

# african arts

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# African Art and Authenticity

JOSEPH CORNET, F.S.C.

The systematic analysis of ethnographic and artistic material from Black Africa is an essential step in the progressive evolution of a history of African art. However, the subject has problems which require close critical attention. One of the most delicate questions concerns the standards of authenticity to be used for traditional art objects. This has become a real problem in Zaïre, at the very moment when the country, through the agency of the Institute of National Museums (IMNZ), is trying to assemble study collections and put on exhibitions of unquestioned merit.

It is well known that people who collect for museums, as well as knowledgeable private collectors, are haunted by the fear of letting fake pieces slip into their collections. We are now witnessing in Zaïre the explosion of a very unsettling phenomenon—the proliferation in more and more areas of workshops for the production of fakes. The situation is the same almost everywhere. The demand has grown enormously in recent years, forcing prices to rise. As the ancestral heritage

dries up it is replaced by new works, which are of unquestioned artistic merit since traditional sculptors often make the statues and masks destined for the traditional art market.

Here is one specific example, among several others. IMNZ has collected several very beautiful small figures in the Luluwa style, all perfect stylistically and with a patina which is above reproach. One day, the opportunity came to buy two additional pieces of this type, on which the mutilations and traces of use were so similar as to arouse our suspicions. The truth of the matter is that an old sculptor, completely familiar with the style of his tribe and at one time himself a carver of many fetish figures, had observed how prices had risen on objects which appeared to have had long use. He had begun sculpting and “aging” small-scale masterpieces. Figure 1 shows four examples of his work which we have had to remove from our display cases.

Under these circumstances, one important question arises: What are the criteria which differentiate the authentic object

from the fake? In practice, those interested in traditional art always look for the presence or absence of certain qualities which speak to the heart, as well as the mind. In addition to the general aesthetic value of a piece—always essential—and the fact that it conforms to the characteristic style elements of a particular tribe, they also value evidence of use (and particularly patination) and a certain degradation due to climatic conditions or the work of wood-boring insects.

These criteria are almost exclusively aesthetic in nature. But to the ethnographer and the art historian, such criteria are difficult to relate to scientific research, since many objects of mediocre or even minimal artistic merit are worthy of consideration for other reasons. Nevertheless, the scientist, even more than the knowledgeable amateur, must know whether a study object is real or fake. As a scientist working in the field of material culture, he is led to reflect on a definition of authenticity. At first glance, such a definition seems easy to establish. It consists of two conditions which are at the same time indispensable and inseparable: Any object created *for a traditional purpose* and *by a traditional artist* may be considered authentic.

This precise double criterion permits us to condemn without hesitation innumerable objects whose manufacture specifically for the market is growing day by day.

It is usually the first condition which is not met. The sculptures (for it is primarily a question of fake statues and fake masks) have not been made for use in funeral ceremonies or circumcision rites, or in homage to ancestors, but for the specific purpose of being sold to the innumerable clients of the African souvenir market. In Zaïre, what has appeared on the market, depending on the area, are armies of Kongo fetishes in hardwood, adorned with properly rusted iron nails; Lega statues and masks in ivory and wood, colored and worn to order; Dengese busts which come directly from the art books (since the real tradition died out a long time ago); and Songye statues dressed up in animal skins and nails which all but disappear under carefully applied dirt.

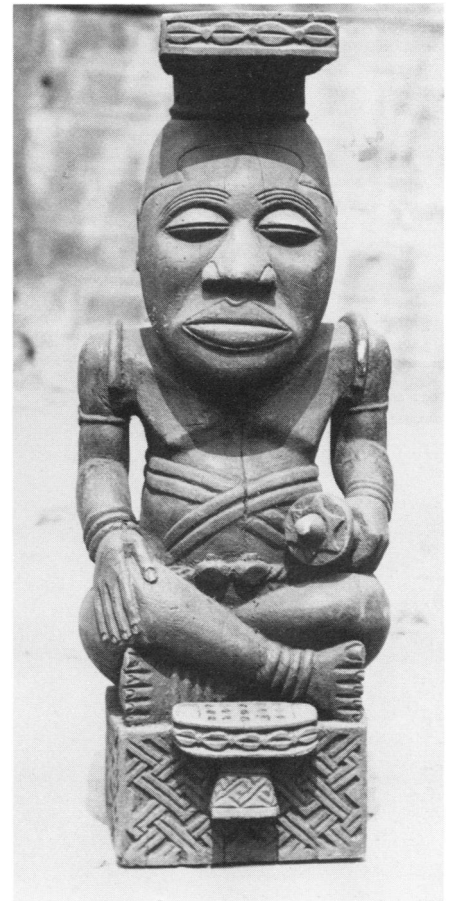
Most fakes are so naively made that they can be spotted immediately. The patina which can be rubbed off, the use of chemical colorings, artificial termite



1. FOUR LULUWA FIGURES, ALL PERFECT STYLISTICALLY AND WITH A BEAUTIFUL PATINA, NOW KNOWN TO BE RECENTLY CARVED AND ARTIFICIALLY AGED. COLLECTION OF INSTITUTE OF NATIONAL MUSEUMS, ZAÏRE.



2. ROYAL SCULPTORS AT THE COURT OF KUBA KING BOPE MABINTSHI, WITH UNFINISHED EXAMPLES OF THEIR WORK.



3. KUBA ROYAL STATUE  
SHYAAM BULAANG NGOONG

holes, the inept intermingling of different style elements—all are dead giveaways. Other fakes are more difficult to spot. Sometimes the object may be *too* beautiful, or too rich in typical detail, since some makers of fake pieces have a tendency to force their talent. In addition, experience teaches one to recognize the specific styles in which fake pieces abound.

Nevertheless, following the gradual disappearance of traditional objects and their growing popularity outside of Africa, there is little question that in the near future we can anticipate the appearance on the scene of professional fakers. Indeed, in the area of ivory, there are already objects so well made that even experts cannot say for certain whether they are authentic.

Certain objects pose problems because they are made by artists who do not belong to the tribe whose style is imitated. This is often the fault of a certain type of modern art education. With the praiseworthy but fallacious purpose of perpetuating traditional art, some regional art schools have established a curriculum basically devoted to the making of pastiches. We know, for example, that a good number of recently-made pieces in the Kuba style come from Luba workshops, whose sculptors not too long ago learned to carve in the Bushoong capital. Some Kinshasa workshops produce a variety of tribal styles. One beautiful Kuba king figure interested us considerably until we came across a Kongo maternity figure and then a Luluwa ancestor figure with exactly the same patination and workmanship.

To date, we have not witnessed in Zaïre the more characteristic and not at all theoretical cases of pieces beautifully made outside of Africa and then returned to the continent to acquire an air of

authenticity, except perhaps for some metal “Kongo” bracelets which originated in Germany.

The proposed definition of authenticity given above applies to all the different kinds of fakes we have mentioned. They are not authentic pieces, on the one hand because they are often the work of non-traditional artists, and on the other because they have been made to meet the demands of collectors and tourists.

Is this to say that the definition applies in all cases? Unfortunately, in reality some objects still pose problems. Before singling out some of these, it would appear useful to return for a moment to something we have already touched upon—the two different approaches one can take to traditional art.

The first looks at the object primarily as a work of art, with an appropriate place in the history of art. This viewpoint is that of collectors and also of museum officials.

The second point of view is that of scholars working in fields such as ethnology, morphology, etc. The aesthetic value of an object is not denied by them or glossed over, but it is one element among many and as such becomes part of a more objective approach. For example, the ethnographer might study the relationship between the beauty and the usefulness of an object.

These two groups of values are often in conflict, and appreciation of specific pieces can be affected. The old collections of Kuba material assembled in the past by Frobenius, Torday, and other travellers include cups and masks entirely lacking in patina. If these were offered to IMNZ collectors today they would be rejected as being new and probably fake. But these are really old objects and very important as chronological guideposts to the study of the development of different forms among the Kuba.

IMNZ has in its reserves a statue of King Bope Mabintshi ma Keen of the Kubas. It is carved in the beautiful reddish wood which is often used for the royal statues, but it is a relatively weak carving. At the time it entered our collections, the figure, along with several other so-called royal statues, was rejected *a priori*, since art historians listed only a very few authentic royal portraits. However, this statue happens to be of a particular rarity because it was carved by Bope Mabintshi himself. It is thus of considerable documentary importance and unique historical value. The *ndop* of Bope Mabintshi introduces us to a series of more complex cases in which one passes from authentic objects to fakes by a series of steps which are scarcely discernible in the objects themselves.

The question of the authenticity of the royal Kuba statues is among the most controversial of these cases. The number of *nyimi* portraits has multiplied in the last 20 years. Some of them are of unquestionable artistic merit, although they are not as beautiful, and certainly not as old, as the renowned examples belonging to the British Museum and the Royal Museum of Central Africa at Tervuren. Their origin can be explained by the fact that it was the custom of certain kings,

notably Kwete Mabintshi ma Mbek (1920-1939), and perhaps even Mbope Mabintshi ma Mbek (1916-1920), to offer visitors a valuable gift. Having observed that the statues were particularly appreciated by Europeans, the kings required the royal sculptors to carve extra *ndop* so they would always be on hand (Fig. 2).

The statues meant to serve as examples of royal munificence seem to fit perfectly the two conditions of our definition of authenticity, since they were made by traditional sculptors for traditional use. However, it is undeniable that this custom of having additional statues made allowed the royal sculptors to make still more new statues on their own to be sold to collectors of Kuba art. One case is even cited of a king who himself had to buy one of these statues in order to present it to a visitor. It was in this fashion that there developed a flourishing business in Kuba royal effigies of all sizes and in all sorts of materials, and these have flooded the tourist market. The moment at which such pieces passed from real to fake, however, was marked only by the change in intent.

Another more recent case from Zaïre provides a further illustration of this phenomenon. The Bwami Society of the Lega was banned in 1948. However, with independence and freedom came a return to traditional ceremonies, and the various objects required for these ceremonies were made by expert artists. Once they got started, however, the artists began to make identical objects designed for sale to Europeans. Here again there was a spontaneous change from real to fake, the only difference being, paradoxically, that the fake objects have taken on an aura of age thanks to artificial wear and patination.



4. KONGO CRUCIFIX IN BRASS.

Let us now turn our attention to the past and examine European influences on the art of Zaïre. To put it another way, having looked at some cases in which real objects turned into fakes, let us now examine some cases in which, in one way or another, fakes have become authentic.

The Portuguese presence in Zaïre from the end of the 15th century on was accompanied by a rapid but rather shallow Christianization. The first Christian religious objects used in Zaïre were imported by missionaries. After a certain period, however, the inhabitants of the Kingdom of the Kongo began to make crucifixes, statues, and medals, and even to cast them in metal, a technique they already knew (Fig. 4).

The first such works can be considered more or less successful imitations of European art. In comparison with their models, they would without question be considered pastiches, and therefore not authentic. However, as the forms developed, and, perhaps, as Christian influence gradually lessened, these objects were entirely freed of European influences and developed a new iconography which is entirely Black African. These objects are proudly exhibited in museums and private collections, while the transitional works, especially the very early ones, leave us with a rather unsatisfied feeling.

The history of African art contains a still more astonishing chapter: "Afro-Portuguese" art, a term applied to works ordered in the 16th century by Europeans from African artists in Guinea, and probably, the Congo. These pieces, usually made of ivory, were fashioned in accordance with the needs and tastes of the travellers and foreign residents who ordered them. They would unquestionably fall into the category which is today called tourist art. Nonetheless, they hold an honorable place in Black African art, their beautiful carving, patina, age, and rarity justifying this rank.

Here we have what by our definition are fakes becoming much sought-after objects, "authentic" in their fashion (since one could conceive of Afro-Portuguese fakes!). Could this not put the entire idea of what is authentic in question? Several centuries from now, will there not be found, among those pieces we scorn today as "airport art," some exceptions which will be considered with respect and found worthy of publication? Will today's fakes one day leave our reserves, where they are at best only tolerated, and take their places among the art objects shown in our exhibit halls? Some of today's fakes could in this fashion become tomorrow's authentic pieces, time having assured them of a curious rehabilitation.

One might ask whether, in the final analysis, the question of authenticity itself is a false issue which exists only because it is characteristic of our time. This skepticism approaches the practical attitude of some collectors, who, tired of annoying

questions about real or fake, assemble collections of pieces which appeal to them, whatever their provenance or importance. This attitude is in some ways close to the objective viewpoint of the ethnographer and sociologist, for whom the avatars of style appear only as typical products of a specific time and place. As such, they are worthy of examination and study, as they are in that world in which the collecting mania and the immorality of speculation are wedded.

Must one ultimately join the skeptics? That would only add to the confusion. It would seem wiser to ascertain what factors underlie the spontaneous enthusiasm or instinctive mistrust of museum officials or private collectors. The basic principle seems to be the essentially evolutionary nature of history in general and of art history in particular. Every style marks a point on this evolutionary line; it belongs to a specific epoch and society, and reflects some of its values. Because it is linked with time, the phenomenon is essentially irreversible. Every attempt to return to the forms of the past is balanced by a check. With the passage of time, the historian can consider and study the significance of all the neo-classic, neo-Gothic, and other revival styles, often linked with a period of mediocre inspiration, whose value, in the final analysis, rests on their creativity.

However, the aesthetic value of a pseudo-archaic piece of the Hellenistic period will never match that of classic Greek works dating to the 6th century B.C. The traditional art of Africa, like all the chapters in the history of art, has an identification slip which includes a description of the geographic, temporal, and social conditions under which the art was produced. Historians must know as much as possible about these conditions, starting with the still very obscure period in which the different styles of traditional art were created; passing through the period of their flowering in the heart of fully-understood societies; and ending in a new era in which this kind of art is rapidly disappearing and is being replaced by a completely different practice and theory. These are founded in part on objective aesthetic examination, rather than on magic or the glorification of authority, and in part on inspiration, which is largely open to non-African influences.

The carvers who make fakes inscribe events on this evolutionary line, in effect constituting chronological swindles. By making imitations faithful to the forms of the past, and artificially aging them in various ways, they try to situate these post-traditional objects in a long-gone epoch when artists were oriented differently within their social system if not in their style.

The cases of the Afro-Portuguese ivories and the first copies of the European crucifixes make this quite clear. When foreign models intrude, or when

works characteristic of another area are made to order, the artistic value of the pieces is not that of traditional African art. The historical interest remains, since history observes all events, whatever they may be. In the case of the Kongo (and Holo) crucifixes the pieces did not become truly authentic until they actually turned into fetishes, expressed in traditional forms and completely integrated into traditional society.

The same principle will permit us to pass more careful judgement on three other groups of pieces from Zaïre. The first of these is Kanyok art, which, as we know it today, has at the very least an ambiguous origin. In the post of Kanda Kanda in Shaba, there developed at the end of the 19th century a commercial center where artworks were sold. Under the influence of the taste of his European clientele, one artist not even originally from that area (he was probably Tshokwe) began to create a new style which was soon imitated by his fellow carvers and potters. Their works passed into history under the name of "Kanyok." In his book, *Plastiek van Congo*, Frans Olbrechts called it a Luba sub-style, and some museums exhibited statues as this style. Their rarity and unexpected naturalism no doubt justified this honor, rather than their often misleading plastic quality. True Kanyok art, it should be added, is abstract and schematic.

A second and very recent example is rather close to the first. In the Mayombe and lower Zaïre area, that particular region from which come the now rare *mintadi* stone sculptures, numerous workshops (several of which have been singled out in Boma) have flooded the market with statuettes in soft stone, rather superficially patinated (Fig. 5). Their style, while unquestionably original, is quite different from that of the *mintadi*, adapting certain formulas from traditional Kongo style to new attitudes and new themes. The dimensions of these pieces are smaller than those of the average *mintadi*, and the stone is different. To someone who knows both types, no doubt can exist.

The third example comes from the Songye region. Everyone knows the strange interpretation of the human face found in the so-called *tshifwebe* masks of this important tribe, with their jutting mouths and exaggerated eyes. On the advice of a European trader of informed tastes, a local workshop was established 20 or 30 years ago, which began to exaggerate still further the characteristic volumes of the masks, thus giving birth to an entirely new category (Fig. 6). In this new type of mask, the nose is prolonged into a crest, and the mouth and eyes are projected forward almost to an excessive degree, thereby creating the most extravagant and at the same time one of the most seductive profiles to be found in all Black African art. The close similarity of



5. MODERN *MINTADI* STONE. IT DIFFERS CONSIDERABLY IN STYLE FROM TRADITIONAL STONES.

the sculptural techniques, the almost un-failing beauty of the proportions, the uniformly aged decoration, the careful drilling of the holes for the fiber collar (or sometimes even the absence of such holes), all point to a single commercial center whose commercial intent is not open to doubt. Nevertheless, this new type of mask has left its mark on the authentic masks of the Tshifwebe Society, though it must be borne in mind that this society ceased its activities several years ago.

There can be no doubt that the Kanyok statues and pottery, the Mayombe stones, and the Songye masks are all quite close to traditional models. In addition, the creation of such workshops is not foreign to the hope of selling at profitable prices works designed to deceive. One must therefore accept the fact that those pieces entirely limited to the use of forms from the past are true fakes. But for the most part this is not the case. For their originality alone these works, we feel, constitute a transitional category falling between traditional and contemporary art. For one thing, while it is true that they borrow stylistic formulas, the creative effort produces more than simple copies. For another, they promote elaborate new forms and leave the artists free to follow their inspiration. On the whole, such works constitute new styles which cannot be confused with traditional styles. One cannot categorically classify them as fakes.



6. THIS TYPE OF SONGYE *TSHIFWEBE* MASK CAME INTO BEING AT THE SUGGESTION OF A EUROPEAN TRADER.

Cases of this type suggest that we should add a third criterion to our definition of authenticity: authentic African art is that art which is produced by a traditional artist for a traditional purpose and conforms to traditional forms.

The third criterion, which we must recognize as not being as essential as the first two—in the sense that there can be occasional creations which do not conform to traditional forms—is useful because of the great homogeneity of African art styles. However, it should be noted that this homogeneity does not exclude either a multiplicity of styles within the same tribe or the natural evolution of such styles.

A work is authentic to the extent that it belongs to the space and time which fit the corresponding style. A work of art seen in its totality is not only a thing of beauty, but also rich with a temporal significance which cannot be separated from its artistic merit. □

*This article is a free translation by Irwin Hersey of a revised version of an article entitled "Critique d'Authenticité et Art Nègre" originally published in Cultures au Zaïre et en Afrique, 1974, 4, pp. 125-136, and based on a paper presented by the author at a Colloquium on the Contribution of Central Africa to the History of Africa, held at Lubumbashi, Zaïre, December 11-14, 1972.*