



## “TRADITIONAL” AFRICAN ART

Jana Jiroušková

*„We Africans prefer things produced in Europe above those produced in Africa...When the Europeans come to Africa, they buy African things - boubou, fabrics, masks etc. They seek for those things because they are African and they do not come from Europe. We would act the same...If I had enough money, I would collect European art in the similar way as the Europeans collect our art.“*

*Abdurrahman Madu, 1991*

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Europe discovered traditional African art. The objects of art coming from the “heart of the mysterious continent” became a desired part of collections belonging to the artists of that period (Matisse, Picasso, Braque, Vlaminck). The interest in traditional African art has further increased after the success of the African pavilion on the Colonial exhibition in 1931 in Vincennes. The Europeans were attracted not only by the mystic nature of traditional African art and by the myth-veiled rituals, which these objects were used for, but also by their shape diversity and stylisation.

As the interest in African art in Europe and America was rising, groups of African artisans and tradesmen involved in the African art trade were forming. The craftsmen gradually aimed to join in their works traditional African elements with European taste in order to accommodate their production to European ideas about traditional African art. Today, it is possible to buy “traditional” African art almost everywhere in Africa. The tradesmen wander along the streets, stand along the roads or in front of hotels and restaurants, but they also own galleries and shops. The offered goods can be sorted by quality to several groups. The first group that is most coveted by the collectors consists of antiquities. These are objects which were produced in the past for the Africans and they were at least for some time serving a non-commercial purpose which they were produced for. These objects constitute only a small part of the supply. Nowadays, it is extremely difficult to find such an object in the supply. The tradesmen, however, know the European obsession with old things well and so they try to persuade every customer that the offered



objects are very old, despite the fact that these "antiquities" were finished only few days ago.

The second group consists of works produced according to objects deposited in famous European and American museums and galleries. These objects can be often distinguished according to the fact that in the production of the replica the author used different material or adjusted the dimensions. That means that he produced a miniature for the street vendor and, on the contrary, he enlarged the dimensions several times for the sellers in shops or in big yards along the roads. Consequently, it is possible to encounter in the European collections objects several times exceeding their originals or, conversely, drums with figural motifs become small containers with caryatids. Incompletion is another defect the objects can suffer from. The artisan has at disposal usually a photo of the object only from one side. Therefore, the back side of the objects produced in this way is often unfinished or fashioned according to the fantasy of the author. The tradesmen offering these goods do not hide that a similar thing can be found in some of the well-known museums; on the contrary, they are trying to increase the price by this fact. In this category of objects we can even find sculptures or masks which are at first sight completely indistinguishable from the originals. The size, material and dimensions correspond to the original and the patina does not raise any suspicion. The object is sometimes partly damaged. This should prove that it is a very old and therefore a very valuable thing. The truth is then revealed only by a more detailed analysis.

The third group consists of objects produced for tourists by the local sculptors. These objects incorporate several styles and they try to the greatest extent to fulfil the wish of the customer. For many tourists, the African art is associated with magic, occult rituals and erotica. Dealers with this sort of objects offer everything. A figure of the founder of the Chockwe tribe Chibinda Llunga bedecked with set of amulets and described as a fetish figure, Bambarra female figures *jo* with breasts to their knees, or male figures with penises to the ground. Mothers breast-feeding their children are also popular. These objects often give a grotesque impression, they use to be relatively cheap and for many tourists they fully suffice as a souvenir from Africa.

As has been mentioned, the "traditional" African art can be found almost everywhere in places with a probable high concentration of tourists. The traditional African arts dealers are divided into several groups according to the place of sale. It is important whether it is a shop owner or a street vendor or a person involved in traditional African art trade working overseas.

The first group of African arts dealers constitutes of owners of shops and galleries. These shops give an impression of overfilled bazaars. We can find here almost everything from the local sculptors' production to objects from distant regions. It is not possible to generalise that a high-quality goods could be found more in the shops that in other places. Even here we can find objects which are a mere variation on the traditional African theme.

Another category of sellers consists of the tradesman in urban markets. These people are leasing sales point for a fee from the city council. For their money, the city council provides them with at least a minimum security and these places are guarded by local police. Even here we find objects of various qualities.

Street vendors constitute the third group. Goods offered by these people are of smaller dimensions and the choice is likewise less diverse. The street vendors form sometimes groups of two or three. Some own a small van in order that they can replenish their



supplies. Others transfer their goods from place to place by a taxi. We can find the largest number of these tradesmen on the busy streets of city centres.

The fourth group constitutes of owners of market areas along the streets leading from town. These areas are fenced and we can find here various objects of art, even of bigger dimensions.

An important factor in the sale or purchase of the "traditional" African art is its price. The price varies to a great extent and it can differ manifold according to the place of purchase of the object. The example which H.B. Steiner presents in his book is entirely convincing. A Danish sculptor from the Ivory Coast made a mask, which he evaluated for 25 USD. When this mask was being sold by arts dealer who had his stand somewhat aloof from the centre of Abidjan, its price ranged between 45 and 70 USD. In the centre, however, the price of this mask would increase on 85 to 140 USD. However, if the African broker is selling this mask to a person who is buying African goods for sale in Europe or America, the price is around 450 USD. On the other hand, to the gallery the object is offered now from 900 up to 1400 USD. The collector who will buy this mask will pay an amount ranging from 1800 up to 2200 USD. The price of the face mask increased almost fifty times on the way from the sculptor to the collector.

Besides the magical objects and erotic motives, Europeans seek particularly for antiquities. They are literally obsessed with information about the age and authenticity of the object. The sellers know this desire of European buyer, but they will never use the word 'authentic'. During the examination of the offered goods the purchaser gets to know that everything is old and that even though some of the items are not very old, they are definitely not new since they have been used for several years. More skilful sellers also add a story from the object's history. How the object has been used, what place does the portrayed motive has in the mythology of the ethnic group that the sculptor comes from or they add a story how difficult it was to obtain the object. This story then follows the object to the collector. A seat from the Tabwa ethnic group was offered by the tradesman with a very moving story which was related to its original owners. The story told how each seat is burned after the death of its owner and how difficult it was to obtain this very precious armchair. Unfortunately, it was revealed after a closer examination that it is a bad fake of an object which is stored in Linden museum in Stuttgart. The sculptor somewhat missed out the back side of the seat, which remained smooth. A figure of a guardian spirit from the Mambila ethnic group from Cameroon can serve as another example. Usually, those statuettes did not exceed 30 centimetres. In the so-called traditional African arts shops, these figures appeared having 150 centimetres. The reason is absolutely obvious. Many Europeans wanted to put these sculptures to their interiors and 30 centimetres dimension was too small. The African sculptors accommodated to this desire and they started to produce these figures for the European clientele in bigger dimensions.

The businessmen and collectors want authentic objects. This raises a question about which object can we consider to be authentic. According to F. Willet, authentic are these objects, which were produced by Africans for Africans and they were also serving to Africans for some time. According to this characteristic, not even the fact that the object is several decades old can add to its authenticity if it was produced for commercial purpose. Several questions arise: What objects are offered at the market place? Are they kitsch? Are they mere copies? Is it possible to buy any authentic objects today at all?

Some researchers like Dramane Kabba claim that at the market places there are only copies of various age and diverse quality because all these objects were made for tourists



or collectors and no one ever took into account that they could serve their original purpose.<sup>1</sup> The offer is certainly very diverse and it is rather an exception than rule to find a real gem. The traditional arts trade increased particularly in the 1960s. The sculptors began to accommodate to this demand; on one hand, souvenirs of a very dubitable quality and, on the other hand, very successful copies of objects deposited in museums started to appear.

Herman Bloch considers the imitations as kitsch, regardless their quality. And a well-made copy is indeed a devils means to the end of art. The question of African kitsch was raised even on a symposium held in 1990 in New York. There, Saul Friendlander denoted as kitsch these objects, which were produced to excite immediate emotional reactions, which loose their coherency in the context and which serve commercial or ideological purposes. According to him there are two types of kitsch: so-called ordinary kitsch, which is commonly offered in urban streets, which are made in consequence of the authors' economic needs and a so-called elevating kitsch which combines traditional symbols and political propaganda. Often, nostalgia and sentiment are associated with kitsch. For example, Sundiata is with popularity portrayed in Mali. Sundiata reigned in 13<sup>th</sup> century and the rise of the Mali Empire is associated with his reign. However, in some cases the authors of the objects of art go back to history that has never happened. According to a historian Samuel Johnson, ancient Egyptians are ancestors of today's Yoruba people. This theory is not accepted by scholars. Even though history has wended by different paths than historian Jonson would like to, we find figures of Yoruba pharaohs on one of the buildings in Nigerian Lagos.

Many collectors or just persons from wider public interested in African art have brought an object from Africa or they have bought it in some traditional African art shop in Europe, being convinced of its great value. However, after an expert examination it has been found out that it is more or less well-made copy that has been produced for European and American clientele. Here arises the problem how to deal with this object. Should it be preserved or destroyed? Even if it is not an original, it retains certain informative value. It provides information about how the "traditional" art gradually accommodates to European taste, which is of course also changing. Likewise, it gives evidence how Europeans imagine this, for many of them exotic, continent.

## Bibliography

Christopher B. Steiner, *African Art in Transit*, Cambridge 2004.

Susan Vogel (ed.), *Africa Explores. 20 th Century African Art*, New York 1994.

Frank Willet, *African Art: An Introduction*, New York 1976.

1. Christopher B. Steiner, *African Art in Transit*, Cambridge 2004., pp. 62–63.
2. Frank Willet, *African Art: An Introduction*, New York 1976, p. 316.
3. Quoted according to Christopher B. Steiner, *African Art in Transit*, Cambridge 2004, p. 127.





1. Seller of traditional art in Luanda. (Photographs by J. Jiroušková)



2. A figurative drum from ethnic Bena Luluwa from the Democratic Republic of Congo (height 117.5 cm). The sculptor created a replica based on this well known artwork in the form of a small figure (height 22 cm) with a small bowl on its head. (Photographs by J. Vaněk)





3. Face masks are popular tourist articles. Sculptors creating replicas of these face masks often tailor their products to the needs of the customer. The mask in the picture only ostensibly resembles the masks from ethnic Yaure from the Ivory Coast on which it was based. (Photographs by J. Vaněk)



4. The figure of Chibinda Ilunga from the ethnic Chokwe from Northern Angola is very well known. We find several versions of this sculpture on the "traditional" African art market from heights of 20 cm to over 100 cm. (Photographs by J. Vaněk)