Donkor, and Victor Ekpu interact in wondrous ways across a page, if their statements do not coincide. At some point, I began to see this project through the eyes of my American students; they simply love the book.

I then recalled the astonishment of a young art student when I pounced upon his copy of the November 2008 issue of Juxtapoz. Surely he must have wondered why the transgressive and transnational African art featured in this arts magazine, and the profiles of photogenic young artists such as Wangechi Mutu and Youssef Nabil, would interest a middle-aged art historian in bifocals? I realized that French artists might have acquired Minotaure, with its articles on the Dakar-Djibouti expedition, as a marker of their own sophistication in the 1930s, just as possession of this issue of Juxtapoz conferred a cosmopolitan status upon an American student in the twenty-first century.

And almost a century ago, artists must have looked through Carl Einstein’s Negerplastik of 1915 in much the same way that my students flip through Contemporary African Art since 1980, entranced by the images alone. In free-standing illustrations that are unencumbered by iconographic analysis, artists can find ideas that correspond to their own interests, be they formal or conceptual. My art history classes, on the other hand, require students to imagine the original work in its intended cultural, social, and political context, constricting the creative associations evoked by its image. In the classroom, do I thus squelch both visual pleasures and transcultural resonance? Perhaps the growing conflict in our field is not between studies of the past and present, or between critical positions rooted in African realities and those rooted in global concerns; perhaps it is simply an extension of the age-old tensions between intellectual understanding (a parsing of our intellectual understanding of the complex past and present, as it is lived in the periodization of African studies. Rich-ard Reid (2011) noted the marginalization of precolonial history from the mainstream Africanist scholarship in recent decades. He attributed the marginalization to exaggerated focus and significance given to the history of the twentieth century.

Despite the increased scholarship on prenineteenth century history—and in such related fields as African Diaspora Studies and in the supporting discipline of archaeology—precolonial African history still receives neither the same attention nor funding as post-nineteenth century history. This was also underscored in a recent discussion scholars held in PRECOLONIALAFRICA@listserv.it.northwestern.edu, a listerv which is dedicated to the study and teaching of precolonial African history. One reason for this, I would argue, is the curious lack of awareness of the scholarship about the field by historians of Africa themselves, as well as the limited number of its practitioners, but also the lack of diverse teaching materials for these time periods. For instance, at the recent roundtable entitled “The Audacity of Gender: Power, Sex, and Social Roles in Africanist Research on Early Africa” convened by Christine Saidi, Rhonda Gonzales, Cynome Fourshey, Carolyne Vieira Martinez, and myself at the African Studies Association in Philadelphia in November 2012, some members of the audience felt that the stories of precolonial Africa were not as easy to grasp, because they often were not conveyed through written texts.

It is here that African art historians can help in making these stories more accessible, not only to students but to a wider audience, and can likewise incorporate the new and exciting research that is coming out of archaeological excavations, such as the Nok sites in Central Nigeria. One of the reasons that contemporary issues have gained so much presence in the history of African art and art history is, as Sidney Kasfir has rightly pointed out, the desire of Africanists to continuously demonstrate that Africa is not backward and underdeveloped. But one of the strongest impressions I took home from my fieldwork in Nigeria was the rootedness of Nigerian peoples in the past. The past informed many of their actions in the present as well as their relations to the phenomena of the modern nation state. My research on the Ndakogboa ancestral maskerades of the Nupe people, which contributed to the exhibition “Central Nigeria Unmasked,” revealed the strong connections that the Nupe peoples have to their past traditions, which they invoke during annual festivals and which are part of the life of the present. This ongoing conversation between the past and the present, as it is lived by contemporary Africans, offers abundant returns for scholarship in African art history and African history, for the classroom and the public. The spread of knowledge about Africa’s rich and complex past and present, its peoples and cultures seems to me one of the most powerful and convincing ways to confront the stereotypes that prevail about the continent.

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Minotaure. 1933. no. 2 (June).


**Representations of Africa in the Classroom**

Constanze Weise

Ever since I started teaching the survey course “History of Africa to 1850,” I have become acquainted with the amazing responses I receive from my students with regard to the material I teach. It became very soon clear to me that this survey class is by far the most important of all African history classes I have taught, because it changes the perceptions students have about the African continent, its people, and its history. Most often students heard little about African history in high school and know about the continent through the stereotypes that the contemporary media convey: chaos, crises, hunger, military dictatorships, genocides, wars, and underdevelopment and, on the less negative side, African wildlife, safaris, and drum music. Thus, the effects of teaching a class about Africa’s thousands of years of rich cultural history are tremendous, and students feel not only enlightened about so many things they never expected to have existed in Africa, but also very grateful to be informed about its history, peoples, and arts. They are astonished by the fact that the continent (and is) home to powerful women political leaders well respected in their communities, by the roles of complex religions in legitimizing political power, or by the existence of highly developed societies that were once connected through trade networks extending across the continent into the Indian and Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. Such information underscores to them that the continent was an important part of world historical processes long before the advent of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and colonialism.

Students’ interests stand in stark contrast to the position that precolonial African history has within the field of African history. This dilemma calls for an epistemological shift to not only question the marginalization of an important part of the field of African history, but also the privileging of the word “colonial” in the periodization of African studies. Richard Reid (2011) noted the marginalization of precolonial history from the mainstream Africanist scholarship in recent decades. He attributed the marginalization to exaggerated focus and significance given to the history of the twentieth century.

Despite the increased scholarship on prenineteenth century history—and in such related fields as African Diaspora Studies and in the supporting discipline of archaeology—precolonial African history still receives neither the same attention nor funding as post-nineteenth century history. This was also underscored in a recent discussion scholars held in PRECOLONIALAFRICA@listserv.it.northwestern.edu, a listerv which is dedicated to the study and teaching of precolonial African history. One reason for this, I would argue, is the curious lack of awareness of the scholarship about the field by historians of Africa themselves, as well as the limited number of its practitioners, but also the lack of diverse teaching materials for these time periods. For instance, at the recent roundtable entitled “The Audacity of Gender: Power, Sex, and Social Roles in Africanist Research on Early Africa” convened by Christine Saidi, Rhonda Gonzales, Cynome Fourshey, Carolyne Vieira Martinez, and myself at the African Studies Association in Philadelphia in November 2012, some members of the audience felt that the stories of precolonial Africa were not as easy to grasp, because they often were not conveyed through written texts.

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**Curating African History**

Kevin D. Dumouchelle

In her recent Dialogue essay, Sidney Kasfir asks whether a series of changes within the study of African art reflect a crisis, or a generational shift. I argue for the latter. Indeed, they reflect developments predicted nearly twenty-
five years ago—though the fact that they remain troubling speaks to evolutions still necessary in some of the field’s own premises.1 Kasfir ends her essay by asking if there are “ways to incorporate insights gained from the study of modernity into the study of the past.” Such methods do, in fact, exist and their further application to the larger practice of our field is essential, not only to keep the study of the art of the African past relevant, but intellectually justifiable.2 Yet her question suggests an assumption with a troubling longevity—indicative, perhaps, of concepts limiting the field.

Kasfir cites the 1989 Triennial, which marked an early engagement with popular painting from then-Zaire, built upon the work of Johannes Fabian, as a transition toward the study of art of the recent African past. I repeat the citation of Fabian because his methodological work from earlier that decade also provided a clear argument for abandoning the duality at work in her final question.3

Frankly, the larger problem remains the profound resilience of this dichotomy. It bears repeating that “tradition” and “modernity” are arbitrary designations, built upon slippery ideological assumptions—in particular, in our context, that “modernity” is equitable with ideological assumptions—in particular, in our context, that “modernity” is equitable with changes that look like “us” (the West), and thus reflect an aesthetic, if not moral, decline (an idea whose origins can be traced at least to Frobenius).4

Certainly, this duality appears to have shaped much of the “salvage anthropology” Kasfir describes flourishing in the middle of the twentieth century. I come here, however, not to bury “salvage anthropology”; Kasfir herself importantly did as much some years ago.5 Moreover, among its contributions remains the observation that, in many places, local understandings of time remain more nuanced than this duality assumes, allowing for the contemporary existence of both cyclical and linear, progressive (“modern”) time.

The most important insight to be gained for the field accompanying the generational shift away from a model of “salvage anthropology” she describes is a renewed acknowledgement that the past is, indeed, past. After all, field researchers were not operating in a “premodern” or “precolonial” art world in the 1960s or ’70s. African art has always been responsive to its own time and conditions—“tradition” and “modernity” are, after all, mere points on a continuum. The benefit of the postcolonial, postmodern turn in our own discipline allows the art of the African past to be imagined, discussed, and interpreted against its own historical horizons, while participating in a teleological progression (recognizing, for example, that the art of the 1800s differs from that of the 1900s for specific, given, material, and intellectual reasons). Because local historical sources, for Africanists, remain (and have remained) comparatively more physically distant, missing, destroyed, or altered/evolved/forgotten/resistant to our own “scribocentric” expectations than those of our colleagues in European or even ancient art, such a move requires persistence, will, and imagination. These, however, are not resources that our field has lacked. Indeed, quite recently Kasfir, along with Marla Berns and Richard Fardon, thoughtfully examined such resources in their own heroically historical “Central Nigeria Unmasked” exhibition and catalogue.6

The generational shift Kasfir describes offers new opportunities for the re-vitalization of the interpretation of historical African art—at least through my own perspective as a museum curator. I do recognize her well-grounded concern for the extent to which academic art historians face hiring and teaching pressure in this new environment to adapt established approaches to historical African art to a new methodological horizon (and in some cases to navigate the nebulous and fissiparous bounds of “visual culture”). Museums, on the other hand, are bound to care for and interpret a full range of historical objects—which, thankfully, are held in perpetuity.

Museums have always been drivers of scholarly developments in the field (Kasfir’s rhetorical concerns notwithstanding); among many others, one could note mid-century shows at the National Gallery of Art (DC), the exhibitions of the Fowler Museum, and the prodigious early decades of the Center/Museum for African Art (going back, as I must interject, as far as Brooklyn’s 1923 Congo show, the first in a US art museum to show African art as “art”). Museums will necessarily remain central for this type of scholarship, as the primary repositories of the historical objects in question. Indeed, as Kasfir’s own Benue project attests, they can also serve as intellectual leaders, engaging academics from a variety of disciplines toward a product that serves a broad audience, while providing platforms for, in her words, “sustained and nuanced argument.

Over the past half-decade, the Brooklyn Museum has allowed me ample opportunities to experiment with strategies for exploring these tensions, from planning an exhibition of El Anatsui within the context of an encyclopedic institution, to reinstalling our permanent, primarily historical African collection chronologically (an opportunity that will surface again in the near future, allowing this experimental effort to inform the next, larger project). In developing “African Innovations,” I was driven by my own central preoccupations with historical context to show our broad collection in a chronological framework, so as to avoid the previous pitfalls of primarily geographic presentations that permitted the unengaged visitor to walk out of the African galleries thinking that African art had always looked like the works on view, or continues to. Instead, I opted for a basically tripartite division of the space—beginning with archaeological and medieval works (emphasizing the cross-cultural nature of “Crossroads Africa”), leading to five sub-galleries that looked at contextual themes in the “canonical” nineteenth-early twentieth century collections, and ending with Brooklyn’s first dedicated space for contemporary African art, reprising the “Crossroads” theme.

The response, particularly from educators at all levels, has been encouragingly positive. The defined space allotted for contemporary art serves multivalent purposes—among them, to assert Africa’s contemporaneity and ongoing creativity, and to engage younger audiences well-versed in, and expecting to see, new genres of contemporary art. It allows for a more nuanced and historically grounded discussion of the works that precede it; traditionally “ethnographic” maps with style area names in these nineteenth-early twentieth century sections are overlaid on a colonial political map ca. 1914, for example, to evoke the historical context in which they were created.

Finally, it provides a space for the reappraisal of twentieth century genres that have been overlooked, particularly by museums, challenging the presumption of mid-century “decline.” Writing of a Chewa “Elvis” mask in his review of “African Innovations” at the Brooklyn Museum, Holland Cotter wrote that “while many images in the installation…celebrate great moral souls traveling through history, certain pieces, this one among them, consciously point to a different reality, a degraded universe, much reduced in spiritual scope.”7 It is by no means my intention to quibble with a laudatory review, but I raise the point to suggest that this concept of “tradition” declining into “modernity” perniciously extends beyond our more rarified discourse here. In bringing the discussions already at work in places such as this journal to a wider public, there is still much work to be done.

Putting the history implicit in the art history of African artworks front and center is ultimately a means of bridging the differences between artists, objects, and museum visitors—a broad effort in which I know Kasfir is joined. If it makes African art a little more “normal,” by taking up Adams’ charge to “move into the broader world of art history” in the process, this is, in the long run, only to its own advantage.8

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Notes
1 “The state of the field…point[s] to an increasing philosophical and methodological diversity in the study of sub-Saharan art,” Monni Adams wrote. Moreover,

2 Encouragingly, clear, engaging, and provocative articles to just this effect have appeared in this journal in the recent past, particularly in an issue devoted to “Emerging Scholarship in African Art” (Winter 2005, vol. 28, no. 4) based upon a symposium at Columbia, several of which remain touchstones to which I find myself often returning.


8 Adams, p. 86.

GONE CONTEMPORARY
Ikem Stanley Okoye

The issues raised by the First Word apart, we also know, whether we operate from the museum or the university, that the long nineteenth century’s fraught history of what passed for knowledge about African art, as well as the accompanying history of collection even into the present, especially compromised studies focusing on historical art. This led, too, to the temptation to abandon ship. That said, we might now ask whether we are not unnecessarily anxious about historical scholarship’s possible decline. Consider for a moment that the “turn” to the contemporary occurs across all fields. European and American modernists have related fears. So do pre-Columbianists, medievalists, and scholars of ancient art. All face the prospect of extinction, or pressure to turn contemporary—by, for example, bringing Judith Butler to reading Hatsheshut’s legacy. For pre-Columbianists, the bugbear is Latin American art, a subfield dominated by modern and contemporary interests, made scarier by the pre-Columbianist’s not having the choice Africanists do of, well, “going contemporary.” Some of us play Primitivism’s interest in Africa in, for instance, the fraught history of modernist photography. Or we have studied the factional exuberance of the African Modern to claim, exclusively, the ground of the postcolonial. This is if, and when, we have not wholesale decamped to studying and writing about, or acquiring and exhibiting, things mainly post-1989.

The much-welcomed gender shift bringing women into art history’s academies or museums plays a part. It turns a field once dominated by men into one demographically its inverse. This is probably the outcome of contemporary art’s offering female art historians greater opportunity to study artists among which larger numbers are women than was possible just twenty years ago. But the specifically Africanist dimension of this shift is an outcome of another truth: The study of the historical (i.e. “traditional”) by involving fieldwork and its difficulties, presented women art historians with everyday challenges not faced by men. Moreover, many aspects of the customary were closed off to women (as Sarah Brett-Smith reported in Bananula Sculpture), the creative extension of honorary maleness to white women researchers not always being on offer. I can imagine many such possibilities in relation to other African culture areas, including those primarily Muslim, so that, for female scholars, studying the contemporary in those same places would in comparison be a cakewalk. For male Africanist art historians, the contemporary is certainly an easier prospect too, putting one on par, experientially, with what all other art historians do during research.

But here’s the rub. By definition, the contemporary field is not organized by region, despite its sneaking in under this guise in fields such as Latin American and, increasingly, African. Indeed, as the terms of reference in an Nka dialogue set it recently, the idea of an “African Contemporary” might be oxymoronic, given that contemporary studies’ claims move in the vicinities of transnationality, diaspora, globality, migrancy, and borderless circulations of images, thanks to the Internet and portable digital devices. This suggests that when future job searches are conducted for museum or university Contemporary positions, committees are unlikely to imagine the position regionally. The younger generation of Africanists such as the First Word imagined—i.e., vested in the contemporary alone—would in this scenario compete in a crowded field that includes not only scholars of, say, the Contemporary in South Korea, but those working on themed subjects such as “women artists’ portrayal of the male gaze,” and which, crossing region, could in a single scholar’s portfolio include art from Mozambique, Canada, Japan, and Panama.

The contemporary field is diverse and more densely competitive than many other fields, whether African, Northern Renaissance, medieval, Japanese, or eighteenth century Europe. Needless to say, the successful candidate in such Contemporary searches will rarely be the person whose Contemporary is limited to “African.” Now, it is not as if humanities academic lines are increasing, nor that art history, specifically, is being populated by more of them. If art history the discipline comes to see Africanists as no longer doing anything but contemporary Africa, then what used to be Africanist professorial “lines” will be appropriated for, perhaps, the Contemporary globally defined. This because the African art history that persuaded a minority of institutions to open up a space for Africanist teaching or display was the African art history that offered something essentially different from those art historical knowledges already on offer. If African art scholars of the future increasingly turn out contemporarist, they will also chase fewer positions with a crowd. Consider, additionally, the observation that in North America and Europe, New Diaspora African art, as well as (in America) old Diaspora African American art, is displacing art produced/residing on the African continent as Africanist subject matter. Doesn’t the scene then become even grimmer? A decamping towards the Contemporary leads, if I may borrow a recent pre-Columbianist line, to African art history going the way of Egyptology.

Self interest will prevent this outcome because Africanists will realize that—unlike scholars of Egyptian art who survive, surreptitiously, thanks to Egyptology’s subsidising clout within archaeology—going fully contemporary will shortly produce flailing: The wise ones turn back to dismantling and re-erecting the problematic mass produced by the nineteenth and early twentieth century ogres who first staked out the interpretative accounting of the landscapes of “traditional African art.” That new effort will involve fieldwork, but increasingly will also involve work in older museum collections. New scholars, necessarily fluent in the operational gestures of a Nigerian mama put or South African shebeen as in a Fortnum and Mason tea salon, will find thoroughgoing engagements with historical and rural urban Africa at least as fulfilling as the Contemporary. Historical Africa’s captivating difference and philosophical depth will not be matched, even half a century hence, by the seductive narratives of current urban art practices whose discursive theories many of us enjoy contributing—incidentally well before the puzzling Thompsonian/Sambaian moment of this series’ introductory commentary.

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Notes

I wondered at that section of the introductory commentary referring to Thompson’s talk at the 1987 ACASA meeting, as somehow marking what I might cast as the Contemporary Spring—the revolutionary moment when the need to study and publish on the contemporary erupts irrepressibly into the conserva
tive consciousness. I was curious that it is to Thompson, whose career had been invested in the worlds of the historical, that Sidney’s commentary gives the kudos.