Beyond Single Collections

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In “Beyond Single Stories: Addressing Dynamism, Specificity, and Agency in Arts of Africa,” Susan Elizabeth Gagliardi and Yàëlle Biro (2019) raise a much-needed discussion. It is based on an urgent need to review the perpetuation of single stories that have been written about in regards to historical African arts. Although problems involved in labeling African arts in museums and publications seem to be unanimously recognized, proposed solutions often simply shift terms or words without necessarily resulting in a deeper revision of colonial practices. Maybe this response is due to the fact that although we recognize Africa as a plural continent, we are not yet open to recognition of many different kinds of objects and collections.

A brief visit to the main museums with African art collections in the United States and European countries is enough to realize that the works presented to the audience, in general, have a very similar profile. Many experts consider objects on display in the museums as among the most representative examples of the cultures to which the works belong, and the museums reinforce certain ideas about “authenticity” and “pedigree” when choosing objects for display. We thus see single collections, meaning collections that, from one to the other, comprise similar types of objects and conform to consistent expectations. The prevalence of a single collection type in museum after museum suggests just one vision of what African arts are or can be. My research trips reveal, however, that in each of almost all of these same institutions, there is at least one shelf in storage with works excluded by museum curators just because the particular objects do not fit within the narrow criteria curators use to ensure the perpetuation of their single collections and also the single stories about individual objects within the collections.

When Gagliardi and Biro propose to use the term style to make clear that terms for identifying African arts primarily refer to formal evaluation of an object, I think they have in mind a very specific type of collection and works within it. Perhaps a way to tell not only new and more nuanced stories for such single collections and works within them but also expand the scope of what we consider as African art is to include in the category other kinds of works that defy the expectations of single collections. Such a practice would thus foster deeper discussions about creative production past and present across the African continent. To show limitations in the idea of style when framed only in terms of single collections and to highlight possibilities for including other types of objects in our presentations of African arts, I offer two distinct examples. The first relates to the colonial period and the second to the present.

A few years after the creation of the Dundo Museum by Diamang, Angola’s diamond company, in 1936, a group of sculptors settled in the “Museum Chokwe Village” annex to its main building. Curator José Redinha led the initiative as a measure to save and protect people considered the last carvers of the “tribal time,” that is, people whose technique and knowledge had not yet been modified by colonialism. Interestingly, many of the sculptors included carved symbols in the works as identifying signatures. However, the people who determined which formal patterns were specific to populations of Northeast Angola, especially Chokwe peoples, were the foreign museum officials and not the sculptors themselves. Museum officials destroyed or discarded works that did not fit colonizers’ expectations of form. The idea of style thus reveals more about the colonizers’ expectations and less about the artists’ own interests. This example suggests that a main challenge in presenting such works is to address the complex local and foreign factors at play in the making of an object in different styles.

Objects produced by colonial-era sculptors at the Dundo Museum are not the only objects that challenge ideas of style tied to single collections of African arts. In countries of the so-called Global South, it is common to see African art collections that are quite different from collections found in the North. In Brazil, for instance, especially after the 1960s, curators and collectors started to build museum collections of African arts from a generic perspective of African heritage without concern for the works’ authenticity. Made for the market, some works combine styles associated with different African peoples. A single mask or statue may clearly combine Yoruba-style eyes, Punu-style diamond-shaped scarification, and maybe a Chokwe-style headdress.

My point here is not whether such works should be in museums. Rather, the pastiches present interesting conceptual challenges to scholars of African arts and our publics. How can one address the different styles together in a single museum label? Beyond noting the presence of different styles in a single work, perhaps it is more critical to examine why artists created such works. If most of the sculptors who made works of composite styles are able to copy “pure” patterns that correspond more closely with renowned works in single collections, why did they choose to bring together different styles in a single creation? What stories do such works tell us about contemporary Africa?

Both the example of the Dundo Museum and the works in Brazilian museum collections offer challenges to the idea of style. More than that, they may remind us that in order to think beyond “single stories,” we may also need to think beyond “single collections.”

References cited


Inside History: Seeking Figurative Thinking

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Discussion of ethnic categorization of art need not be specific to Africa. Yet in our field, the discussion has become concerned with specific aspects of colonial situations and their later appropriations and reappropriations in Africa. The attribution of objects to an ethnic group as typical of that group has contributed to essentializing identities. Such thinking is associated with the idea that certain stylistic traits result from the emanation of the spirit of a distinct people, expressed or represented by a uniform type of production and often thought of, whether consciously or unconsciously, as existing out of time. Certainly, historians and anthropologists questioned the notion of ethnicity in the 1980s, but their calls to put it into perspective through a stratigraphy of the concept’s construction has not yet had a significant impact on the study or exhibition of art objects. Therefore, Susan Elizabeth Gagliardi and Yàëlle Biro usefully put on the table a topic that has remained one of the unresolved aspects of African art studies. They suggest accepting the fact that we often know little about the history of the objects and propose to remove ethnicity from the “one tribe, one style” equation.