works within them but also expand the scope of nuanced stories for such single collections and also the single stories curators use to ensure the perpetuation of their objects do not fit within the narrow criteria of what African arts are or can be. My research museum after museum suggests just one vision of an object in different styles. The prevalence of a single collection type in 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 Y oruba-style eyes, Punu-style features, and Nyamwezi-style mouth and teeth. In the 1950s, a notice probably from Ernesto de Vilhena, a member of Diamang Direction in Lisbon responsible for the Dundo Museum’s initiatives, required each sculptor to choose a symbol as a signature. However, Vilhena did not insist on the signatures to acknowledge authorship. Rather, extant documentation from the time indicates Vilhena implemented the policy to differentiate works made by sculptors in the Museum Village from objects created in the past. Actually, Portuguese museum officials used the signatures to monitor the quality and quantity of the output of each sculptor.

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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 Yaelle 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.
In order to achieve that goal, Gagliardi and Biro recommend severing the ethnonym—or what is most often regarded as the name of an ethnic group but which may just as well be the name of a region—from the societies concerned while only retaining it as a label qualifying a given style as identified by networks of African art enthusiasts in the course of the first half of the twentieth century. It would, for example, follow that “sculpture, Senufo” would no longer be understood as “sculpture, Senufo population,” or possibly in this case “sculpture, Senufo region,” but as “Senufo-style sculpture.” However, the signal given would remain unclear. It might perhaps make sense in this particular case, studied at length by Gagliardi, and in certain other examples, but would transforming this approach into a new, and unique, paradigm really allow us to move on and progress further in our understanding of African artistic productions? Or might it not, instead, close the door to the very possibility of addressing their histories?

While the two authors discuss theoretical issues and consider embarrassment created by the colonial legacy, they do not take into account the contemporary implications of the ethnic assignment of style. Are we sure that we are ready to understand “Senufo style” as we would understand “Art Deco style” or “Louis XIII style”? Regarding the latter two designations, nobody would nowadays feel their identities affected in any way by the terms. Yet, objects labeled with a style name that is still constitutes an ethnic are often likely to be seen as identity markers and as stakes in the political or social uses of history, without their histories having necessarily been investigated.

Moreover, despite the wishes of the two authors, their approach suggests that everything is settled while the ethnic group remains there, in the background, still swathed in timelessness if what becomes recognized as a style is not accompanied by temporal coordinates. Yet a style marker only makes sense in a particular context. Yes, in the context of documentary