

THE FETISH A(R)T WORK: AFRICAN OBJECTS IN THE MAKING OF EUROPEAN ART HISTORY 1500–1900

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ABSTRACTS

Alexander Bevilacqua (Williams College, Williamstown, Massachusetts) on “Africa Before Africa at the Court of Dresden”

Where was Africa at the early modern German court? In 1590, the Saxon elector Christian I acquired a collection of Afro-Portuguese ivories for his *Kunstkammer* at the Leipzig fair. Yet these objects are recorded in the 1595 inventory as being from “*Turckey*” (Turkey), something of a catch-all designation at this time. If it misrecognized authentic West African provenance, the Dresden court nevertheless had a capacious place for representations of Africa. In masked festivities that preceded chivalric tournaments, for example, the Saxon electors impersonated African rulers among others. Long before it became common to enlist non-European people in court festivity, German princes and nobles themselves impersonated foreign rulers through costuming, masking, and cosmetic transformation. While the earliest non-European referent of these performances were Mediterranean and Central European Muslims, by the decades on either side of 1600 the Dresden electors engaged in a much wider-ranging set of world-making masquerades that particularly foregrounded dark-skinned people, including Africans, and their clothes and artifacts. Even after these festivities began to allude to Atlantic enslavement in the middle of the seventeenth century, they continued to represent African rulers in majesty. Though ephemeral, these festivities were often richly recorded: memorialized in writing, both manuscript and print, they were also illustrated both in painting and printed images, sometimes ornately. This visual record allows us to track the changing role of Africa and its arts in the court’s imaginary. The history of court festivity suggests that ideas about African culture and art formed an important strand of court culture even in the absence of authentic African art objects or when their provenance was not recognized as such. To understand the long-term history of European concepts of African art, it is necessary therefore to consider this strand of its genealogy—the history of “Africa before Africa” at the European court.

Yaëlle Biro (independent scholar and curator, Paris, France) on “Sahelian Textiles: The Contrasted Writings of Paul Soleillet and Frantz de Zeltner”

Precious cloths are among the first examples of African material culture to have entered Western consciousness and collections as early as the end of the fifteenth century. The travel chronicles of Portuguese explorers to the Kingdom of Kongo attest to the inclusion of luxury textiles in the earliest exchanges between the Manikongo Joao I of Kongo (ruled c. 1470–1509) to King Joao II of Portugal (ruled 1481–95). This reception was one of admiration as attested by the reaction of sea captain and explorer Duarte Pacheco Pereira (c. 1460–1533), who declared Kongo luxury cloths “so beautiful that those made in Italy do not surpass them in workmanship.” While these earliest examples don’t seem to have survived, fine cloths from West and Central Africa are found in collections assembled by European princes and merchants such as the famous seventeenth-century Kunst- und Wunderkammer des Christoph Weickmann in Ulm, Germany. Grounded in that history, this talk will focus on the evolution of the reception of Sahelian textiles in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, through the writing of Paul Soleillet (1842–1886), a civilian with commercial interest who traveled across the Sahel in 1878, and Frantz de Zeltner (1871–1930), a colonial officer appointed to study the “folklore of Senegal and Sudan” around 1910. This presentation proposes that we consider the two men’s contrasting discourses, from admiration to denigration, as they reflect the evolving colonial context of the turn of the twentieth century. This analysis will further consider the particular position of craft in the reception history of Africa’s material culture.

Justin M. Brown (Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut) on “‘Idolatry, obeah, or any other fetish’: Discourses of Ritual Objects in Postemancipation Suriname”

In the period after emancipation, colonial authorities in Suriname enforced laws prohibiting all forms of worship considered “idolatry” (*afgoderij*). These laws penalized anyone who participated in “African” rituals or possessed associated ritual objects. This talk investigates the biography of one specific object: an obeah (protective charm) made of wood, cowrie shells, and plant fiber. The Dutch anthropologist Herman ten Kate acquired the obeah from colonial police in Suriname around 1885 before consigning it to the Rijks Ethnographisch Museum in the Netherlands. This presentation examines how, over the course of its life, this object shifted in meaning from personal charm to contraband to museum object. Using newspaper articles, court records, and ethnographic accounts, the talk shows that these shifting meanings reflected competing frameworks for interpreting African-inspired ritual objects. For the original owner the obeah represented one of many solutions offered by a pluralistic market of religious services in an ostensibly free society. For the colonial authorities, the obeah represented an obstacle to the promise of civil progress—premised on a Protestant moral ethic—in the postemancipation period. For the European anthropologist, the object served as a relic of primitive fetish worship.

Joshua I. Cohen (City College of New York and CUNY Graduate Center, New York City) on “Africa in the World: Comparison and Art in the Long 19th Century”

This paper launches a critical examination of comparative methodologies in European visions of African material culture during the long nineteenth century. It aims to revise understandings of the well-known Western trajectory of African objects from the status of “fetish,” “curio,” or “artifact” in the nineteenth century to “art” in the early twentieth century—a progression that still sometimes gets schematized as moving triumphantly from ethnography’s ideologically charged othering to the liberating universalism of art history and modernism. Engaging with scholarship in comparative literature, museum studies, and art history, the paper examines a range of institutional histories, collecting practices, and writings about material culture from Sub-Saharan Africa starting in the 1790s. It analyzes comparative museological projects in France alongside French and German survey texts, as well as the more specialized writings of Georg Schweinfurth and Maurice Delafosse, among others. By reflecting on this trajectory, broader questions can be posed about ongoing curatorial and scholarly uses of comparison, which seem to have come back into fashion with the recent global and decolonial turns in art history, and continue to hold a prominent yet strangely enigmatic place in the discipline and in curatorial practice.

Roberto Conduru (Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas) on “Behind the Scenes of Black Art in Brazil: Martiniano Eliseu do Bonfim, from Captivity to Religion Between Salvador and Lago”

This talk will follow the path of Martiniano Eliseu do Bonfim (Salvador, 1859–1943), a backstage figure essential in the transformation of Afro-Brazilian religious artifacts into works of art, as well as in the historiography of Black art in Brazil, to discuss the weight of African and Western values in these processes. Son of enslaved Africans who gained freedom in Bahia, educated in Salvador and Lagos, active as a religious, builder, consultant, translator, and teacher in Brazil, Bonfim is a fundamental agent in the process of cultural exchanges between the Bight of Benin in West Africa and the Bay of All Saints in Brazilian Northeast, from the end of the nineteenth century to mid-twentieth century. In addition to acting as a consultant to *Candomblé* scholars such as Edison Carneiro, E. Franklin Frazier, Ruth Landes, Donald Pierson, and others, he helped Raimundo Nina Rodrigues and Manuel Querino to write their pioneering studies on Afro-Brazilian religions, among which are the first reflections on religious artifacts with African origins as works of art in Brazil: *As Bellas-Artes dos Colonos Pretos do Brasil—a Esculptura* (The Fine Arts of the Black Settlers of Brazil—the Sculpture), from 1904, and *A raça africana e os seus costumes na Bahia* (The African race and its customs in Bahia), from 1916, respectively, in which, however, the principles that forged Black art in Europe weighed more. African and Afro-Brazilian artistic values became more prominent, although also in line with old and new Western artistic principles, when the *Candomblé* artifacts produced by Deoscóredes Maximiliano dos Santos, an apprentice of Bonfim in the 1930s and known as Mestre (Master) Didi, were transformed and became to be understood as artworks from mid-1960s, with the encouragement of his wife, Juana Elbein dos Santos.

Cécile Fromont (Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut) on “History and the Fetish: The Delcommune Nkisi”

Since at least the eighteenth century, west central Africans have created anthropomorphic empowered objects called *minkisi* (singular *nkisi*) that combine material and spiritual elements. These elements are drawn from the crosscurrents of Atlantic commercial networks to manage the effects of long-distance trade on local societies. Europeans who witnessed and at times partook in the social agency of *minkisi* would turn to the neologism of “fetish” to convey their perception of the objects’ powers. Drawing from Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological approach to history, this talk reflects on the background and trajectory of one of these powerful figures, seized in 1878 by the Belgian merchant Alexandre Delcommune from the rulers of Mboma at the mouth of the Congo River. It analyzes the figure as a historical object, that is, in Merleau-Ponty’s words, a fetish, which, from its creation to its current life as museum object, has bound together Africans and Europeans as a frame for and actors in their shared history.

Gabriele Genge (Universität Duisburg-Essen, Essen, Germany) on “Versatile Constellations of African Art: Fetishism and Totemism Framing the Knowledge of Object and Image”

The history of a Western concept of African art that has found its way into the discipline of art history often remains vague—seemingly the result of an extensive search for traces in a colonial framework where transcultural contacts and communication have rarely been documented. However, the discursive reading of texts and images not only has to reflect the respective colonial situating of a wide field of actors and networks; it is also about including an undeniable ambiguity of the visible. The epistemic openness is particularly evident in the Western constructions of fetishism and totemism. This talk explores these concepts and their genesis, and at the same time asks what role their location in art history has had for intellectual discourse and its actors in the Black Atlantic.

While fetishism resulted in aesthetic theories of a “formless” or “sublime” that can initially be grasped in the context of the Enlightenment, totemism soon acquired the standing of an epistemological figuration that challenged Western thought far more comprehensively. Bound to theorems of sign and image, to categories of nature and culture, this versatile constellation operates with forms of writing and reading the linear that open up a broad field of concepts—of image and object, and of a “knowledge of line” (Tim Ingold). They are found in early source texts from John McLennan to James Fenimore Cooper, in the writings of Henri Bergson, Leo Frobenius, and Wilhelm Worringer, as well as in the “silhouettes” of African rock painting, which experienced its appreciation with surrealist modernism. These new perspectives elucidate a cultural-geographical context of African art that was fluid in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, meandering from the Americas to West Africa and Egypt.

Simon Gikandi (Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey) on “Visible Objects and Invisible Selves”

This talk investigates and reflects on why, how, and when African religious objects became transformed into works of art in European institutions. Focusing on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the presentation explores what happened when a sacred object was invented first as a fetish—a source of fear and terror—and then reinvented as an artwork available for display and the public gaze in a museum. How could objects that had entered the European imagination as depositories of ugliness co-exist with the ideas and ideals of beauty and taste that were central to debates about the modern aesthetic? What was the relation between these objects, often confined to ethnographic museums, and African figures in the works of prominent artists in the European art museum? And what would happen if the fetish object and the painting were brought into a play of kinship and affiliation?

Alexandre Girard-Muscagorry (Musée de la Musique, Paris, France) on “Writing ‘On, Around, and About’ African Objects in the Age of Abolition: The Case of Victor Schœlcher’s Collection”

A key figure of the French anti-slavery movement, Victor Schœlcher (1804–93) is mostly known for his role as President of the Commission on the abolition of slavery in charge of preparing the abolition decree signed April 27, 1848. Unlike many “armchair abolitionists,” Schœlcher grounded his political commitment in several long research trips abroad that led him to study the consequences of slavery in Mexico and the Caribbean islands (1829 and 1840–41), Egypt (1844–45), and Senegambia (1847–48). The depth and complexity of his political trajectory, as well as his official promotion to the rank of national “liberator” of slaves under the French Third Republic, contributed to overshadow a central aspect of his life, such as his relationship to objects and, particularly, to African material cultures. The son of a porcelain-maker, Schœlcher made a name for himself as a Salon critic in the 1830s and as a strong promoter of “social art.” Throughout his life, he maintained a keen interest in the history of European art and music, assembling a large personal library and an important collection of engravings, bronzes, and medals. However, Schœlcher also acquired numerous artifacts while in the Americas or Africa, ranging from archaeological fragments to everyday objects and instruments of repression on the plantations to document both the extreme violence of slavery and the “civilized character” of Black peoples. In addition to building his collection, his interest in the material cultures of African and Caribbean societies runs through many of his writings, both travel accounts and political essays. It is also demonstrated in numerous inscriptions he wrote directly on the objects. Based on these various sources, including the unpublished manuscript of his travel to Senegambia in 1847, this talk shows how Schœlcher’s abolitionist background, his direct encounters with the Black Atlantic, as well as his early texts on “social art,” shaped his approach to African art. Specific attention will also be paid to the close intertwining of his collecting and writing practices and, more specifically, to his extensive use of inscription.

Daniel H. Leonard (Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania) on “Irrecoverable Objects? De Brosses’ Fetishism at the Limits of Natural History and Aesthetics”

In *Du culte des dieux fetiches* (1760), Charles de Brosses coined the term *fetishism*, a critical concept that still troubles multiple disciplines today. Arguing that fetishism is the universal first stage of all religions, De Brosses insists that fetishes represent nothing beyond themselves—apart from the divine power attributed to them by individuals and the nations that worship them. Recontextualizing fetishism as historically contingent ritual practices and beliefs, De Brosses aims to rescue it from figurism. An ahistoric strategy of appropriation and assimilation, figurism uses allegorical symbolism to transform fetishism into a prefiguration of more exalted and “reasonable” beliefs, or to disavow it entirely. For De Brosses, the erasure of fetishism in the name of progress invariably involves a struggle for cultural and political supremacy. This talk considers two approaches De Brosses uses to maintain fetishism’s status as “direct worship, without figuration”—a commitment that seems to preclude transforming fetishes into artworks. To begin, De Brosses adopts natural historical methods, compiling an exhaustive catalog of “facts” that testify to the incommensurate diversity of fetish objects and worship. Indeed, many fetishes—such as sacred places, the sea, animals, and plants—are not objects as such, and the “circumstantial detail” of their worship defies generalization. De Brosses also adopts a broad notion of *aisthesis* to theorize fetishism as an irrational “mechanism” of mind. Not only are fetishes irreducible to objects apart from the ritual practices that endow them with power, but this direct passionate attachment collapses the distance between subject and object, negating the logic of representation and anthropomorphism. De Brosses therefore denounces Hume’s characterization of the stones worshipped by the ancients as “failed statues.” However, the talk concludes by arguing that this critique exposes fissures in De Brosses’ methodological commitments that ultimately lead to the very recuperation he fought so hard to resist.

Risham Majeed (Ithaca College, South Hill, New York) on “Faith and Fetish: Medieval Eternity and the Colonial Landscape”

“The savage and his near relation, the peasant, never make use of articulate speech, except to lay traps for their enemies. Ever since 1789 France has been trying to persuade mankind, against all evidence to the contrary, that all men are equal....” So wrote Honoré de Balzac before his death in 1850, collapsing time and space by making the “savage” and the “peasant” equivalent and interchangeable just as France was navigating its national identity and doggedly pursuing the riches of its future colonies. This paper argues that when they entered the post-Revolutionary French imagination, both medieval and African objects were first understood in a proto ethnographic framework. Medieval sculptures had been hacked off churches in the newly formed provinces (*départements*), the purview of the peasantry, and they arrived in the metropole as “trophies of superstition.” The countryside was construed to be the memory of the nation and was both reviled and revered as a place unchanged in its beliefs and mores since the Middle Ages. The peasant was seen as the atavistic remainder of that time and became a surrogate for the “rude” nature of medieval art. These strategies of making the medieval “primitive” became a well-established trope through the nineteenth century and, this talk

argues, such approaches were extended to the presentation of African objects in France in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Lionel Manga (writer and critic, Douala, Cameroon) on “What Did the Faustians Miss?”

Testimonies found inside graves, both antique and prehistoric objects, are trusty remains, according to Michel Serres. They provide proof of our human essence. Western art took advantage of such African objects to renew itself at a critical point in the discipline’s history, an already well-known story of Dada and the Surrealists as cultural appropriators. These Faustian elites of the art world were fascinated principally by shapes, confined to the visible. Might they have missed important aspect of these African objects? Did they overlook their cognitive role, as pieces that were part of a comprehensive system, grounded in patterns deriving from the mythology? Somewhere in *Le Cru et le Cuit*, Claude Lévy-Strauss asserted that when it comes to the realm of appearances, a so-called “primitive” is indeed very aware of the different properties involved. This talk seeks to confirm this observation by illuminating a Togolese divination whose sayings oddly sounds like those of quantum mechanics, as encapsulated by Carlo Rovelli. Since their inclusion into Western museums starting in the nineteenth century, these sets of objects from “the dark continent” have aroused great public curiosity. These objects contribute to the cultural allure—and subsequently the financial success—of these institutions. The idea of returning these objects to their countries of origin is currently a matter of much debate and often bitterness. Opponents find this proposal to be a painful amputation. I argue that there is more at play than sheer exoticism alone. This talk places primitivist impulses within the context of scientific achievements of the time. It proposes that the main purpose of primitivism was to provide a context by which the Western world might transfer onto these African objects what rationalism was waving goodbye to, as a way of explaining nature.

Matthew Francis Rarey (Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio) on “Renaming the Fetish in the Eighteenth-Century African Atlantic”

Since its deployment in the context of Europeans’ and Africans’ disagreements over the value of objects and lives in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century West Africa, the discourse “fetishism” has played a critical role in delimiting a European concept of African art history and its constitutive objects. But in response to a dearth of scholarship regarding Africans’ opinions on the material culture of the eighteenth-century Atlantic, this talk asks how Africans’ responses to Europeans’ accusations of fetishism re-map the concept’s entanglements with art history’s early development in eighteenth-century Europe. The sources used are the testimonies of a series of African-born men—tracing their origins to Angola, Cape Verde, and Ouidah—who appeared on trial before the Portuguese Inquisition in Lisbon between 1704 and 1731. Each was accused of *feitçaria* (translated here as “fetishism” or “sorcery”) stemming from their use of apotropaic objects and amulets for physical protection in Africa, Brazil, and Portugal. And each objected to or explained away the accusation by re-classifying the objects using terms like “Mandinga,” “Salamanca,” “Cape Verde,” and “Relic Pouch.” Focusing on select case studies to analyze each of these terms in turn, as well as the objects they identified, this talk suggests the

accused did not deploy these names as a kind of corrective to Europeans' mislabeling, but rather to interrogate Inquisitors' conceptions of their objects' cultural genealogies and valuations. If we are to understand, in Delinda Collier's words, art history's early formation as a "pidgin language in the theater of conquest," what might these men have been saying to their European interrogators by defining their objects in this way? And given that these debates over objects took place in the Portuguese Inquisition, how might these terms impact our historical framing of not only African art history's institutional origins, but its concomitant racializing mechanisms?