



**Book Review: Yaëlle Biro, Fabriquer le regard:
Marchands, réseaux et objets d'art africains à l'aube du
XXe siècle**

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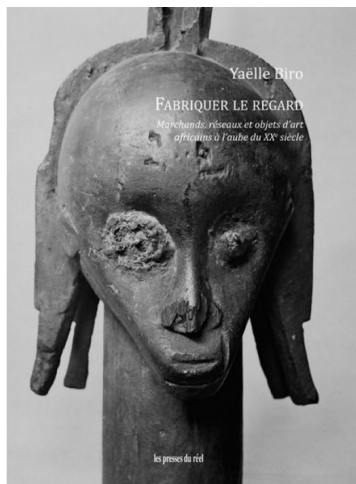
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Book Review

Yaëlle Biro, *Fabriquer le regard: Marchands, réseaux et objets d'art africains à l'aube du XXe siècle* (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2018)

by Felicity Bodenstein



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Fabriquer le regard: Marchands, réseaux et objets d'art africains à l'aube du XXe siècle, delivers a highly detailed, archive driven study of the early market for African objects in Paris between 1900 and 1920, thus providing an entirely new chapter to a story that in terms of the history of the art market, had until now focused on the rise of art market giants such as Charles Ratton and Louis Carré in the 1920s and especially the 1930s. In this sense, Biro's work is chronologically complementary to Maureen Murphy's book, *De l'imaginaire au musée. Les arts d'Afrique à Paris et à New York (1931-2006)* published in 2009 in the same collection *Œuvres en sociétés, Les presses du réel*.

Based on a PhD thesis defended in 2010, the original manuscript was entitled, *Transformation de l'objet ethnographique africain en œuvre d'art. Circulation, commerce, diffusion des arts africains en Europe et aux États-Unis des années 1900 aux années 1920*, but it has been considerably enriched by Biro's post-doctoral work and her experience at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, where began working as a curator in 2007. Her work in reconstructing the networks of relations that contributed to establishing a discourse and a market for

these objects is characterized by her use of as yet largely unpublished archival material situated in the United States, allowing her to provide us with the interconnected portraits of such figures as Joseph and Ernest Brummer and John Quinn and to augment the text with a series of important annexes, in particular a series of historic photographs in an album produced by Charles Sheeler that documents the entirety of his collection.

The opening chapter provides a convenient synthesis of the market for exotic curiosities progressively defined as *ethnographica* in the second half of the nineteenth century and neatly sets up a background for her detailed analysis of the early Parisian and North American dealers and collectors that allows the reader to measure the amplitude of the transformation of those market logics in the first decade of the twentieth century. The shift to a market for “primitive art”, or “art nègre” is then examined through the case study of the Maison Brummer, situated in Paris before moving to New York. The Brummer brothers, in particular, Joseph Brummer appear as precursors of the famous Paul Guillaume, in establishing a market for ethnographic art by working with ties to the world of avant-garde artists in Paris and elsewhere in Europe. The following chapters are a portrait of the trans-Atlantic commercial relations that contribute the valorization of these new categories, based on a one-directional flow of objects already collected and “enriched”¹ by European dealers and artists. By considering this extension of the market to New York and incorporating new actors such as Paul Guillaume and Marius de Zayas, Biro also considers the very different cultural logics at work in both of these cosmopolitan contexts in the description, interpretation and to a lesser extent display of these objects.² A focus on the collector John Quinn considers the result of this transfer and transformation of interests from Paris to New York.

Though the author introduces some key figures in each of these chapters, Biro largely avoids producing or reproducing elements of the teleological tale of the invention of African art by those “pioneers” capable of according them exceptional value³ a biographic construction more clearly at work in one first publications dealing with the market for ethnographic objects in the Anglo-Saxon world: *Provenance: twelve collectors of ethnographic art in England, 1760-1990*, directed by Jonathan King and Hermione Waterfield and published in 2006. Though it is an intention perhaps less explicitly underlined than in John Wayne Monroe’s recent book *Metropolitan Fetish* (2019), Biro’s work with the archive and some of the more mundane aspects of commercializing these pieces, including their photographic staging, shows her intention to deconstruct the already much-criticized myths surrounding the discovery narratives of “primitive arts” from the perspective of how they were marketed. She achieves this by carefully establishing the social

1 Luc Boltanski et Arnaud Esquerre, *Enrichissement. Une critique de la marchandise* (Paris: Gallimard, 2017).

2 On the issue of display see also the recently published book by John Wayne Monroe, *Metropolitan Fetish: African Sculpture and the Imperial French Invention of Primitive Art* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2019).

3 Hermione Waterfield and Jonathan King, *Provenance: Twelve Collectors of Ethnographic Art in England, 1760-1990* (Paris, Geneva: Somogy Barbier-Mueller museum, 2006).

and economic complexity of the artification process theorized in last decade by Nathalie Heinich.⁴ All the chapters follow on from each other chronologically and cover different geographical scales, types of traders and collectors as well as practices that transformed the status of African objects into icons that have as a consequence become more readily relatable to the European avant-garde than to their place of production.

As the largest and most influential buyers, Biro situates the development of ethnographic museums and the organization of Universal Exhibitions or World Fairs as the driving force in the development of this pre-1900 market. Consequently, the situation of the French market echoes that of its museums, the Trocadéro Museum which was founded only in 1878 after decades of failed attempts at creating an ethnographic museum in Paris. It followed that French interest in this market⁵ was far less important than what could be observed in Britain and Germany in the nineteenth century. A booming market for *ethnographica* is illustrated through the business activities of such figures as William Downing Webster (1868-1913) in London and the Umlauff dynasty in Hamburg. Their modes of acquiring and appreciating these objects in a market tightly associated with the commerce of natural history specimens, is considered through ties to colonial networks, allowing the reader to gain an overall sense of the suppliers and the competition at work in these new European networks. The pages dedicated in the first chapter to the modes of collection (from military spoils to diplomatically motivated forms of exchange) underline the gaps of knowledge that characterize the origins of these collections.

Increasingly, the market as it developed in Paris from the 1900s onwards was detached from the colonial provenance of these objects through the intervention of new interests and discourses related to the avant-garde and a first to a lesser extent to antiquarian considerations. Their relative lack of publications and early departure in 1914 for New York allowed the Brummer brothers to remain much less well known than dealers such as Guillaume et Ratton, but Biro's work shows how directly their early commercial activities were tied to the circles of Parisian cultural life that have since been credited with the discovery of the primitive arts. Joseph Brummer first trained as a sculptor, in the study of Auguste Rodin and later in the Colarossi Academy in Montparnasse; when he entered Matisse's academy in 1908, the artist would already have been in possession of his first African pieces.

The motivations behind his move to the more lucrative activity of *brocanteur*, are not entirely known, but his friendship with artists such as the American painter, Max Weber whom he meets in 1906 and with whom he shares an interest for African sculptures, provided him with access to a large network of artists, writers, and collectors, notably the painter Henri Rousseau and Guillaume Apollinaire that would prove key to his establish-

4 Nathalie Heinich and Roberta Shapiro, eds., *De l'artification: enquêtes sur le passage à l'art, Cas de figure 20* (Paris: Éditions de l'Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2012).

5 See also: Manuel Charpy, *L'objet et ses horizons: La fabrique des objets exotiques à Paris et New York au XIXe siècle*, in *Material Culture Review*, no 79 (2014), 24-46.

ment. Nevertheless, the exceptionally rapid development of the business that he came to share with his brother relied on a series of strategies meticulously detailed by Biro.

The combined use of strong ties to a local avant-garde community and exhibitions internationally, the sponsorship of publications and the circulation of images, such as the use of Brummer's images by Carl Einstein in his famous 1915 publication, *Negerplastik* all contributed to the success of the *Maison Brummer*. Constantly moving between these very different figures and geographic spaces allows the author to follow a wide variety of actors in parallel, providing an account which is at once very rich though perhaps making the narrative a little hard to follow at times. There are also numerous and varied indications in terms of price increases (though little sustained analysis of profits) between those initial spheres of exchange in which Brummer acquires his pieces and those very different social circles related to his own sales, but Biro also indicates that the intrinsic value of objects in precious ivory, gold and bronze remained an important factor in the pricing process. Tellingly Brummer is one the first dealer to have sold Benin bronzes in Paris in 1913, whilst hundreds, even thousands of these pieces had already gone through the market for ethnographic objects in London and Berlin since 1897, illustrating a strong shift in their status.

The analysis of the discourses of authenticity, influence and artistic merit related to market strategies and early connoisseurship is pursued in the second chapter where it becomes clear that in the North American context, there are decisive differences in the reception and the subsequent development of the market that can at once be related to the presence of a large African-American community and to the rapid and simultaneous initiation to modern art and African objects in New York shortly before the First World War as detailed in her discussion of the impact of the Armory show (1913) on the creation of galleries such as the Washington Square Gallery where for the first time artworks by contemporary European artists of the avant-garde were placed in direct relationship to objects from Africa as works of art. Equally Alfred Stieglitz's 291 Gallery with the famous exhibition *Statuary in Wood by African Savages: The Root of Modern Art* is a landmark moment in the invention of the autonomous African artwork. These trans-Atlantic exchanges developed despite the war, and the exhibitions and sales to follow relied on new networks notably involving the young Paul Guillaume whose collaboration with Marius de Zayas is examined in some detail. As hundreds of objects cross the Atlantic, both develop different sets of ideas and theories that are nevertheless in constant dialogue. It is also interesting to note the absence of any political positioning – be it colonial or anti-colonial – in the circuits of dealers and buyers that Biro deals with. Guillaume's recourse to advertisements in colonial journals at the very least implies that he had no scruples about acquiring objects from context of economic exploitation, such as related to the rubber industry in the Congo and by that time well known for its abominable working conditions.

The portrait of the collection of John Quinn allows Biro to illustrate the first stages in a phenomenon essential to understanding the marketing of African objects up until today, a process based on the establishment of pedigree, and on the legitimacy and reputation

of former owners, both dealers and collectors. Quinn's collection unites all of the strands and actors that were presented in the first chapters and illustrates how the market created and legitimated a taste for certain object types.

In her conclusion, Biro points out that the narratives built around these objects in establishing their status as artworks, narratives produced by the publications, exhibitions and other events, such as the *Fête Nègre* organized by Paul Guillaume at the Champs-Élysées theater in Paris in 1919, stand as completely detached from their contexts of origin. The history of the commodification of these objects will now have to take another step back, before Brummer and the Paris of the 1900s, to the first stage in their trajectory from the African continent to Europe.

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