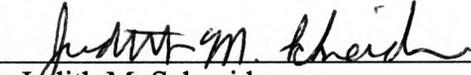


APPROVAL SHEET

Title of Thesis: The Positioning of African Art in the Global Art Market: A Look at
Western Attitudes and Influences in the Lives of Contemporary
African Artists in the United States

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ABSTRACT

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Tineka Archer, Master of Arts, 2003

Thesis directed by: Dr. Edward Larkey, Associate Professor and Graduate Program Director of Modern Languages and Linguistics

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The success of a contemporary African artist depends on how well the artist does in the global art market. The purpose of a global art market is to respectfully promote and equally recognize cultural others. However, the global art market has consistently been regulated under Western cultural, political, and economic systems. Western values dominate and marginalize other cultures such as contemporary African artists living in the United States. As a result, contemporary African artists are positioned on the periphery of the global art market. It is white male artists in the working and upper classes who gain the most social and economic privileges. Certain Western societies have not been as open and receptive to contemporary African artists as they have been to white male artists. The purpose of the study is to recognize behaviors that marginalize African artists in the art market, learn of contemporary African art, and create a dialogue that could change the positioning of contemporary African art in the global market. I identify Western behaviors that are particularly modeled after, but not limited to, the attitudes and influences related to the colonization (16th - 20th century) and post-

colonization (20th -21st century) of Africa by Europe and the United States of America. Even though some ethnographic museums and fine art galleries in the United States have made a place for traditional African art, the on-going absence of contemporary African artists reinforces colonial attitudes in today's global art market. Such attitudes regard the paradigm of African art as primitive, exotic, and inferior to Western art. Those in the art market who possess these attitudes refuse to view and, thus, accept modern concepts from contemporary African artists. In order to change prejudicial attitudes in the global art market, they must be recognized. Then, it is up to the individual to widen his perspectives. Studying contemporary African artists living in the United States may encourage some Western societies to alter certain behaviors when regarding other cultural art.

This research discusses Western attitudes that influence the global art market. In addition, it examines arguments against categorizing Western art as central and African art as peripheral in post-modern and pluralistic societies. It also analyzes how contemporary African artists and Westerners view traditional African art and the legacy of traditional African art in African and Western contemporary art. Finally, this analysis examines the unfair presentation of contemporary African art in Western museums and galleries.

**THE POSITIONING OF AFRICAN ART IN
THE GLOBAL ART MARKET: A LOOK AT WESTERN
ATTITUDES AND INFLUENCES IN THE LIVES OF
CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN ARTISTS IN THE UNITED STATES**

by
Tineka Archer

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of the University of Maryland in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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To Daddy, Mama, and the rest of the Archer family
for their love, patience, and support.

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I want to express my deepest gratitude to my best friend, Jesus Christ, for the patience, knowledge, and understanding to endure.

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I. INTRODUCTION

This introduction discusses different views regarding African art. Incorporating a wide range of positions from contemporary African artists and the Western world allows for further individual interpretation and understanding of African art. The importance of appreciating contemporary African art as another form of formal art could minimize attitudes that classify cultures as superior or inferior. More importantly, other cultural artists would be allowed a more equal playing field in the global art market. In the following passages, African art will be defined as it is understood by some in Western literature and some contemporary African artists.

Understanding African art on the part of the Westerner requires interpreting African art beyond Western ideologies such as religion and politics in order to appreciate African art. A people's religion and social structure must be recognized and studied (Gillon 23). Noll comments "to isolate a work of art always makes reference to a system of the exposition organizer's or *concepteur's* own values, a common trap of Eurocentrism" (trans. 48). In other words, removing African art from its original framework and then choosing to assess it within a foreign environment will inevitably lead to labeling African art as primitive, exotic, or uncivilized.

Some art historians still ponder whether African art really is art. These historians qualify high art as visual beauty that is disengaged from religion and politics. However, this premise does not apply to European religious and political art. Western art collectors, dealers, historians, museum directors and gallery curators all influence how Westerners perceive African art. (Visionà 22). Their influences are derived from "the symbolic capital they produced" and this favors disengaged art (Nicodemus 78).

These agents of the art world propose two types of African art: traditional and contemporary. Traditional African art is a conduit between man and his fears of the unknown or any unexplainable phenomena. Fanon explains the importance of the unconscious and dreams to African societies. For instance, the sexual drive is a great matter in traditional communities. He continues that according to ethnologists, if a man dream of fornicating with a woman other than his own he must confess the dream publicly and compensate the husband or the woman's family for his crime (Fanon 55). In order to vanquish or succumb to his terror, such as the brutal psychological and emotional intrusion of European colonizers, man gives his fear an aesthetic form seen in traditional art to protect him from uncontrollable powers and forces (Stokstad 1052; Fanon 56).

Traditional African art is also seen as tribal artifacts that represent mankind's first instruments, beliefs, and innate behaviors in the form of masks, tools, statues, idols, and weapons (Contemporary 4-5). From my observation, common material used in traditional art include: wood, stone, terracotta, ivory, metal (i.e. copper, silver, gold, and bronze), animal skin, bones, cloth, beads, cowry shells, feathers, fiber, and paint made from berries and plants. Common traditional African artworks include: head stones, stone and wooden figures, masks, drawings and inscriptions, stools, bowls, ivory carvings, jewelry, vessels, and staffs which focused on social, cultural, and religious structures.

Some contemporary African art is recognized by its detachment from religious symbolism and intuitionism, while more emphasis is given to modern aesthetic material (i.e. oil paints, water colors, canvases, paintbrushes, gouache, rice paper, lino print, etc.),

themes, and concepts. Contemporary artwork is not utilitarian like traditional art (Contemporary 4-5). It is evident that services that traditional artists once provided are no longer needed today which allows for contemporary African artists to focus on inner thoughts and moods. Most popular contemporary African artists are educated in Western institutions whereas traditional and lesser known African artists are self-taught. Fanon argues that in order for the native to survive colonial rule, the native must be concerned with individualism and assimilation in the colonial world (60). Certain themes that are reflected in contemporary African art are similar to traditional art such as daily activities, family values, religion, and socio-political issues.

Western assessments on the positioning of traditional African art are conflicting. Visionà reports that traditional African art is more likely to be found in museums of natural history, whereas contemporary African art is more often featured in fine art museums and regarded as high art (22). Roy informs that traditional African art can now be found in fine art museums in the West (Stokstad 912). Roy also states that the basis for this modification began in the late nineteenth century. This was when the West started objectively to study and appreciate the aestheticism of traditional African artifacts as art (Stokstad 912). However, Roy does not explain his findings on how this transformation came about.

Whether or not, an accurate evaluation can be made about African art from Western literature, I introduce these three contemporary African artists, Hussein Saidi, Amadou Bassine Diop, and Gabriel Tenabe and ask them to give their opinion on how they would define African art:

Hussein Saidi is a working artist from Tanzania. When he arrived in the United States in 1995, he continued making jewelry from coconut shells as he was doing with his brother at home. Before his brother introduced him to jewelry making, Saidi was a vendor selling cassette tapes. Saidi comes from a family of artists. His father was an art teacher. He would “come home [after work], set the table [for an art lesson], and watch and correct them as they [worked]” at the same time “other children were outside playing.” His oldest brother makes jewelry and does commercial art like store banners; his two younger brothers are musically inclined. I asked Saidi how much artistic influence does he have over his own children’s artistic ability, and he answered, “I want them to be creative...if they want [to be an artist], they can”. He encouraged them to pursue “various professions”; he insisted that their “creativity will help them to do anything.”

Saidi married a Peace Corps volunteer who was serving in his country. He currently lives and works out of his home in Silver Spring, Maryland. He and his wife have a son and a daughter. Located beneath their basement’s stairwell was Saidi’s cramped studio, big enough for one and isolated enough to maintain his privacy.

In 1991, Amadou Bassine Diop’s brother, a diplomat at the time, invited him to the United States from Senegal. Diop taught himself to draw and paint while growing up in Senegal. Diop started making batiks in Senegal before switching to painting with oils and gouache in the United States. Batik making is a long process. It requires waxing, dying, and re-waxing on cotton cloth; a process that would take too much time in the United States. Making batiks is also a community effort. Sometimes more than one artist is needed just to complete one batik.

Diop's first exhibitions in the United States were held at the American Institute in New York and Howard University Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. His success led to more exhibitions. Later on in his art career, he began teaching glass painting at the Smithsonian Museum.

Diop attended art school in Washington D.C. to learn new techniques like mixing colors. Diop believed that "anyone can go to art school and learn to paint, [yet,] you don't become an artist. It's a gift. You have to have it in your heart. You're either an artist or not." Diop also added, "in school you appreciate art more."

He painted for three consecutive years in the United States before trading in his paintbrushes for a computer. He later chose a more stable career in information technology. Diop mentioned it was hard making a living as an artist and raising a family in the United States. Although it has been seven years since Diop has picked up a paintbrush, he would still like people to remember him for his artistic gift, many expressive ways, and inner thoughts.

Gabriel Tenabe is a lecturer on African art and the director of the James E. Lewis Museum of Art at Morgan State University. He began drawing at an early age and later moved into painting people's portraits. At that time, many of his patrons were Nigerians. When the country's economy plummeted, it was difficult for Nigerians to patronize Tenabe. This economic crisis became a transitional period for him. He began reading books on Western art and started to incorporate his own cultural style into abstract art and expressionism. As a result American and European expatriates who recognized his works became his new patrons.

Tenabe moved to the United States in 1972, where he continued his education and training at Morgan State. His academic pieces became popular in collections even among the art professors at Morgan State. One professor even called his work “primitive” (probably in respect to traditional African conceptualism). In late 1970, one of Tenabe’s works was featured at the United Nations Plaza in the *African Artists in North America* exhibition.

Tenabe’s involvement at Morgan’s museum led him to his curatorial position. His decision to take over the museum stemmed from his personal responsibility to preserve, protect, and advocate for artists. Soon enough work and family obligations took over his studio time. One day, Tenabe hopes to return to his true calling—painting. I chose Tenabe to be a part of this research because the heart of an artist never dies.

The similarities between Tenabe, Diop, and Saidi are prominent. Family responsibilities (i.e. marriage) and education (e.g. cultural capital) were reasons for immigrating to the United States. Western culture influenced all three artists to develop new artistic methods (from jewelry and batik making to oil and acrylic painting) and techniques (i.e. portrait painting, abstractionism, mixing colors). These new approaches proved to be lucrative (e.g. economic capital) for the artists. In brief, these artists had to incorporate aspects of Western civilization in order to compete in the global art market. Nonetheless, their styles, expressions, and feelings remain attached to the field of African art.

Diop and Saidi both share the same ideas about the meaning of African art. Diop stated that “[African art is an] expression of the people.” Saidi defined African art as a people’s way of life. He gives the Maasai people as an example. The Maasai are a

pastoralist ethnic group found in north central Tanzania. He added, "They don't have a whole lot but the way they dress and decorate themselves... to me that's art." Diop also mentioned that there are different categories of African art, contemporary and traditional, which includes ceremonial and traditional masks that are about religious beliefs.

Clearly, African art is such a general label to describe a broad-spectrum of art from a vast continent. It requires a wide-range of definitions. In my opinion, African art consist of the collective works by Africans that embody African philosophy, religion, or ideology (i.e. social class, economic conditions, culture). Artists from other cultures (i.e. Western, Hispanic, or Asian) do integrate African concepts or techniques into their art, but the ownership of African art belongs to Africans. My belief is that every individual, group, class, or culture deserves recognition for its work or contribution to the universe. When an artist borrows from another artist, it is important that he acknowledge publicly from whom and where he developed his concept or style. African artists are no exception. When African artists live in the United States (e.g. abroad), it is foreseeable that they would make use or be influenced by Western culture (i.e. current events or non-religious themes) and techniques (i.e. computer graphics, mediums, mixing colors). Tenabe, Diop, and Saidi have all admitted to the influences of Western culture in their work. However, these influences do not detract from these artists' contribution to the field of African art.

A. Theoretical Issues and Review of the Literature

The theoretical framework in this wide-ranging study includes the concepts of Eurocentrism, racism, Western imperialism, universalism, symbolic capital, modernism, post-modernism, and pluralism.

Eurocentrism describes “exclusive [Western] attitudes, the sense of group centrality” that evokes “feelings of cultural uniqueness and the attitude of superiority towards other peoples and their mores” (Smith 47). Smith would agree that Eurocentrics “stand at the centre of their physical and moral universe” (47). This superior attitude “corresponds to disdain or fear of external life-styles” (Smith 47).

Wallerstein defines racism as the belief that “one group is genetically or ‘culturally’ inferior to another group in such a way that the group said to be inferior cannot be expected to perform tasks as well as the presumably superior group” (Wallerstein 43-44).

Western imperialism, a practice of “using international institutions, military power, and economic resources to run the world in ways that will maintain Western predominance, protect Western interests and promote Western political and economic values” (Huntington 40). Wallerstein asserts that Westernization and modernization are seemingly synonymous (44-45). When the West uses its resources to colonize Africa, it sends the message that Westernization is the quintessence of modernization.

Throughout the traumatic conquest of Africa, African society was considerably destabilized. Faced with Eurocentrism, racism, and Western imperialism, Africans were dehumanized and victimized. Europe considered African cultures backwards and inferior to Western culture. Although these Western attitudes created a deeper misunderstanding and misinterpretation of traditional African art, Europe stole Africa’s richest resources and traditional culture at its weakest moment to build Europe’s greatest collections of African art (Visionà 21).

Belgium's Tervuren Museum, funded by King Leopold II, now holds the world's largest and finest collection of Central African art, particularly, from the Congo. In the documentary *African Art: Legacy and Oppression*, the occupation of the Congo, in the late 1800s, was remembered as the bloodiest conquest in Africa. In 40 years time, the Congolese population was cut in half by ten million people. Congolese slaves and hostages were forced to work in rubber forests where they were traumatized and malnourished. This eventually brought about diseases that aided in diminishing the population. In a letter to a Belgium senator and reformer in 1898, describing the Congolese people, King Leopold II wrote, "I'm [...] meeting these porters [...] black, black, black miserable frizzy and bare head supporting the load..." This letter clearly exemplifies the Eurocentric and racist attitudes of that time.

Fanon provides a European colonizer's psychological view of native Africans during this political, economic, and ideological system of exploitation. Natives were "men of evil repute" and "a sort of quintessence of evil" who lived in "a place of ill fame." The native is pronounced to have no morals or ethics. The colonizers see their traditions and myths as "the very sign of that poverty of spirit and of their constitutional depravity." Even though colonizers felt that the colonized were not worthy of adopting Western values, this did not prevent them from spreading Western imperialism. "The Church in the colonies is the white people's Church, the foreigner's Church. She does not call the native to God's ways but to the ways of the white man, of the master, of the oppressor" (Fanon 39, 41-43). Fanon recognizes that the colonizer seldom referred to the native in an explicit manner, but the native could easily interpret how the colonizer perceived him:

Those hordes of vital statistics, those hysterical masses, those faces bereft of all humanity, those distended bodies which are like nothing on earth, that mob without beginning or end, those children who seem to belong to nobody, that laziness stretched out in the sun, that vegetative rhythm of life. (Fanon 42-43)

This mentality was also evident in the 1897 World Fairground in Tervuren, Belgium, where the main attraction was the viewing of two Africans; one was supposedly from a 'civilized' village, perhaps where the inhabitants were more obedient and accepting of European language, religion, and dress, and the other was from an 'uncivilized' village, where the inhabitants were perhaps more rebellious against European culture. This dehumanizing exhibition implied that Africans and their culture were savage, barbaric, and ancient ("Legacy of Oppression").

Nicodemus confirms that if any person wants to be considered 'modern,' that person has to adopt some form of Western culture. Therefore contemporary African artists are taught certain criteria through Western training on how to imitate Western modern artists (78, 83-84). Universalism promotes Western principles that work to assimilate cultural others. The argument can be made that "Western culture is in fact universal culture" (Wallerstein 45). "The principal of universalism is based in theory on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, asserting the existence of both international "moral" law and values (equality) of all humanity" (Wallerstein 44-43). However, this concept is also parallel to teaching constant indifference towards other cultures (Wallerstein 45).

Certainly, these Western values and attitudes serve to peripheralize contemporary African artists in the global art market. In agreement with Smith's explanation of Eurocentrism, I must add that Eurocentric behavior does exclude the contributions of

contemporary African artists from the arts. Those who benefit most from Eurocentric values in the art market are white, well-educated, affluent males.

Due to the West's assumption of cultural superiority, I associate its control over the political and socio-economic system of cultural others as a form of racism manifested through Eurocentrism. The notion of universalism cannot be upheld under these conditions. Therefore, in order for contemporary African artist living in the United States to succeed, they must have symbolic capital.

Bourdieu states that symbolic capital "is to be understood as economic or political capital" (132). It is recognized as "legitimate, [...], under certain conditions [...] in the long run, guarantees 'economic' profits" (Bourdieu 132). Symbolic capital consists of economic, social, and cultural capital (Harker 20). Economic capital (e.g. monetary wealth) is replaced by symbolic legitimate capital that is identified as prestige and authority (e.g. reputation) in the art market (Bourdieu 132). Social capital refers to secured, prestigious social relations or agents (the art dealer/ 'symbolic banker', the critic, gallery directors, curators, collectors, academies and museums, and the initiated art public) (Bourdieu 133-136; Nicodemus 78). Cultural capital can either be inherent (e.g. affluent family), earned (e.g. employment status), or learned (e.g. education) (Bourdieu 149-156).

I believe symbolic capital creates a symbolic value for the artist, the agent, and the consumer. In order to survive in the art market, an African artist must depend on social and cultural capital in order to achieve economic capital. Artists who do not receive sufficient economic capital sometimes leave their profession for better paying jobs. "Making a name for oneself" produces "symbolic and monetary value." (Bourdieu

133-135). Education is the main cultural capital for an African artist. An African artist who receives Western or European academic training is more likely to receive social and economic capital and be more highly regarded than a self-taught African artist. In the end, the artist would gain longevity in the art market. However, I do not believe that longevity ameliorates a marginalized position, not even during this postmodern era. Before postmodernism, modernism was dominating movements in the arts.

According to The Dictionary of Art (1996), modernism “in Europe and its colonies from the mid-19th century and in the United States from the early 20th century” is “the drive to create previously unimagined objects and new ways of seeing them”(775-777). The Dictionary of Sociology (2001) defines modernism as “a movement in the arts, culture, and architecture that accepts the progress of Enlightenment¹ project and is particularly concerned with functionality in form, where a preference for ‘modern’ functional design is always stated” (154). Modernism is the turn around to post-modernism (Dictionary of Sociology 154).

It is uncertain as to when post-modernism began but it became a legitimate term in the visual arts in the mid-1980s (Dictionary of Art 358-360; Dempsey 269-273). It “became an opportunity for pluralism² within the visual arts in the United States” (Dictionary of Art 358-360). It was also an opportunity for contemporary American artists to criticize current cultural mores (e.g. racism, sexism, and war) (Dictionary of Art 358-360). From a sociological standpoint, post-modernism “stands in contrast to most other sociological theories in that it rejects Enlightenment ideas of seeking to understand and control society through the application for rational thoughts. To the post-modernist, societies cannot be understood in a rational way because they are subject to constant

change” (Dictionary of Sociology 187). In conclusion, post-modernism rejects formal practices of modernism (Dictionary of Art 358-360). Even though some artists have abandoned these practices, various institutions continue to emphasize modes of modernism and Enlightenment (Smith, T. 775-777). The uncertainty over whether the essence of post-modernism truly exists is an on-going debate (Dictionary of Art 358-360; Dempsey 269-273).

B. Methodology

Western influences and attitudes are analyzed through personal interviews, actual and virtual site visits, literature review, and personal thoughts. I conducted three face-to-face interviews. The participants gave verbal consent to the interview and understood that the interview was for research purposes only. I also explained to the participants that they would receive no direct benefits including monetary gain for their participation. I informed them that their knowledge would be a potential benefit to others. I e-mailed the participants a brief description of the study and the following interview questions:

Introduction

- Why did you become an artist?
- Are there any other artists in your family? If so, who? And what do they do?
- Is it difficult to be an artist in the United States? If so, why or why not?
- Do you consider your style to be more traditional or contemporary? Why or why not?
- Would you consider your work political or social? Why or why not?
- How do you prepare yourself mentally before beginning a piece?
- How have your artistic styles changed over the years?

Native Country

- How are artist viewed in your country?
- Who can be considered an artist in your native born country? (Dancers, singers, sculptors, etc.)
- What traditional art is your country (community or ethnic group) known for?
- Did you collaborate with other artists in your country? Do you presently collaborate with other artists?

- What is being done in your country (community) to support the arts that you know of?

Medium/Messages/Inspirations

- What mediums do you use? Why?
- What do you like to say in your art?
- What images do you prefer to use to get your message across?
- What emotions provoke you to begin and complete a work?
- Who (artist or non-artist) has inspired you most in your artwork?

Influences and Responsibilities

- How has European and Western art affected your artwork?
- How much influence do you see African artists having in the global art world?
- What role should African art play in today's society? (e.g. a reminder of yesterday or today)

Marketing/ Income

- Do you create according to the needs of society or a specific group?
- Who are your typical buyers?
- Has your work been received successfully? Why or why not?
- What is an artist's income like in the United States? In your home country?
- Do you believe African artists have become too commercialized? Why or why not?

Definition

- How would you define African art?
- From your experience, what is the difference between traditional and contemporary art?
- What is the difference between artist and artisan?

Conclusion

- How do you feel about the current representation of contemporary African art?
- Where do you hope to be ultimately, in the future, with your career in the arts?
- How would you want people to remember you concerning your work?

I learned of Hussein Saidi and Gabriel Tenabe from the director of the African Art Museum of Maryland in Columbia, Maryland. I met with Saidi, a contemporary Tanzanian artist, at his home in Silver Spring, Maryland. We spoke in the basement where the interview began with a tour of his studio. At the James E. Lewis Museum of Art on the Morgan State University campus, I conducted my interview with Gabriel

Tenabe, a curator, art critic, and artist from Nigeria. Tenabe began the interview with a brief lecture on African art history. At the end of the interview, Tenabe gave me a tour of the museum. Amadou Bassine Diop was introduced to me through a professor at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. I met with Diop, a former working artist from Senegal, at Starbuck's in Silver Spring, Maryland. I began the interview with a series of questions. I asked each individual the same interview questions, recording their answers by hand in a notebook. The interviews lasted between 2-4 hours. After the interviews, I kept in contact with the interviewees using electronic mail or telephone for follow-up questions.

I made actual and virtual site visits to museums and galleries where I sought out Western views (e.g. signs of Eurocentrism, racism, Western imperialism, and symbolic capital) on contemporary African artwork and artists. I chose the following five museums because of their location and reputation: The Walters Art Museum (Baltimore, Maryland), the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (Richmond, Virginia), the Hirshhorn Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art (Washington, D.C.), the African Art Museum of Maryland (Columbia, MD), the James E. Lewis Museum of Art at Morgan State University (Baltimore, MD), and the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art (D.C.).

Before I began the site visits, I went online to see if any of the museums had a website on the World Wide Web. I looked for information on contemporary African and Western art and artists. I examined permanent collections and past and present exhibitions. During the actual visits to the museums, I collected and studied the maps, brochures, and booklets of each museum-- looking at the rooms that exhibited African

art. From the captions near the artwork, I collected data with paper and pencil. Secondly, I went to rooms exhibiting contemporary (20th -21st century) art. I briefly spoke with employees about the exhibits. Museum visits lasted 2-4 hours.

The University System of Maryland and Affiliated Institutions (USMAI) were also used as sources for data collection within the literary field of art and sociology. The chosen literature gives Western historical as well as present-day points of view of traditional and contemporary African art.

Notes

¹ Enlightenment, a philosophical movement that flourished in Europe and North America during the 18th century, characterized by a belief in progress and a desire to challenge traditional modes of thought through rationality (Dictionary of Sociology 81).

² Pluralism, the view of power in society that sees it dispersed among many different groups and individuals. It rejects any concentration of power in the hands of single elite (Dictionary of Sociology 182).

II. Recognizing a Traditional African Art Form: The Art of the Sherbro, Bulom, and Kissi

This chapter recognizes the Sherbro, Bulom, and Kissi's artistic visions and works in metal and stone. In the 13th century, they occupied Sierra Leon and Guinea along the West Atlantic Coastal forest. In the mid-15th century, when Mande-speaking people invaded upon the three ethnically related groups, they dispersed throughout Sierra Leone. The Sherbro settled on Sherbro Island, a coastal strip to the east of Sierra Leon. The Bulom remained on the mainland of Sierra Leone. The Kissi moved to the north-east of Sierra Leon (Gillon 113).

Uniquely carved stone images known as *nomoli* (see Fig.1 page 19) were found on Sherbro Island and central Sierra Leon. The Sherbro (and the Bulom) worked with metal to carve *nomoli* from steatite or soapstone. While these groups borrowed ideas and techniques, each one had its own distinctive style. The Kissi were known for using steatite and soapstone to carve figures called *pomtan* (singular: *pomdo*) (see Fig.2 page 20). *Pomtan* were mostly found in areas of Guinea. The purpose of *nomoli* and *pomtan* were to carry supernatural power (Gillon 113). Later generations of the Kissi were among those who discovered these stones while tending the rice fields or digging for diamond. They considered these stones to have inherited their own ancestors' spirits. Through divination, the stone is given the identity of an ascendant ancestor. After a sacrifice, the ancestor's spirit enters the stone. The Kissi kept these stones at home in a shrine and drew upon them during divination and ancestral practices.

The distinction between the groups' carvings is seen in the detail of the work.

The *pomtan* attributed to the Kissi are usually described as cylindrically bodies with spherical heads. But this is an over-simplification, since *pomtan* sculptures vary a great deal in shape of head, hairstyle and facial

or body markings. Other features, such as bared teeth and hooked noses, are seen in some figures but are absent in others. Cross-hatching, to decorate the neck or indicate hair, and other markings occur occasionally on both *pomtan* and *nomoli*. (Gillon 116)

The *nomoli* of the Sherbro, though also showing some individual variations, have clear-cut characteristics: large heads set at an acute angle on a short neck, projecting jaws, bulbous eyes, stylized ropelike beads around the chin and reaching to the top of the head, and ears raised in bas-relief in almost circular shape with a round protuberance closing the rim. (Gillon 116)

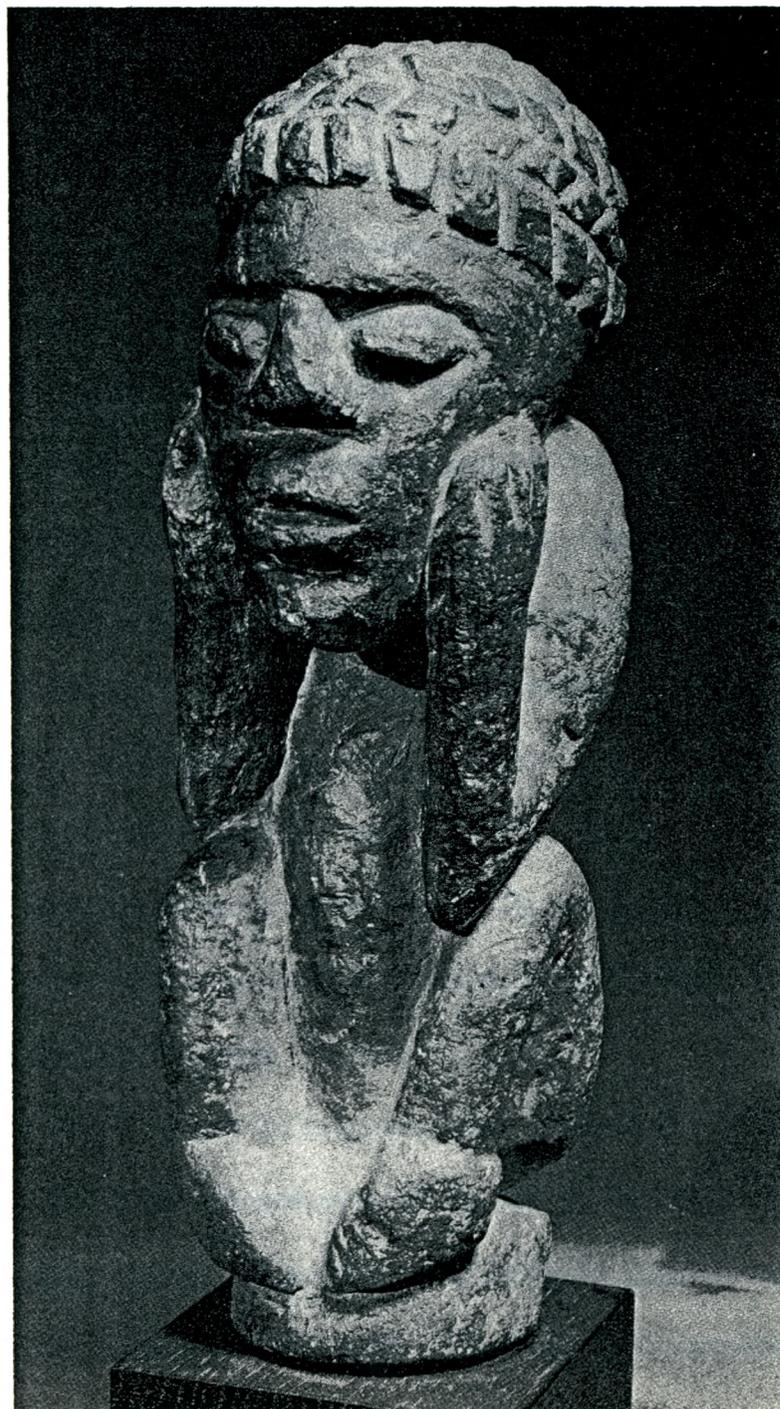
Distinct techniques and markings were mostly based upon the artist's ability, creativity, geographical location, or just the time period. *Nomoli* have been dated as far back as 400 years or more. Gillon notes that some experts believe that inhabitants earlier than the Sherbro and Kissi carved these stones, but Gillon adds that thorough historical analysis show that the Kissi make up one of the earliest groups and that their works existed until the 20th century (Gillon 113-120). Even though the *nomoli* and *pomdo* were not intended for show, their history brings appreciation to the craftsmanship, creativity, and the understanding of a people and the artist.

Traditional African art is functional, religious, magical, and symbolic, a cultural evidence of a people becoming civilized (Ndiaye 41). Tenabe linked traditional carving, sculpting, and casting techniques to traditional African art. The role of a traditional African artist was to preserve the history and the culture of its people; as well as serve the religious and social needs of society. Diop speculated that traditional African art preserves knowledge and traditions. Museums use traditional art to educate people about the past. I believe traditional African art is a classic collection of artistic utilitarian African objects. It is remnants of a past civilization. The artist's intention was to create aesthetically pleasing utilitarian and religious objects for their community.

The Art of the Sherbro, Bulom and Kissi



79. *Nomoli*. Mende country. Sierra Leone. Soapstone. Height 14 cm (5.5 ins). Museum of Mankind, London, 1906.5-25.2. Photo: Arno Hammacher, in A. Tagliaferri and A. Hammacher, *Fabulous Ancestors*, New York, 1974.



76 (left). *Pomdo*. Kissi. Guinea. Soapstone. Height 26 cm (10.25 ins). Musée des Arts Africains et Océaniens, Paris. Photo: André Held.

Today's museums, galleries, and auction houses continue to recognize and exhibit traditional African art in the same fashion as royal European families and aristocrats once did in the 16th century. Traditional African art was and remains an ornament of status in Western society. The older and more primitive the object is the greater the owner's reputation becomes. The Medici families of the 16th century were great patrons of the arts, particularly African ivory carvings. Chiarini and Van Helden documented the Medici family as they steadily climbed the social hierarchy from the plebian class as farmers to merchants, then, from merchants to the patrician class as aristocratic bankers, and, finally, to the noble class as dukes, princes and queens (Chiarini, "The two branches of the Medici family") and (Van Helden "The Medici Family").

The social, economic, and political capital of the Medici family depended upon the patronage system, "a continuation and extension of the feudal relationship between lord and dependent and a social and political system organized under certain elements of Renaissance behavior" (Weissman 28-29). The Renaissance became an age of consumption, a materialistic culture, and art became a commodity. There were great demands for various art forms (e.g. cultural capital). The Medici's economic and political capital afforded them cultural capital. The acquisition of unique and hard-to-obtain art, for the aristocratic and noble families, helped establish and maintain relations (e.g. social capital) (Weissman 154-155).

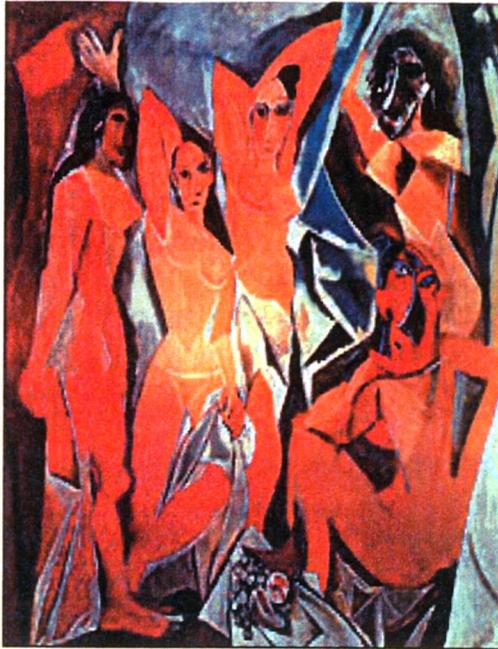
Bourdieu recognizes the dominant classes' demand for cultural production which is a result of its "fully developed capitalist" economy (Nicodemus 76). The dominant classes that had economic and political power during the sixteenth century were European royalty, nobles, and aristocrats. The dominant classes chose to express the

legitimization of their power by restricting cultural production or obtaining rare, exotic African art in this case (Nicodemus 76). In Renaissance societies, African art was incorporated as ornamental art; it became symbolic capital in modern Western societies (Nicodemus 76). Even though, museums, galleries, and universities have the wherewithal to exhibit traditional African art, they still fail to appreciate contemporary African art.

III. Contemporary Art: An Inheritance from Traditional African Art

This section examines the legacy of traditional African art within contemporary art. It also demonstrates connections between contemporary African and Western artists. During the rise of modernism (1880-1940), Pablo Picasso's popularity (e.g. social and economic capital) in the arts soared in Europe and North America when he began integrating African abstract ideology and symbolism in his work (Visionà 20, 22; Stokstad 11022-23 and 1049; African Art: Legacy of Oppression (videocassette)). Picasso (1881-1973), a Spanish painter, gained so much public attention that the art public gave little, if any, value to traditional African culture.

Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J. Version O) (see Fig 3 page 24) is Picasso's earliest work in which he "resisted traditional notions of perspective and beauty in its use of flat patterns and Iberian and African sculptural models" (The Bulfinch 365). The stylized and distorted composition of *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J. Version O)* has repeatedly been reported as inspirations from Picasso's visitations to African sculptures in the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro and his friends', like André Derain, African mask collections in the late summer of 1907 (The Dictionary of Art vol. 24 p. 714 and vol. 8 p.241). The painting calls to mind a mysterious "ritual" combining "eroticism" and a "fear of death". The images of the women are "savage in style and violent in its dismemberment of the female body" (The Dictionary of Art vol. 24 p.715).



Pablo Ruiz y Picasso (1881-1973)
Les Desmoiselles d'Avignon—
1907
Oil painting on canvas

Picasso's "remarks to a friend about the African masks he used for the faces of the demoiselles on the right" identifies specifically African conceptualism:

Men had made those masks... as a kind of mediation between themselves and the unknown hostile forces that surrounded them, in order to overcome their fear and horror by giving [them] a form and an image. At that moment I realized that ... painting... isn't an aesthetic operation; it's a form of magic designed as a mediator between this... hostile world and us, a way of seizing the power by giving form to our terrors as well as our desires. (Stokstad 1052)

"Picasso used this distortion of the female form to express his anxieties about women, love, and sexuality. The painting reveals Picasso's attempt to harness the forms of non-Western carving and the power of magic and ritual in African art" (World Book Encyclopedia).

Most non-western and tribal art is abstract (The Bulfinch Guide 192). Abstract ideas are representations of human bodies or animal forms that are still recognizable as such with no attempt to imitate these forms faithfully (The Bulfinch Guide 192). Considering abstractionism was not a part of modern European art, introducing an indigenous, African-influenced style, Picasso's work was a rebirth for the arts. This revivification became the 20th century's most significant art movement: Western Cubism. (The Bulfinch 365). "The basis of Cubism was conceptual rather than perceptual, as it was not predicated on what could be seen by the naked eye but by the stable components of an object, both seen and known about" (The Bulfinch 365). Figures are illustrated symbolically rather than naturally (The Dictionary of Art vol. 8 p.241).

Western Cubism was a movement away from Impressionism¹ (Bradford 978-1021). By 1912, other artists in France began adopting Cubism such as Juan Gris, Jean Metzinger, Fernand Léger, and Albert Gleizes, which also led to other artistic

movements, such as, Orphism², Purism³, Cubo-Futurism⁴, and Precisionism⁵ (The Bullfinch 366).

Picasso's abstractionism awarded him both social and economic capital due to his race, nationality, family, and education (e.g. cultural capital). He was a white male from Western Europe. According to the Cleveland Art Museum, his father was an artist and an art teacher at a municipal art academy in Barcelona. Picasso at 14 years old enrolled in the academy. Later, he entered the Royal Academy of San Fernando in Madrid. His education earned him a commission from a local convent. In addition, he received regional and national awards for his academic paintings. His social capital was made up of art dealers, art critics, museum and gallery owners, academia, and the art public. Art dealers, 'symbolic bankers', invested their reputations in Picasso's new style. Art critics judged his work and gave him tremendous reviews, which in return strengthened both the art dealers and Picasso's reputation. Since museums and galleries had confidence in these art agents, they exhibited Picasso work to the art public, particularly to the dominant class. Being in possession of Picasso's art increased the owner's cultural and social capital. Generally, Picasso owners are already affluent and well educated; Picasso's work is a symbolic investment (Nicodemus 78-79). His art was highly valued and sought after; art agents who sold his work thus profited, professionally and financially. Museums and galleries charge the public a fee to see Picasso's work; they also receive donations and gifts from wealthy patrons. In return, patrons' names are displayed on plaques or in museum brochures (e.g. social and cultural capital). Universities improve their reputations by owning or unveiling a Picasso, which could lead to an increase in student enrollment.

Contemporary African artists living in the United States do not benefit from symbolic capital in the same way as Pablo Picasso did in Europe and North America. Eurocentrism, racism, and Western imperialism limit Western vision in viewing the intellection and craftsmanship of African artists. Educating Western society about the lives of Saidi, Diop, and Tenabe may assist in shifting these Western attitudes.

Saidi's family lived in Dar es Salaam, the capital of Tanzania where his father worked for the government and taught art. He sometimes took Saidi to his natal village to experience the hardship of village life in order for him to appreciate the amenities of city life. This experience enhanced Saidi's creativity to relate his art to life in Tanzania. His father's teachings and artwork perhaps prompted by colonialism convinced Saidi to think that Western and European craftsmanship was better than African craftsmanship. He soon realized for himself that copying Western artists meant having his own identity and style taken away; his work began to look like everybody else's.

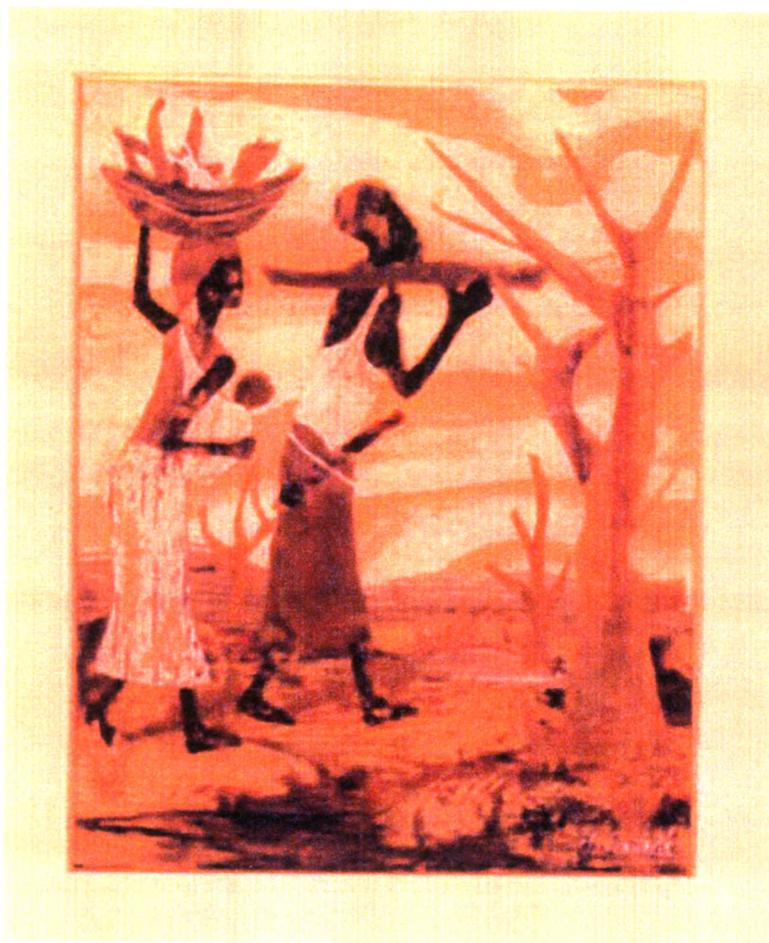
Family, community, the universe, music, spirituality, emotions, other people's experiences, and daily activities are frequent subjects and messages in his art. Emotions are important to Saidi in beginning a piece. "Personal pieces take longer because I got to get a lot out of my head," revealed Saidi. He feels that anything at one time can be a message; artists have a lot to say and one message is oftentimes not enough. Saidi creates what he is feeling and not what society dictates to him.

First, Saidi would picture the size he wants his artwork to be. Then, he would decide if he wants the piece to be realistic or abstract. He would research his ideas on the Internet, in magazines or newspapers and finally, do a layout to begin his piece.

Although Saidi's inspiration comes from no particular person or place, his art is always being influenced. He admitted that Western art expanded his usage and range of color whereas before he used only natural colors. Since his arrival to the United States in 1991, Saidi has diversified his artistic style (i.e. jewelry making to painting). He paints, draws, and uses mixed media to build and to create. These include: acrylic paint, pens, markers, linen canvases, banana tree bark from Tanzania, corn husk, Connecticut birch bark, pine needles, leaves, coconut shells, plywood, and pine cones. He also studied computer graphics.

In this picture, *Far Away from Home* (see Fig. 4 page 29) Saidi used sanded plywood as his canvas. The annual growth rings and variegated grain markings in the plywood serve as the Tanzanian landscape and skyline. Birch barks range in shades of brown. They are durable and have two different sides and textures; one side is smooth, heavy and dark; the opposite side is lighter-colored, bumpy, and paper-thin. They form the women's heads, neck, arms, back, legs, and clothes as well as the baby. Banana tree bark has two textures; one side has smooth grooved lines and various shades of brown. The other side has a light, thin, web-like structure. It is commonly used to build roofs in Tanzania. The trees in this piece are fashioned from banana tree bark. The hills and mountains in the background are from cornhusk. The leaves and cornhusk create the bowl and the objects inside it. This nostalgic work is Saidi's sentimental yearning to return to his life in Tanzania. It venerates the fertility of woman and earth; for without it, home (e.g. Africa, Tanzania) would not exist. Earth yields food (i.e. vegetables and rice) and protection (i.e. trees for shelters, gates, and cooking) for its inhabitants. Generally, African women harvest the land. In *Far Away from Home*, the women appear to be

Hussein Saidi
Far Away - 1999
25" X 22"
Banana bark, birch bark,
leaves, and husks on
plywood



returning home after harvesting the land. They are bringing food and wood, to build or cook with. The woman carrying the baby also symbolizes the woman's fertility. His use of natural materials pays homage to traditional African artists.

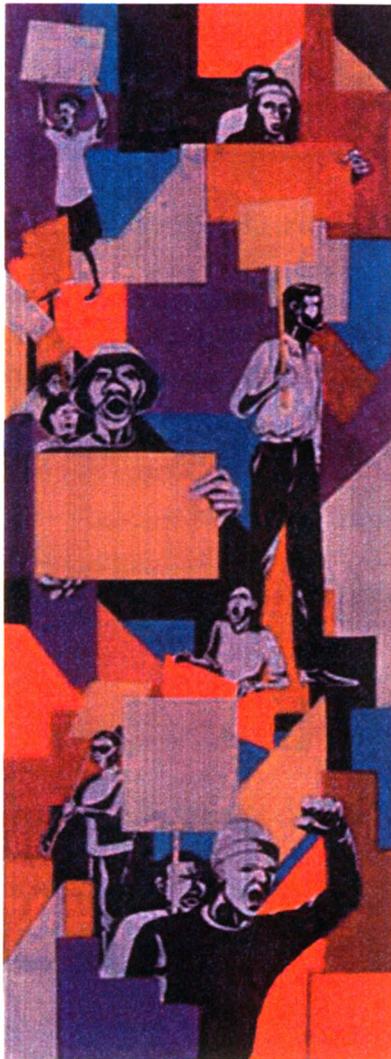
In *Call for Peace* (see Fig. 4 page 31), Saidi exemplifies his adoption of Western aesthetics (less "Africanness") through synthetism⁶. His experience during a serial sniper's shooting spree that occurred in 2002 in his town inspired this piece. In efforts "to heal the people" from this tragic event, Saidi used geometric forms and images of protesters to call for peace against the violent killings. Saidi creates diversity and unity with images of men and women, presumably, white, black, and brown, carrying signs and protesting with anger and despair. The bare signs leave it to the viewer's discretion to imagine his or her own words to call for peace. Saidi's use of contrasting colors (bright and dark colors) and flat geometric and abstract shapes makes the painting move and breathe.

Saidi and his spouse are writing a grant proposal in hopes of returning to Tanzania to tell other artists about his experiences. "There are many young Tanzanian artists without someone to tell them about art like having you own style and showing them that they have natural materials around them that they can use. They need a lot of education," expressed Saidi. There is not much artistic creativity among the artists because everyone picks up on what someone else has created or stylized. They reproduce quickly to sell to tourists and expatriates in order to survive. For example, many Tanzanian artists reproduce the master carvings of the Makonde.

The lack of education and diversity can paralyze an artist's creativity.

Tanzania's struggling economy makes the cost of living less; this is how artists are able

Hussein Saidi
Call for Peace – 2002
40" x 14"
Acrylic on canvas



to survive. Unfortunately, in a developing country such as Tanzania, fame is hard to come by for an artist. In the United States, an artist has to be creative in order to succeed.

He admits that it is discouraging to go to galleries with ethnic art. Gallery owners and curators already have set a standard for art which does not include contemporary African art, despite their spoken efforts of including diversity in their gallery. So, Saidi does his own advertising and promotion because it is difficult to deal with gallery owners. The best way for him to sell his artwork is being present at art shows or festivals; this way a consumer can speak directly to the artist.

Hussein Saidi's personal account points out the significance of symbolic capital, Eurocentrism, racism and Western imperialism to an African artist living and working in the United States. Saidi's first encounter with symbolic capital began with cultural capital. He was born into a well-off family. They lived in the capital of Tanzania as opposed to the village. His father was a teacher who also worked for the government. His American spouse could be considered both cultural and social capital. His marital status increases his economic status as he moves from a developing country (e.g. Tanzania) to a developed country (e.g. United States of America). His wife's social connections (i.e. friends and family) buy his artwork and help him make a name for himself (e.g. social capital) in local venues in Maryland. Through word of mouth, Saidi's social capital grows. At this point, Saidi's economic capital (the family's savings and profits from his sells) allows him to work full-time. Saidi knows that the artist does not completely determine the value of art, as Bourdieu teaches. It is ultimately up to the consumer (social capital), or agents, to decide. Saidi is aware of the opportunities for social capital as he writes a grant proposal and seeks assistance through various

organizations in order to revitalize the arts in Tanzania. Saidi's experiences with agents in the art field are not always productive. When he was turned away from galleries that said they promote diversity but felt Saidi's work would not fit with their theme, this left Saidi and myself to wonder more about racism in the global art market.

Looking at Diop's symbolic capital, Diop began his art career in the United States after his brother, a diplomat (e.g. cultural and social capital) in the United States, helped him move to America in 1991. Upon his arrival, he had a desire to study art at a Western institution (e.g. cultural capital) in order to improve his techniques and enhance his skills (i.e. color mixing). Although Diop's prices depended on the time he put into the work, its size, and the amount of inspiration required, Diop knew overall that it was his patrons (e.g. social capital) who put a value on his work. Still Diop's economic capital as an artist was insufficient, despite his support from family, friends, and other patrons (e.g. social capital). Diop had to switch careers. Already possessing an associate degree in economic sciences (e.g. cultural capital) from the University of Dakar, he became an information technician, a more promising profession (e.g. cultural and economic capital) in the United States. However, Diop surprisingly confessed that two weeks prior to this interview, he began painting again.

Before Amadou Diop would start a piece, his eyes and heart had to be inspired. Anything he wanted his work to say was a matter of inspiration, not obligation. An inspiration could come from anywhere, anyone, or anything such as a baby's cry. "I'm an emotional person. All emotions provoke me to create," admitted Diop. "I painted more when I was happy and pieces went uncompleted when [a particular] emotion was gone." Diop did not believe in creating art according to the needs of society. Although,

he admires the works of Spanish artist, Salvador Dali, he claimed that European and Western art has not affected his work.

For Diop, anyone could be an artist. The way you see things and the way that you express yourself spiritually or mentally whether it is through music, painting, writing, singing or storytelling, it is a form of art. "Art is a platform where people can come together no matter where they are from." said Diop.

Diop enjoyed using symbols because they had deeper meanings and allowed for more interpretations. The Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership commissioned Diop along with other international artists to give their interpretation of "global partnership" to present in their annual report (see Fig. 6 page 35). The effects that the Cold War had in Senegal inspired Diop, in this untitled work, to paint the broken chain to symbolize "open trade and economic opportunity", the hatching egg "the birth of new democracies and the rebirth of existing ones", "the semi-observed figure through a half-opened door symbolizes the emergence of individual freedom," and the golden sun is "the promise of world unity touching all lives and all endeavors" (The Japan Foundation Center 22).

Diop's use of symbolism and synthetic style evoke the psychological impact of the Cold War. He envisions a country renewed. His colors mix and move from dark to bright, then to light. The darker colors at the bottom left corner exemplify yesterday and an old world order. The bright colors of red, yellow, and orange respond to a hopeful and joyous mood for a new world order. The person in the left corner personifies the artist to whom this vision belongs. As the sun rises and gives light, this picture reminds me of the breaking of day.



Amadou Bassin e
Diop Untitled
1991

The Japan Foundation Center for Global Partnership:
Annual Report (1991)

Just as the chains break, the person in the window emerges to greet and praise the sun. The green earth, the chickens, and the hatching eggs represent fertility, life, and sustenance, which give refuge and hope to the people. Diop's work symbolizes a new day for Senegal.

For Gabriel Tenabe, an artist and curator, an artist's creative process begins and ends with the way the artist thinks, processes thoughts, or translates information culturally. Society should not dictate to an African artist to be more or less African nor should it dictate how the artist should feel or create. Tenabe sensed that an African artist also should not feel reluctant or ashamed to incorporate traditional African techniques and material in his works. Tenabe felt that a piece of work should reflect what the artist is feeling and what he wants to voice to the world. The artist plays a unique role in society because he can record time as he creates a work of art inspired by a historical event.

Tenabe considered contemporary African art as works created by current African artists. He suspected that contemporary African art seriously moved away from traditional techniques (i.e. carving, sculpting, and casting) and African religions in the late 1940s and early 1950s when African artists began traveling to Europe to study art. Traditional tools made from stone were replaced with paintbrushes and cameras; traditional materials such as stone, wood, and iron were replaced with canvases, watercolors, and film. Images from African religions (i.e. deities and demi-gods) were replaced with more familiar Western images (i.e. portraits of men and women).

Tenabe stated that it is difficult sometimes to distinguish between contemporary African art and other cultural contemporary art. However, he believed that the African

artist would always produce African art even if he were acculturated into European and North American culture. “Culture is like smoke, said Tenabe, “you can put a lid on [a pot], but somehow smoke will find a way to seep out.” Tenabe explained that an artist’s style and technique indicates his origin (just as the different stone-carving styles of the Sherbro, the Bulom, and the Kiss in the 13th century).

Tenabe confessed that some African artists currently living and working in Africa are being expected to have Western training (e.g. cultural capital) before their work is even bought or recognized by African patrons (e.g. social capital). Tenabe’s transformation with the shift in the Nigerian economy demonstrates Bourdieu’s point on the importance of a “fully developed capitalist” economy and the dominant class’ demand for cultural production (Nicodemus 76). Tenabe’s paintings were unavailable at the time.

Expressionism⁷, symbolism⁸, and synthetism are traditional concepts that make up the legacy of traditional African art within contemporary art. They are interrelated and exemplified throughout *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*, *Far Away from Home*, *Call for Peace*, and Diop’s untitled piece. Like all traditional artists, these Western and African contemporary artists engrave their own individualism and perspectives on the world. Their usage of symbolism is evidence of their expressionism of inner moods and emotions. Picasso’s insecurities about women, love, and sexuality are symbolized through the distorted female figures and African mask. The Tanzanian women and landscape personifies Saidi’s longing for home; the protesters illustrate his cries for peace and tolerance. A utopian vision of Senegal epitomizes Diop’s hopes and desires. Synthetism characterizes these artists’ creative processes. They observe natural forms.

Their imaginations of the conscious or sub-conscious, feelings (i.e. fear, hopes, or longings), and experiences (living abroad, war, or observing other art forms) all strengthen the meaning behind their works. Their emphasis on color, line, and form is aesthetically pleasing because they emit dramatic, emotional, and expressive effects. It is through these processes that Western and African artists share a legacy of traditional African art.

Notes

¹ For a discussion on Impressionism, see Dempsey 14.

² For a discussion on Orphism, see Dempsey 99.

³ For a discussion on Purism, see Dempsey 114.

⁴ For a discussion on Cubo-Futurism, see Dempsey 83, 88.

⁵ For a discussion on Precisionism, see Dempsey 134.

⁶ For a discussion on Synthetism, see Dempsey 53-55 and Dictionary of Art 173-174.

⁷ For a discussion on Expressionism, see Dempsey 70.

⁸ For a discussion on Symbolism, see Dempsey 41.

IV. HAVE WE REALLY PROGRESSED? CENTRAL VS. PERIPHERAL ART WITHIN POST-MODERN INSTITUTIONS

The purpose of Okwui Enwezor's account on contemporary African art is to challenge whether a post-modern world has rightfully adapted post-modernism and universalism in the global art market. Enwezor is a conscious critic, curator, and publisher of contemporary African art. He is African-Nigerian and lives and works abroad. In a written interview by Chika Okeke entitled, *Contemporary African Art: Beyond Colonial Paradigms* (*Art Papers* (2002)), Okeke interviewed Enwezor. The following sections are a brief summary of that interview:

Chika Okeke: "How forceful or useful would it be today to criticize the notion of "center" and "periphery," insisting that what some refer to as peripheral, the work of African artists for instance, are necessarily alternative perspectives of what constitutes excellence in the arts" (Okeke 6-7)?

In response, Enwezor considered the notion of "center" and "periphery" to be unacceptable. Today's new world order has given birth to new societal models that have buried former powers of imperialism and the homogeneity of art. Accepting these labels would weaken the ethics of "decolonization" and "de-apartheidization". Becoming conscious of contemporary African art requires post-modern objectivity; progressive attitudes, beliefs, and practices that no longer compare the legitimacy or illegitimacy of contemporary African art to traditional African art, which purely responds to the colonial image of the indigenous African. In order to realize the complexity and detachment of these modern African approaches that deviate from the more conforming practices,

Enwezor has created Nka, a journal on contemporary African art, for a universal audience (Okeke 6-7).

Okeke: "Why was it important that the show, *The Short Century, Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945-1994*, toured major venues in Germany and the USA? Is this one instance where you had to acknowledge the importance of the "center" as the site of legitimation" (Okeke 6-7)?

Enwezor answered that his exhibition has appeared in Europe and North America, but he does not feel that appearing in these venues has legitimized the works of these artists. "Economic and institutional disparities make respectful dialogue between struggling, developing economies and those that are stable and developed often difficult, and at best uneven." This exhibition brings modern African history and culture to the center stage "in a broader global political and cultural context." Africa is demanding its turn to speak. Artists need to express their individual and personal experiences with decolonization. Enwezor is dedicated to expanding the "parameters" of contemporary art. African art is challenging and stimulating. It forces "curatorial and institutional practices" to look beyond "the framework of the dominant contemporary artistic networks" and to speak of a new genre of contemporary art (Okeke 6-7).

I believe Enwezor makes a valid point that labeling art as "central" or "peripheral" goes against the principles of post-modernism and universalism. However, Western societies have always and still continue to label art. The fact that he acknowledges an economic division between Western and African cultures and a need for recognition exemplifies the marginalization of contemporary African artists. Thus,

African artists from developing countries have fewer opportunities for economic, social, and cultural capital in the global art market.

Enwezor believes that African art excels because it expresses different sensitivities within the arts. His dedication to expanding the “parameters” of contemporary art and forcing institutions to look beyond the dominant networks (e.g. Nka) may be a legitimate way of reversing Western attitudes and re-positioning contemporary African art. By doing this, Enwezor holds Western societies accountable to the principles of post-modernism, pluralism, and universalism. For some societies still recognize forms of art as central and peripheral.

The disproportionate representation of contemporary African artists in Western institutions is evidence of this labeling. I observed several museums and galleries in Washington D.C. and the metropolitan areas and I immediately noticed the pivotal roles that Eurocentrism, racism, Western imperialism, and symbolic capital play in the unequal representation of contemporary African artists.

Although I was aware of Western influence in some museums, I still expected to find traditional African art in all of these museums, but I did not expect to find many displays of contemporary African art. My theory was quickly proven on my first site visit to The Walters Art Museum. The Walters Museum exhibited Egyptian artifacts, Orthodox Ethiopian icons, and European Exoticism¹, but there were no displays of traditional sub-Saharan African art. I understood the absence of sub-Saharan African art to be evidence of Eurocentrism, racism, and Western imperialism. Sub-Saharan Africans were darker skinned than Saharan and Eastern Africans. During the African slave trade,

Europeans considered them to have more value as commodities. Even though contemporary art of any kind was not a permanent exhibition at the Walters Art Museum, I did take note of their visiting contemporary exhibition. This exhibition displayed a series of African-American illustrations by Jerry Pinkney. I gathered that the Walters did not have a strong interest in contemporary art.

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts exhibited Egyptian and sub-Saharan African art but in separate galleries. Egyptian artifacts were placed with Greek and Roman art. Traditional sub-Saharan African art was showcased in its own gallery. Here, The Virginia Museum suggests to the public that Egypt is not a part of the African continent. This positioning of art signals to the public that Egyptian culture is superior to sub-Saharan cultures. When I observed several rooms featuring modern and contemporary art, I was not startled to find that most of the artists were mainly from North America, Europe, and Asia.

My expectations were the same when I visited The Hirshhorn Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art. The Hirshhorn Museum exhibited more of the legacy of traditional African art through Western and European movements (e.g. Impressionism, Cubism, and Abstract Expressionismⁱⁱ). Contemporary African art was not a part of these movements. I feel that when contemporary African artists are not allowed to display their works to the public in international museums, they are being prevented from contributing to the global art market.

Later, I discovered that The African Art Museum of Maryland was the size of two living rooms. It was obvious that The African Art Museum did not receive much funding or support (e.g. economic and social capital) because it had a very small collection of

traditional African art and no contemporary art. This visit made me wonder even more about the future of contemporary African art.

My skepticism did not stop there. During my visit to The James E. Lewis Museum of Art, I expected to find contemporary African art because it was located on the campus of a historically black college (e.g. Morgan State University). Instead, I found a permanent collection of traditional African art and contemporary works by North American and European artists. After having spoken with the curator, Gabriel Tenabe, I learned that The Lewis Museum also had little to no funding (e.g. economic and social capital).

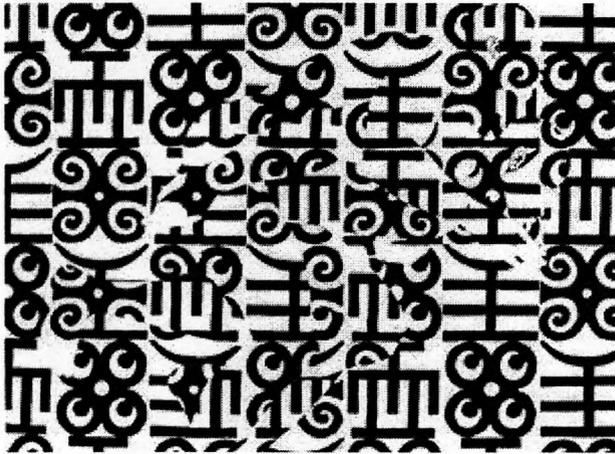
The Smithsonian National Museum of African Art proved to have the most impressive collection of African art. It was the only museum that exhibited both traditional and contemporary African art. The Smithsonian's collection of contemporary art was small, but stimulating. The exhibition entitled *Journey and Destinations: African Artists on the Move* featured five contemporary African artists from Ghana, Sudan, Nigeria, and Côte d'Ivoire. The exhibition "explored the important histories of migration and the negotiations of artistic, cultural, personal and group identities among African artists who make up the growing and significant Diaspora of practicing artists now living in Europe and America" (Smithsonian). "The nomadic lifestyle of these contemporary artists forces us to re-examine the borders, both actual and imagined, between Africa and the rest of the world and reflect on their critical place within the global art world" (Smithsonian). I was delighted with how The Smithsonian exposed meaningful works of contemporary African artists to the public. Among these artists in *Journey and Destinations* were Kwesi Owusu-Ankomah (see Fig. 7 page 45) and Bright Bimpong (see

Fig. 8 page 46). I easily detected the legacy of traditional art in Owusu-Ankomah's use of Adinkra symbols and Bimpong's use of iron. I enjoyed the Owusu-Ankomah's unique use of Adinkra symbols to create camouflaged images. The black and white paint gave the painting movement and agility. I was immediately drawn to Bimpong's sculpture because it possessed such boldness and strength.

I was also happy to learn that The Smithsonian's effort to present contemporary African art did not begin with *Journey and Destinations*. Its past exhibition, *Encounters with the Contemporary*, featured African artists from Sudan, Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, Ethiopia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Tunisia, and Kenya. Themes focused on "education, technique, and socio-political contexts" (Smithsonian). Magdalene Odundo (see Fig. 9 page 47) was among these accomplished artists. Her African heritage exudes from this pottery. I found its curves and roundness to be soothing and sensual. The burnt-orange color is relaxing and inviting. The Smithsonian Museum exemplified the diversity that contemporary African artists need. I took note that the majority of these artists received much of their training in Western institutions, which supports the significance of symbolic capital and Western imperialism in the global art market.

Although traditional African art can be found in most fine art museums, it continues to function under a primitive or exotic framework. Western institutions have the power to measure the value of African art by separating Egyptian art from sub-Saharan African art into two rooms and by separating African artists from Western artists in two museums (i.e. The Smithsonian National Museum of African Art and The Hirshhorn Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art). In conclusion, these separations weaken the appreciation for contemporary African art.

**Journey and Destinations: African Artists
on the Move**



Painting

Off My Back

Kwesi Owusu-Ankomah· born 1956, Ghana
Ghana

1995

Acrylic on canvas

H x W: 157.1 x 211.7 cm (61 7/8 x 83 3/8 in.)

Museum purchase

2000-17-1

Owusu-Ankomah draws on the symbols of his native Akan heritage reproducing, either directly or with subtle variation the Adinkra symbols (such as the Akoben, the war horn; Dwenini aben, the ram's horns; and Ma te, I've heard what you said) found on many Akan stamped cloths. He uses generous amounts of black acrylic paint to approximate the dye, known as Akinkra aduru, which has the consistency an color of coal tar. These symbols serve as both surface and background for the composition. Owusu-Ankomah adds two large figures engaged in combat, as though caught within a charged environment. With the overall patterning effect, these great figures somehow attain both voluminous form and decorative potency. Space is felt and negated simultaneously. Moreover, his skillful application of the acrylics--raised in parts, applied with an aggressive brushstroke--gives texture and atmosphere to the piece, as though it vibrates from the movements of the characters trapped within.

Owusu-Ankomah is a skilled painter who clearly understands the limits and challenges of his medium. Like other contemporary international artists, he addresses the two-dimensionality of the canvas, playing with perspective, movement and voluminous forms to address the histories of painting practice. His use of Adinkra symbols as pattern and narrative serves not only to visually unify the work and the action therein, but also to integrate indigenous traditions with modernist technique and form.

Journey and Destinations: African
Artists on the Move



Figure

Efo II

Bright Bimpong· born 1960, Ghana

Ghana

1993

Iron

H x W D: 44 x 20.6 x 20.7 cm (17 5/16 x 8 1/8 x 8 1/8 in.)

Museum purchase

2001-3-1

Bimpong fashions whimsical yet riveting figures that speak to the human condition and exude sensuous attitudes, accenting both the tactility of the material and agility of the artist's hand. He notes, "I use the figure in a gestural manner to evoke emotion. Hence, appeal to the conscience of mankind to deflate all bigotries and accept the cultural fusion of modern times" (Interview with the artist, N.Y., 1993).

Magdalene Odundo

Nairobi, Kenya

B. 1950

Magdalene Odundo was raised in Kenya and India. In 1971 she moved to England to train in graphic arts and ceramics. After study trips to pottery workshops in Abuja, Nigeria, and Kenya (1974-75), as well as pueblos in the American Southwest (1976), she returned to England and received a master's degree from the Royal College of Art in 1982. She now lives and works in England.

Untitled #1

1994

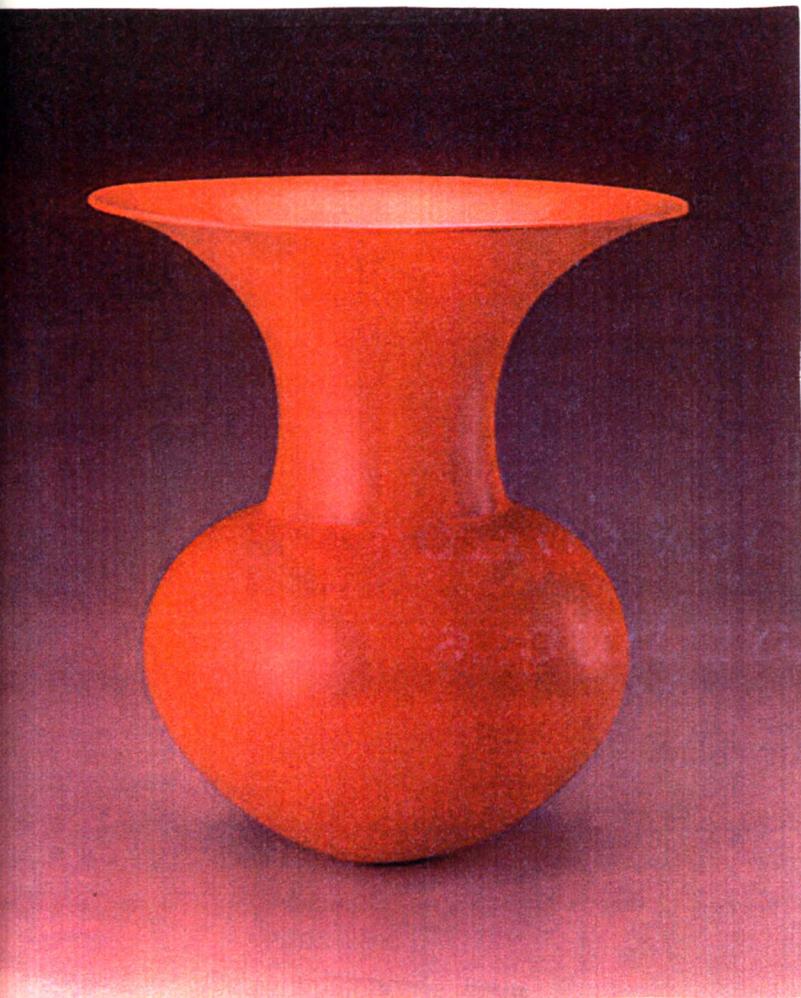
Ceramic

H. 47.5 cm (18 11/16 in.)

95-8-1, museum purchase

Odundo's works reference both African and European modernist forms and refer, more generally, to world ceramic history and technique. She regards her pieces as nonutilitarian containers of form and color, describing the subtle, elegant shapes as "capturing the unfurling of a plant, the fall of a Victorian sleeve, the momentary stillness of a dancer's sleeve, or the silhouette of a Kenyan woman bound in layers of cloth" (Marla Berns, *Ceramic Gestures: New Vessels by Magdalene Odundo* [Santa Barbara: University Art Museum, University of California, 1995], 25).

These works are hand-coiled, scraped smooth with a gourd, coated with slips and burnished. The color is dependent upon the firing technique. Orange-rust colors are achieved by firing the pieces in the oxidized atmosphere of a gas kiln. The black pots are stuffed with combustibles (wood chips and shavings) and undergo a second firing.



Notes

¹ European paintings and sculptures of Saharan culture and landscape

² For a discussion on Abstract Expressionism, see Dempsey.

V. CONCLUSION

Due to their peripheral positioning, I believe African artists have a harder task in achieving symbolic capital than Western artists. Eurocentric, racist and imperialistic attitudes, which accompany symbolic capital, are the very causes of their positioning. These attitudes will always hinder contemporary African artists. Despite it all, African art has survived for centuries and transmitted its legacy to many Western art movements. Whether or not some contemporary African artists are conscious of Western influences in their works, many of them still draw upon their African heritage for inspiration.

After examining all the evidence, I suggest that the more contemporary African art (and other cultural others) is exposed to the public in museums and galleries, the better the chances are of reversing Eurocentric, racist, and imperialistic attitudes in the global art market. Then Western viewers would be more objective and take more progressive steps towards learning about and investing in contemporary African art. More African artists would have access to symbolic capital, and the meaning of universalism and post-modernism would seem relevant to the global art market.

With all things considered, the dialogue concerning the future of contemporary African artists remains open. Since I am sure there are still many unanswered questions about the positioning of contemporary African art, on-going discussions and research are needed and welcomed.

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