

ART/artifact

African Art in Anthropology Collections

S. Vogel et al (1988)

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Introduction

Susan Vogel

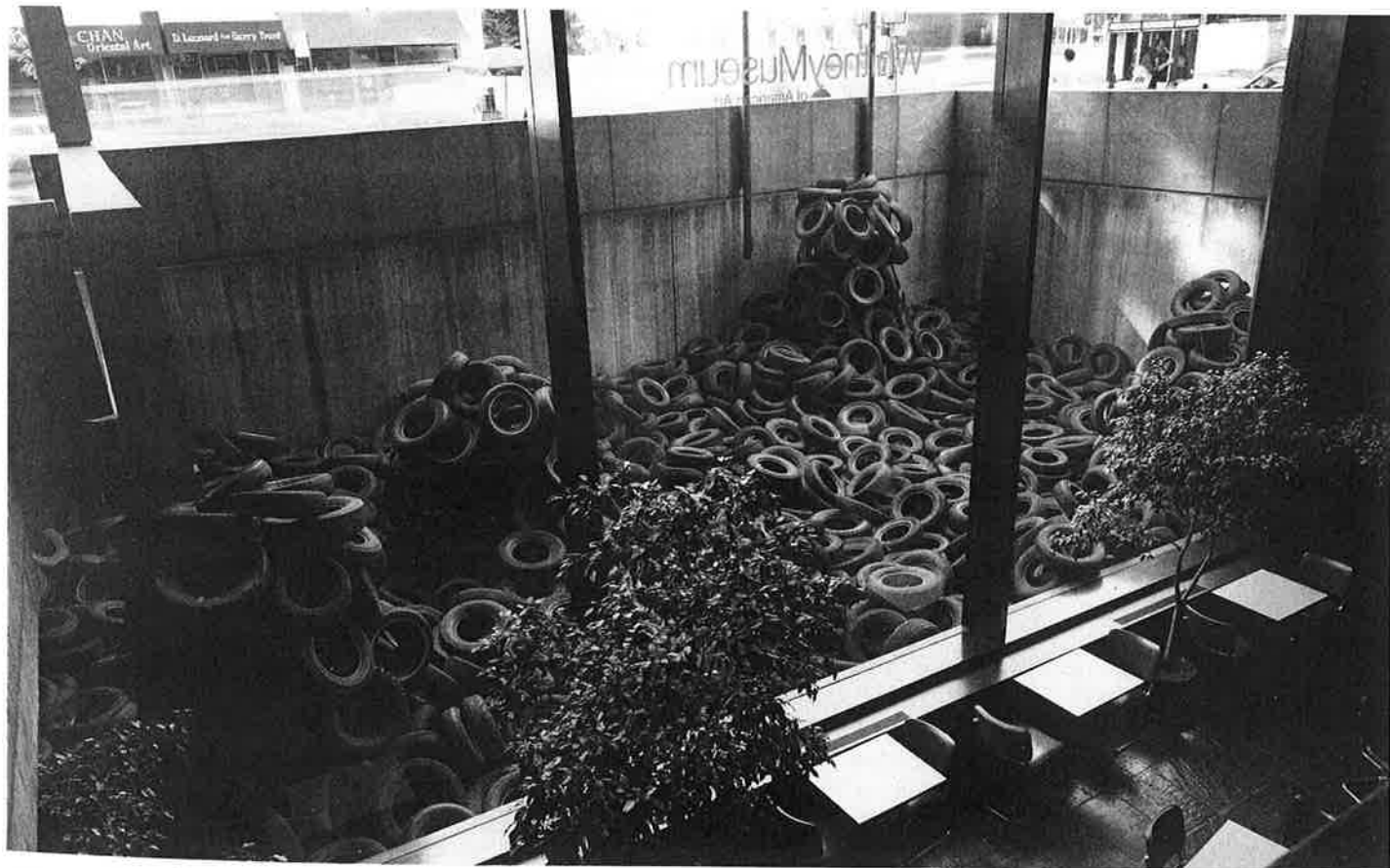
This is not an exhibition about African art or Africa. It is not even entirely about art. *Art/Artifact* is an exhibition about the ways Western outsiders have regarded African art and material culture over the past century. A central issue is our classification of certain objects of African material culture as art and others as artifacts. Our categories do not reflect African ones, and have changed during this century. An examination of how we view African objects (both literally and metaphorically) is important because unless we realize the extent to which our vision is conditioned by our own culture—unless we realize that the image of African art we have made a place for in our world has been shaped by us as much as by Africans—we may be misled into believing that we see African art for what it is.

In their original African setting most works of art (I use our phrase for the moment, but more on that later) were literally viewed differently from the way we see them. Masks were seen as parts of costumed figures moving in performance, or seen not at all. Figures often stood in dark shrines visible to only a few persons, and then under conditions of heightened sensibility. Other objects were seen only swathed in cloth, surrounded by music, covered with offerings or obscured by attachments. Most sculpture could be seen only on rare occasions. As Arthur Danto says here, the primacy of the visual

sense over all others is particular to our culture: African objects were made to belong to a broader realm of experience. If we take them out of the dark, still their movement, quiet the music, and strip them of additions, we make them accessible to our visual culture, but we render them unrecognizable or meaningless to the cultures they came from.

To understand these objects better we must consider the intersection between the ways we see them literally, and the metaphorical vision our culture has of them.

Most visitors are unaware of the degree to which their experience of any art in a museum is conditioned by the way it is installed. As the enshrinement of African sculptures in the Michael Rockefeller wing at the Metropolitan Museum in the early part of this decade subliminally communicated the aesthetic and monetary worth of African art, so do anthropological, art historical or other kinds of installations color the viewer's estimation of what he sees. The conditioning begins with the selection of what is to be displayed. Because today the forms and materials of art are frequently the same as those of non art objects, the setting or context in which art is displayed may be its most evident defining characteristic. A pile of tires in front of a museum is to be viewed as art where the same pile in a gas station clearly is not. The very presence of an African stool in an art exhibi-



Installation view of Alan Kaprow's *Yard* (1961) reconstructed in 1984 for the Whitney Museum of American Art's exhibition *Blam! The Explosion of Pop, Minimalism and Performance 1958-1964*.



The 1910 African Hall at the American Museum of Natural History combined ethnography and zoology, and was organized geographically. Note the novel use of color transparencies placed in window boxes, to give the viewer a sense of context. Negative Number 32926. Courtesy Department Library Services, American Museum of Natural History.

tion makes assertions about African material culture.

The museum exhibition is not a transparent lens through which to view art, however neutral the presentation may seem.

Museum installations have naturally reflected the philosophies and attitudes of their organizers from the time they first began. One of the first Western settings for African objects was the "curiosity room." French, German, and English scientists and amateurs had formed collections of exotic, natural and manmade wonders since the Renaissance. Most curiosity rooms made no allusion to the original cultural context of objects, and implied little aesthetic intent or competence on the part of their makers. *Art/Artifact* exhibits such a room recreated from The Hampton Institute's first presentation of its ethnographic collection in the 1870s (p. 103). Such "curiosity" collections rarely separated botanical, zoological, and geological specimens from cultural artifacts, and often mixed together objects from different places.

"Curiosity rooms" were often private, but during the third quarter of the nineteenth century, museums of nat-

ural history opened to the public in many American and European cities. With a strongly educational mission from the outset, these museums presented didactic exhibitions using their specimens to illustrate prevailing theories, as they do today. It was the midtwentieth century—relatively late in the history of Western collecting—before African sculptures made much of an appearance in art museums. Once they did, it became necessary to determine which objects were properly art and should be displayed in art museums, and which were artifacts that belonged in natural history museums.

The category of African objects defined as art has steadily expanded throughout the twentieth century. Virtually all of the African art works we now know were once classified as artifacts. The problem of distinguishing between the two categories has proven remarkably resistant to clear-cut solutions, and continues to bedevil those who collect and exhibit African and the other "Primitive" arts.

The question arose from several historical circumstances. It originated in the fact that during the 1880s and

1890s, when the first African museum collections were being formed in Europe and America, the almost universally held definition of art excluded non-naturalistic traditions. Early African collections were generally made in the field and included large numbers of utilitarian objects, biological and geological specimens, and other things of a purely scientific interest. Separating the small number of sculptures from this mass was made more problematic by the fact that the continuum of objects runs unbroken from freestanding figures, for example, to figures that are incorporated in staffs or musical instruments, to staffs or instruments with fine nonrepresentational decorations, to rudely formed, purely functional staffs and instruments. The material—usually wood—provided no obvious demarcation between fine and applied arts.

No help came from the African peoples who produced the objects. They did not distinguish between art and other manufactured objects, and rarely had a word that could be translated as "art." Early writers made much of this fact which was still being regularly mentioned at the time of the "Primitivism" exhibition in 1984. Because the creators of these objects were not making a claim for their status as artists or for their works as art, and since their products generally failed to correspond to the art made in Europe at the time, most objects were classified as ethnographic specimens and sent to anthropology museums.

In natural history museums African artifacts were used to illustrate different aspects of culture. At the end of the last century, many thinkers considered African and other "Primitive" cultures to be living fossils, contemporary ancestors that had preserved early stages in the evolution of culture. African artifacts were seen as providing a precious glimpse into the past of human development, the dawn of consciousness, and the roots of art—as the word "primitive" implies. Cultural evolution was believed to have reached its zenith in late nineteenth century Europe. Though the theory of an evolution of culture has been a minority point of view in the twentieth century, most natural history museums still deal mainly with "low cultures" and exotic cultures and exclude "high cultures" and familiar ones such as those of the United States and Western Europe. (I do not wish to imply that the museums today regard their subjects as primitive, but simply to point out that their focus on the study of certain culture areas was established at a time when those were prevailing attitudes, and that they still study essentially the same areas.) In all cases, anthropology museums have continued to use their collections as sources of information about culture.

Art museums have tended to view their collections from the opposite perspective using information about the cultural setting to understand the work of art. The different orientations of the two kinds of museums are immediately visible in the ways they have acquired and displayed their collections. Anthropology museums have

prized large field collections which combine extensive documentation with duplication. Because they sought what was typical of the culture rather than what was unique, they often exhibited (more in the past than today) vast series of closely similar objects, often arranged typologically (i.e. weapons, masks, cups).

In contrast, art museums have not traditionally been concerned with documentation, but have preferred the unique object, valuing originality and invention—the qualities that separate art from craftsmanship in Western definitions. Art museums have accordingly purchased works one by one (or acquired collections that were formed that way) and have avoided redundancy.

During the four or five decades that art museums have been dealing with ethnographic art, however, the separation between the anthropological and the art historical approaches has narrowed. Anthropologists are increasingly sensitive to the aesthetic dimension of the objects in their care, as art historians have become alive to the vast amount of anthropological information that they can use to understand art. This has tended to make their respective museums' installations resemble each other more than ever before.

The crowded presentation of the old fashioned natural history museum grew out of a desire to show many typical examples, but it also reflected the generally cluttered aesthetic of the period. It is interesting, however, to note that one of the earliest exhibitions of African sculpture in an art gallery presented it much as art museums do today—isolated for aesthetic contemplation, completely removed from its cultural context or any suggestion of use.



Installation view of Stieglitz' 291 Gallery, New York City, 1914-1915.

A photograph of Alfred Stieglitz' 291 Gallery exhibition of African art in 1914 already shows an African art purified of its functional look. The Fang sculpture seen standing on a pedestal is a reliquary guardian originally attached to a box of ancestral bones for the purpose of warding off intruders. Here it appears cleansed of bark and bones, and the dowdy aura of the ethnographic

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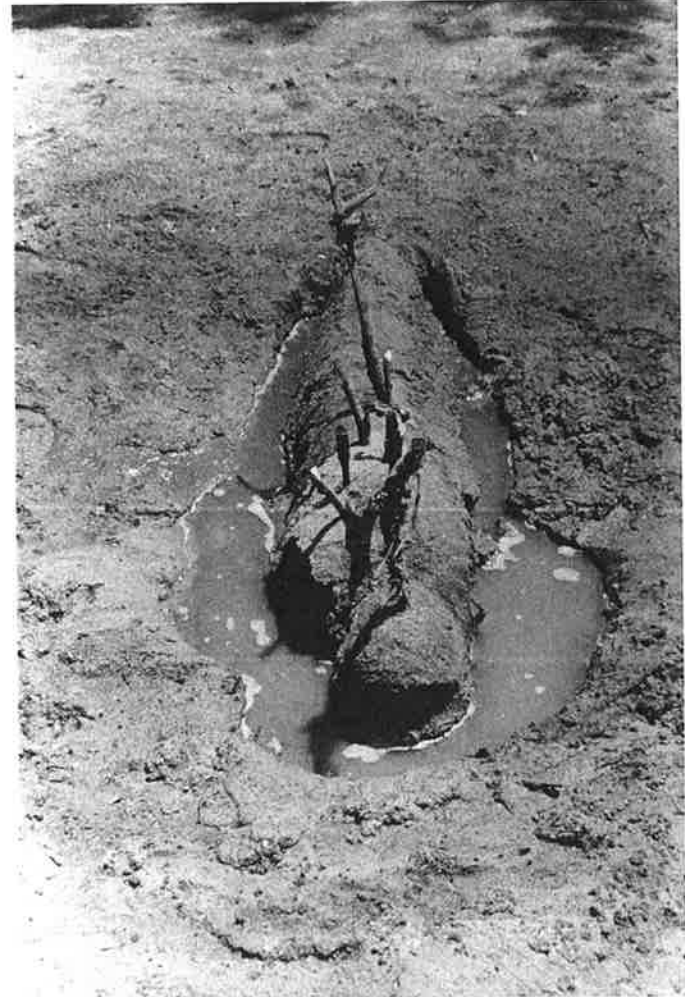
specimen. The impulse to strip African art of its visible cultural context has roots in the desire to make it resemble art of the West and conform to our definition of what art is. An essential quality of Western art is that it exists for its own sake, that it has a higher ambition than to be useful in any pedestrian sense. That African art is functional—even when its function is spiritual as in the case of the Fang guardian figure—can appear to compromise its status as art.

The corpus of nearly a thousand bronzes seized in the Kingdom of Benin and brought to Europe in 1891² was the first African material that Westerners generally recognized as art (p. 55). No other African work then known so closely fit the European category of art: the bronzes were produced by a technically complex process; they were representational and moderately naturalistic; some plaques and altar groups seemed to depict scenes. Hundreds of Benin bronzes were auctioned for high prices soon after they arrived in Europe. Nevertheless, most were acquired by museums of ethnography.

The introduction of African art around 1907 into the circle of avant garde artists in Paris, and the subsequent transformation of their art led to the creation of a European art that resembled some African works. This in turn led people in advanced circles to accept many kinds of African sculpture as art. In an extremely gradual process, artists, then scholars, museums, and the general public have progressively redefined certain kinds of African artifacts as art. The process seems to be led by artists whose nonrepresentational, then abstract, and finally pseudo-artifactual works, have been followed at each stage by the acceptance of more and more African objects as art. This process may now have come as far as it legitimately can. Western artists have been making pseudo-artifacts for some time—nonfigurative objects apparently useful in some unknown ritual, or private culture. Many resemble "Primitive" architecture, ritual sites, altars, weapons, traps, tools and so forth, mainly of an extremely unadorned kind. Repeating the process that has continued through much of this century, we can look again at the African artifacts that they resemble and regard the artifacts as art. But should we? And if not, then have the earlier shifts in definition between art and artifact been equally inappropriate?

Opinions differ: they even differ on whether an artifact definition is worth discussing. And there are still those who say we do not yet know the first thing about how to look at African art or artifacts. The originating cultures, however, tell us certain things about problematic objects that cannot be ignored.

In Africa the experience of any given work of art varied from person to person, and was closely tied to the circumstances in which it appeared. When an African artist created a sculpture, he almost always made it for a particular purpose, a specific audience, and often for a single location. The object's profound meaning



Untitled, 1977. Ana Mendieta. From Fetish Series. Earth-body work of sand, sticks and water, executed at Old Man's Creek, Iowa City, Iowa. Photograph courtesy of The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York City.

was known in greater or lesser degree to that original audience who understood it with varying nuances of emphasis.

For example, a men's society mask might be regarded as entertaining and possibly intimidating by uninitiated youths; initiated men would identify with it as an expression of their power and would understand its deeper spiritual and social meaning gradually as they rose through levels of initiation; women and members of different clans, courtiers or commoners might view it respectively as ugly and menacing, a glorious manifestation of their group, or as awesomely sublime. An artist could fix mainly on the details of manufacture and the skill of the artist. Those who did not belong to the original audience, such as Africans from a neighboring area, might see the sculpture as unknown and alien, or might mistakenly interpret it in terms of their own differing traditions.

Only the original audience could experience the work of art in its fullness, and their experience was multifar-

ious. Further, that experience changed over time. The villagers who today watch a masquerade performance may perceive in it things the originators never foresaw, and may only dimly understand certain symbols that have become remote since the masquerade was created. This was probably always true as generation succeeded generation. (In some measure, of course, the same can be said of all art made in a time or place different from the viewer's.) How, then, are we to see African art? The only context available to most Westerners is the museum. If the original African experience was variable and can be only imperfectly simulated outside its culture, then a museum presentation can only be arbitrary and incomplete.

When at the end of the nineteenth century African art came to the attention of the West, it was mounted—both in the art world and in ethnological circles—the way Greek, Roman, Chinese, and other antiquities were displayed at the time: that is, figures set off by square or rectangular pedestals; masks and heads on necklike blocks; some masks hung on the wall like relief sculptures. (Masks, of course, are not relief sculptures; they are the front of a composition that included the wearer's whole head—a realization that complicates rather than elucidates the display problem for a museum.) Recognizing that the methods we adopt to display African sculptures are arbitrary and remote from the ways in which they were meant to be seen forces us to reexamine our displays.



The Arches, 1959. Alexander Calder. Painted steel. 106 x 107 ½ x 87 in. Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City. Gift of Howard and Jean Lipman 82.44. Photograph by Jerry L. Thompson.



The Freedman, 1863. John Quincy Adams Ward. Bronze, H. 20 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of Charles Anthony Lamb and Barea Seeley Lamb in memory of their grandfather Charles Rollinson Lamb, 1979. (1979.394). Photograph by Jerry L. Thompson.

How would African art be shown if it had reached us for the first time in the 1980s? Museums are conservative institutions and have changed their displays very little in the past half century or more—aside from reducing the density of exhibits and increasing the labels. The presentation of the art of our own time, however, has changed considerably.

Partly under the influence of African and other "Primitive" arts, twentieth century sculptors have tended to create works that stand in the viewer's space; earlier works usually carried their own space with them, in their own scale. A small bronze horseman stood on a small bronze patch of earth, for example; a monumental marble figure stood by a huge marble tree trunk. In contrast, African and Modern sculptures were generally not meant to be isolated from the viewer by a frame or base, but to invade, to share his environment. African figures do not create their own scale or space, but intrude into ours and establish their size in relation to the human body. They are large or small, they dwarf us or make us giants by cohabiting our space. If our reference were the art of our own time, and not that of a century ago, we might want to show African sculpture without barriers or mounts.

In the exhibition is a repousse brass head made in the royal court of Abomey (p. 53). It is either an unfinished work, or all that remains of a complete figure; in



Sleeping Muse, Constantin Brancusi, Bronze, H. 6 $\frac{3}{4}$, L. 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1949. (49.70.225).

its present state it could not have been a significant or useful object in Abomey, and would almost certainly not have been displayed. How must we display it? The curatorial impulse is to mount it upright on a block, but since it has become meaningless in terms of its original culture, and has now become an artifact of our culture, could we validly show it simply lying on its side? That would give it a certain resonance with works of Western art (notably Brancusi's "Sleeping Muse") and would be a statement about the place this African head occupies in our inventory of cultural objects.

There is no single right way for us to exhibit the head from Abomey or any African object—only ways that are more or less illuminating, beautiful, instructive, arbitrary; faithful to this or that school of thought. We exhibit them for our own purposes in institutions that are deeply embedded in our own culture. There is nothing strange or wrong about that. It is simply a given.

In the exhibition is a large, interesting-looking, honey colored bundle of rope with regular knots visible beneath the binding, and some thick black encrustation on one side (p. 175). Placed under the spotlights of an art

museum it looks like a work of modern art, though it is smaller than most. It is in fact a hunting net made by the Zande people of Zaire and collected for the American Museum of Natural History by Herbert Lang in 1910. For the Zande its purpose and meaning were straightforward—to catch animals in communal hunts that brought meat to the village. However symbolically or metaphorically the Zande conceptualized hunting, no expressive intent is apparent in this artifact. (In Danto's formulation its meaning was its purpose.) Furthermore, its present configuration is not its intended one; to be useful or even to be examined by the Zande it would have to be unfurled. The intriguing black encrustation is accidental, perhaps tar from the ship that brought it here.

In evaluating the hunting net, its Zande makers and users would probably have been concerned with workmanship, the toughness and uniform thickness of the rope, the regularity of the knots, and the evenness of the openings—all qualities necessary to its functioning. Most African languages have a single word that means good, useful, well made, beautiful, suitable. This net

would probably have merited that word. But it would probably not have been considered interesting to look at. Though it bears a spurious resemblance to works of Modern art, the net cannot itself be considered a work of art.

Also in the exhibition is a needle case made by the Lozi people of Zambia which consists of a series of finely wrought iron needles with twisted ends and polyhedron terminals pushed randomly into a tightly wrapped fiber case (p. 185). We can admire the efficiency of the case which protects the points of the evidently precious needles, the variety of their forms and decoration, and we can also see an expressive dimension in the irregular way they have been thrust into the case. But that would be a false reading of this object because, like the rope net, it is not in its intended configuration. The needles were meant to be used singly; their present position and grouping is as temporary and accidental as that of any pincushion or pile of tomatoes in the kitchen. The Lozi might have been interested in the various kinds of ornamentation on the needle's tips, and of course in how sharp they were. I doubt they would have wasted time on other visual aspects of this object.

A great wooden bowl from Wum in the Cameroon Grasslands is also a functional object—probably intended to hold elements of chiefly regalia during displays—but it is also a masterful sculpture (p. 58). The body of a male figure wraps ingeniously around the bowl and cradles it on his knees; his arms merge progressively into the bowl itself until his hands lose all volume and become only lines incised into the bowl's surface. The breadth of his shoulders and knees, out of all proportion to his slender torso, suggest energy, protection, stability. The artist who carved this bowl made a functional object whose expressive form takes it beyond the net, or the needle case into a realm our culture calls art.

But the people of Wum almost certainly classified it in quite a different way. They saw in this sculpture a useful object, a symbol of their kingdom, an heirloom; an expression of the continuity and security of their state. Ordinary people probably differed about the artistic quality of the work, for its forms are unusual and exaggerated. Kingdoms had more than one such bowl, all equivalent in function and expressive of the same values. Some surely recognized this one for the superior expression that it is, though our information on such questions is woefully thin.

Whether the Wum bowl is art, whether the hunting net, or the Lozi needles are art or artifact is strictly our problem. The makers of humble African nets, needles, stools and mats that we term artifacts have not somehow aspired to sophistication and the status of art and failed. They never for a minute lost sight of the fact that these were simply useful, wellmade objects. The question and the categories are ours.

African cultures do not isolate the category of objects we call art, but they do associate an aesthetic experi-

ence with objects having certain qualities. The aesthetic experience is universal—with or without a word that describes it. Africa is only one of a great number of world cultures that created and recognized art while lacking a word like our "art". As Blier points out, before the sixteenth century the English word "art" referred primarily to the idea of practical skill.¹ The Latin root *ars* has its source in the word *artus* meaning to join or fit together. Both the Italian term *arte* and the German word *kunst* were linked to the idea of practical activity, trade, and knowhow. Arthur Danto's definition below (p. 32) is well suited to the art of our own time, but does not entirely answer the African situation. "To be a work of art," he argues, "is to embody a thought, to have a content, to express a meaning. . . ."

In African cultures numerous natural and manmade objects embody complex meanings including, for example, certain leaves, animals, shells, and metals. Motifs woven into textiles and mats, incised on the human body, or painted on walls are named and significant. The shapes formed by sacrificial blood or wine poured on the earth carry meanings. The basket of bones, the pan of sacrificial materials, the lump of clay at the center of a shrine may be the most highly significant element there, even when flanked by sculpted figures. Like the baldachin, the monstrance and the altar itself in a Catholic church, African sculptures often embellish shrines whose most complex meanings are embodied in nonaesthetic objects like the Catholic host. Danto's definition holds true of African works of art, but fails to separate them from much else in the culture. It leaves out the aesthetic dimension.

Though African languages do not have a word for art, they have many words that indicate artistry; words for embellished, decorated, beautified, out of the ordinary. Sometimes there are two words for the same type of object: one for the natural or plain example, another for the embellished or manmade one. (A naturally occurring separation between the front teeth has one name, and is beautiful, but less so than the cosmetic separation produced by filing, which has another name.) Many Africans make a distinction between the product of artistry, and the routine object on the basis of the beauty of the object, and the care and skill that went into making it beautiful. I do not know how they would classify the deliberately rough, ferocious or ugly sculptures made by artists (that we would consider art) that do not fit into the definition I have concocted here. Where their definition corresponds to a dictionary definition of art is in the sense of skill and the requirement that there be something deliberate, and manmade about the beauty of the object. In traditional African thinking, art is a sign of culture and man's ability to fashion the merely useful to his desire.

Notes

1. Suzanne Blier, "Art Systems and Semantics: The Question of Stylistic Taxonomy in West Africa" forthcoming in the *American Journal of Semiotics* (1988).