ART AND RISK IN ANCIENT YORUBA

In this book, Suzanne Preston Blier examines the intersection of art, risk, and creativity in early African arts from the Yoruba center of Ife and the striking ways that ancient Ife artworks inform society, politics, history, and religion. Yoruba art offers a unique lens into one of Africa's most important and least understood early civilizations, one whose historic arts have long been of interest to local residents and Westerners alike because of their tour de force visual power and technical complexity. Among the complementary subjects explored are questions of art making, art viewing, and aesthetics in the famed ancient Nigerian city-state, as well as the attendant risks and dangers assumed by artists, patrons, and viewers alike in certain forms of subject matter and modes of portrayal, including unique genres of body marking, portraiture, animal symbolism, and regalia. This volume celebrates art, history, and the shared passion and skill with which the remarkable artists of early Ife sought to define their past for generations of viewers.

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ART AND RISK IN ANCIENT YORUBA

IFE HISTORY, POWER, AND IDENTITY, C. 1300

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For Rudy

"The chicken captured by the hawk knows that the hawk will kill it, but it still cries out – not to be saved, but so that everyone knows what happened to it."

Igbo Proverb

"The only rule [in art] is that there are no rules. Anything is possible. It's all about risks, deliberate risks."

Helen Frankenthaler

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PREFACE

Just as every Yoruba city has its own history, each center has its own unique art history. The sculptures of ancient Ife (Ile-Ife), ancestral home to the Yoruba, have long intrigued both local residents and African art scholars because of their tour de force visual power and technology. Yet, despite a century of research on these Ife antiquities, scholars to date have made little headway in understanding their historic import and larger meaning. The striking temporal differences (three-quarters of a millennium) between the era when these works were made (c. 1300 C.E.) and the modern period, to say nothing of the notable visual distinctions between ancient Ife art and modern-era Yoruba traditions, have made this a daunting task. The artistic and cultural importance of these ancient arts makes this challenge all the more worthwhile.

How does one write a book about a 700-year-old civilization without written records and only minimal archaeological work? It is a challenge and one made even greater by the large metropolitan community occupying this site. Yet often it is the most challenging projects that are the most rewarding. The lack of written texts in some ways is a plus. So too is the rich urban fabric of present-day Ife. It was during several of my many interviews in the city that I discovered the ways in which certain ongoing visual traditions offer vital insight into the construction of identity in the past.

The greater challenges were things I had not expected – often involving questions of time. The added wait for permits authorizing publication of photographs from copyright holders, as well as the long hours spent creating the array of drawings and reconfiguring them into the multi-figure plates extended the process. In between, I dedicated several years to serving as curator for an exhibition project on Ife art, *Dynasty and Divinity: Ife Art in Ancient Nigeria*, selecting objects and working to secure the requisite funding for this and a related scholarly catalog

through an NEH research grant. In the end it became clear that I would need a different publishing format to produce the kind of scholarly work I had planned for my research. An equally great challenge over time proved to be that of abundance. As more and more chapters were written, the text and images grew larger than could fit a single volume. I had to undertake cuts to make it manageable, leaving aside for another day my discussions on gender, jewelry and textiles, as well as architecture and urban planning. As hard as this was, the move made this book stronger and the very thickness of the present volume speaks to the unique brilliance and scholarly importance of ancient Ife art.

I first became interested in the arts of ancient Ife (in southwestern Nigeria) as a subject of scholarly investigation while working as a research assistant at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. At the time, it was hosting the *Treasures of Ancient Nigeria* exhibition curated by Frank Willett and Ekpo Eyo. Writing a review of the catalog for the *Art Journal* (Blier 1982) further piqued my interest. What intrigued me in particular in this exhibit was one work, a life-size copper mask identified with the early Ife ruler and important art patron King Ọbalùfọ̀n II. This mask became the focus of my first scholarly essay on Ife material (Blier 1985), which addresses this ruler's identity and life and how they offer critical vantages into Ife, its arts, and its history. The article, republished in 2011 in the *Centennial Anthology* of the *Art Bulletin*, offered an important new reading of the famous Ife life-size heads in near-pure copper and copper alloy (the technical term for "brass" or "bronze") and was the first to address these and other works from the vantage of Ife politics and history.

While this marked my initial academic foray into the ancient arts from Ife, it was not my first experience with the Yoruba. I had lived and worked for two years as a Peace Corps volunteer in the Yoruba community of Savé (in Benin Republic), one of the sixteen original Yoruba city-states said to have been established by royals from ancient Ife many centuries earlier. During my stay there I traveled extensively around Yoruba centers located along the border area between Benin and Nigeria. A number of years later, research in the Abomey area to the south of Savé, where important Yoruba influences impacted the Dahomey (Fon) Kingdom, also focused my interest. Some of my Yoruba experiences and insights have been addressed in print (Blier 1988; 2001; 2010c).

As work on my 1988 book on Dahomey *bocio* arts came to a conclusion, I again turned my scholarly attention to Ife, cojoining my own long-standing interest (and experience) among the Yoruba with a new concern for these ancient sculptural works. I see the history of Ife as having inspired these great arts and their complex iconic features, an urban history that is evidenced in part in family oral traditions and rituals, but also in its visual culture, particularly that related to Ọbalùfọ̀n II and other leaders of his era. Memories of these ancient figures are still very much

alive and in play today. With rare exceptions, previous Ife scholars (archaeologists and art scholars alike) have made little attempt to link the archaeological evidence and related artifact data to this city's own unique history. Even a brief overview of publications on Ife art and archaeology over the last century points out that this remains one of the great lacunae of Ife art scholarship.

In part for this reason, I have focused my Ife analysis on the centrality of place and the need to view and engage these arts around specifics of temporality, addressing both as a means of understanding art, society, and history more generally. This also has taken me to newer methods of spatial analysis and mapping using GIS. My aim has been to bring together the diverse and sometimes contradictory data from this center's archaeology, oral history, sociopolitical dynamics, and religious forms with the ancient arts themselves. My work constitutes a scholarly marriage of sorts between diverse research foci (especially archaeological, site-specific, local oral historical, and ritual data), enriched by new evidence I have acquired through in-depth analyses of the artworks themselves as well as interviews with descendants of early Ife family leaders and other individuals at this center.

I began by scouring the many archives in the United States and Europe (among these, the Frobenius Institute in Frankfurt, Germany). Starting in 2002 I made an array of brief but in-depth concentrated trips to Ife and the surrounding area, visiting shrines and archaeological sites, attending ceremonies, examining objects, and, equally importantly, carrying out interviews with chiefs, priests, and lineage heads. A combination of in situ investigation of associated archaeological settings, interviews with families long associated with this center and its shrines, observations of local rites in which ancient arts once featured, detailed analysis of the sculptures themselves, and in-depth analysis of the extant primary and secondary sources has afforded me an array of new perspectives. Issues of history related to less studied lineages were of special interest to me, as were local histories that had largely been overlooked by earlier scholars. Generally I have been keen to look outside the well-traveled pathways to find those histories that challenge long-standing assumptions about this center in terms of historical engagement.

Each day as I walked around the various neighborhoods of Ife and nearby villages, I kept an eye out for links between present and historic forms – as well as discontinuities. My goal throughout this research was not only to gain a deeper understanding of the artworks in question but also to try to reposition these works within the specific geographic and temporal settings in which they were made, found, and used. A sub-theme is that of autochthony, with many of these objects seen as potent evidence of related identity concerns. A complementary theme is the creative role of contestation and crisis, elements that also feature prominently in Ife mythology (Blier 2004) even (especially) in contexts of historic disempowerment and displacement. Similar issues have interested me in earlier research (Blier 1995),

but in Ife these ideas are expressed in very different forms and contexts. Urbanism and cosmopolitanism are critical to my analysis, encouraging me to address Ife historic identity less in terms of ethnic primacy (and proxy, e.g., as holding a uniquely Yoruba or other identity). I look instead to this center's importance as home to an ethnically diverse population consistent with Ife's historic identity as a thriving manufacturing and trade center with broad regional commercial reach.

As one of the first art historians to undertake research in Ife itself on this ancient sculptural corpus, my vantage has been framed in part around disciplinary concerns, focusing on issues such as subject matter, iconography, and material. I also have looked closely at the physical properties of these artworks – and their myriad of surface details – taking each object apart in my mind and putting it back together again, both individually and as part of the overall corpus. One of my early and most important discoveries was the close connection between modern regalia and early Ife political history. Trained in a graduate program that addressed both art history and archaeology, I was cognizant of the shared problems and potentials of each discipline and its forms of investigation. While my research presents new possibilities, alternative perspectives, and rich avenues for further inquiry, it does not portend to offer "knowable" "facts" and like all such findings mine will benefit from further investigations – archaeological among these. It is my hope that both my queries and my conclusions will encourage other scholars to take up these remarkable works – and Ife itself – in new, provocative, and equally challenging ways. Some of my Ife scholarly work has appeared in shorter articles (Blier 1982; 1985; 2004; 2010a,b; 2011; 2012a,b; 2013).

The long-standing Ife tradition of burying objects at local sites and removing them for yearly rituals has impacted the ancient works and what can be gleaned about them. While Willett, among other early Ife archaeologists, often viewed ongoing archaeological sites as largely haphazard collections of artifacts, paying little attention to the family histories of those artifacts long identified with these sites, I maintain that many of these locales and the arts and individuals associated with them have continued to carry importance and to hold insight into the past. Hence many of the ancient sites still have vital historic Ife lineage ties.

This book is divided into two parts. Part I (Art, Risk, and Identity) explores questions of art making, art viewing, aesthetics, and body marking practices. Part II (Politics, Representation, and Regalia) looks at the corpus of copper and copper alloy portrait heads, animal sculptures, crown and headdress forms, scepters, and seating. While my larger interest is in the unique ways in which Ife art informs issues of risk, society, religion, and politics, I am also interested in the array of complementary themes of identity around which risk and creativity are engaged, specifically the risks assumed by artists, patrons, and viewers, and the dangers implicit in attendant subject matter and modes of portrayal.

During the first two of my various research stays in Ife (2002, 2004, 2006, and 2008), I lived with a family in the Modakeke sector near the city's historic western Ibadan gate in what was once the stranger's ward (and before that, an area occupied by a core group of autochthonous Ife residents). This sector is still home to many of its most important ancient shrines. Several years prior to my arrival there had been a flare-up of the mid- and late-nineteenth-century Modákẹ́kẹ́-Ife civil strife (Ogunfolakan 2009). In the course of my stays, I witnessed homes and businesses that had recently been burned or abandoned. Some were beginning to be rehabilitated. Several ancient Ife shrines were destroyed in this conflict. New residences are encroaching on these and other once-holy sites. The array of interviews I carried out during this research are referenced here by the last name of the individual followed by the notation, "pc" (personal communication) and the abbreviated year of the interview, for example Elutide pc.02. These interviews are listed at the end of the volume along with other communications such as letters and emails that bear complementary citation forms. In the few cases where individuals asked me not to cite them on a specific topic because of its sensitivity, I have followed their wishes, identifying the source more generically.

Ife's archaeological matrix, where various early artworks have been found, includes both primary (undisturbed) and secondary sites (those used long after the works were created and deposited often in contexts of ongoing ritual use). In the latter contexts artworks continued to be used into the modern era. Ife's primary archaeological sites include most importantly: 1) Ìta Yemọọ (near the eastern city walls and one of the main gateways, a site dedicated to queen/goddess Yemọọ), that yielded important terracottas and copper alloy castings); 2) Wúnmọníjẹ̀ (near the purported burial site of King Ọbalùfọ̀n II, which lies behind the palace in the city center), from which a large body of copper alloy heads was excavated); 3) Ọbalára's Land (identified with Ọbalùfọ̀n II's son, Ọbalára, and located on the western outskirts of the city), which has yielded a corpus of important terracottas, and; 4) Láfògido (positioned near Wúnmọníjẹ̀ behind the palace), which is associated with a grouping of regalia-rich animals. Secondary sites include: 1) the Iwinrìn Grove, located some 500 meters from Ọbalára's Land and associated with Ife's indigenous Igbo residents; 2) the Ọsángángan Ọbamákin shrine near the Iwinrìn Grove, which is identified with Ọbalùfọ̀n II's father; 3) the Ọrè Grove site near the city's eastern border, identified with an important corpus of stone sculptures; and 4) the Olókun Grove, centered on a pond near the northeastern outskirts of the city where early glass-bead manufacturing and iron smelting took place. Key chapters of this book focus on (and are contextualized within) Ife's main archaeological sites, exploring related subjects and modes of portrayal within this site-specific frame: Chapter 2 (viewing: the Ọrè Grove); Chapter 3 (aesthetics: Ọbalára's Land); Chapter 5 (portrait heads: Wúnmọníjẹ̀); Chapter 6 (animal avatars: Láfògido).

PREFACE

The vast majority of Ife artworks are now the property of Nigeria's Commission of Museums and Monuments and are housed in its museums – at Ife and Lagos principally. Responsibility for their safety and the preservation of their historic identity is in the hands of museum professionals. Yet these ancient arts are still the historic property of the Ọ̀ọ̀ni of Ife, who is charged with their safekeeping at the behest of his long list of predecessors and on the behalf of Ife and larger Yoruba populations everywhere, who fall under his historic jurisdiction. A majority of Ife's ancient art treasures have come from sites that were known in the early twentieth century, even if related data generally were never collected and/or preserved. These arts thus speak to the many centuries of local investment (some 700 years) in preserving and retaining the identity of these remarkable artworks in Ife and the broader area within local family contexts, despite several later periods of war in which the city was evacuated. This is patrimony (inherited property to be safeguarded) at its best and most effective. The enduring importance of these artworks is even more remarkable for this truly extraordinary preservation history.

Only in the 1950s, when these arts were collected through British colonial efforts, did the highly successful local systems of artifact preservation and knowledge retention begin to break down in significant ways. This shift tragically coincided with the artworks' appearance in several international art exhibitions, making known their great art historical merit. This increase in visibility became a factor in the thefts and losses that have continued to plague the brilliant cultural heritage that is (and was) Ife. Although the aim of their appropriation and integration into a formal museum structure in the 1950s was to safeguard these extraordinary works, these events dovetailed with earlier and ongoing colonial efforts. These activities included the control of lucrative regional trade, as for example the Niger River Kede sites of Tada and Jebba where several ancient Ife-linked arts were found. Colonial interests also involved the support of broader missionary efforts to bring local religious practices to an end, among these rituals in the Ife area in which historic artworks had figured prominently. The destruction of Ife religious shrines through early archeological practices contributed to the loss of material evidence on ancient Ife in equally poignant ways. Sadly, many of these works (not only from Ife, but also from Benin, Tada, and Jebba) were lost in the aftermath of these transfers and have never been recovered, a problem exacerbated by a rash of museum and university thefts in the 1980s (and later) that deprived Ife (and the world) of many brilliant art treasures.

Our knowledge of ancient Ife art today also is shaped in part by Western interest in and demand for these remarkable works. These factors also are a critical part of the larger history of this city and its visual culture. The 1990s saw a steady growth in the number of Ife artifacts entering private collections in the West. There are heated debates among scholars and museum professionals about how to address this

problem. One impact has been the dearth of new archaeological research undertaken in Ife, leaving the terrain more accessible to potential looters and their beneficiaries. Too often, in the 1990s at least, these stolen objects were circulated with official papers legalizing and legitimating these actions. Today, happily, it appears that this is no longer the case.

In the wake of a 2009 Ife exhibition, *Dynasty and Divinity: Ife Art in Ancient Nigeria*, initiated by the Botin Foundation in Spain, several thoughtful articles were published that addressed these works around issues of cultural patrimony. "Ile-Ife Triumphs in the British Museum, London: Who Said Nigerians Were Incapable of Looking after Their Cultural Artefacts," asks Kwame Opoku, in the title of his blog entry of 18 April 2010. With another equally salient title, he challenges us: "Are Major African Art Exhibitions Only for the Western World? Ife Art Exhibition Begins in Spain but Will Not Be Shown in Nigeria or Any Other African Country" (23 June, 2009). As he inquires in the latter piece: "Do young African artists, unlike their European and American counterparts, not need to see such exhibitions? Soon all the experts on African art, including Ife art, will be Europeans and Americans who will be paid or generously funded by the rich American foundations to come and teach us African art. . . . [T]here should be reciprocity, mutual respect and a balance of interests. Collaboration should not be a one-way communication" (Opoku 2009). Evoking some of the same issues as related to these ancient African artworks, Opoku adds:

> In the absence of adequate public information, one is left to wonder whether the exploitation of African cultural resources follows the same pattern as the exploitation of our mineral and other resources i.e. we supply cheaply to the great advantage of the West which nowadays does not even have to send in an army for whatever it wants as in the olden days. Somebody has to explain to the African peoples why we must continue to put our cultural resources at the disposition of the West when Western States do not show the least inclination to do the same for us. (Opoku 2009)

Much more can (should) and hopefully will soon be done along these lines.

A brief note on language: Yoruba linguistic terms are ripe with double-meanings, euphemisms, and plays on tonal differences. This has resulted in Yoruba scholars sometimes disagreeing about how to interpret the same passage. Questions of language terms in discussions of early Ife art are even more complicated due in part to key changes in language over time, specifically core differences in the ancient Ife dialect (as seen for example in the Ìkédù text which can no longer be understood in this region) and that spoken in Ife and other areas today. Historically different dialects also were spoken in the broader Yoruba region. Several years

of intensive Yoruba language training and use in the course of my Peace Corps service in the ancient Yoruba center of Savé (also known historically as Chabe) played an important role in my early understanding of this culture and its rich linguistic grounding. In addition I undertook a Yoruba language tutorial at Harvard in preparation for my research in Ife to address these arts. To Bassey Irele and Adisa Ogunfolakin, I owe a debt for their help with the array of Yoruba language questions and other issues in this text. There are now several Yoruba dictionaries. I like Abraham's (1958) detailed expositions, but there are others with more widely accepted translations and spellings I use (such as the Nigerian University Press edited dictionary 2001 and Fakinlede 2002). There are notable differences among Yoruba scholars on not only the meanings of key terms but also sometimes spellings. Publications on Yoruba art have differed considerably over the last several decades on the use of diacritical marks, including various publications by the same authors. I have included diacritical marks in this text with respect to key Yoruba phrases and terms with the exception of place names, individuals, and cited sources (the latter for reasons of conformity). The bibliography and list of sources are devoid of diacritical marks for similar reasons. For spelling of Ife sites I follow Frank Willett (2004). Oral traditions, as we will see, are but one of many sources that I use to study the ancient arts of this center. And, although this volume represents the first large-scale art historical work to study ancient Ife art in its local historic context, originally I intended this to be a longer text, coming to the difficult decision to remove several historical background chapters to make the present book more manageable.[1]

In the end, the relative fit of one or another interpretation of ancient Ife art will come into greater clarity as scholars continue to grapple with the history of this center and the multiplicity of evidence that I and other scholars bring into play when addressing this unique artistic corpus. While much of this volume explores works whose meanings cannot be known with certainty, I feel confident that over time the most meritorious (and useful) ideas on ancient Ife art will gain a foothold and those factors that are invalid (something unavoidable in work on early cultures such as this) will fall away. However, when misunderstandings and misinformation take hold and accompanying distortions gain primacy, different questions are in play. Addressing these inaccuracies is imperative for false assumptions often linger and scholars could continue to be identified with assertions they never made. Such has happened with Rowland Abiodun's 2014 volume where certain details of my work (both evidence and interpretations) have been misrepresented based on an unfortunate misreading and misstatement of my findings. Among these inaccuracies, Abiodun writes (2014:15–18) that I oppose the learning and use of Yoruba language and related oral traditions for the art historical study of ancient

Ife sculpture. Nothing could be further from the truth[2] as amply demonstrated not only in the current volume but also in my previous articles on Ife and Yoruba art, as well as other cultures I have studied. Contrary to Abiodun, who incorrectly states (2014:244) that I chose to "avoid . . . Yoruba language and its fundamental importance to understanding Ife art . . . " I have gone out of my way to collect and engage a wide range of local Ife oral traditions in my research and analysis. I also take up the rich corpus of oral historical data published over the previous century on early Ife history and culture by an array of local Ife scholars largely left out of Abiodun's analysis in his promotion of a more regional pan-Yoruba and ahistorical approach to these works (see Conclusions, notes 2 and 3 on methodological distinctions in our work). For a discussion of the different interpretations we have of the historic importance of King Ọbalùfọ̀n II and key works in ancient Ife art such as the copper Ọbalùfọ̀n mask (**Plate 3**, a work I address in greater detail in Blier 1985), the life-size copper and copper alloy heads (Chapter 5), the copper seated figure from Tada (**Plate 4**), and the two royal king figures (**Plates 48** and **49**), see Conclusions, notes 3, 4, and 5.

This volume would not have been possible without the aid of numerous people who played central roles not only in helping with my research but also with the difficult task of securing images and bringing this manuscript to publication. First I wish to thank Biodun Adediran, Barbara Blackmun, Babatunde Lawal, and Akin Ogundiran for reading various sections of my manuscript. I also owe a large debt to Carla DiBenediti, Barry Hallen, Nick Robertson, and Nike Okundaiye for inspiration and support throughout the Ife research and writing process. Thanks to the anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press who provided overviews that have strengthened this volume. For local help with my field research questions I owe real thanks to Yinka Odewale and Dapo Collins. Thanks go out as well to the many Ife residents who offered me information on various aspects of ancient Ife art. They are cited separately in the listing of sources at the end.

For critical support in terms of work in various Nigerian museums and with permissions to publish related images, I owe a debt to Mallam Yusuf Abdallah Usman, the Director General of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, as well as Mayo Adediran, Bode Adesine, and Ochuole Ekunke. For help with images I also wish to thank Lisa Binder, Carol Braide, Julie Hudson, Peter Junge, Graham Nisbet, and Kristen Wenger. Throughout the research and writing period numerous scholars, friends, and students have offered scholarly insight and moral support, among these: Wande Abimbola, Andrew Apter, Claude Ardouin, Lateef O. Badru, Malcolm Baker, Karin Barber, Ashley Bennett, Marla Bernes, Francesca Bewer, Susan Bielstein, Herbert M. Cole, Nicola Courtright, Ekpo Eyo, the late William Fagg, Gail Feigenbaum, Agbo Folarin, Awofiranye Kayode,

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A NOTE ON THE ILLUSTRATIONS

Except where noted otherwise, I have dated the ancient Ife sculptures illustrated here to c. 1300 (1250–1350 C.E.). A vast majority of these are part of the national Nigerian museum collections (Ife and Lagos most importantly) and are published with permission of the National Commission of Museums and Monuments. I am including, where known the museum registration numbers and measurements furnished by Willett in his 2004 catalogue raisonnée, as well as the specific object numbers that he has furnished. Also see Willett (2004) for a delimitation of those heads that were likely at one time to have been part of full figures versus those that were identified as smaller "busts." Some of the works which he (and I) have included have disappeared subsequent to their being photographed; this information also is provided by Willett (2004). Among the Ife sites whose works have disappeared are those of Ọbalára's Land, Igbó Ọbamèri, Òkè Ẹ̀sọ́, and Ọbalùfọ̀n temple (Ọbalára's Compound) that originally were housed in the university in Ife. With an eye toward addressing as completely as possible the ancient Ife corpus, Willett also has included several works that are now in foreign museum and private collections in the West. I am including images of some of these works as well. Willett's term for Ife "bronzes," e.g., heavily leaded zinc (brass), I am listing instead as "copper alloy" (meaning predominantly copper with various alloys and trace elements). Many of the ancient Ife works were painted (with details of red, black, and white remaining). Detailed analysis of the pigment remaining of the Ife sculptures also can be found in Willett (2004). The photographic collection that he compiled, a number of examples of which I also am publishing, are housed at the Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery, University of Glasgow, Scotland.

Except where otherwise indicated, all drawings are by the author. Providing a rich image corpus to convey the power and diversity of ancient Ife art is critical to my project. This book contains 135 numbered plates (black and white along with colored photographs, as well as various drawings and maps). However, when taking account of the array of composite photographs and drawings the number of images reaches nearly 475. I have provided sources for each, enabling scholars to look them up elsewhere if desired.