

# THE FETISH A(R)T WORK: AFRICAN OBJECTS IN THE MAKING OF EUROPEAN ART HISTORY 1500–1900 A CLARK CONFERENCE OCTOBER 19–20, 2023

This conference convenes scholars across the humanities who examine the making and “invention” of African art in European discourse. The presentations will delve into diverse writings on African objects and interrogate various orientations which transformed these objects from ritual artifacts and fetishes to works on the art market and held in private collections and public museums. Discussion will be grounded in the texts and practices of the early modern period (1500 to 1900), encompassing sources as varied as global art history, natural history, travel literature, ship inventories, African geography, comparative religion texts, sales and private collection catalogs, as well as technical treatises. In short, we will ask: How did encounters with African objects generate the redefinition of art for the discipline? A central thesis of this conference is that encounters with African art, objects, and ritual were central to the formation of the discipline and writing of art history. While this topic has been addressed in the twentieth century, we believe that this history has a longer genealogy, and we aim to unfold the multivalent ways in which African objects and beliefs structured concepts of art, aesthetics, economics, and value. This conference will thus be an opportunity to integrate known encounters between the African object and Western *episteme*, but also, on a fundamental level, to explore the plasticity of a discipline in the process of inventing itself at the time of colonial expansion.

## PROGRAM

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 19, 2023

AUDITORIUM

MANTON RESEARCH CENTER

CLARK ART INSTITUTE

9:00 AM

WELCOME

Caroline Fowler (Research and Academic Program, Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts)

- 9:10 AM INTRODUCTION  
Anne Lafont (École des hautes études en sciences sociales [EHESS], Paris, France)
- 9:40 AM SESSION 1: FETISH / COUNTER-FETISH  
“Irrecuperable Objects? De Brosses’ Fetishism at the Limits of Natural History and Aesthetics”  
Daniel H. Leonard, Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania  
  
“Faith and Fetish: Medieval Eternity and the Colonial Landscape”  
Risham Majeed, Ithaca College, South Hill, New York
- 10:40 AM COFFEE BREAK  
MANTON READING ROOM
- 11:00 AM SESSION 1 CONTINUED  
“Africa Before Africa at the Court of Dresden”  
Alexander Bevilacqua, Williams College, Williamstown, Massachusetts  
  
“Renaming the Fetish in the Eighteenth-Century African Atlantic”  
Matthew Francis Rarey, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio
- 12:00 PM DISCUSSION  
Moderated by Emmelyn Butterfield-Rosen, The Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, New York
- 1:00 PM LUNCH BREAK  
*Café 7 is open 10–3 in the Clark Center (main museum building) Lower Level.*
- 2:30 PM SESSION 2: FETISHIZATION PRACTICES  
“Africa in the World: Comparison and Art in the Long 19<sup>th</sup> Century”  
Joshua I. Cohen, City College of New York and CUNY Graduate Center, New York City

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

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

4:00 PM

DISCUSSION

Moderated by Erica Moiah James, University of Miami, Florida, and Clark/Oakley Fellow (2023–2024)

5:00 PM

PUBLIC RECEPTION

MANTON READING ROOM

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 20, 2023

AUDITORIUM

MANTON RESEARCH CENTER

CLARK ART INSTITUTE

9:30 AM

WELCOME

Caroline Fowler (Research and Academic Program, Clark Art Institute)

9:35 AM

SESSION 3: FETISH IN THEORY

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

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

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

11:05 AM

DISCUSSION

Moderated by Christophe Koné, Williams College, Williamstown, Massachusetts

- 12:00 PM LUNCH BREAK  
*Café 7 is open 10–3 in the Clark Center (main museum building) Lower Level.*
- 1:15 PM SESSION 4: BLACK ATLANTIC FETISHISM  
“Behind the Scenes of Black Art in Brazil: Martiniano Eliseu do Bonfim, from Captivity to Religion Between Salvador and Lago”  
Roberto Conduru, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas  
  
“‘Idolatry, obeah, or any other fetish’: Discourses of Ritual Objects in Postemancipation Suriname”  
Justin M. Brown, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut  
  
“Versatile Constellations of African Art: Fetishism and Totemism Framing the Knowledge of Object and Image”  
Gabriele Genge, Universität Duisburg-Essen, Essen, Germany
- 2:45 PM DISCUSSION  
Moderated by Michelle Apotsos, Williams College, Williamstown, Massachusetts
- 3:30 PM COFFEE BREAK  
MANTON READING ROOM
- 4:00 PM CLOSING DISCUSSION  
Moderated by Anne Lafont, EHESS, Paris
- 5:00 PM PUBLIC RECEPTION  
MANTON READING ROOM