vis-à-vis the West. For example, in the case of William H. Sheppard, Emil Torday, and to a more limited extent even Herbert Lang, there was the expectation that the display of their collections might cast a more positive light on the peoples of Africa.

Several of the essays in this book focus on individuals who converged in the same area during roughly the same period, in some cases literally bumping into each other. For reasons that will become clear in the brief outline of the history of the Congo presented below, Leo Frobenius, Emil Torday, William H. Sheppard, Samuel P. Verner, and Frederick Starr all met or followed each other in rapid succession in the Kasai region of the Congo Free State, home to the Kuba, Luba, Lele and related peoples. With the exception of Verner and Starr, their collecting itineraries and activities were mostly planned independently of each other. Nevertheless, through gossip, as well as through actual encounters, knowledge of each

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others' activities intensified competition and influenced what was collected.

This convergence of collectors is especially important when one considers the issue of African agency, since the suppliers were finite in number and many of the African artists and sellers encountered and dealt with a number of the collectors. Some Africans certainly understood the desires and tastes of the collectors, and some became quite adept at manipulating the market. Patterns of trade and manufacture that have been described for the recent period (Steiner 1994) were also typical of this early period, although many people today erroneously assume that before the cash economy had enveloped Africa, the situation was more pristine and authenticity could more easily be defined. On the contrary, in this period at the dawn of the colonial era, exchange values were being established and objects that had not previously been commodities were being defined as such for the first time. Artifacts and the texts that came with them were an important part of this process of economic redefinition – new scales of value developed as different sorts of wealth, both material and immaterial, entered into the economy.

The exchange of objects between Africans and Europeans also created an arena in which material objects could be used to define African ethnicity and culture. Labels and explanations were needed to connect objects, cultural practices, and people. Fabian notes (chapter 4) how each collected object provided an answer to a question not yet asked: knowledge was created as things were collected, defined, and redefined in a Western epistemological system. The people who made the objects were associated with them through a labeling process that acquired great importance in the subsequent administration of the Congo Free State and the Belgian Congo. As MacGaffey and Fabian suggest (see chapters 4 and 9), these texts are an integral part of the creation of art, but they go further and are a way of classifying people, communities, and social systems. It is in the search for labels for artifacts that much of the contemporary map of Central Africa was created.

Generalizations about the nature of early colonial collecting often make Africans appear more passive than they were. Although African participants in the collecting process often remain anonymous, in some instances they have left their “signatures” on the collections – signing

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works, making replicas or fakes, or making choices about parting with certain pieces and not others. Africans made conscious choices about what to give, sell, or make for the collectors, based on their perception of the outsiders' interests and desires. Force and bribery were used to secure objects, both in warfare and as part of the daily imposition of colonial power, but when one looks closely at what actually happened, to the limited extent possible using the available sources, African agency becomes as important as the fantasies and intellectual schemes of the scientists, ethnographers, missionaries and entrepreneurs who take the spotlight in the written history of African collections in the West. To take just one example, Frederick Starr notes with frustration how Frobenius' recent purchases in the Pende area had affected both the quantity and quality of what was available; and on another occasion, how his request for objects showing signs of age led to the appearance of quantities of suspiciously aged objects (see chapter 7).

Central Africa, specifically the Belgian Congo, was both typical of collecting in other parts of Africa and other parts of the colonial world, and at the same time unique. The search for exotic artifacts has been described in terms of the early development of museums, colonization, and the emergence of various bodies of knowledge that placed colonized places and peoples in the West's orbit. World's fairs and commercial expositions, both pre-dating museums and contemporaneous with them, competed for the attention and pocketbooks of the public (Coombes 1994; Rydell 1984). In Africa, by the end of the nineteenth century, specifically after the Berlin conference, all of the colonial powers began sponsoring systematic collecting expeditions that brought back trophies and artifacts for display in expositions and museums. Personal collecting and public and private sales also continued, reaching into different pockets of society at different times. In some respects, however, King Leopold's Congo was unique, for here was a territory both claimed as a personal possession – by a foreign king who never set foot there – and supposedly opened through his largesse to the world for exploration and exploitation. As we shall show, the financial and public relations problems that developed in the Congo, as well as the very organization of the Congo Free State, led to certain kinds of international outreach among investors, the press, museums, and scientists associated with the latter, hence the international nature of the collectors mentioned in this book.

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The Congo Free State's employees and officers were likewise an international mix, as were the destinations of the artifacts.

Within the Congo, there was a concentration of collecting activity in those places where other forms of economic intervention were taking place. Villages along the major rivers – particularly those tributaries that supported steamers – became trading stations, and many collectors made short collecting sojourns as the river boats stopped for supplies of wood for fuel, food, and trade goods, especially ivory and rubber. Both the nature of the artifacts produced and the way they were valued were affected by this convergence of collectors in particular areas. In the Kasai, beginning with Sheppard's visit in 1890, a rapid succession of visitors sought artifacts among the Kuba and collected massively over the next two decades. Five of the papers in this volume (Arnoldi, Binkley and Darish, Fabian, Mack, Schildkrout) discuss collectors in this region. Three of the papers (Geary, Keim, Schildkrout) deal with collectors in the northeastern part of the Congo, including Lang and Chapin and their predecessors, Schweinfurth, Junker, and Casati. Even though these collectors followed one another in succession over a forty-year period, they clearly influenced each other. As Geary (chapter 6) shows in her discussion of book illustrations of the Mangbetu and Azande, tropes were created about Africa and specifically about these groups, and provided models for subsequent collectors. Moreover there was time for Africans to adjust to the expectations and demands of the collectors, and this had a marked impact on the art of the region (see Schildkrout and Keim 1990a).

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CONGO

An overview of the history of the Belgian Congo will be useful at this point, to set the stage on which artifact collecting took place. While the collectors described in this book were minor players in the history of the region, they brought back tangible objects that were used to construct the Africa of popular imagination. Themes in this story include the slave and ivory trades, the scandals of the Congo Free State, and the subsequent regularization of Belgian rule. The scene begins on a river – the Congo (also called the Zaire River), the world's second largest in volume and length. Its basin, stretching over 2,000 kilometers both north and south

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and east and west, covers most of Central Africa and comprises many ecological zones ranging from dry grasslands, to rain forest, to marsh, to riverine. This was the jungle of Tarzan, the river of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and the backdrop of museum dioramas and live expositions.

For at least two millennia, Bantu-speaking peoples have been colonizing the Central African environments, settling new lands, improving technologies, increasing population densities, and linking communities through long-distance trade and conquest. By the time the Portuguese arrived on the West Coast in 1483, Central African political organizations included thousands of village chiefdoms and several centralized societies such as Kongo, Luba, and Lunda, as well as a web of long-distance trade routes for commodities such as copper, salt, and iron and shorter distance routes for articles such as crops, game, medicines, and crafts (e.g., Connah 1987; Phillipson 1985; Vansina 1990).

The Central African slave trade has been justifiably characterized as a massive wave that spread destruction across the continent (Miller 1988). Nevertheless, from the fifteenth century the slave trade had the paradoxical effect of both destruction and development. Notorious for its negative impact on African people, it nonetheless did not end the long-term intensification of human activity in Central Africa and provided some Africans who were left behind with new political and economic opportunities. By the time the Belgians began their conquest in the late nineteenth century, nearly the whole of the Congo River basin was inhabited. The grasslands north and south of the rain forest were home to many African kingdoms and empires, and the forest regions were moving toward larger-scale social organization. Extensive trade networks reached everywhere (Harms 1981; Miller 1983; Reefe 1983; Vansina 1966, 1990).

Among the first to feel the effects of the slave trade were the Bakongo, a people who live on the West Coast just south of the mouth of the Congo River. The Bakongo kingdom welcomed the Portuguese arrival and soon profited from its middleman position between the supply of slaves and other products coming from the interior and the Portuguese buyers on the coast. However, conflicts and trade between Portuguese, Euro-Africans, the Mani Kongo (the king), and provincial nobles, led to frequent warfare. Moreover, interior peoples such as the Imbangala regularly invaded the Kongo while other Europeans established competitive trading posts to the north and south. By the late seventeenth century

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Kongo had broken into fragments and many of its citizens became slaves themselves (Hilton 1985; Martin 1972; Thornton 1983).

This sequence of prosperity followed by destruction repeated itself many times as the slaving wave advanced eastward into the continent. In the seventeenth century, slaving states such as Kasanje and Matamba flourished about 300 kilometers inland. In the eighteenth century the violence was concentrated about 500 or 600 kilometers from the coast, and in the first half of the nineteenth century the Lunda empire, centered on the upper Lulua River, benefited from the raids and trade. Violence subsided behind the wave, but the slave trade continued to define much of the chaotic life of the region. The poor and powerless suffered from warlords who taxed, kidnapped, and conscripted labor. The powerful remained so only as long as they had access to firearms and trade goods from the coast.

In the east and north of the Congo basin, Arab traders developed similar patterns. An Arab trade in African slaves that had existed for nearly a thousand years reached Central Africa in the middle of the nineteenth century. From Zanzibar on the far east coast, the Swahili–Arabs crossed Lake Tanganyika in 1840 and thereafter developed Maniema, an ivory and slave empire ruled loosely by Tippu Tip in the 1870s and 1880s. To the south, other Swahili–Arab and African traders established states (e.g. Reefe 1983: 198–202). On the Nile River to the north, slavers and ivory traders founded Khartoum in 1822 and by the 1860s had reached the Azande and Mangbetu, located on the northeastern edge of the rain forest (Keim 1983). Generally the Arab trade from the east was as destructive as the European trade from the west, but unlike the Europeans, the Arabs themselves entered the interior of the continent and organized large areas of what is now eastern Congo under their own leadership. Thus at least some aspects of Swahili–Arab and Sudanic–Arab culture including new crops, language, and clothing styles spread rapidly into eastern and northeastern Congo.

THE EUROPEAN SCRAMBLE FOR AFRICA

Until the nineteenth century most European interest in Africa was satisfied by staying on the coasts. In terms of art, collecting focused on objects made of rare and valuable materials, particularly ivory. Artists

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were commissioned to make specific objects such as salt cellars, spoons, and horns that often depicted the earliest encounters between Europeans and Africans. The criteria for collecting reflected the tastes of wealthy Renaissance merchants and their interest in exotic curiosities. These were very different criteria from those that developed in the nineteenth century with the emergence of ethnology, anthropology, and the reification of the “primitive.” It is these later collecting agendas that are explored in this book, although it is important to note that even during the Renaissance some forms of African art were adapting to global markets (Bassani 1977; Bassani and Fagg 1988).

In the nineteenth century important changes in European society such as industrialization and the rise of the middle class led to a growing interest in Africa and eventually to colonization of the entire continent. In Africa, the first evidence of change came at the very end of the eighteenth century with efforts to stop the slave trade and tentative explorations of the interior. Throughout the nineteenth century a growing European involvement in Africa led to an extensive campaign to end the trade in humans, ever more frequent explorations, the founding of numerous Christian missions, increasing trade in non-slave commodities (e.g., vegetable oils, ivory, rubber) and the establishment of a few coastal colonies. Meanwhile, technological advances in firearms, transportation, communication, and medicine made life in Africa much less costly to Europeans.

Given the voracious colonial appetite of modern Europe and the knowledge and interest that had accumulated, except in South Africa there had been surprisingly few efforts to take African territory by the 1880s. This failure to colonize meant that Europeans still perceived the costs of large-scale colonization in tropical Africa as greater than the potential benefits. By the 1890s, however, they were in the midst of a rapid and violent “scramble” to take all territory possible. What changed from the 1880s to the 1890s seems to have been an intensification of European nationalism. The growing European identification of personal well-being with national well-being led to incident after incident in which the states of Europe clashed abroad while masses of citizens at home demanded that there be no slight to their nation. The great powers – Britain, France, and the newly-formed Germany – found that every spark could ignite a fire and indeed, in 1914 a spark lit the conflagration of