

Roderick J. McIntosh

## FROM TRADITIONAL AFRICAN ART TO THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF FORM IN THE MIDDLE NIGER

The reversal in the name of this paper of the title of this Symposium, "From Archaeology to traditional African Art" is a purposeful act. In a number of art historical fora, I have argued that traditional, connoisseur-based methodologies of art historical analysis are insufficient to deal with the ancient terracotta statuary art emerging from legitimate controlled excavation and, unfortunately more voluminously, from looted sites in the Jenne region of the upper Middle Niger of Mali (R. McIntosh 1989, 1992; R. & S. McIntosh 1986; S. & R. McIntosh 1985). Briefly, the argument of those articles is that, despite the centuries and enormous social change in the Middle Niger separating the makers and users of these terracottas from the present-day analyst, basic scientific excavation and recording can provide critical information about the historical and socio-cultural context of the art's function and reasons for discard. Indeed, situating the terracottas in context is necessary to discover the active historical role played by art in the lives of the population and in generating social change in the prehistoric Middle Niger.

My objection is to the traditional view of the Middle Niger terracottas as *objets trouvés*, cultural orphans that can only ever be studied by an (Idealist) empathic intuition of the historical structure of the civilization of the art's makers'. This is a hoary tradition in art history. Ackerman (1963:131) explains the methodology by which the connoisseur discovers "artifacts that help to define historical structures... by a communication with human feelings in the past..." The first objective of this paper is to reveal the (to my mind) bankrupt Hegelian Idealist pedigree to this aspect of traditional africanist art history. The example used is its application by Bernard de Grunne to the Middle Niger statuary.

But, these criticisms are simply a particular case of a broader critique of tradi-

tionalist art history articulated even more harshly by a younger generation of africanist art historians and anthropologists. Amongst others, Ben-Amos (1989), Berns (1989), Clifford (1985), Elkins (1988), Kasfir (1984), Pfaffenbeger (1988) and Ravenhill (1987) castigate the discipline for its reluctance to study art as social history, for its a-theoretical stance, and for art historians' ties to the speculative art market. Theirs is a fundamental challenge to the assertion that contextless objects elicit in the trained observer a mystical empathic reaction to a past culture.

This is a critique of the idealist roots of traditional art history made principally *within* the discipline. These same scholars attempt in their own research to demonstrate Vansina's (1984:213) assertion that "art produced by forces outside itself expresses metaphors which in turn can lead to further cultural and social change". It is a fundamental assertion of this paper that the recursive, mutually – reinforcing nature of social practice entangled with art is a field of analysis best tackled by the art historian freed of the discipline's tradition of empathic connoisseurship.

I have reversed the title of the Symposium to entitle this paper "From traditional African Art to the Archaeology of Form in the Middle Niger" in order to assert that archaeologists ignore at their peril the perspectives of the post-traditionalist art historian on art as reflection and, at the same time, active crystallizer or magnet for social action. Revisionist art history can provide hypotheses that are testable with the scientific methods of prehistoric archaeology about the continuity of cultural manifestations over long periods of time or about the nature and circumstances of change mediated through objects. In the final part of this paper, I present the example of the Middle Niger "Symbolic Reservoir". The archaeologist and revisionist art historian can join forces to demonstrate

how we can examine the role of constellations of symbols in the evolution of Middle Niger urban life and community heterogeneity as early perhaps as the mid-first millennium AD. But to get to that hopeful point, we must first understand the poverty (and perversion for the purposes of those who would profit from the criminal traffic in looted terracottas) of the traditional approach.

Revisionist art historians inveigh against claims that 'masterpieces' or 'native aesthetics' are recognizable by the trained connoisseur because they are abstracted from the flow of time. In the older tradition, aesthetic interpretation is synonymous with the study of Style, or representations of essences primordially embedded in stable historical collectivities, sometimes called nations, sometimes civilizations, sometimes tribes (Adams 1989:6-7; Kasfir 1984). In this view, art reflects, but is epiphenomenal to the 'genius of an era'.

As stable historical collectivity, the nation, civilization, or tribe is the artifact of that monolithic, Idealist concept of an Age, each with its own discrete 'spirit', integral over deep-time, the *Einheitskultur*. The label *Einheitskultur* (Weber 1978: 1013-14) is purposefully used here to recall affinities with 19th century historicism. Central to the historicist movement of Idealism was the belief that each Age, each Nation is bounded and incommensurable because each is fundamentally new and different from all others (Popper's Principle of Radical Novelty – Elkins 1988:360-73; Gadamer 1960:153-214). Aesthetics have a critical position in the identification and study of the *Einheitskultur*.

There is a long pedigree to the notion that privileged aesthetics are the only route to knowledge about vast, timeless cultural entities. Its classic articulation was in the thesis of incomplete spiritual realization in Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics* (1823-29).

Until such time as the historical and sensuous world implodes into union with the Absolute Mind, we must wallow in the torturous process of collectivities (nations) ratcheting themselves through time and space. Each nation is the expression of its own trajectory, each looking forward to a unique destiny, each an expression of discrete and non-comparable Essences.

The authority for interpretation of other times, other peoples is aesthetic. The Hegelian Mind of each collectivity imprints its seal on external objects: "the sensuous is spiritualized in art, in other words, the life of spirit comes to dwell in it under sensuous guise... it continues to belong to the soil from which it sprang, has received, in short, the baptism of the mind and soul of man, and only presents that which is fashioned in consonance with such a sacrament" (Hegel 1964: 398-99, cf., 409). The details of culture practice and the past are just sense deception hinting obliquely at deeper inner coherences and unique mystical destinies of each *Einheitskultur*. Analysis goes no further than lofty description of privileged aesthetics – wherein are deposited Hegel's richest intuitions and ideas of nations. In this tradition, Spengler (1926-28) speaks of the voices of the blood made material in his Prime Symbols of great civilizations: Egypt in stone, classic Greece in the symmetry of the sculpted human body, and the "pure unlimited space" of western civilization.

What, then, is Idealism's alternative to empiricism's deception for knowledge about the past or other cultures? It is mystical rapture, the "mystical union of the genius of production with the genius of interpretation" (Gadamer 1960: 166). Aesthetics are not a passive book to be read. They disengage us from our time and space and allow by sensuous intuition "that strange fusion of memory and expectation into a whole" (Dilthey, in Gadamer 1960:195). But this is precisely the contra-

diction never confronted or resolved by the Idealists. If one is emersed in the Essence of one's own unique Age, and if there can be nothing but divination stimulated by looking at the essence deep within oneself, then whence comes the detachment from the object required for critical understanding? For the mystic historians of *Einheitskultur*, this was a non-problem. Final authoritative interpretation resides solely with demonstrable direct historical descendants, i.e., with members of the same *Einheitskultur*. Again to Spengler (1926-28: 11, cf., 320): "The member of an alien Culture can be a spectator... but he can never be a statesman, a man who feels the future working in him".

If all this sounds arcane, this is a tradition that haunts us still today in the interpretation of the Middle Niger terracottas. The interpretations are grounded in the claim that there are certain "existential experts" (Thompson 1974:2) with privileged knowledge of original meanings of ancient art. Let us look at the appeal for authority to these direct historial descendants in Bernard de Grunne's recent work on the ancient Middle Niger sculpture (1987, 1988). To him it is sufficient to show that certain archaeological features (a sandstone "altar" or a "sanctuary" with ritual vessels) at sites such as Jenne-jeno have a superficial similarity to contexts of statuette use recalled by elderly informants for the art historian to have demonstrated the continuous, seamless character of the cultural inner logic of the Middle Niger societies. It matters not that his informants had no experience with the terracottas other than 19th century family traditions about their use. The research methodology involved showing photographs of statuettes in collections or drawings of body positions from same to a limited number of elders and asking them what the gestures and postures meant (T.Togola, pers. comm., 1989). Analysis tends to be arbitrary: I hold the opinion

that de Grunne accepted those informant interpretations that came closest to his own ideas. We are neither informed of the variability in informant responses, nor whether de Grunne's ideas changed in any way during the course of fieldwork. Certainly there is no critical discussion of the assumption that a privileged aesthetic, namely gestures and bodily pose (putative gods' portraiture and guides to positions for veneration), lays open the essential heart of a timeless cultural system. To quote de Grunne (1988:54), "Their persistence through many centuries clearly demonstrates the pervasive influence of this system and the importance of bodily gestures for the art history of the region". Significantly, de Grunne quotes Lévi-Strauss to the effect that, to gain knowledge of one of Africa's great mystical religions, an archive of bodily gestures "would become more valuable witnesses than archaeological sites or monuments" (1988:54) – a thinly veiled justification for the continued rape of the Middle Niger cultural heritage.

And this is precisely where this example of traditional African art history ceases to be a relatively harmless exercise. For the art historical world has conferred credentials to de Grunne (his Yale Ph.D., publications in referred journals appearing without editorial or independent scholarly rejoinder). Legitimated by extension, and therefore perpetuated is de Grunne's interpretative mode that assumes that, once the key aesthetics (bodily gestures and postures) are identified for the Middle Niger *Einheitskultur*, other chronological and contextual information about the terracottas is less informative, if not largely irrelevant. Legitimated is the methodology that places looted art pieces (those utterly lacking in context) on equal interpretative footing with pieces painstakingly exposed in the course of scientific excavation. So why even bother with the excavations, time consuming and costly as they undeniably are?



Why be upset by the grotesque loses to the archaeological landscape of the upper Middle Niger as each year hundreds of laborers are engaged to rip through scores of Malian tells searching for terracottas?

Should anyone doubt the cynicism powering this situation, just examine where the knowledge and legitimacy of de Grunne is now being employed: in the expert-examination chambers of Sotheby's. There, Malian and other masterpieces of African art are authenticated, valued and prepared for the art world's most elite and speculative auction. We should all hang our heads in shame.

Despite its failure as an historical methodology, clearly an original Hegelian aesthetics still hold attractions for those who presuppose that everyone in a culture shares the normative rules of that society. Belief in a homogenized culture with impermeable frontiers flies in the face of the known history of, for example, the spread of Islam into the Middle Niger. Islamization came about not by the ecstatic 'rebirth' of whole communities, but by differential, or mosaic acceptance by different segments of society. The processes took centuries. Slowly pagan Jenne-jeno was abandoned in favor of the growing Islamic Jenne. Many more centuries were required to mold the enormously syncretistic construct we know as the distinctive Islam of the Middle Niger today.

Culture is differentially participated in by various sub-groups. The classic concept of the *Einheitskultur* that demands cataclysmic closures to deep-time, homogenized collectivities, protected from neighboring cultures by a rigid, impermeable membrane just does not hold up to analysis.

I think the continuing seduction of the *Einheitskultur* is a love for a connoisseur-based notion of knowledge, one that is disdainful of context and that is blind to the potential of objects to change the world. Instead, I believe the study of Form can

play a vital role in understanding the complex historical process by which objects as constellations of symbols are used as encoding/decoding devices. These symbolic devices can be critical to a people's social construction of reality. It is the archaeologist's task to interpret how past societies respond and adapt to the world as socially constructed. Therefore, it is imperative that the prehistoric archaeologist be attentive to the ways in which art historians reconstruct how art functions as Vansina's (1984:158-59) "concrete symbols [crystallizing] unfocussed ideas and [mobilizing] people... a crystallizer of metaphors in tangible form". To illustrate this, let us examine how art historians can aid in the investigation of processes that led to first millennium AD urbanism in the Middle Niger.

One of the classic issues for the prehistoric archaeologist is the rise of complex society (urbanism included). Under what circumstances does a society become hierarchical? How is that vertical segmentation maintained? What evidence do we have for changing relations between the sub-groups of these hierarchical societies? We return to the Form of objects. Objects are currency with fluctuating value in the negotiation of meaning between sub-groups in a population. But objects are not randomly employed. Form can also guide us to the effect of a culture's notion (and to competing notions held by different sub-groups) of tradition, to the effect of history on the negotiation of meaning. In this view, the past is a source of multiple, negotiable realities and of material or ideological materials for the crystallization of action in support of sectional interests.

Let us use the motif of the Symbolic Reservoir to show how symbols, ideologies, mythologies or objects come to be available for the dynamic social strategies of complex societies. The Symbolic Reservoir may be thought of as a vast, deep-time, curated supply of symbols or ideolo-

gies available as social codes. There are no objective, rigidly-fixed meanings transmitted from the past. Meaning attached to specific elements of the Reservoir often work at the level of social 'givens'; meanings can be quite different for different sub-groups and certainly can change over time.

Core symbols for one sub-group may be marginal to the ideology of another. Ambiguity and incongruence provide the historical dynamic. We should consider the Symbolic Reservoir to be a fluid pool maintained through time despite the appearance or borrowing of new elements, the waxing and waning of others, or the disappearance of yet others.

Using a reservoir motif, we can focus on the process of emerging social complexity as differential use by sub-groups of those symbols in their legitimating repertoires. They dip into the reservoir, appropriate and manipulate sets of symbols and myths to invent traditions legitimating their own sectional interests. It is at this level that objects change the world and, simultaneously, can serve as lenses on historically specific legitimization episodes.

Secondarily, the Symbolic Reservoir concept can help the break down the archaeologically-unuseful distinction between art (i.e., High Art) and material culture. In articles on the use of terracottas as corporate ensignia used during the rise of cities in the upper Middle Niger, I have tried to show that art was just one of a reinforcing cluster of materials employed by different sub-groups in an expanding "corporate discourse" that marks early urbanism (McIntosh 1989: 81-83, 1991). The other ensignia discussed there are burial posture and settlement patterns.

Indeed, some of the most innovative 'processual' work now being done in West African archaeology takes a similar approach to material culture in places of rich artistic and ceramic traditions with dated excavated sequences on the order of 1,000

years. For example, in Cameroon, Judy Sterner (1990) and Nic David are experimenting with an analytical framework they call "symbolic montage". Here, bits and pieces of material culture traditions are refitted and manipulated by sub-groups in a society to make reinterpretations of social meaning. The process studied is the expression of social variability within socially regulated conventions of object use and expression of Form. The unit of study is the deeply curated pool of symbols seen ethnographically and archaeologically. The task is to see how symbol association shifts through time and to see how these shifts related to changes in meaning and to changes in the political or economic circumstances of the community.

These studies demonstrate that we can have a lens, blurred to be sure, to train on the deep-time instrumentality of art and objects. Studies of continuity of artistic traditions need not be limited to exercises in uniformitarianism, or reasoning by ethnographic analogy. However, because of blinders peculiar to their discipline, archaeologists have shown themselves poorly prepared to plumb the depths of curation or to monitor the permeability of the reservoirs' membranes. I would argue that the best historians of art, those who resisted the seduction of historicism, have been doing precisely this all along. Now is the time to encourage more.

Much would be gained were (revisionist) art historians to turn their aesthetic training and sensibilities to situations, such as early Jenne-jeno, where excavations reveal an explosion of ethnic or occupational corporate groups complemented in the terracottas by an explosion of variation of form, decorative detail and context of use. It would be useful to have art historians look at other art forms, such as other ceramic design motifs, copper jewelry, iron implements, etc., to see if similar patterns show up there as well. We need the art historian's complementary perspective to

help translate the 'corporate cacophony' we presume this art to represent into an understanding of how new levels of ambiguity of belonging were resolved, thereby allowing urbanism to succeed. Certain questions about the developing population hierarchy and segmentation could never be addressed in the connoisseur tradition of analysis characterized by the de Grunne research. But such question should be the very meat of the new art history as social history. Who in the population was allowed to craft, display, or venerate equestrian statuettes? Which sub-group tapped the deeper Symbolic Reservoir to appropriate the snake versus the disfigurement versus the maternal motif? Did the meaning of a gesture or motif change as the dynamics of urban life evolved through time? With this approach, the study of gradual assimilation of very different ideologies, such as Islam, ceases to be the impossibility it is in Hegelian historicism.

Let us end with an example of how the new art history can open up brand new data fields for archaeologists. An art historian, Pat McNaughton (1991), has written an implicit appeal for archaeologists to join his research on a vast savanna "corridor" of formal and conceptual similarities in an important class of West African art. He finds from Lake Chad to the Senegambia an unnaturally narrow range of image-making conventions for certain items, such as helmet masks and iron staffs. These are precisely those objects traditionally linked to fundamental principles of sorcery, systems of leadership, 'casted' enterprises such as blacksmithing and leatherworking and to pan-regional griot and marabout traditions. Are the artistic similarities happenstance? Is it happenstance that these artistic corridors coincide with the areas of some of Africa's first complex societies, metal working, and long-distance trade diasporas? Is McNaughton on to evidence of a level of contact far earlier and far more pervasive,

than archaeologists have imagined before? It will take a collaborative effort to know.

I firmly believe that, as archaeologists, we deal with the incompletely preserved remains of past action upon multiple aspects of the world as socially constructed by prehistoric peoples. How can the archaeologist approach the social construction of reality of the dead? We cannot interview them. It would be delightful, but I remain sceptical of the whole idealist enterprise of mystical communion with the collective Mind of a past peoples. As traditional African art history transforms itself, art historians and archaeologists can find mutual terrain and collaborate to mutual advantage on the deep-time symbolic power of Form.

(Houston, Texas 1.13.1992)

#### References

- ACKERMAN J.S., "Western art history", in (eds.) J.S. Ackerman and R. Carpenter, *Art and Archaeology* Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963.
- ADAMS M., "African visual arts from an art historical perspective", *African Studies Review* 32:55-103, 1989.
- BEN-AMOS P., "African visual arts from a social perspective", *African Studies Review* 32:1-53, 1989.
- BERNS M., "Cross-cultural perspectives: art history in the upper Benue". Paper presented at the Triennial Symposium on African Art. Submitted to *Journal of African History*, 1989.
- CLIFFORD J., "Histories of the tribal and the modern", *Art in America* 4:164-77, 215, 1985.
- ELKINS J., "Art history without theory", *Critical Inquiry* 14(2):354-78, 1988.
- GADAMER H-G., *Truth and Method*. New York: Crossroad, 1960.
- GRUNNE B. DE, *Divine Gestures and Earthly Gods*. Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1987.
- GRUNNE B. DE, "Ancient sculpture of the Inland Niger Delta", *African Arts* 21:50-55, 92, 1988.
- HEGEL G., *Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1823-29.
- HEGEL G., "Selections from The Philosophy of Fine Art", in (eds.) A. Hofstadter and R. Kuhns. *Philosophies of Art and Beauty* New York: Modern Library, 1964.
- KASFIR S.L., "One tribe, one style? Paradigms in the historiography of African art". *History in Africa* 11:163-93, 1984.
- MCINTOSH R., "Middle Niger terracottas before the Symplegades gateway", *African Arts* 22(2):74-83, 103-04, 1989.
- MCINTOSH R., "Early urban clusters in China and Africa: the arbitration of social ambiguity", *Journal of Field Archaeology* 18:199-212, 1991.
- MCINTOSH R., "This way out of chaos: prehistorians and art historians look at each other anew", in (ed.) P. Schmidt. *The Future of Archaeology in Africa* Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1992.
- MCINTOSH R. and McIntosh S.K., "Dilettantism and plunder - illicit traffic in ancient Malian art", *Unesco Museum* 149:49-57, 1986.
- MCINTOSH S.K. and McIntosh R., "Archéologie et histoire de l'art" *Grand Atlas de l'Archéologie. Encyclopaedia Universalis*. Paris pp. 312-13, 1985.
- MCNAUGHTON P.R., "Is there history in horizontal masks? A preliminary response to the dilemma of Form", *African Arts* 24:40-53, 88-90, 1991.
- PAFFENBERGER B., "Fetishised objects and humanised nature: Towards an anthropology of technology", *Man (N.S.)* 23:236-52, 1988.
- RAVENHILL P., "The past and future of museology in Sub-Saharan Africa", *ICCROM Newsletter* 13:34-36, 1987.
- SPENGLER O., *The Decline of the West*. New York: Knop, 1926-28.
- STERNER J., "'Montage', sacred pots, and 'Symbolic Reservoirs' in the Mandara Highlands of North Cameroon", Paper presented at the March 1990 meeting of the Society of Africanist Archaeologists, Gainesville, 1990.
- THOMPSON R.F., *African Art in Motion*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974.
- VANSINA J., *Art History in Africa*. London: Longman, 1984.
- WEBER M., *Economy and Society*. Berkley: Univ. of California Press, 1978.