

AFRICA

The Art of a Continent

Edited by
Tom Phillips



Prestel

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WHY AFRICA? WHY ART?

Kwame Anthony Appiah

Tenabea nyinaa nse.

(All dwelling-places are not alike.)

Asante proverb

I learned about art growing up in my home-town, Kumasi, the capital of Asante, an old kingdom at the heart of the new republic of Ghana. There were paintings and drawings on our walls; there were sculptures and pots, in wood and ivory and earthenware and brass; and there were art-books in the bookcases. But above all, my mother collected Asante goldweights: small figures or geometrical shapes, cast in brass from wax originals, that had been used for weighing gold-dust when it was (as it was well into this century) our currency. The figurative goldweights are wonderfully expressive: they depict people and animals, plants and tools, weapons and domestic utensils, often in arrangements that will remind an Asante who looks at them of a familiar proverb.

Quite often, for example, you will find a weight that represents two crocodiles with a shared stomach (fig. 1), which will evoke the proverb: *Funtumfunafu ne Denkyemfunafu baanu yafunu ye yafunkoro; nanso woredidi a na woreko no, na firi atwimenemude ntira*. It means, roughly: Stomachs mixed up, crocodiles' stomachs mixed up, they both have one stomach but when they eat they fight because of the sweetness of the swallowing. The idea of the proverb – which expresses one of the dilemmas of family life – is that while the acquisitions of each family member benefit the whole family (there is only one stomach), the pleasure of enjoyment is an individual thing (the food has to get into the stomach through one of the mouths).

Even the abstract geometrical weights, with their surfaces decorated with patterns, often use the *adinkra* symbols, which are found as well on Akan stools and funeral cloths, each of which has a name – Gye Nyame, for example – and a meaning – in this case, the power of God. But quite often, also, you will find that one of these elegant weights, so obviously crafted with great skill and care, has a lump of unworked metal stuffed into a crevice, in a way that completely destroys its aesthetic unity; or, sometimes, a well-made figure has a limb crudely hacked off. These amputations and excrescences are there because,



Fig. 1 Goldweight, Asante,
18th–19th century, Private Collection

after all, a weight is a weight: and if it does not weigh the right amount, it cannot serve its function. If a goldweight, however finely crafted, has the wrong mass, then something needs to be added (or chopped off) to bring it to its proper size.

There is, thus, an extremely elaborate cultural code expressed in these miniature sculptures; and with the patina that comes from age and human handling, and the exquisite detail produced in the lost-wax process that made them, many of them have an obvious aesthetic appeal. It does not take long to recognise that the goldweights of Asante differ from those of other Akan societies: Fante or Baule, say. Nor is it hard to recognise stylistic change over the centuries. There are histories of taste written in these objects, if only we could read them. Goldweights, in sum, have many of the features that we expect of works of art. In Ashanti itself, they were appreciated for their appeal to the eye; or for the proverbial traditions they engaged. But in the end, as I say, they were weights: and their job was to tell you the value of the gold dust in the weighing pan.

The best of the Asante goldweights are among the splendours of African creativity. But they were not the product of a culture that valued these objects *as art*. Their decorative elegance was something prized and aimed for, of course; but it was an ornament, an embellishment, on an object that served a utilitarian function. It is clear that some people – chiefs among them, but also the richest commoners – made particularly fine collections of weights, and that, in using them in trade, they advertised their wealth at the same time, by displaying the superior craftsmanship of their possessions. Perhaps once, when the weights were still being used, people knew the names of those who made them best; but no one now knows the names of the great casters of goldweights from the past. Still, to insist upon my point, in appreciating and collecting these weights as art we are doing something new with them, something that their makers and the men and women who paid them, did not do.

The goldweight tradition is also very particular. The use of figurative and abstract weights, made in brass by the lost-wax process, is not widespread in west Africa, let alone Africa more generally. Outside the Akan region of Ghana and Ivory Coast, there are, so far as I am aware, no traditions that have produced objects that could be mistaken for Akan goldweights. Akan goldweights are African, because the Akan cultures are in west Africa: but these traditions are local, and while they reflect the complex cultural and economic exchanges between, say, Asante and the Islamic traders of the Sahel, or Baule culture and the European trade of the coast (and thus reflect currents of life wider than those of the societies in which they were made) it would be a mistake to see them as capturing the essence of the vast gamut of African creativity.

Anyone who has looked at collections of masks from western and central Africa will tell you that you can soon learn to recognise roughly where most of them come from: the traditions of each society in masking, even those that have influenced and been influenced by neighbouring traditions, are still quite recognisably distinct; as are the roles masks play in the different forms of performance where they have their fullest life. The point here is the same: Africa's creative traditions are various and particular. You will no more capture the essence of Africa's arts in a single tradition than you can grasp the meaning of European art by examining Tuscan painting of the 15th century. And what goes for art, goes, even more, for life. Africa's forms of life are too diverse to capture in a single ideal type. An understanding of our goldweights requires that you know something not of African but of Akan life: the generalities about African life are, by and large, human generalities.

So we might as well face up to the obvious problem: neither *Africa* nor *art* – the two animating principles of this exhibition – played a role *as ideas* in the creation of the objects in this spectacular show.

Africa

Take, first, 'Africa': through the long ages of human cultural life in the continent, and, more particularly, in the half-dozen or so millennia since the construction of the first great architectural monuments of the Nile Valley, most people in the continent have lived in societies that defined both self and other by ties of blood or power. It would never have occurred to most of the Africans in this long history to think that they belonged to a larger human group defined by a shared relationship to the African continent: a hundred years ago, it would not have occurred to anyone in my home-town. Only recently has the idea of Africa come to figure importantly in the thinking of many Africans; and those that took up this idea got it, by and large, from European culture.

The Europeans who colonised Africa thought of sub-Saharan Africa as a single place, in large part because they thought of it as the home of a single – Negro – race. (That is why, when we speak of Africans, black people come to mind: despite the fact that lighter-skinned north Africans – Arabs, Berbers, Moors – are unequivocally inhabitants of continental Africa.) In the European imagination, the cultures and societies of sub-Saharan Africa formed a single continuum, reflecting an underlying racial unity, which expressed itself in the 'savage rhythms' of African music, the 'sensuality' of African dance, the 'primitive vigour' of sculpture and masks from what was called the 'Dark Continent'.

As intellectuals in Africa came to think of themselves, for the first time, as members of a Negro race – and as Africans – they drew not only on this general Western framework, but also on the ideas of African-American intellectuals – Alexander Crummell, E. W. Blyden, W. E. B. Du Bois – who had been taught to understand themselves as Negroes in the context of the New World system of racial domination, the framework left by slavery. In the New World, where so many dark-skinned people had been brought together from Africa, and deprived of the specific cultural knowledge and traditions of their ancestors, the common experience of the Middle Passage and of enslavement bonded together people whose ancestors had lived very diverse styles of life, hundreds, sometimes thousands, of miles apart. In the New World – in Brazil, or Cuba or the United States – people of diverse African ancestries, bound together in each place by a shared language, might end up experiencing themselves as a unity.

But in Africa itself, the great diversity of societies and cultural forms was not homogenised by the slave trade. Over the last millennium, as Islam spread across north Africa and into west Africa, and down the east African littoral; over the last few centuries, as Christianity came (with its multiple inflections) in the footsteps of European trade and colonisation; over the last century, as colonial empires bound African societies increasingly tightly into the new global economic system and into the modern order of nation-states; over the last decades, as the global spread of radio and television and the record and film industries has reached its tentacles into villages and towns all over Africa; there have, of course, been enormous forces bringing the experiences of African societies closer together. But despite all these forces, the central cultural fact of African life, in my judgement, remains not the sameness of Africa's cultures, but their enormous diversity. Since many of the objects in this exhibition antedate some or all of these energies of incorporation, their origins are more diverse yet.

This should not be surprising. We are speaking of a continent, of hundreds of millions of people. But the fact is that the legacy of the old European way of thinking, in which what unites Africa is that it is the home of the Negro, makes it natural for us, here in the West, to expect there to be a shared African essence: and that tradition makes us equally likely to expect that this essence will show itself in the unity of African art. In this older way of thinking, after all, all the arts everywhere expressed the common genius of a people. (This is one reason why so many of the objects collected by Europeans in Africa in the last two centuries are labelled not with the name of a maker, but with the name of a 'tribe', an ethnic group whose shared conceptions these masks or bronzes or shrine-figures were thought to

express.) But, as you will see as you travel through the works on display here, it would take an eye completely insensitive to the particular to reduce this magnificent miscellany to the expression of the spirit of a singular, coherent, African nature.

What unites these objects as African, in short, is not a shared nature, not the shared character of the cultures from which they came, but our ideas of Africa; ideas which, as I have said, have now come to be important for many Africans, and thus are now African ideas, too.

Art

It is time now to explore, for a moment, the second side of the difficulty I have been adumbrating: the fact that what unites these objects as art is our concept as well. There is no old word in most of the thousand or so languages still spoken in Africa that well translates the word 'art'. This, too, is not too surprising once you think about it: there is, after all, no word in 17th-century English (or, no doubt, in 17th-century Cantonese or Sanskrit) that carries exactly that burden of meaning either. The ways of thinking of 'art' with which we live now in the West (and the many places in the world where people have taken up this Western idea) began to take something like their modern shape in the European Enlightenment. And it is no longer helpful to try and explain what art has come to be for us by offering a definition; in an age in which, as John Wisdom liked to say, 'every day, in every way, we are getting meta and meta', the art-world has denizens whose work is to challenge every definition of art, to push us beyond every boundary; to stand outside and move beyond every attempt to fix art's meaning. Any definition of art now is a provocation, and it is likely to meet the response: Here, I have made (or found) this thing that does not meet your definition and I dare you to say it is not art.

Still, we have received ideas about art and about artists: and my point is that most of these ideas were not part of the cultural baggage of the people who made the objects in this exhibition. For example: since the 19th century especially, we have had an important distinction between the fine and the decorative arts, and we have come increasingly to think of fine art as 'art for art's sake'. We have come, that is, increasingly, to see art as something we must assess by criteria that are intrinsic to the arts, by what we call aesthetic standards. We know art can serve a political or a moral or even a commercial purpose: but to see something as art is to evaluate it in ways that go beyond asking whether it serves these 'extrinsic' purposes. Many of the objects in this exhibition, on the other hand, had primary functions that were, by our standards, non-aesthetic, and would have been assessed, first and foremost, by their ability to achieve those ends. Something about our attitude to art is captured by the incomprehension we would feel for someone who looked at a painting and said: 'It's profoundly evocative, of course, but what is it for?'

A response

If African art was not made by people who thought of themselves as Africans; if it was not made as art; if it reflects, collectively, no unitary African aesthetic vision; can we not still profit from this assemblage of remarkable objects?

What, after all, does it matter that this pair of concepts — *Africa, art* — was not used by those who made these objects? They are still African; they are still works of art. Maybe what unites them as African is our decision to see them together, as the products of a single continent; maybe it is we, and not their makers, who have chosen to treat these diverse objects as art. But it is also *our* show — it has been constructed for us now, in the Western world. It might be anything from mildly amusing to rigorously instructive to speculate what the creators of the objects celebrated here would make of our assemblage. (Consider:

some of these works had religious meanings for their makers, were conceived of as bearers of invisible powers; some, on the other hand, were in use in everyday life.) But *our* first task, as responsible exhibition-goers, is to decide what *we* will do with these things, how *we* are to think of them.

In presenting these objects as art objects, the curators of this exhibition invite you to look at them in a certain way, to evaluate them in the manner we call 'aesthetic'. This means, as you know, that you are invited to look at their form, their craftsmanship, the ideas they evoke, to attend to them in the way we have learned to attend in art museums. (It is hard to say more exactly what is involved here – at least in a brief compass – but most adults who go regularly to exhibitions of painting and sculpture will have practised a certain kind of attention and found it worthwhile: and if they have not, it is hard to see why they should keep going.) So what is important is not whether or not they are art or were art for their makers: what matters is that we are invited to treat them as art, and that the curators assure us that engaging our aesthetic attention will be rewarding.

We can also accept that they were selected on a continental basis that guarantees nothing about what they will share, nothing about how these objects will respond to each other. Provided you do not expect to discover in these creations a reflection of an underlying African artistic unity, an engagement with the whole exhibition will be more than the sum of the unrelated experiences of each separate object, or each separate group of objects from a common culture. How these individual experiences add up will depend, of course, as much as anything else, on the viewer; which is as it should be. But there are questions that might guide a reading of this show – it is part of the pleasure we can anticipate from it that there are so many – and, in closing, I would like to suggest a few of mine.

Let me start with a datum: this exhibition decisively establishes that anyone with half an eye can honour the artistry of Africa, a continent whose creativity has been denigrated by some and sentimentalised by others, but rarely taken seriously. I have been arguing that to take these African art works seriously does not require us to take them as their makers took them. (If that were so, we should, no doubt, be limited to religious evaluations of Western European art of the High Middle Ages.) And one other way to take them seriously would be to reflect through them on how the enormous temporal and spatial range of human creativity exemplified in this exhibition has been adapted in our culture over the last few centuries to an interpretation of Africa as the home of people incapable of civilisation.

What does it teach us about the past of Western culture, that it has had such great difficulty learning to respect many of the art works in this exhibition, because they were African? Many of these objects come from European collections, and were assembled as curiosities or as puzzles or as scientific data: they were undoubtedly appreciated – loved even – by many of the individuals who gathered them. But they have rarely lived at the heart of our aesthetic consciousness; and when they have, it has often been with astonishing condescension: Ladislav Szesci told readers of Nancy Cunard's *Negro* (a work published in 1934 in celebration of black creativity; see Cunard, 1970):

The Negroes have been able to create works of art because of their innate purity and primitiveness. They can be as a prism, without any intentional preoccupation, and succeed in rendering their vision with certitude and without any imposition of exterior motive.

It is part of the history of *our* culture – something that bears reflection as we travel among these African artefacts – that half a century ago, this was an obvious way of speaking up for African art.

What (more hopefully, perhaps) does it tell us about our cultural present that we have now, for the first time, brought together so many, so marvellous African artefacts not as ethnographic data, not as mere curiosities, but for the particular form of respectful attention we accord to art? How, in short, may

we interpret our exhibition itself as part of the history of our Western culture: a moment in the complex encounter of Europe and her descendant cultures with Africa and hers? This is a question that everyone who visits this exhibition is equipped to reflect on: all of us can dredge up a common sense that we have picked up about Africa, and we can test that common sense against these uncommon objects.

These, then, are some questions that I bring to this show. But, like each of you, I will bring many others, some of them peculiar to my own history, some more widely shared.

These artefacts will speak to you, and what they say will be shaped by what you are as well as by what they are. But that they speak to you – as the goldweights of Asante spoke to my English-born mother – should be a potent reminder of the humanity you share with the men and women that made them.

As they speak to you, they will draw you into an exploration of the worlds of those who made them (this is always one of our central responses to art). What you will discover in that exploration is not one Africa, but many: a rich diversity reflected in – but by no means exhausted by – the parade of wonders in this extraordinary exhibition.