Beyond Single Collections

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In “Beyond Single Stories: Addressing Dynamism, Specificity, and Agency in Arts of Africa,” Susan Elizabeth Gagliardi and Yaelle 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, such works combine styles associated with different African peoples. A single mask or statue was 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.

A former official in charge of a diamond mine in Angola, especially Chokwe peoples, was the 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, extent 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.

Notes

1 As tax payment was mandatory in Angola during the colonial period, the carvers who worked in the Museum Village faced two options. They could work as sculptors at the Dundo Museum or work in diamond mines. Extant documentation in the Diamang archive at the University of Coimbra, Portugal, reveals that at least one sculptor went to jail after deciding to leave the Museum Village and return to his hometown. After twenty days in prison, he returned to the Museum Village and continued to work there.

2 In 1958, a notice probably from Ernesto de Vilhena, 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, extent 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 created by 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 considered 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 paucity, the notion of style remains as a method and also as a gateway to explore processes of creation. Differentiating styles is not an end in itself but a first step of sorting things out in order to pursue more detailed analyses.

When I refer to a “style of Lāstā,” I mean a style of painting purposely designed by Ethiopian painters between the 1640s and 1740s through the orders of the local elite of Lāstā revolting against the king (Fig. 1). Importantly, the style radically differs from the style then in vogue in the capital of the Ethiopian kingdom. Questions about motivations and formal decisions remain unanswered, but they provide bases for examining modalities and meaning of figurative thinking at work—that is, what thoughts are expressed through the figurative language and how the thoughts literally take shape (on “figurative thinking,” see Francastel 1967). In any case, should we not rather give up on excessively standardized descriptions of objects? In a publication, the information provided in a caption for an illustration may be subject to interpretation, but the explanatory data are—or must be—provided in the body of the text. In a museum the telegraphic text of the tombstone is not intended to require clarification in long chats. How, then, do we account for scientific and social enquiries and knowledge? There is no unequivocal answer but, before questioning the form of presentation, whether publication or label, it is absolutely necessary for a museum to first probe what it really wants to address.

Referencing Toward the Future: How New Categories May Emerge

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Gagliardi and Biro accurately recognize language as an important site of change in the presentation and discussion of African arts with a historical bent. Toward the end of the essay, they make the point that, “Once we recognize that our determinations of style reflect our evaluations of form, then we must also revise our language to signal to our audiences that the style of a particular object may or may not reflect anything about who made it, for whom, or why” (2019: 4).

This is an important point to emphasize, i.e., that the work of signaling, or even addressing more strongly than merely signaling, to audiences that the naming conventions used by art markets and museum displays carry with them histories of epistemic violence. The work of questioning and undoing these categories and the violence out of which they emerge is far from over. The work of scholarly criticism has indeed got us to a point where “educated” audiences are aware that categories like Baule or Shona or Zulu reference constellations of meaning that are much broader than the simplistic colonial “tribal” descriptors. Each object so described was collected from a particular place, at a particular time, often under circumstances that involved domination and violence in colonial encounters. What’s more, the work had been made at a particular time, in a particular place, by a particular person or people. It had been used either in the flow of daily life, in ceremonial circumstances, or as art or ornament. This is how, as scholars and audiences schooled in critique, we approach these works, as the authors acknowledge. The work of conveying this to audiences—perhaps the majority of museum-goers—must continue even at the risk of appearing didactic to those who know better.

When we turn to language and contemporary artistic creations that reference past eras of African art, such as Theaster Gates’s installation that illustrates Gagliardi and Biro’s essay, the authors also correctly argue that the work of “recognizing complex histories” cannot be passed from museums or universities onto living artists (2019: 4). This is the responsibility of scholarship. In South Africa, for example, critique of colonial categories of neat “tribes” has been consciously undertaken by some artists, but the penetrating task of developing methods for giving detailed histories back to artistic works that were collected in colonial situations and are held in collections of museums in South Africa as well as in Europe and North America, is being done by scholars collaborating across disciplines (e.g., Hamilton and Leibhammer 2016). Attempts to get beyond static inherited categories requires opening up again and again the thickness of how works were talked about in the contexts in which they originated in Kenya or Mali or Zimbabwe in languages other than English or French. It was often when works were collected by outsiders that they moved from being described in quotidian terms that normalized them in the life-worlds of their creators and users to being bluntly labeled by “tribe.” It may not be possible fully to undermine the use of designations like Baule because of how well established they are in international circuits as Gagliardi and Biro recognize.