



## Africa: Trade, Traffic and Collections

Felicity Bodenstein

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Felicity Bodenstein

## Africa: Trade, Traffic and Collections

This issue of JAMS considers the exponential growth of an export market for cultural objects from the African continent since the middle of the nineteenth century, from the first episodes of commercial and military colonialism (Cormack) through to the dramatic rise from the 1890s onwards (Hüsgen, Tsogang Fossi). It then considers the shift away from the categorization of African cultural objects as ethnographic to the flourishing of a “primitive art” (also often termed as “art nègre”)<sup>1</sup> trade in Paris (Saint-Raymond, Vaudry) and finally moves through the issue of post-colonial trade (Girard-Muscagorry); closing with an article on the question of illicit trafficking that has marked the currently termed “tribal art” market for African objects. The director of Abidjan Musée des civilisations, Silvie Memel Kassi also considers how the current situation of African museums is changing and how these institutions are preparing in order to offer a suitable environment for returning objects. The central question is the role of commercial transactions in the establishment of systematic collecting practices of cultural material from sub-Saharan Africa, transactions driven by the growing presence of European powers on the continent and motivated by the corollary establishment of specialized ethnographic collections in Europe.

Nowhere can the intertwined development of international trade, curiosity and ethnographic museums be read more clearly than in the correspondence between the Bavarian-born doctor Philipp Franz Siebold, who had spent seven years as the resident physician of the important Dutch trading post Dejima in Japan, and François-Edme Jomard, founder of the Geography Department at the Royal Library in Paris (1828) and participant in the Egyptian Expedition of Napoléon Bonaparte. When Siebold described his plans for such an ethnographic museum in 1843, he deplored what he saw as the “inconceivable indifference” with which European powers considered their ethnographic collections. His own observations reflected the shift in cultural policy that would lead to the creation of most major European public ethnographic museums. Writing to Jomard

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1 On issues related to the use of these different racist terminologies – see John Warne Monroe, *Metropolitan Fetish: African Sculpture and the Imperial French Invention of Primitive Art* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2019).

of the need for such institutions in order to help open up trade routes and facilitate the understanding of extra-European cultures, he surmised: “you who agree with me that it is now or never time for the capitals of the empires of civilized Europe which have colonies or which propose to found them, to create within them museums of geography and ethnography, the existence of which is a prerequisite for the success of their undertakings.”<sup>2</sup> Collections of material culture would easily allow the visitor to consider at the same time the potential of foreign raw materials as well as the techniques used to process them into different types of goods, ranging from the most sophisticated artistic forms to simple everyday objects.

The – admittedly Eurocentric – framing of the question of trade in African cultural objects presented in this issue mirrors this historical moment; it does not intend to signify the absence of circulation and commerce of cultural objects before the middle of the nineteenth century within the African continent or from Africa to Europe prior to this period but rather seeks to reflect on the manner in which modes of acquisition, types and quantities of acquired objects changed significantly due to a process of colonization that was economic before it was political. For centuries, Africa had been involved in many forms of global commerce: to the East with China and other areas of the Indian Ocean from the eighth century onwards, and to the West, first with the Portuguese, then increasingly with the Dutch and the British, along a coastline that Europeans named after the “commodities on offer for exchange” – the ‘Gold Coast’, ‘the Ivory Coast’, the Grain Coast (modern Liberia) and the Slave Coast, between modern Benin and south-western Nigeria as “Africa became seen by outsiders in the terms of the extraction and consumption of resources”.<sup>3</sup> The contact zones created by this commerce led artists and artisans in different parts of the continent to create specific types of objects that might best be qualified as export goods. The most famous case in point were carved objects in “white gold”, a term often used for Afro-Portuguese ivories. Produced by Sapi (Sierra Leone) and Beni (Nigeria) artisans to satisfy the taste of European travelers for intricately carved elements with an exotic flair, these pieces became a highly coveted must-have in European princely cabinets.<sup>4</sup> Prestigious because of the precious nature of the material in which they were carved, the value of these oliphants, salt-cellars, spoons, vases and other small vessels translated particularly well transculturally, so that the vast majority of objects from the African continent that were collected in Europe before the nineteenth century

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2 Lettre sur l'utilité des musées ethnographiques et sur l'importance de leur création dans les états européens qui possèdent des colonies ou qui entretiennent des relations commerciales avec les autres parties du monde, publiée à Paris, 1843, in Ernest Théodore Hamy and Nélia Dias, *Les origines du Musée d'Ethnographie* (Paris: Jean Michel Place, 1988), 229–48.

3 Toby Green, *A Fistful of Shells: West Africa from the Rise of the Slave Trade to the Age of Revolution* (London: Penguin, 2019), 108.

4 Conceição Borges de Sousa, L'ivoire afro-portugais: un nouveau langage, in Gaëlle Beaujean-Baltzer and Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, eds., *L'Afrique des routes. Histoire de la circulation des hommes, des richesses et des idées à travers le continent africain* (Paris: Actes Sud, Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, 2017), 96-103. Ezio Bassani, *African Art and Artefacts in European Collections: 1400-1800* (London: British Museum, 2000).

were made of ivory. They have been reinterpreted in the last decades as the first examples of a globalized form of artistic practice.

Nevertheless, sub-Saharan Africa was the least well represented part of the world in early European public museum collections at the beginning of the nineteenth century,<sup>5</sup> and the growth of trade and circulation of objects from that part of the world developed in parallel to the growing trade for ethnografica, which became a new specialization for dealers from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards. A detailed account of the history of Steven's auction house, one of London's largest auction houses for natural history and ethnographic objects, aptly entitled *A Romance of the Rostrum*,<sup>6</sup> documents how, in the 1820s, the acquisition of extra-European curiosities shifted from an informal market mainly driven by actors involved in collecting and directly trading or exchanging with each other to the development of a more specialized and professional market where private collections were dissolved and often absorbed by large museum collections. Allingham's account documents how the trade of material culture was initially imbricated in a constellation of "curiosity" where natural history retained a place of prime importance well up until the second half of the nineteenth century when the ethnographic became an independent category of inquiry and a domain of trade of equal importance to natural history specimens. In Germany, the growing volume of collections of African objects in ethnographic museums in the second half of the nineteenth century is a good indicator of the development of a market whose main protagonists were active in the international port city of Hamburg.

As was shown by Glenn Penny, in the case of Germany the museums were the principal and the most influential buyers in this new market.<sup>7</sup> The French situation was notably different. Here the ethnographic market was small in comparison to Britain and Germany, and museums, in particular the ethnographic museum at the Trocadéro (1878), acquired their collections mainly through gifts or scientific expeditions,<sup>8</sup> growing exponentially in numbers from 1885 onwards.<sup>9</sup> This remained largely true until a part of the cultural objects that had previously been classified as ethnographic were rebranded

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5 Nigel Barley, Africa: in the shadow of the Enlightenment, in Kim Sloan and Andrew Burnett, *Enlightenment: Discovering the World in the Eighteenth Century* (British Museum Press, 2003), 270-275.

6 Emily Grace Allingham, *A Romance of the Rostrum; Being the Business Life of Henry Stevens and the History of Thirty-Eight King Street, Together with Some Account of Famous Sales Held There during the Last Hundred Years* (London: Witherby & Co., 1924).

7 H. Glenn Penny, *Objects of Culture. Ethnology and Ethnographic Museums in Imperial Germany* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 59; H. Glenn Penny, Science and the Marketplace: The Creation and Contentious Sale of the Museum Godeffroy, in *Pacific Arts*, no. 21/22 (2000), 7-22.

8 Emmanuelle Sibeud, Du Trophée Colonial à l'art Nègre, Les Collections Africaines Du Musée d'ethnographie Du Trocadéro: Muséographie, Ethnographie et Idéologie Coloniale', in Soraya Boudia, Sébastien Soubiran, and Anne Rasmussen, eds., *Patrimoine et Communautés Savantes* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2009), 170.

9 See the numbers provided by the report published in 2018: Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, *Rapport sur la Restitution du patrimoine culturel africain. Vers une nouvelle éthique relationnelle* (Paris, November 2018), 128-29, <http://restitutionreport2018.com/>.

as “art”. Indeed, from the 1910s onwards, Paris became the main market for the “arts nègres” as they were called (a term that was used interchangeably with “arts primitifs” until the end of the 1930s). Yaëlle Biro’s book, *Fabriquer le Regard. Marchands, réseaux et objets d’art africains à l’aube du XXe siècle*, reviewed in this issue (Bodenstein) retraces this change, whilst the contribution provided here by Léa Saint-Raymond and Élodie Vaudry traces some of the essential elements in the development of an important secondary market from the 1920s onwards, identifying different types of markets ranging from junk to financial investment.

Conversely, the historical record of internal markets on the African continent before the twentieth century is quite sparse with no equivalent to the wealth of anthropological studies that have continued to explore the issue since the seminal work undertaken by Christopher Steiner in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>10</sup> Though not directly related to the question of the market, historical studies on different contexts of production allow us to underline that in many communities, their cultural objects were most probably created outside of open market circuits, often in exchange for other services or related to specific functions (religious, political, social) providing artists and artisans with other means of living from their work than direct sales.<sup>11</sup> Much as was the case in Early Modern Europe, they often depended on relationships with specific institutions such as guilds in order to produce and circulate objects whose function clearly often defined their future destination.

So, whilst there was a long tradition of commerce and exchange along the coasts and in major trading cities, in many parts of the continent, especially those vast rural geographies that had remained out of the range of direct contact with Europeans, culturally important objects only rarely had the status of commodities, and even when they did it was only relevant in very specific spheres of exchange in which European trade was not included. It is important to note that outside of ivory objects which dominate the literature on European collecting of African objects until the beginning of the nineteenth century, most of the types of objects that would become focal points of European collections – in particular in the domain of the “arts nègres” from the beginning of the twentieth century onwards in avant-garde artistic circles (such as the famous Punu or Fang masks described by Vlaminck and Derain)<sup>12</sup> – were not familiar and had not appeared in collections, private or public before the 1880s, suggesting that they did not circulate out of the continent before the colonial era.

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10 Christopher B. Steiner, *African Art in Transit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 4–15.

11 Gaëlle Beaujean, *L’art de Cour d’Abomey: Le Sens Des Objets* (Paris: Les Presses du réel, 2019); Oriiz U. Onuwaje and Kokunre Agbontaen-Eghafona, eds., *The Guilds of Benin: Artefacts, Antiquities and Arts*, in *The Benin Monarchy. An Anthology of Benin History* (Nigeria: Wells-Crimson, 2018), 221–33; Suzanne Preston Blier, *Art and Risk in Ancient Yoruba: Ife History, Power, and Identity, c. 1300* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

12 Joshua I. Cohen, *Fauve Masks: Rethinking Modern “Primitivist” Uses of African and Oceanic Art, 1905–8*, *The Art Bulletin* 99, no. 2 (3 April 2017): 136–65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043079.2017.1252241>.

This diversity of object status ranging from the inalienable, often religious or political object to the readily produced and easily commodified artefact is the essential background to understanding the typology of acquisition or collecting practices (forms of purchases, gifts and indeed theft) that developed during colonial expansion, as illustrated in this issue by Cormack, Hüsgen and Tsogang-Fossi. The forced or strongly coerced commodification of certain types of objects that had been produced and preserved for specific social uses might be the most significant change in how cultural objects moved out of Africa from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards and it is certainly also one of the most controversial ones. This change was made possible by the enforcement of treaties of trade and protection and justified by the nascent discipline of ethnography and its mission to “salvage” and to document cultures, in particular those “disappearing” through contact with modernity.<sup>13</sup> It is a change that was for a long time readily overlooked because of its strong relationship to contexts of violence (see Cormack in this issue) whilst Eurocentric questions, such as shifts in object status from the ethnographic to the aesthetic, have received far more attention.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, understanding the market for cultural objects moving out of Africa, set into circulation either through direct encounters with foreigners or through the intermediary of so-called middlemen, means paying particular attention to commodification as a process,<sup>15</sup> one which took on specific characteristics in the context of extreme power asymmetry that accompanied the extension of colonialism on the continent. It also implies taking into consideration the nuances of object status in terms of property and mobility, considering in particular indigenous concepts of inalienability,<sup>16</sup> and how they varied across very different cultures and through time – not only because of but often due to the processes of colonization coupled with modernization, religious conversion and growing urbanization. It means acknowledging different forms of agency on both sides of such transactions across a space of very graduated intensities of contact (in this issue see Hüsgen). Modes of inquiry into the history of trade with cultural objects that focus on what happened in Africa to bring objects into circulation and the “middle passage”<sup>17</sup> to Europe, have only just been established<sup>18</sup> and the work of Zachary Kingdon, *Ethnographic Collecting and African Agency in Early Colonial West Africa*, reviewed in this issue by Julian

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13 Enid Schildkrout and Curtis A. Keim, *The Scramble for Art in Central Africa* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

14 Ruth B. Phillips and Christopher Burghard Steiner, *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 3.

15 Igor Kopytoff, The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process, in Arjun Appadurai, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64–91.

16 Annette B Weiner, *Inalienable Possessions the Paradox of Keeping-While-Giving* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Annette B. Weiner, Cultural Difference and the Density of Objects, in *American Ethnologist* 21, no. 2 (1994), 391–403.

17 Steiner, *African Art in Transit*, 9.

18 Z. S. Strother, “Breaking Juju,” *Breaking Trade: Museums and the Culture of Iconoclasm in Southern Nigeria*, in *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 67–68 (2017): 21–41, <https://doi.org/10.1086/692780>.

Bondaz, is an excellent example of how to bring together two sides of an equation that is very often considered uniquely from a European perspective.

This is in large part due to the very unequal state of documentation of the provenance history of objects coming from the African continent in Western collections. The articles in this issue adopt very different strategies in dealing with the opacity of the “social lives” of these objects before their first or indeed second or third sale in Europe: taking one of two main approaches that consist on the one hand of trying to overcome this challenge or, when that is indeed impossible, of trying to get a better understanding of the conditions that have favored this loss and subsequent absence of knowledge.

Examining the case of objects from the current region of South Sudan, Zoe Cormack considers specifically the history of violence<sup>19</sup> that is associated with different forms of acquisitions related to some of the approximately 15,000 objects from that area that reached European museums between 1840 and 1885. Focusing on the unusually well-documented work of Italian geographer and explorer Giovanni Maini, she examines the nature of the links between collecting and “predatory commerce” in particular during his missions from 1859 to 1872. She shows how his capacity to access material depended on trade networks and especially on the stations called *zariba* and how, alongside the extraction of local material culture, the practice of collecting also “changed patterns of production in response to a market”. Jan Hüsgen’s work considers the different modes of collecting related to the work of German colonial officials in the “Togo-Hinterland Expedition” (1894/95). Though presented as having strictly scientific ambitions, the conditions in which many of the acquisitions were made can clearly be directly associated with “punitive” actions that were preceded by forms of resistance. Also, coercive conditions did not hinder actors on the African side from engaging in “intensive and lengthy negotiations for the acquisition of particularly rare objects”.

Richard Tsogang Fossi’s study of a set of correspondence at the ethnological museum of Hamburg takes the case of the sale of a collection from the Cameroon Cross River brought together in the first decade of the twentieth century by Alfred Mansfeld. He examines the commodification and first sale of a set of objects of which the potential buyers do not even have as much as a descriptive list. Interestingly, the sale price and the interest of the buyers seem to repose uniquely on the reputation and legitimacy of the European seller, an Austrian medical doctor who had entered the German colonial service in 1904, as the negotiations with museum actors and collectors in Hamburg, Leipzig and Berlin try to settle the destiny of a completely unspecific ensemble whose main selling point was to represent a geographic area from which very little material had as yet been made available.

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19 For a difference case study on the role of violence see: Dan Hicks, *The British Museum. The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (London: Pluto Press, 2020).



The work presented by Léa Saint-Raymond and Élodie Vaudry on the role of the Drouot auction house in Paris as a space for the creation of a secondary market in the 1920s and 1930s shows how a quantitative approach can usefully help to shift away from a focus on the individual gestures of recognition of the talented dealer's "eye" and the "invention" of African art, in order to consider questions of price and profit as an often-unmentioned driving force. Their study also considers how authorial anonymity in relation to the history of the object was used to the advantage of a system of value creation on the European market that allowed other criteria such as the provenance related to Western collectors and artists to become all the more important for the pedigree and price of an object.

Alexandre Girard-Muscagorry's proposal of a near-complete object biography underlines the amplitude of what is usually lost in terms of information through the different processes of decontextualization that have stripped the most valued pieces in African art collections of relevant knowledge, but also literally of parts of their materials. The destiny of a Mumuye mask, whose exact provenance in Zing, Eastern Nigeria can be determined thanks to ethnographic fieldwork carried out by Arnold Rubin from 1965 to 1970, along with information about its trajectory to Europe through Fouban, is a clearly-documented example of the continued flow of objects out of the continent after independence, in particular in contexts of crisis, in this case, possibly the economic aftermath of the Biafra civil war. Indeed, seventy-four percent of cultural objects from Nigeria in French collections were acquired after independence, most but not all on the secondary market.<sup>20</sup> The case of the Mumuye masks illustrates the theoretical nature of the impact of such international measures as Unesco's 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property which was not ratified by France until 1997.

The last article by Silvie Memel Kassi, the current director of the Musée des civilisations in Abidjan, the largest museum of the Côte d'Ivoire, provides some of the insights from her doctoral thesis on the illicit traffic of cultural objects from her country and on the gap between existing legislation and the possibility of enforcing it, but also on the fine line between legal and ethical considerations. She places today's illicit trafficking at the end of a long history of cultural extraction practices going back to pre-colonial trade and examines these as an interplay of exogenous and endogenous factors. Her personal experience with the major theft of objects from the museum in 2010 due to security conditions created by a political crisis, but also her more than twenty-seven-year career in museums, allow her to consider the impact that this loss has had on different communities in Côte d'Ivoire and the damage done by the commodification processes to how they consider the value of their own cultural heritage. However, she also provides key examples of current efforts to reverse this process through activism and communication campaigns that she considers as a necessary corollary to legal measures and to restitution. There can be no doubt that reading her text alongside the Maureen Murphy's 2004 interview with the Parisian art dealer Jean Roudillon in this issue (published here for the

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20 Sarr and Savoy, *Rapport sur la Restitution du patrimoine culturel africain. Vers une nouvelle éthique relationnelle*, 132.



first time) provides us with two very contrasting points of view on the ethics of object circulation and its future; current debates indeed show the need for more work and supporting context from historians in order to get a better sense of the many questions that still constitutes such a large part of the lacunary market stories of African cultural objects.