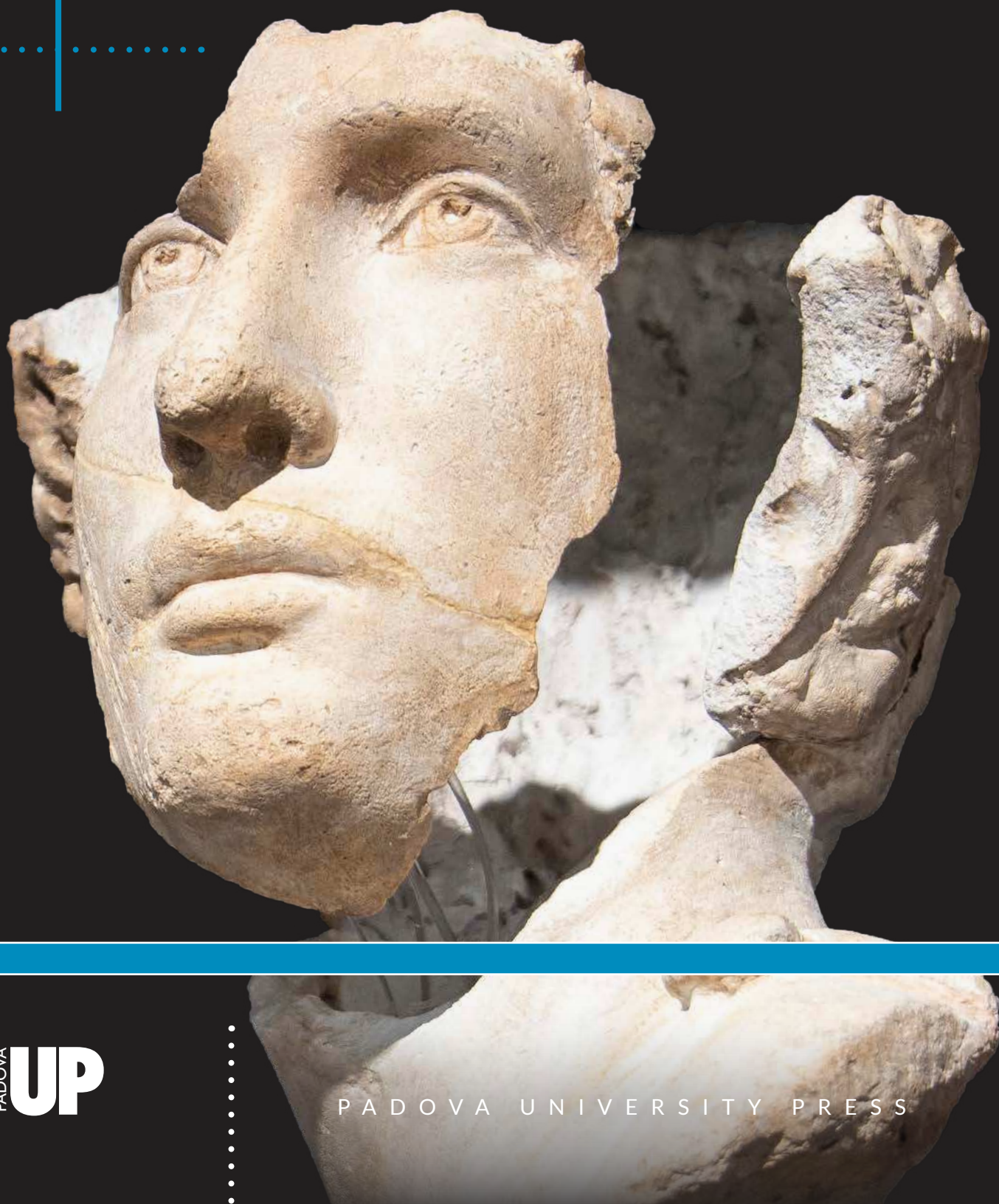


BEYOND FORGERY

COLLECTING, AUTHENTICATION AND
PROTECTION OF CULTURAL HERITAGE



ANTENOR QUADERNI

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COLLECTING, AUTHENTICATION AND
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Edited by

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COLLECTING AFRICAN ART:
AUTHENTICITY AS CULTURAL INTERPRETATION AND OBJECTIVE
REALITY. PROBLEMS AND MEANINGS OF MODERN FORGERY

Marta Nezzo

ABSTRACT

The complexity of meanings conveyed by the African objects produced between the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century is related to the social, cultural, and religious worlds to which each of them belonged. That is to say that a Yoruba statue is different from a Chiwara crest or a Luba headrest, not only as far as the shape is concerned, but – most of all – regarding its cultural meanings. Arriving in the European and American collections, all of these objects became something different: legitimized and valued as artistic (and/or exotic) masterpieces, or otherwise considered as curious things, as evidence of “human primitivism”. Their authenticity was questioned, considering two types of “criteria”: both anthropological and aesthetic evidence was involved in their evaluation, two references that were the two faces of the same concept of authenticity or forgery. What are the terms of the problem today?

KEYWORDS: forgery; African art; non-European art; authenticity; art market.

SOME PRELIMINARY REMARKS

This text deals with a specific problem related to the forgery of “African Art”: the market of rough (or vulgar) fakes and its effect on the collective imagination related to African visual cultures. A special sort of fakes – “lower class” fakes – will be discussed, completely leaving out any details regarding “beautiful” (even counterfeited) objects¹. So far, this latter group has been less dangerous than the former, due to the fact that fewer people are interested in it.

A rather tough perspective on this subject will be presented, but today the problems connected to the forgery of African art are not at an advanced stage of discussion.

The widespread opinion on these kinds of pieces – especially in Italy – is completely wrong, and this brings up several problems; among these one must stress the difficulty of attracting a new generation of art historians interested in becoming connoisseurs of African art. Fortunately, this gap has been partially filled by anthropologists and ethnographers; however, their perspective is not interested in an investigation into problems of image shape, in its development and its being shared as a witness of human excellence. That is to say that a new generation of studies will develop only when young scholars have applied visual tools to examine old (and new) African objects. It should be noted that works of art must be considered not only as a support for cultural studies, philosophical

¹ See below. The faint boundary between counterfeits and copies produced with different aims has long been a subject of discussion: *Unpacking Culture* 1999.

inquiry, or abstract concepts: images are a problem themselves; they are the second great symbolic language of humankind, besides oral language. We are too often careless and unmindful with regard to their power, when actually, we must recognize that today we are completely dominated by visual messages, by visual suggestions. Not only the mass media and the web, but the increasing presence of our cities, buildings, posters and – why not – Fashion itself, are the figural translation of the present way of living: they are the representation of our awkward age but also of our desires. Working on art history means carrying out innovative research on the relations between the past and the present; it means drawing students' attention to the development of figural language and to its ability to modify the world – for better or, obviously, for worse – making people aware of the major issues of our time. Today, this is taking place as far as Western and Eastern art are concerned, but the ancient arts of Africa are disregarded by art historians overall, or better, they are considered “a world apart”.

SOME NOTES ABOUT THE ITALIAN SITUATION: MUSEUMS, RESEARCH, AND THE GENERAL PUBLIC

In Italy there are several museums that house African masterpieces, often in proximity to African ethnographic objects: they are located in Florence (Museo Paolo Mantegazza), in Rome (Museo delle Civiltà), in Turin (Museo di Antropologia e di Etnografia) and so on. Here scholars (anthropologists and ethnographers) are particularly attentive when it comes to the scientific knowledge lying within the pieces they preserve, and they are also interested in their artistic value; we cannot disregard their studies. However, their training is not necessarily linked to art-historical methodology. Furthermore, we have other kinds of museums: for example, the missionaries' museums. These are principally interested in representing the relationship between African peoples and priests; the objects exhibited are not necessarily “original” and sometimes are copies, and indeed the true status of these kinds of items is often not declared in the captions, because it is unrelated to the mission of the Museum itself. But is the general public keen to discover the difference? The most detailed inquiry into Italian museums keeping genuine African artistic (or ethnographic) items is a book edited in 1977 by Ezio Bassani, who listed fourteen Collections where one can find items from the sixteenth to the twentieth century². Bassani was the most important Italian scholar in this field of scientific research, and he worked with a special regard for the methodology of art history. In fact, he was a self-taught man who dedicated his life to building a new consciousness of the value of African art, in Italy and abroad. He found help in Italy's academic world, collaborating with the great art historian Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti³, but he also worked with William Fagg, the most important British scholar in this field. However, after the death of Ragghianti, his example was unfortunately not followed by Italian academic art historians. This borderline situation resulted in an almost complete absence of Sub-Saharan African Art from the public university courses on art history. As written above, for a long time only anthropologists taught African Art courses⁴; beyond these we might remember the great care of some other private institutions such as the Centro Studi Archeologia Africana in Milan, which organized some important exhibitions on Sub-Saharan creativeness and art. But just a few of the proposals put forth by these scholars have reached the general public. The vast majority of citizens have never been to the aforementioned museums (nor to the missionaries' museums); on the contrary, they tend to see “counterfeited” objects on the web and especially at flea markets. As a result of this situation, these kinds of “counterfeited” items do not need to exhibit any

² BASSANI 1977.

³ In 1979, they founded together the Centro per gli Studi dell'Arte Africana, linked to the Università internazionale dell'Arte di Firenze (a special Institution that has no relationships with the Università degli Studi di Firenze): GIOLI 2010; BASSANI [2014] 2016; NEZZO 2017; NEZZO 2020a = 2016; NEZZO 2020a.

⁴ BARGNA 2003.

quality, nor require any authenticity to be appreciated, and this is because they are addressed to completely inexperienced consumers. These objects belong to a lower class of forgery⁵.

ABOUT “AFRICAN ART”: DEFINITIONS AND THE PRACTICE OF COLLECTING

But what does African Art⁶ mean? It is a vague expression used to define any African artistic culture, disregarding even the date or the place where each object is or was made. From a historical point of view, it is a colonialist definition. Fighting this terminology is not easy, but it must be stressed that Africa has bestowed many different works of art and masterpieces upon the world. Therefore, when speaking about “African art”, one could actually be referring to *Cotton Global trends*, by Yinka Shonibare or to a *Crowned head of an Oni*, dating from the late fifteenth century (from Nigeria, Ife Royal Kingdom), or to a *Queen-Mother Crowned Head* (dating from the beginning of sixteenth century, from Nigeria Benin Royal City) or to a *Songye powered figure*, a piece of traditional art from Congo (dating from the nineteenth or twentieth century). All without distinction⁷. This last example (*Songye powered figure*) serves to focus on another kind of misunderstanding between cultures. In Europe, these kinds of statues have been named “fetishes” (with a negative connotation), from the beginning of the colonial period. The truth is that they were created as something different. In their original culture they had also been thought of as benign figures⁸: “The Songye effigies are representations of ancestors. Literature has given credence to the belief that the Songye figures are representations of the forces of the universe [...]. They make us sense a reality that goes beyond the human scope and could be a source of happiness or of anguish”⁹.

It is clear that – in this field of research – the anthropologists, the archaeologists and the art historians have to cooperate, with the aim of highlighting not only the original (and present) cultural significance, but also the artistic value of the various African cultural heritages; looking at the past, without forgetting the present globalization. Why is there such an urgent need for this convergence? In the past, as a result of the policy of colonialism, a group of objects, made by different cultures geographically located in the current states of Congo or Nigeria or Sierra Leone, reached Europe and were consigned to the ethnographic museums, which disregarded the fact that they were great expressions of human creativeness¹⁰. During the nineteenth century and the first half of the 20th, due to the colonial point of view, in Europe and the USA the consideration of African Arts

⁵ The term “lower-class fakes” denotes at least two categories of objects produced to be sold in street markets and in “ethnic galleries” (which are quite different from art galleries or antique shops). These could be defined as mass-produced objects and their status is widely debated. Nevertheless, here I am specifically referring to, on the one hand, the objects that aim to counterfeit particular masterpieces from the Baluba or Benin or Bambara or Fang culture (and so on and so forth) and, on the other hand, the ones declared as belonging to a specific culture but actually conceived as a stylistic pan-African mix, inspired by different cultures in history (actually very far from each other, both in terms of geographical and chronological domains).

⁶ *A Philosophical Inquiry* in STEPHAN 2000.

⁷ Well known as “Primitive” or “Tribal Art”, but these definitions are outdated.

⁸ That is to say they were responsible for the health of people and sometimes they were in charge of administering justice.

⁹ NEYT 2004. The Songye Powered figures are not the only example. There have been many instances of misunderstanding between cultures. For instance, during the nineteenth century, the *Sande Masks* (Sierra Leone, Liberia) were identified with the Devil himself, because of the assonance between the Gola word “deveh” (spirit god) with the English word “devil” (GOTTSCHALK 1990).

¹⁰ This hard perspective was the one in place at the beginning of the twentieth century. Although it had been changing over the years (especially because of the avant-garde art, an intellectual status symbol for rich upper-class Europeans), this prejudice left its traces in different fields: in ethnological theory before the Second World War and in the general opinion of common people afterwards. About the problem of museums and exhibitions (both of peoples and objects), from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century, the bibliography is endless. Despite this situation, some suggestions could be given with regard to Italy and abroad: BASSANI 1984; PRICE 1992; CLIFFORD 1999; *Sensible Objects* 2006; CIMINELLI 2008; ABBATTISTA 2013; DELPUECH, LAURIÈRE, PELTIER-CAROFF 2017.

was wrong. Most people believed that Africa was a continent without history, where the arts were standstill, fixed on a mythical primitive situation. At best they believed that in the remote past, some ancient civilizations had actually developed in Africa, but due to the influence of European people and culture¹¹. Quite commonly, they believed that, by the beginning of the twentieth century, all those civilizations had disappeared¹². Far from it, the Avant-garde artists declared the artistic value of African objects, but refrained from highlighting their original cultural or religious values.

Today, decades after the majority of European colonial possession has finished, a different political situation urges and enables us to correct the mistakes of the past, and not only as far as arts are concerned. First of all, we must speak in the plural, explaining every time if an object is Kuba, Luba, Hemba, Ife, Kissi and so on. That is to say, we must speak about distinct African peoples and times; speak about distinct African arts, because Africa – just like Europe – during its history expressed an abundance of different visual cultures and keeps on doing so¹³. Even though in 1927 a French colonialist officer – Georges Hardy – underlined that it was erroneous to define the production of such different cultures as he had seen in French Africa¹⁴ with a single expression (*art nègre*), we can see that, considering the general public, until recently the current European way to refer to the arts of African peoples has not really changed. Nevertheless, something is shifting.

Today, the idea of an “African Art” History at a standstill, fixed on a mythical primitive situation, is completely outdated. Just as obsolete is the idea of an “African Art” which is absolutely free from other people’s influence. Now, thanks to the great work of anthropologists and scholars, a more conscious audience has acknowledged that Africa has had and still has a multitude of different visual

¹¹ FROBENIUS [1933] 1950; EISENHOFER 2003; ELUYEMI 2005.

¹² Looking for an example that you can take as a source, see PETTAZZONI 2012 and NEZZO 2020b. A modern perspective is in PLANCKENSTEINER 2007.

¹³ African art has been explored throughout manifold hermeneutic tools; today, the choice to categorize the objects according to their style – thereby associating them to specific geographical and cultural contexts of production – is shared by African, European, and American scholars (as an example among others, see Babatunde Lawal’s research on the Yoruba culture, e.g., LAWAL 2012). This choice has likely been inspired by the historiography of European art, where styles are “localized” in order to map influences, transfers etc. Therefore, rather than ethnicity, historiography is at the heart of the question. As far as sub-Saharan Africa is concerned, scholars have had to face, on the one hand, the long absence of autochthonous written sources (although there are collective oral memories and material evidence, including “high-end” artworks – see RAGGHIANI 1981; KI-ZERBO 1981) and on the other hand, the parceling of history along with the dangerous tendency to split up the two unequal eras of oral and written expression (with the consequent prevalence of one over the other, which can vary depending on the segment of discourse in question). Today, the idea that the necessity to historicize the past should not mute current developments is common thought; sometimes, starting from current developments, we end up completely changing our research perspective. Exploring the vast bibliography that has stemmed from this is beyond the scope of this paper. Nonetheless, we may cite some research that can provide calibrated solutions, e.g., BARGNA 2003. In African Art studies, the difficulty of marrying the anthropological-cultural vision with the art-historical definition (a difficulty which regards all the studies on visual culture – see FREEDBERG 2008) proves to be strictly connected with the de-colonial redefinition of the concept of African history (e.g., CALCHI NOVATI, VALSECCHI 2005). Looking beyond the Italian borders, we may cite the interesting experiment on the art of the “tempe retrouvée” (eighth-fifteenth century) by FAUVELLE 2013 and the (also philosophical) re-appropriation of this topic by African scholars, proposed by DIOP 2018. It should be noted that the oppressive sense of guilt that casts its shadows on these studies has produced a dangerous scientific situation. Even though, more than forty years ago, the famous SAID [1978] (It. trans. 2016) claimed his work was aimed «non tanto a eliminare le differenze [...] quanto a sfidare l’idea che le differenze comportino necessariamente ostilità, un assieme congelato e reificato di essenze in opposizione», there is still a general hostility dominating the reception of any page that is written concerning a de- and/or post-colonial topic. The “badge of political correctness” is requested – including a detailed off-topic bibliography and philosophical justification for every single term that is used – for an article or book which aspires to be “scientific”. It has become a sort of obsession – considering the word count limitations imposed for published papers – whose only result is an imposition of intellectual aphasia onto those who deal with intercultural matters, beyond the context of political sciences. The anthropological-cultural side is less aggressive, perhaps because it is better informed about the material objects of discussion. The eccentric fronts of investigation are penalized by all of this just as much, creating what we could call “return colonialism”. Indeed – in a sort of self-justifying litany – the research goes to great lengths to define itself but does not define its own object where a “banal” meta-critical reading would make it possible to recognize the author’s position (and his/her horizon of cultural reference) from the content that he/she has expressed.

¹⁴ HARDY 1927.

cultures, expressed in the breadth of its history and to varying degrees influenced by neighbouring countries or by far off peoples. The increase in interest in collecting these kinds of objects regards not only the museums but also a quite large number of private individuals. Looking at these people and their group of sculptures, several possible guidelines can be determined. Some collectors love contemporary globalized art¹⁵, while others prefer the ancient masterpieces from different cultures and places: the Djenné terracotta sculptures from Mali, or the ancient Dogon wooden carvings (also from Mali), or some Benin Royal Kingdom bas-reliefs, and so on.

But there is a third branch of this collecting world which I am interested in: consisting in a base of relatively modern objects, again belonging to different cultures and geographic areas, all of which were produced between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. Once more these objects exhibit the extraordinary variety of the peoples, styles, ages, and places of arts in Africa. However, it was often the case that they arrived in Europe without a precise indication of their place of origin or the country where they were collected, and the most revealing traces of their provenance have to be sought in the details of their style. Yet they pose further problems. Most of the African stone sculptures, terracotta or wood carvings that reached Europe within the first half of the twentieth century were originally consecrated to a deity or to an ancestor's spirit. Once they had been cast-off by their users, they could be sold; but sometimes they were simply stolen despite the feelings or the faith of their owners. Today some of the instances of worship expressed by these objects are still relevant, while some others have been abandoned. What is certain is that when these objects arrived in Europe, they changed their status: initially liturgical masks or holy statues, they became "African Art" masterpieces, losing their religious meaning and, to make matters worse, no longer bearing any proof of their real, original value, whether it was artistic or religious, or both¹⁶. Since then, the only other guarantee of their validity as an expression of an African visual culture is their longstanding presence in any important Western collection.

AUTHENTICITY AS CULTURAL INTERPRETATION

All in all, after emphasizing all these matters, what does the word "fake" mean in reference to African arts? It is common knowledge that in Europe a masterpiece is called a "fake" when its origin is ambiguous; that is to say when the signature or attribution to one particular author or date has not been confirmed by experts and/or by documents. An instance of this occurred in 1984, when in a canal in the Italian city of Livorno, several false heads "by Amedeo Modigliani" were "accidentally" found. As far as African arts are concerned, the problem is quite different. The genuineness of African objects collected in Europe was, from the beginning, strictly related to their actual ethnic use and other special cultural ties. Today this idea is refused or considered only partially true, because racism is suspected. To understand the problem, we could take a look at the forgery measuring scale proposed by the archaeologist Frank Willett in the second half of the last century. Here the concept of "fake" is discussed in detail, starting from three crucial points. A traditional African artwork is considered original if it was/is¹⁷: produced by an African artist, linked to a specific/particular culture, intended for people of the artist's same culture, and/or used for religious, social, or political purposes in that culture. If one (or more) of these three points is not fulfilled, the object is not considered entirely fake, but, step by step, gradually becomes "less original"¹⁸. If we adopt Willett's

¹⁵ ENWEZOR, OKEKE-AGULU 2009 provides a "politically correct" inquiry on contemporary "African art". Actually, some African artists have been coming out in recent years and their world leadership in the present artistic practice on the cross between local and global, between action and thought, is continuously increasing and evolving (see Zanele Muholi at Venice's Biennial 2019, Peju Alatise at Venice's Architecture Biennale 2021).

¹⁶ PRICE 1992; CLIFFORD 1999; CIMINELLI 2008.

¹⁷ If this Culture is somehow current.

¹⁸ WILLETT 1976.

point of view, the problem not only concerns dating an object at the right period of its manufacture or defining the precise nationality of its author: we also need to know the ethnological destination and the specific use of the object itself. Why is this opinion considered to be somehow related to the colonialist culture? Because it asks the objects to show signs of human usage and culture, that is to say of human existence. It seems interested not only in the things, but also in the control of the soul of the people to which they belonged. Nevertheless, Frank Willett was a great archaeologist¹⁹ and it is quite sure that he did not despise African arts, nor African peoples; in fact, the opposite is true, for he studied African Arts as a cultural and historical complex system. Maybe, though, he also realized that the problem of counterfeiting would increase dramatically and, consequently, would inhibit the correct understanding of the historical value of these arts. Because every time the actual history of a masterpiece is unknown, wherever it may come from, one starts imaging and inventing what had been its role in the world, and this is a dangerous practice. The world itself has become a giant melting pot: a process which is destined to continue. If we take a look outside the walls of our room, we can see many people – our new fellow countrymen – who were born in Africa, Asia, America or Oceania and are living here in Europe today. To build a positive coexistence, mutual knowledge could be of great help; therefore, every individual should learn to see, behind every fellow citizen, the great culture which he or she comes from. But how might we understand the respective cultures if we cannot distinguish between old artefacts and their modern distortion for only commercial purposes?²⁰

Summing up, the so called “tribal use” (which Willett pointed out) could be something more than an exotic suggestion; it becomes – against the world of forgery – a guarantee of the authenticity of the objects. This does not mean that some items which are characterized by little or no consumption cannot be authentic.

THE LOWER CLASS OF FORGERY AND ITS EFFECTS

So, today, how can we talk about the “fake” versions of African art? Frank Willett rightly warned us of the danger, with a scale of measuring forgery. Today a “commercial version” of so-called “African art” (mostly produced in Pan-African factories) is spreading in our flea markets (and sometimes in specialized galleries). This trade is building a fake concept of old and traditional African aesthetics. It is merely an expression of forgery, with no regard to cultures, history, artists and so on. It represents “African art” as imagined by an uneducated audience, that is to say, the Western general public. In the Italian high school curriculum, the study of the civilization of images of other continents is not required. This results in a visual and cultural prejudice that threatens not only the historical knowledge of the arts of the world, but also the goals of coexistence, in other words our unavoidable future.

Sometimes the counterfeiters copy a ritual object which belongs to a specific culture, simply distorting features and dimensions. The traditional (and symbolic) harmony of shapes is lost and the object “becomes the evidence” of the persistent (supposed) naivety of Africa. This kind of forgery is often freely inspired by the great masterpieces, preserved in the most important museums of the world, as happens with the famous heads of the numerous Oni of Ife (an ancient kingdom of Nigeria), the counterfeiting of which is never lacking in flea markets (*fig. 1*). Of course, fakes of this type (of such poor quality) have great success when it comes to sales, because they are not so expensive. But this success also shows that “other” cultures are not held in high esteem neither in Europe nor in the USA, or at least that this esteem is not so widespread and is restricted to specialists. Sometimes the forger mixes the styles of different traditional and ancient cultures, manufacturing *pastiches*. Three years ago, I saw a strange object at the flea market of my town: it looked like a woman with a strange

¹⁹ WILLETT 1971.

²⁰ It is even obvious to underline that this discourse is neither concerned with the quotations of the ancient in contemporary works of art, nor with its revival in the context of a production that perpetuates traditional culture.

hat and a water bowl (fig. 2), and it was bronze-cast. To a not well-trained eye it might have appeared to be a common “genre scene”. On the contrary, it was a *pastiche*, realized by merging the iconography and the style of a *Queen-Mother Crowned Head* (several items from the ancient Royal City of Benin, Nigeria; dating from the beginning of the sixteenth century) with a female *Figure of cup carrier*. This last subject was often used – in several African cultures – to represent the offerings of magic or sacred substances to a deity or to invite spirits to come back to earth. For example, in the Court Art of the Luba Culture (Congo Basin) this kind of figure was wood-carved and represented a *Kaolin carrier* (fig. 3), meaning a woman who is offering kaolin. This material was considered a sacred substance, involved in processes of transformation or revelation.

On the contrary, the heads of Queen-Mother of the Oba²¹ were royal portraits, precisely bronze-casted. The Queen-Mother could not attend to nor see her son, but she was an important political figure in the royal power structure. Named *Iyoba*, she wore a special crown, “distinguished by the forward-pointing coral-beaded peaks”²². Thus, the counterfeiter, preparing the object for the flea markets, merged two cultures which were far from each other in terms of geographic distance, but also in terms of style, meanings and so on.

However, the worst that can happen is when the forger deliberately copies an important masterpiece, to sell it as the expression of a culture different from the one which originally created it. Of particular relevance is an example from e-commerce. Two years ago, on the internet, I found a poorly-executed copy of two important masterpieces of the Benin Royal Kingdom: the portraits of dwarves of the Royal Court.

They date between the fifteenth and the sixteenth century *circa* and they are considered two of the most beautiful examples of bronzes produced by the culture of ancient Benin. They were probably destined to be exposed on an altar. The presence of the dwarves at



Fig. 1 – A fake head of an *Ife Oni* in a flea market. Photo by Author.



Fig. 2 – A *pastiche* obtained merging iconography and style of a *Queen-Mother Crowned Head* (from the ancient Royal City of Benin, Nigeria, sixteenth century) with a female figure of cup carrier in a flea market. Photo by Author.

²¹ “In the Benin Kingdom, the *Iyoba*, or mother of the *Oba* (king), occupies an important and historically significant place within the Benin political hierarchy. The title was first conferred upon Idia, the mother of king Esigie, who used her political skill to save her son’s kingdom from dissolution in the late fifteenth century. Ever since that time, queen mothers have been considered powerful protectors of their sons and, by extension, the kingdom itself. Because of the enormous esteem in which they are held, *Iyobas* enjoy privileges second only to the *Oba* himself, such as a separate palace, a retinue of female attendants, and the right to commission cast brass sculptures for religious or personal use. [...] The heads of queen mothers are distinguished from those of kings by the forward-pointing peaks of their coral-beaded crowns”. Please see this text and some photos of the original pieces consulting the Metropolitan Gallery on the Net: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/316614?searchField=All&sortBy=Relevance&ft=Iyoba&offset=0&rpp=20&pos=4>.

²² *Ibid.*



Fig. 4 – “*The married couple*” presented online as a Pygmy Culture artwork, counterfeit after the couple of Benin *Dwarves* of the Weltmuseum in Wien. Photo: Public Domain.

the court of the Oba dates from the fifteenth century and has been demonstrated, but today we know of only two bronzes with this subject.

The poorly counterfeited couple of dwarves found on sale while surfing the web (*fig. 4*), was presented as “a married couple, of Pygmy Culture”²³. The dealer noted: “The great charm of these statues is the result of careful manufacturing. The couple is represented as dressed for a great marriage ceremony. There are precious details, such as the hair, the bracelets, the necklace and the man’s beard”. It was not clear precisely where and when these fake “Pygmy bronzes” were produced, but one thing was clear: by selling them, the merchant of fake items changed the “widespread history” of the two ancient original objects that were copied, their meaning and maybe even the sex of one of the dwarves portrayed, in order to sell not only a fake “masterpiece”, but also an exotic and romantic fairy tale. From the point of view of an art historian, the style and the details are misrepresented; the Edo People (who originally created this iconography) are forgotten. But most of all, the Pygmy people are betrayed, in the sense that they are traditionally nomadic people, not interested in manufacturing heavy objects (the declared weight of the counterfeited statues is 5 kg). As mentioned above, only two ancient bronze figures of dwarves survived the devastation of the Kingdom of Benin, perpetrated by the British in 1897, and now both

are located at the Museum für Völkerkunde (today Weltmuseum) in Vienna. Freely inspired by this double portrait, the forger gave us a happy married couple, that is, the actually unhappy sign of equivocal relations between African and European people. But how long would the ancient Benin dwarves will remain as only two (or four...)? Today one can find the grotesque forgery of one of the most important masterpieces of Edo ancient art in almost every flea market.

Why emphasize the objects in flea markets, in Italy and abroad, or on the web? Why not speak about fakes sometimes sold by mistake in some private galleries in Paris, Bruxelles or New York? The reason is that flea markets and the internet are visited by many people: they have the greatest power and influence on the collective imagination, reaching almost all of the general public in the globalized world. Therefore, they are the first step in building up a collective concept of ancient or traditional African arts outside Africa. Yet, as we have seen, these are dangerous places: not only when it comes to the naive and unprepared customers, but much more to the survival of the real value of the history of old African visual arts in the world. The reader must consider what would be done if one wanted to export the brand of Italian Renaissance Art: would one prefer to exhibit the original *David*, or its bad copies? This masterpiece is well known worldwide, but imagine a different situation: imagine that the *David* stood hidden in a private collection or in a museum far away from us or that it was dramatically destroyed. Imagine that our only idea of Michelangelo’s greatness remained linked to an object like this purple one that I found online (*fig. 5*). Fortunately, all of Michelangelo’s works are famous and well known to the general public; their value is “fixed” and celebrated. In contrast, it is impossible to say the same about the African Arts. During and after the Colonial Age not all African cultures had the chance to save their traditions and their history. And, most significantly, their Cultural Heritage was stolen

²³ The Pigmy live between Congo, Gabon and Cameroun, not in Nigeria.

by Europeans. As a result, most of the research on this topic is now done by European or American Universities, and these studies, at least in Italy, have hardly ever had the chance to actually reach a large audience.

Sometimes, in recent years, there has been talk of the restitution of objects to their “original owners”: this would be a huge problem, as anyone can imagine, especially because the maps of ethnicities do not correspond to the boundaries of the various African states. What could be done in the meantime? The first duty for art historians is to properly preserve the objects and to promote correct understanding of them. In Italy there is a good number of people in a position to pursue this aim: some individuals in charge of museums, as already mentioned, and a few private collectors (connoisseurs), who have spent almost all their life studying and collecting African arts (approximately a few dozen people, at least for Italy).

Taking a cue from all these observations, the reader is invited to consider one last question: is it certain that our way of exposing the original objects of African Arts does not in itself constitute a sort of falsification? Our books and museums show us many wood or metal objects, without their original dressing. Only in a few cases can we see, in Europe and the USA, the way the statues or the carved masks, which we now own, were supposed to look. For example, the helmet masks usually called *Bundu*, coming from the secret feminine society “*Sande*” that was (and still is) responsible for the “education” of young girls in several groups of Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia²⁴, are often exhibited in western private and public collections. To perform the rites for which they were created (special ceremonies of or after feminine initiation) these masks should be richly dressed, but they almost always end up being displayed without their palm dresses or their metal jewels: that is to say, without their fancy-dress. The worst part is that they are deprived of the chance to dance, which originally was one of their main purposes. To conclude, exhibiting these objects is a major problem, because westerners are rarely able to give them their intended meaning and fail to reproduce their original look. Every time, we run the risk of counterfeiting not only their aesthetic value, but also the whole culture which produced them, whose meaning they are supposed to express.

To sum up once more: what does forgery mean in African arts? Looking online and at flea markets, one might say: “Buying and selling these fakes is a way of supporting the handicrafts trade... What’s wrong?” The problem arises when the copies are passed off as “originals” from the past, exploiting people’s ignorance. But this ignorance is not an individual problem, nor an aesthetical one: rather, it is a political problem. Owing to the conviction that in modern globalized society, knowing visual cultures of non-European people is not strictly required, counterfeiters are essentially given free rein. This is just the latest edition of Western colonialism.

In conclusion, forgery is much more than a sales problem. It will lead to the erasure of all the cultures which did not reach the globalization age having already been perfectly studied, documented and widespread. It is the result of a massive disregard for human rights, of an attitude that mocks the variety of human expressions. In short, counterfeiting of art objects (not only African) is a form of contempt for ourselves.



Fig. 5 – A funny interpretation of the Michelangelo’s *David* broadcasted online. Photo: Public Domain.

²⁴ PHILLIPS 1995.

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51. Lanifica, *Il ruolo della donna nella produzione tessile attraverso le evidenze funerarie*, a cura di M.S. Busana, C. Rossi, D. Francisci, 2021

For centuries, art forgery has threatened our cultural heritage's intangible values and undermined fundamental concepts like public trust, ownership, knowledge, and identity. Moreover, honest copies and digital technologies like virtual or augmented reality nuance the uniqueness on which the protection of cultural objects is based. *Beyond Forgery. Collecting, Authentication and Protection of Cultural Heritage* explores the blurry notions of original, fake, and copy, the stimuli to forgery and its implications, and the authentication techniques from a historical perspective and within a broader discourse about securing cultural heritage. The book includes some reflections on forgery and art collecting and the role of museums in representing authenticity. The relationship between forgery and illicit trade in cultural goods is also addressed. Gathering contributions by scholars in the fields of archaeology, art history, history, anthropology, philosophy, museum studies, legal studies, psychology, and natural science, this book offers a wide perspective on some of the most significant threats and challenges our cultural heritage has posed and poses to us. Acknowledging such threats and challenges is crucial for understanding, protecting, and valorizing our cultural heritage.

Il falso d'arte ha minacciato i valori intangibili del nostro patrimonio culturale per secoli e minato concetti fondamentali come fiducia pubblica, proprietà, conoscenza e identità. Inoltre, copie e tecnologie digitali come la realtà virtuale e aumentata mitigano il concetto di unicità su cui si basa la tutela degli oggetti culturali. *Beyond Forgery. Collecting, Authentication and Protection of Cultural Heritage* indaga le nebulose nozioni di originale, falso e copia, le cause della falsificazione e le sue implicazioni, e i metodi di autenticazione degli oggetti in prospettiva storica e all'interno di un più ampio discorso sulla protezione del patrimonio culturale. Il libro include alcune riflessioni sulla falsificazione e il collezionismo d'arte e sul ruolo dei musei nel rappresentare l'autenticità. Viene trattata anche la relazione tra falsificazione e il traffico illecito di beni culturali. Raccogliendo contributi di studiosi nei settori dell'archeologia, della storia dell'arte, della storia, dell'antropologia, della filosofia, della museologia, della giurisprudenza, della psicologia e delle scienze naturali, questo libro offre un'ampia disamina di alcune delle più importanti minacce e sfide che il patrimonio culturale ci ha posto e ci pone. Riconoscere queste minacce e queste sfide è cruciale per comprendere, proteggere e valorizzare tale patrimonio.

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