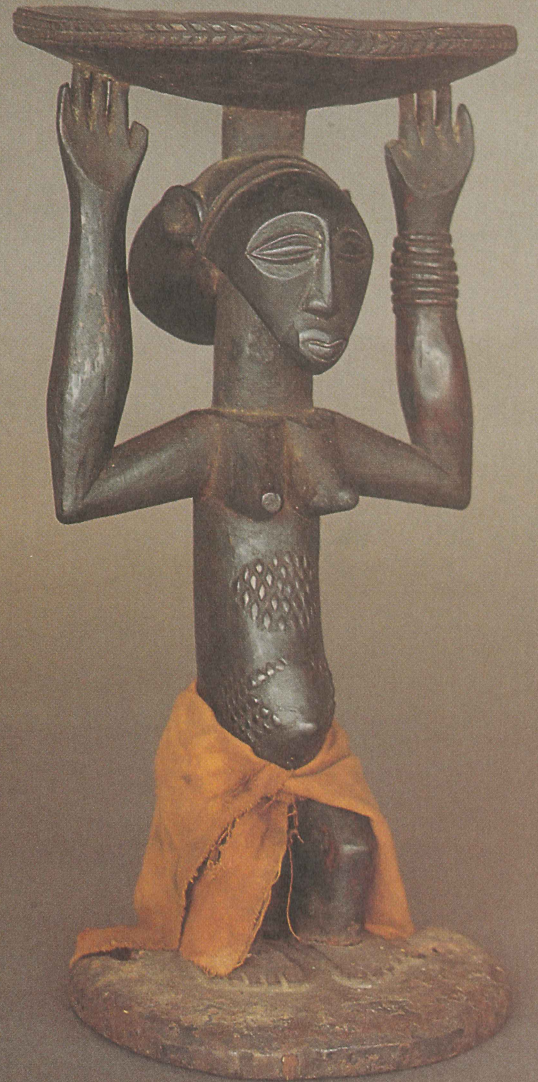

IN A NEW LIGHT

AFRICAN ART AT GRINNELL COLLEGE



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EXHIBITION

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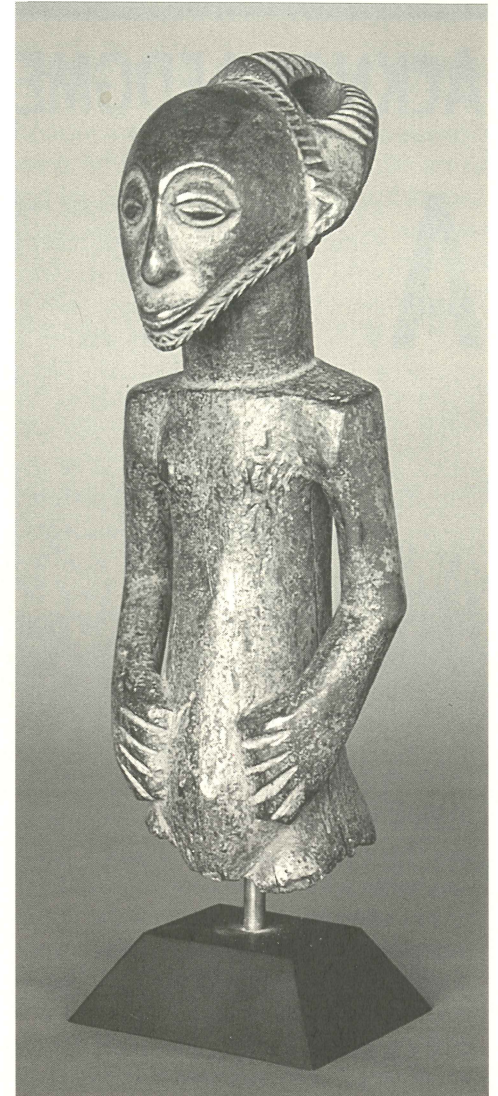
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IN A NEW LIGHT: TEACHING AFRICAN ART

This catalogue and the exhibition it accompanies represent the responses of fourteen Grinnell College students to the vast field of African art studies. These students, who came to Grinnell's first African art exhibition seminar from a variety of fields, started with a basic introduction to African art and by mid-semester moved into sophisticated discussions of the power of museum exhibitions to influence the public perception of African art. The class worked with a group of objects from Grinnell's permanent collection, selected for their quality as representatives of various types, their aesthetic appeal, and their diversity. In *A New Light*, like most exhibitions of African art, focuses on sub-Saharan Africa rather than on the entire continent.¹ The exhibition presents objects from western and central Africa, historically the two regions most heavily represented in Western museums

and private collections.²

An awareness of the particular dangers of misrepresentation in addressing Africa and African art was central to class discussions. While African art is unfamiliar to most museum-goers, this lack of familiarity does not imply neutrality—whether consciously or unconsciously, many people bring a great many subtle preconceptions to their encounters with African art. When the African continent appears in American public discourses, such as the news media, movies and television, it is associated with disasters such as drought and civil war; with ancestor worship, fertility rites and other “pre-modern” practices; with small, isolated villages, and with “primitive” art.³ The Western view of Africa is, in other words, limited and often misinformed. Africa is and has long been a place of prosperity, of complex political structures, of elaborate philosophical and

religious beliefs, and of sophisticated aesthetic systems.

African art is rarely addressed in surveys of art history, which usually focus on the art of the Classical Mediterranean, Medieval and Renaissance Europe, modern Western Europe, and the United States. The study of African art provides a much-needed opportunity to explore aesthetic systems that developed over the course of thousands of years without Western influence.

The arts of Africa were unquestionably affected by contact with Western cultures, which began in a sustained way in the sixteenth century as Portuguese sailors first rounded the coast of West Africa⁴ and culminated with the colonization of the continent by European powers. Artists responded to the changing needs of their audiences, adapted their work to new markets, and made use of the new materials available to them. Still, in many parts of Africa sculpture, masks, textiles, ornaments, and other arts continue to be made and used—nowhere is Africa untouched by the impact of the West, yet nowhere has African culture been completely abandoned.

¹ “Sub-Saharan” refers to Africa south of the Sahara desert, excluding Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt and Libya.

² The lack of objects from eastern and southern Africa—Kenya, Somalia, Tanzania and South Africa among other countries—may be attributed partially to a long history of undervaluation of the arts of nomadic peoples (much of this area is too dry to sustain settled populations). In addition, the arts of some areas were viewed as atypical were and therefore less interesting to collectors of African art. Ethiopia and Eritrea, for example, have for centuries been predominantly Christian; their religious arts have more in common with the art of Byzantine Europe than with the arts of central and western Africa. In eastern Kenya and Tanzania, a region known as the Swahili coast, visual arts have a strong Middle Eastern and Indian flavor as a result of centuries of trading contacts. Fortunately, the students in the

seminar were able to view the arts of southern and eastern Africa during the visits to the University of Iowa Museum of Art, which has one of the finest and broadest collections of sub-Saharan African art in the country.

³ The use of the word “primitive” in reference to African and other non-Western artistic traditions embodies many of the preconceptions viewers bring to African art. The term carries a host of negative connotations, including “simple”, “brutish” and “uncivilized”.

⁴ Contact between sub-Saharan Africa and the European world began long before the modern era, with travel across the Sahara during the Classical Greek period (or before). Drawings on rocks and caves in the Sahara desert depict the horses and chariots used by early trans-Saharan travelers.

The maintenance of many African artistic traditions is at least partially attributable to the intimate links between the arts and political, religious, historical, and economic systems. Art is an integral part of the installation of rulers, of ceremonies by which human beings communicate with the spirit world, of festivals that mark harvests, of the dances that mark births and funerals, and innumerable other social events, both public and private, sacred and secular.

Whether an object is deeply sacred or purely secular, African art emerges out of rich cultural traditions that determine many elements of its form, while other elements are left to the creativity of the artist or the commissioner of a work of art. For example, in order to effectively perform its desired function, a Dogon or a Mende mask must resemble the character it is intended to embody—an antelope or an idealized young woman.⁵ (pages 34, 40) Still, artists have a great deal of room for personal expression within the constraints imposed by tradition. Each carver develops his own style (the male pronoun is used here deliberately—carvers are traditionally male throughout Africa). The tension between adherence to tradition and artistic innovation creates a tangible energy as artists push preexisting forms in new directions without straying from the necessary ties to tradition, like musicians creating variations on a well-known composition.

The history of the collection and display of African art reveals much concerning the prejudices and

misunderstandings students of African art must combat in assembling exhibitions.⁶ African objects first came to Europe as souvenirs, brought home to Europe by the first Portuguese, British, Dutch and French sailors, traders, missionaries and colonial officials. These objects were labelled “curiosities” and treated essentially as found objects—as if these carefully produced objects were not made by artists but instead simply emerged from their varied cultures in a process closer to instinct than to creativity. African masks, sculptures, textiles and other items were displayed alongside fossils, animal skeletons and carefully pinned insects, all exhibited in cabinets to inspire wonder rather than to encourage appreciation for other cultures.

With the rise of anthropology as a scholarly discipline in the 1920s and 1930s, African objects moved to a different venue: the halls of natural history museums. Here they were appreciated as scientific documents, evidence of African religious practices, political structures and social organization. Displayed in crowded museum cases, African objects were studied as scientific documents, not admired as aesthetic achievements. The diorama is perhaps the most characteristic emblem of this approach to the display of African art objects. In a large, glass-walled case, manikins and set-pieces provided a life-sized “environment” within which objects were displayed, approximating their appearance when in use.

The next shift in the appreciation of African art came during the early twentieth century, as a group of European artists were working to

achieve a direct expression of their subconscious and emotions through art. Many of these artists came to see in non-Western art a model for their desired liberation from the constraints of naturalism (a misunderstanding of the motivations of non-Western artists, whose work was less self-expression than carefully controlled variations on strictly defined and deeply symbolic forms). As Picasso, Vlaminck, Derain, and Matisse began to collect African art, they celebrated the objects’ purely formal attributes rather than their value as sources of insight into other cultures. Their appreciation, however, did encourage others to see the objects that populated ethnographic museums as worthy of aesthetic as well as anthropological attention.

The history of the collection and exhibition of African objects explains much concerning the information that accompanies or, more to the point, the information that does not accompany the artworks in this exhibition. Most notably absent from the labels are names and dates, the most basic information museum visitors expect to find beside a work of art. Visiting an exhibition of African art, one would have the impression that all African artists are anonymous, that all African art exists in a vague past that cannot be assigned a specific date.

In fact, African artists were and are often extremely well known, receiving commissions from distant towns and villages, gaining great status and wealth. Unfortunately, the names of artists were rarely recorded by the collectors of Af-

rican art, who were often predisposed to believe that such information was irrelevant. Why record the name of an artist when their work was not truly creative but instead instinctive? How could dates be important if African art remained unchanged for millennia (until Western cultures “civilized” the continent)?

These ideas have, thankfully, changed drastically as prejudices about Africa have been challenged and rejected. Today, art historians are increasingly focused on the creativity of individual African artists, in some instances discovering works of art in many different collections that are all attributable to a single artist. In this way, objects formerly accompanied only by an ethnic label (“Bamana people, Mali”) may be replaced by information that reflects the importance of individual creativity (“Master of the Segou style, Mali”).

Similarly, studies of style and iconography reveal that African art can often be dated to a specific period. Unfortunately, because much African art is made of wood, which deteriorates quickly, most museum collections consist predominantly of objects no more than a century old. For this reason, African art history generally does not have the chronological depth of Western art his-

tory. Still, exceptions do exist, including important archaeological discoveries that turned many Western preconceptions about Africa and African art on their heads.

In Nigeria, for example, a great many amazingly sophisticated terra-cotta sculptures, sensitively sculpted heads and body parts, were discovered by tin miners in the Nok region. Scientific dating reveals that these objects may have been created as long ago as 900 BC. At other sites in Nigeria, most notably Igbo Ukwu and Ife, archaeologists discovered metalwork of such astounding refinement that they assumed these figures, ornaments and masks must have been produced by some long-forgotten Western culture in the region! In fact, these sites (the first dated to the 9th-10th century AD, the second to the 12th-15th century) were likely the political and religious centers of important, cosmopolitan cultures.⁷ These and other examples of the long, rich history of artistic production in Africa indicate that the potential exists for a much more detailed history of art throughout the continent.

Though brief, this overview of the issues, problems and promise of African art studies indicates

the richness of the field. African art provides a route to profound appreciation for non-Western cultures, and it affords insight into twentieth century aesthetic systems and artistic movements. African art’s changing styles, media and iconography provide insight into African history, from the earliest human habitation to the present. In addition, the history of Western collection and exhibition of African art reveals much concerning political, economic and social changes in Western society. Over the course of the semester, the students in this seminar considered carefully generally accepted notions concerning “art”, “tradition”, “authenticity”, and “history”, often modifying or rejecting their conceptions of these terms in light of our discussions. Clearly, the study of African art has the potential to add a great deal of depth to a liberal arts education. *In A New Light: African Art at Grinnell College* demonstrates this potential, and it indicates the many directions in which further studies might take these and other Grinnell students.

⁵ This resemblance, it is important to note, rarely depends on physical likeness in the manner of Western portraiture. Instead, artists focus on attributes that are less tangible and often more significant (for outer appearances often conceal as much as they reveal). In her essay on portraiture in Africa, Jean Borgatti characterized the distinction between Western and African portraiture: “African portraiture, unlike Western portraiture, emphasizes social rather than personal identity and reflects an aesthetic preference for the general and ideal over the idiosyncratic and representational.” Borgatti and Richard Brilliant. *Likeness and Beyond: Portraits from Africa and the World*. NY: Center for African Art, 1990. (p. 73)

⁶ The following brief summary of the history of African art collection and exhibition draws on several recent publications. These include: Paudrat’s essay “From Africa” in *Primitivism in Twentieth Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*. William Rubin, ed. NY: Museum of Modern Art, 1984. Sally Price’s *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989. James Clifford’s *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988.

⁷ For further information on these sites, see Ekpo Eyo and Frank Willet *Treasures of Ancient Nigeria*. NY: Alfred A. Knopf and the Detroit Institute of Arts, 1980.