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# **SOZIALANTHROPOLOGISCHE ARBEITSPAPIERE**

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**Of Artists and Connoisseurs:  
Cultural Authority in Cross-Cultural Contexts.**

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## **Zur Herausgabe der "Sozialanthropologischen Arbeitspapiere"**

Die Initiative zur Herausgabe der Sozialanthropologischen Arbeitspapiere ging vom Schwerpunkt Sozialanthropologie des Institutes für Ethnologie der Freien Universität aus. Absicht war es zur Belebung der ethnologischen und sozialanthropologischen Diskussion beizutragen. Dabei gerieten auch soziolinguistische und agrarsoziologische Fragestellungen zunehmend in das Blickfeld sozialanthropologischer Forschungen, sodaß die Arbeitspapiere nun am Institut für Ethnologie, in Kooperation mit Kolleginnen und Kollegen der Abteilung Afrikanistik an der HU-Berlin und des Institutes für Agrarsoziologie der TU-Berlin herausgegeben werden.

Als Teil der Sozialwissenschaften erfaßt die Sozialanthropologie die Diversität menschlicher Kulturen mit dem Anspruch des Verstehens und erforscht die Bedingungen möglicher Formen menschlichen Seins. Dabei spielen sowohl interkulturelle Vergleiche als auch die vertiefte Befassung mit lokalen Gesellschaften und Lebensweisen eine wichtige Rolle. Für das Verständnis der gegenwärtigen Kulturen und Gesellschaften ist einerseits die Auseinandersetzung mit den dominanten Industriekulturen unerläßlich, andererseits aber müssen die Lebensweisen jener dreiviertel der Menschheit im Vordergrund stehen, die sich an den Rand der modernen weltmarktorientierten und industriekulturellen Entwicklung gedrängt sehen. Daher müssen nichtindustrielle Kulturen und Gesellschaften - auch wenn sie heute keine unabhängige Existenz mehr haben - mit besonderem Gewicht in jede allgemeine komparative Fragestellung aufgenommen werden.

Ein besonderer Schwerpunkt der Arbeitspapiere soll auf empirischen Untersuchungen liegen. Dabei versteht sich die Reihe insbesondere als Diskussionsforum, in dem erste Berichte aus noch nicht abgeschlossenen Forschungen vorgestellt und einer Fachöffentlichkeit zugänglich gemacht werden.

**Of Artists and Connoisseurs:  
Cultural Authority in Cross-Cultural Contexts.**

**by**

**Sally Price**

**Berlin 1991**



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Who is qualified to arbitrate in cases of conflicting depictions of cultural realities? An anecdote reported in the American press may serve to introduce this delicate problem.

A young woman named Shallini Venturelli had recently arrived in the United States from India, when she was invited to speak to a ladies club. She reports:

The club secretary had advised me that perhaps a dose of history with a pinch of politics and culture would be wonderfully suited to their taste. I obliged. After an excellent tea served on fine silver, I started to talk. I talked of the past, of struggles, of despair and poverty on the subcontinent; I talked of the present, of political battles and world maneuvers, of challenges that lay ahead; I spoke of the right to learn, the right to self-awareness, of the chains of tradition and the poverty of women.

I did not notice for a long time that the faces around me had begun to twitch, that the women were shifting restlessly. When I suddenly became aware of the growing discomfort, I stopped. "Does someone have a question?" I asked.

The club secretary rose and drew me to the window.

"My dear," she said in a low voice, "it is history and culture they wish to hear about, not misfortunes." "But the truth is not misfortune; it is truth," I replied in a whisper, thoroughly confused. "Of course. But can't you leave out the bad parts? Talk about maharajas. And there are elephants and tigers, and you can even tell us about your beautiful sari, and show us how you put it on."

I looked down at the floor. There was an exquisite Persian carpet under my feet; I hadn't noticed. I remained by the window for a few minutes. The secretary had returned to her seat, and there were smiles and expectation on a few faces. "Ladies," I said, "my deepest apologies for meddling with your fantasies. Since I do not share them, and India is not a fairy tale or a novel by Rudyard Kipling, I must say goodbye. Thank you."

[Christian Science Monitor, April 1977; cited in Rosenblum 1979: 164-165]

The incompatibility of these two views of India -- one by a first-hand participant in the life of the country, the other by readers of Rudyard Kipling and the National Geographic -- has parallels in cultural soirées devoted to every corner of the non-Western world. I've encountered my fair share as an occasional speaker to groups of "primitive art" collectors; the plea is always to "leave out the bad parts," to focus on things of pleasure and beauty, to illustrate and confirm the comfortable stereotypes. Speakers who balk at these requests are seldom invited back, and those who acquiesce are left holding the reins to Western images of non-Western

lives. In this paper, I will trace some of the mechanics of this process, raising questions about the basis of cultural authority in Europe and the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Two aspects of "primitive art" connoisseurship are particularly relevant for present purposes: the relocation of aesthetic responsibility from the creator to the viewer, and the metaphorical injection of seniority into one end of the viewer/creator relationship. With the other-as-artist reduced to a charmingly but naively creative child, the Western connoisseur-collector plays the role of proud parent, wisely selecting from the spontaneous scribbles those drawings worthy of a frame and a place on the wall. Often this process of selection occurs in the dusty storerooms of anthropology museums; once cleaned and given a plexiglass case in an art museum, the chosen few take on the status of "masterpiece." The aesthetic judgment is generally not made in consultation with people from the society where the object was crafted, and it is the collector's name, not that of the artist, that is typed into the credit line of the label.

Much of the functioning of our society involves, it seems to me, the assignment and maintenance of status differences of this sort. The distinction between plaintiffs and judges, between students and teachers, between workers and bosses, between acrobats and ringmasters -- these lines help us delegate responsibility for decisions and judgments that might result in chaos if each person were to tackle them independently. Things seem to work more smoothly when we assign responsibility for making judgments to specialized people. Again, a journalistic report will help me make my point. The good citizens of Cincinnati in the United States were recently charged with determining whether an exhibition of photographs by the late Robert Mapplethorpe in a municipal gallery constituted art or pornography. Under particular scrutiny was a photograph of a finger inserted in a penis. An art historian with impeccable credentials arrived in court and (discreetly circumventing issues of meaning to focus on the safer topic of form) testified, under oath, that the juxtapositions of light and shade, the shapes and textures, indeed the overall aesthetic effect, constituted "a central image, very symmetrical, a very ordered, classical composition." Jurors were grateful for the information, delivered with authority and decisiveness; as one commented afterwards, "I'm not an expert. I don't understand Picasso's art.

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<sup>1</sup>I draw here on material originally presented in Price 1989, using "Western" to designate people whose primary cultural assumptions are based on European-derived tradition, regardless of whether they live, for example, in New York, Berlin, Tokyo, or Lagos.

But I assume the people who call it art know what they're talking about." On this basis, a not-guilty verdict was mercifully delivered (New York Times 18 October 1990: C17).

These people who are said to "know what they're talking about" are, in essence, the holders of our rubber stamps, an immensely powerful instrument that comes in many varieties: The U.S. Department of Agriculture uses one kind on slabs of beef; a priest or judge has a different one for marriages, a patent officer has been issued one for mouse traps, a motor vehicle department employee for driving skills, a tenure committee for professorial competence, an urban engineer for bridges, and a customs official for suitcases and duffle bags. Notary publics use them on signatures; and there are even people authorized to perform the same service exclusively for one particular person's signature, such as the art historians empowered to approve or discredit the signatures of Rembrandt van Rijn. From the doctor's scrawl on our birth certificate to the coroner's equivalent some number of years later, every aspect of our lives is touched by authentications of different sorts conducted by people we count on to distinguish things that are OK-able from their look-alikes that are not.

Closely related to these official stamps of approval, which are absolute (yes or no) and generally not open to appeal, there are also the more nuanced personal nods of approval that we call endorsements; Elizabeth Taylor validates the smell of Passion perfume, Christian Dior's monogram evokes the subtler design features in selected men's crew socks, and a retired member of the U.S. Congress (Tip O'Neill) helps his fellow senior citizens decide on their travel plans through televised endorsements of a hotel chain. I recently read a journalistic book about the Maasai people of Kenya that carries such an endorsement -- not for the book, but for its subject; bold print on the front cover argues that the Maasai are worthy of our interest because they are "the tribe Isak Dinesen admired above all others."

Like child-proof caps, airport security checks, and sanitized toilet-seat covers, all these selectively-administered blessings are designed "for our protection," broadly conceived. Not surprisingly, approval-granting extends also into the realm of art, where designated experts stand vigil over quality control, commending the wheat and rejecting the chaff. Here, most of the rubber stamps are owned by people whose formal training is in Western art history, and most of the works they assess are by artists from our own world -- Europeans and Euro-Americans, plus their cultural soul-mates. In this (the majority) of cases, both the judges and the bejudged in some sense and within some arguable range of variation share a common vision of the

enterprise of professional artistic expression, and Westerners who elect to become professional artists are at least to some degree aware of the game they will be playing -- with its rewards and frustrations, its tension between commercial and aesthetic dimensions, and its vulnerabilities to the personal preferences (not to mention personal politics) of those with the credentials to promote or denigrate, sponsor or undercut, and otherwise influence the public reception of artists' efforts.

But there is another art market in which these same generalizations do not hold. This second domain has been dubbed "primitive art," not as some would have it "for lack of a better term," but rather for deep ideological reasons that undergird the Western hierarchy between "us" and "them," between "high" and "low," between "advanced" and "backward," "modern" and "traditional," "literate and non-literate," "industrialized" and "non-industrialized," and all the rest. In our sports-oriented culture, we have even envisioned the planet as consisting of worlds in global competition; serving at once as players and as referees, we then proclaim that our own world comes in "first" and the world of these other peoples "third."

The many discussions in which participants in the "primitive art" world have talked with me about the mechanics and principles that vertebrated their collecting, assessing, and appreciating have persuaded me that in this special case of art connoisseurship and art marketing, the experts to whom people turn for rubber-stamping and quality-endorsing perform a sleight-of-hand, and a strongly motivated one, that elevates their role from one of author-ity to one of author-ship. For this to happen, the original artist's role must be minimized or even erased entirely from the record; with sufficient cultural distance between artist and connoisseur, this is not a difficult task.

The generally recognized authorities on "primitive art" -- that is, those persons we empower to promote or demote or extol or ignore particular objects -- are basically the same people who are authorized to pass judgment on Western art. Prominent collectors, directors of major art museums, experts affiliated with Sotheby's or Christie's, and art critics for major newspapers all serve in this role.

In the global game of art connoisseurship, the critics who make the Olympics for art in general (or, as the late connoisseur Joseph Alsop put it, art of the five "Great Traditions") are automatically qualified to enter the "primitive art" division as well. But the reciprocal understanding that characterizes Western art -- artists' understandings about their own role (in terms of commercial vs. aesthetic involvements, and so forth) -- no longer holds true for this division. Some of the factors that encourage this situation are quite obvious:



differential wealth, access to a lucrative market, and so forth. But others may be less self-evident; one involves, not the marketing or assessing of the art, but rather its very authorship.

Extensive interviews with "primitive art" collectors in Europe and the United States (reported more fully in Price 1989) exposed a strong and widely shared perception that the aesthetic quality of the objects on their coffee tables, walls, and display shelves derives from their discerning "eye" rather than from any special sensitivity on the part of the people who carved or constructed or painted these objects. This essentially boils down to collectors viewing themselves and their colleagues as doing for African sculpture (for example) what Andy Warhol did for Brillo boxes or Marcel Duchamp for urinals. A pervasive Western tendency to deny individual identities to people viewed as "primitive" has led to a popular notion that the beauty and greatness of "primitive art" may properly be credited, not to its hands-on makers but rather to its aesthetically discriminating Western connoisseurs. Even as the Western world has, rather triumphantly, "discovered" the artistic riches of other societies during the twentieth century, it has at the same time shouldered responsibility for the (selective) preservation, promotion, distribution, interpretation, and -- ultimately -- definition of these arts. The situation supports a remark made by Pierre Bourdieu, regarding the social context of Western art, that "The games artists and aesthetes play and their struggles for a monopoly over artistic legitimacy are less innocent than they might seem" (1979: 60), but when we move the discussion from Western to "primitive" art, the imbalance in power between artist and critic makes the situation even more extreme.

A few background remarks about the academic study of art will help clarify what I mean. It's probably fair to characterize the discipline of art history as focusing on the lives and works of named individuals and on the historical succession of distinctive artistic movements. Like music, literature, and drama, the story of the visual arts is presented as a mosaic of contributions by creative individuals whose names are remembered, whose works are distinguished, and whose personal lives and relation to a particular historical period are seen as meriting our close attention.

But this general focus on individual creativity and historical chronology stops cold at the borders of the so-called Great Civilizations. Beyond those borders, art is more often than not described as having been produced by an unnamed figure who represents his community and whose craftsmanship respects the dictates of that community's age-old traditions.

Before taking a closer look at this composite fellow (and he is a "fellow," for his gender identity is decidedly male), I would like to rehearse a few observations about the ways that anthropologists have dealt with the interaction between creativity and tradition in non-Western culture. On the one hand, many descriptions of "primitive" societies are written in a tense known as the "ethnographic present" (which might better have been labelled the "ethnographic past," given its evolutionary connotations) and this fact serves to abstract cultural expression from the flow of historical time and hence to collapse individuals and whole generations into a single figure who is alleged to represent his fellows past and present. Malinowski's "Trobriand native" and Evans-Pritchard's "Nuer herdsman" were constructed more to tell us about cultural norms and generalized patterns of behavior than to explore the nature of individual differences or diachronic developments in their respective societies. This mode of description, which is not limited to anthropological monographs, survives today, only slightly bruised and selectively discredited by a growing debate about the role of history in the lives of non-literate peoples.

But in spite of these new trends, and contemporaneous with them, many accounts of "primitive art" (both popular and scholarly) continue to insist that aesthetic choices are governed exclusively by the tyrannical power of custom, and the possibility of individual creativity is swept neatly under the rug. One full-time expert, for example, has asserted:

In Africa there is no creative artist, as such .... [the African artist] produces the masks and fetishes according to the needs of the moment, always on order of the dignitaries of the tribe and never following his inspiration of the moment. [Kamer 1974: 33]

From this perspective, the identity of particular artists loses its importance, since they are participating in aesthetic production much as a factory worker would contribute labor to an assembly line. A conceptual jump is then made from the artists' lack of individual creativity to the artists' lack of individual identity. The artist becomes "anonymous."

Collectors of African and Oceanic art often assert that the "anonymity" of the artist contributes importantly to their enthusiasm. One collector I talked to in Paris became very animated about this component of his passion:

I am completely enchanted by the artist's anonymity. Not knowing the artist is something that causes me enormous pleasure. Once you learn who made an object, it ceases to be primitive art.

And Vincent Price (who, in addition to being an actor, is an avid collector of African art) put it this way:

the anonymity of the creator actually enhances a work of art.... it is our very ignorance of the men which supplies some part of the mystery of [its] creation. [Anon. 1972: 22-23]

Another writer, Dennis Duerden, commented:

The identity of the individual African sculptor has tended to become obscured, because he is manipulating forces which exist outside himself, so that once he has caused those forces to enter into the sculpture, he sinks into anonymity. [1968: 16]

And finally, an editorial in African Arts treated "anonymity" as a given and went on to discuss its implications for the recognition of individual artists.

With the artist himself thus reduced to anonymity there cannot develop that cult of the individual that can surround the works of a single European or even Japanese master carver or painter. [Anon. 1971: 7]

One question that is rarely asked about the "anonymity" of tribal artists is who it belongs to. After all, as Nelson Graburn has pointed out, "just because collectors or museum audiences do not know who made something does not mean that the artist's village mates did not" (1976: 21). But this distinction is not always drawn very clearly. A New York Times critic remarked a few years ago, in a review of the Center for African Art: "In our name-oriented Western culture, it boggles the mind that such works as these are anonymous" (Glueck 1984). Now it is conceivable that this critic intended to be signalling our own ignorance of the artists' names. Yet I have reason to believe that for her readers, and perhaps even for her as well, the anonymity of African artists is understood, not as a mind-boggling lapse in the Western preoccupation with names, but rather as a feature of tribal art that inheres in its native context. The Western ignorance of artists' identities is often used as grounds for dismissing their individuality and assuming that art is produced by the community as a whole; one contributor to African Arts remarked nonchalantly, "As little is known of the names of individual African artists, a work is generally considered to be the product of a culture" (Sigel 1971: 52). And even people who are acutely aware of the individuality of non-Western artists can inadvertently perpetuate the stereotype of their anonymity. When one well-known commentator listed "the anonymity of the artist" (Wingert 1962: 377) as one of the "features common to the arts of all primitive areas," he failed to specify that he was discussing anything but the realities of life in "primitive areas." And when another characterized African art as being "with only very rare exceptions anonymous" (Rodrigues 1981: 23), he left the same distinction undrawn.

But whatever its origin, "anonymity" contributes importantly to the image of "primitive art" in the Western world. As one Paris dealer remarked to me with only gentle irony, "If the artist isn't anonymous, the art isn't primitive."

The portrayal of "primitive" artists as the unthinking and undifferentiated tools of their respective traditions -- as people who are essentially denied the privilege of technical or conceptual creativity -- raises interesting questions about the ways in which "exotic" peoples are used to legitimize Western society and culture. Labeling such portrayals racist or patronizing would perhaps be an oversimplification, but I believe a case can be made that the famous "anonymity" of "primitive art" (along with its close relative, the "timelessness" of "primitive art") owes a great deal to the needs of Western observers to feel that their society represents a uniquely superior achievement in the history of humanity, a more sophisticated cultural level in the evolutionary scheme.

An article in the popular French magazine, Réalités, argued that the suppression of individuality in favor of a homogenized communal ideology is a fully generalizable characteristic of African and Oceanic societies, and that it is expressed through art forms in which personal identities are collapsed into abstract schematizations.

The art of Africa is anonymous. ... The reason for this lies in the nature of the civilizations that create them. They reflect communal societies, where the individual exists only as a part of the group. ... In Africa and Oceania, art ... has to offer the community mirror images in which it can recognize itself. ... art is the cement that holds the community together; but for it the tribe would die. [Darriulat 1973: 42, 45]

Later on in the same issue of the magazine, a distinguished member of the Académie Française picked up on the theme again, explaining the absence of individuality through an explicitly evolutionary scheme whose suggestions of racism were only poorly concealed by his disclaimer that "African and Oceanic art is in no way inferior to Western art" (Huyghe 1973: 67). He argued that "little value is set on individuality," and this phenomenon cannot be properly understood without distinguishing the language of words, "connected to thought-processes which take place in the upper brain," from the language of images, which "originate in those areas of the brain where the drives, instincts and emotions are based." Associating this lower-brain language with the "less developed societies ... where words are less closely bound to the intellectual process than to the imagination," he explained that "in these societies art is a complete communal language in itself." The implications of the contrast are then elaborated:

There is no room for individual expression in art of this kind. Forms can be reduced to their primary geometric state, because they are governed by a psychological law, which is itself the reflection of the universal biological principle of the conservation of energy. Straight lines involve the least expenditure of energy, and the easiest way to remember any given feature of the real world is to reduce it to geometric shapes, which are basic and universal. African and Oceanic art is geometric because its creators are instinctively imitating the ways of nature. It is not in any way the result of sophisticated and concerted research, as modern Western art is, but of an innate way of looking at the world. [1973: 67]

Once having determined that the arts of Africa and Oceania are produced by anonymous artists who are expressing communal concerns through instinctual processes based in the lower part of the brain, it is but a quick step to the assertion that they are characterized by an absence of historical change. Even some of the most well-meaning correctives to the misapprehension that "primitives" have no sense of history have a hard time completely abandoning this bit of received wisdom. One book on "primitive art" opens with a remark that some "primitives" do have writing and histories, but then adds an interesting clarification: "These are not people without memory; they are simply people with bad memory" (Roy 1957: 7). More common in the literature on "primitive art" are flatly categorical denials of its historical dimension. A 1972 essay entitled "Art as a Universal Phenomenon" is relatively typical:

The primitive artists ... are rooted in religious, mythical conceptions. These anonymous artists feel they are a link in an unending chain of generations. [Bihalji-Merin 1972: 7]

An Australian story that came to my attention in 1987 provides one illustration of the way in which inadvertent cultural assumptions contribute to the ongoing dehumanization of "primitive art." David Bennett has chronicled the experience of Malangi, an artist from Arnhem Land, in an article called "the man who was forgotten before he was remembered" (1980). It all began in 1963 when a Hungarian art collector, struck by the "astonishing personal style" of Malangi's bark paintings, took one of them back to Paris and donated it to the Musée des Arts Africains et Océaniens. During the course of the same year, photographs of several bark paintings (including Malangi's) were passed on to a government official who was involved in the conversion of Australia's currency to a decimal system, and he in turn passed them on to designers working on the new banknotes. Through this route, Malangi's painting eventually made its way onto the Australian one-dollar bill, but his identity had been lost in the shuffle. Thanks to the combined intervention of a journalist and a schoolteacher who recognized Malangi's design and mentioned the possibility of a lawsuit, the oversight was caught and Malangi received both financial compensation and an inscribed medal in recognition of his work (though on the bill itself credit still appears in the form of the Western designer's initials). When the Governor

of the Reserve Bank was questioned about how all this had come about, his answer was revealing. He said that everyone involved had simply assumed "that the designs were the work of some traditional Aboriginal artist long dead" (Bennett 1980: 45). The conceptual distancing of "primitive art" into a remote and anonymous past -- which many people consider to be almost a matter of common sense -- is clearly of more than abstract importance in the lives of those who create it; Malangi's story is better documented than most, but it is far from being unique.

Putting on hold for a moment the popular image of the "primitive artist" working within an age-old tradition governed by communal custom, let us consider the alternatives. In order to do this, it will be necessary to shift our attention from a prototypical world citizen known as "the primitive artist" to the actual individuals who are responsible for producing objects of "primitive art."

Bill Holm has commented sensitively on the nature of tribal "anonymity" in documenting the work of the Kwakiutl artist Willie Seaweed.

Northwest Coast Indian artists, like "primitive artists" of other cultures, have been largely anonymous in our time. Moreover, when modern man, a product of a society which puts great emphasis on names, fame, and individual accomplishment, looks at a collection of masks or other works of art from such exotic cultures, he is unlikely to visualize an individual human creator behind each piece. Seldom will he be helped toward personalizing the faceless "primitive artist" by the labels he might read. Work might be identified as "Northwest Coast," "Alaska," or "British Columbia Coast." At best a tribal identification might be made, although the likelihood of its being inaccurate is considerable. The idea that each object represents the creative activity of a specific human personality who lived and worked at a particular time and place, whose artistic career had a beginning, a development, and an end, and whose work influenced and was influenced by the work of other artists is not at all likely to come to mind. [1974: 60; see also 1983]

Other scholars have also been exploring the possibilities for illuminating the darkness in which Northwest Coast artists' identities have been shrouded. Robin K. Wright describes progress that has been made in de-anonymizing Haida artists such as Charles Edenshaw, John Robson, John Cross, Tom Price, Gwaitehl, and others. Even for objects crafted in the early or mid-19th century, she has demonstrated the potential of careful stylistic analysis for delineating the work of particular individuals; in cases when a style can be identified but the artist's name is no longer retrievable, she simply creates an epithet such as "Master of the Long Fingers" (1983).

Researchers have been coming to similar conclusions in other parts of the world as well. In their study of Igbo arts in Nigeria, Herbert M. Cole and Chike C. Aniakor note that "[i]ndividual hands are recognizable in

Igbo sculpture, as they are in most African art, and artists were and are well-known locally" (1984: 24). In spite of the fact that a majority of the pieces illustrated in their catalogue were loaned by collectors unable to supply artists' names, the authors' documentation of those identities that were available supports their generalization and communicates their appreciation of Igbo carvers as artistic individuals rather than as interchangeable technicians for some mythical communal spirit. For a few objects in the Cole & Aniakor volume, the indication of authorship was altogether unavoidable (e.g., a mask bearing large black letters on a white background that announced: BY ODOIMILIKE); for many other objects, a relatively straightforward inquiry seems to have been all that was necessary; and one suspects that yet further attributions might be possible through an even more persistent application in Nigeria of art historical and ethnographic methods. In short, although much more can be done to demystify the notion of non-Western artists as real people, a start has certainly been made.

In terms of the historical dimension, recent research that applies sophisticated historical and anthropological approaches to the study of the past in Africa, Oceania, and the Americas is building a persuasive case that the non-historical reputation of "primitive" societies is a construction of Western cultural biases and the limitations of traditional Western modes of scholarship (Leach 1990:3). This effort is beginning to show that, if we're willing to abandon our requirement that historical knowledge come to us in black-and-white pages of date-sprinkled text, the historical dynamism of other peoples, as well as their memory of it and interest in the past, are much greater than Western commentators have traditionally imagined.

But the study of art in these societies has some serious catching up to do before it fully reflects this increased awareness of historicity. In general, scholars have failed to recognize that the materials necessary to implement the art history of non-literate peoples are still available, at least for those who are willing to tolerate long hours in dusty museum storerooms and colonial archives and to engage in the challenging enterprise of field research. The overwhelming sense one gets upon reading any large body of popular or scholarly commentary on so-called "primitive art" is that the identity of its makers, and their moment in historical time -- in short, the provenances of particular pieces -- is (regrettably) lost forever.

What happens, then, when these unprovenanced arts meet up with collectors, museum curators, tourists, and other enthusiasts of exotic artistry whose vision of the world is structured to a significant degree by names and dates? Well intended but often misdirected attempts to bring disparate art worlds into meaningful

contact can sometimes further muddy the already murky canal through which objects pass on their way from tribal obscurity to Western authentication as art -- with profound and occasionally farcical consequences for transcultural artistic encounters. Barbara Babcock has provided a particularly poignant example.

While superintending Pueblo pottery revivals, Kenneth Chapman of the Museum of New Mexico insisted that Maria Martinez authenticate and increase the value of her pottery by signing it -- something that Pueblo potters had never done. When the other potters in the village realized that pots with Maria's signature commanded higher prices, they asked her to sign their pots as well and she freely did so until the Santa Fe authorities realized what was happening and put an end to this semiotic riot. [1987: 394-95; see also Bunzel 1972: 66]

But even under less obviously comical circumstances, unthinking adjustments that are made to fit non-Western art objects into Western visions of artistic authorship are not brought about without cost. Consider, for example, what happens when an object passes into the hands of a Western collector.

The game of competitive acquisition produces a special exhilaration that is unknown among non-collecting art lovers. The metaphors that collectors call on to evoke the emotions of collecting vary from game hunting to drug addiction to sexual conquest; people have described the thrill of collecting as being like that of stalking wild animals, others have referred to their obsession as a toxicomania, and others have spoken of their desire for possession as "Don Juanism." One dealer told me that he placed non-collectors in the same category as men whose only knowledge of women derives from reading pornographic magazines. He went on to clarify the meaning of his metaphor by confirming it with an anthropological example. Just as primitive headhunters have always understood, he proposed, "knowledge is founded upon possession."

Viewing the phenomenon of connoisseurship within the special context of serious collecting, we see that aesthetic considerations lose none of their relevance, but that several new elements come into play as well. The additional factors reflect the identity of a given work of art, not in terms of its physical form or original creation, but in terms of its subsequent history of ownership. Collectively, they define what is commonly referred to as the object's "pedigree."

The pedigree for a work of art, like that for a dog, constitutes an authenticated line of descent, providing for the potential buyer a guarantee of the value of the purchase. In this sense, it is not unlike the deed for an historical landmark or the yellowing book plates in a rare volume; it specifies the company one will be keeping, in retrospect, by assuming ownership. The pedigree for a work of art lists, not only previous



owners, but also the exhibits and publications in which it has appeared, the sales at which it has changed hands, and the prices that have been paid at each transfer.

Focusing on the special case of "primitive art," we see that collecting in this area involves certain considerations that do not come into play in the collecting of other types of art. After an ethnographic artifact has been removed from "the field" (whether by sale, theft, or some other variant of the transfer to Western ownership), it is customarily issued a new passport. The pedigree of such an object does not provide detailed information on its maker or its original owners; rather, it counts only the Western hands through which the object has passed. An African sculpture that was once owned by a Western artist such as Jacob Epstein or a well-known dealer such as Charles Ratton or a prominent collector such as Nelson Rockefeller is unrelated, in this system, to a sculpture by the same artist that was not.

The anonymization of "primitive art" is essential to this specialized identity, for by glossing over both the artist and the non-Western owners, people who deal in "primitive art" free themselves to concentrate on a pedigree of more readily recognizable distinction. Edmund Carpenter has pointed out that American Indian artifacts are routinely named after famous previous owners, and of course one of the conventions in museum labeling is to accept the anonymity of "primitive" artists, but to show less indifference (and more gratitude) toward the people who have taken over possession of the objects once they reach the "civilized world."

If we imagine the identity of an object to be built out of its known history, then it is clear that that of a European painting, for example, begins at the moment of creation, within a specific context of artistic movements, interacting schools and personal relationships, innovative responses to a known past, and perhaps the patronage of a historically documented figure; in addition -- but always in addition -- the identity of a particular piece depends on its subsequent life history. For an Ashanti gold weight or a Xingu feathered headdress, this is not normally the case. The fact of its "anonymity" effectively reduces its documented history to Western collectors, museums, auctions, and catalogues.

In discussions with "primitive art" dealers over the past few years, I have several times brought up the lost artists, and raised the possibility of their relevance. Two kinds of response have been given.

One argues that it is the gifted or trained connoisseur (by definition, a member of Western civilization) who first "sees" the artistic quality of a piece. One dealer was willing to talk to me at length about his understandings of connoisseurship, sensitively analyzing his own "eye" for quality -- what aesthetic elements

were decisive, what role was played by subjective emotion, how he evaluated closely comparable pieces, and through what kind of discourse he was able to persuade other collectors of the beauty that he had identified. At the end of this rather detailed discussion, I asked whether he thought any of what he saw in a given object would have been recognized or perhaps even intended by the artist who made it. His answer was immediate and emphatic: "Certainly not!" The artist of such an object, he explained, was at most interested in crafting it well, according to the (technical and other non-aesthetic) standards of the community; he had no appreciation of its artistic qualities, which depended on the European's gaze to be discovered. According to this line of reasoning, responsibility for objects as works of art resides with Western connoisseurs. As one French dealer put it, "The object made in Africa ... became an art object upon its arrival in Europe" (Kamer 1974: 33). From this perspective, there is really no point in fussing over the exact identity of those who happened to produce them, for these people are both interchangeable as artists with others in the community and insensitive to the aesthetic value of what they have created.

The second argument makes no reference to artistic intent or the locus of connoisseurship, but asserts, rather, that information concerning the identities of artists is, lamentably, not available. According to this view, the practice of documenting a collector's name but not that of the artist (both on museum labels and in dealers' dossiers) results simply from the untraceability of personal identities, which have been lost through a combination of native inattention to named artists (since the intent of the art is purely "communal"), the absence of written documentation, and the unfortunate but now irremediable insouciance of early collectors. Let us make a brief detour into the realm of classical art history to consider the implications of this claim.

It is true that a great many pieces of Western art bear a physical "signature" of a sort that is lacking on objects from (say) Native America, Africa, or Oceania. However, even a cursory brush with art historical scholarship suffices to abolish the dream that these signatures neatly match objects to makers in any incontestable manner. Rather, a significant number of them serve as a point of departure for a complex, ongoing discussion that calls on (and sometimes even exceeds) the considerable erudition of the most specialized devotees, not to mention the most advanced techniques of visual and chemical analysis in the laboratory. I draw on an article by Joseph Alsop (1986) to make my point.

In summarizing the art historical research on what was once known as "the Cellini Cup," Alsop offers a brief overview of the devoted attention that Dr. Yvonne Hackenbroch lavished on this object. His story

focuses on her conversion from the position she assumed on the basis of her analyses of it in the 1960s -- that is was stylistically too late to be the work of Benvenuto Cellini and was instead the creation of a Delft goldsmith of the 16th century named Jacopo Bilivert or Biliverti -- to the stance that she finally adopted a full decade and a half later and supported in her "sober one-hundred-plus [-page] copiously illustrated" contribution to the Metropolitan Museum Journal -- that it was a "fake," probably crafted in the 19th century by a German locksmith's son, the notorious Reinhold Vasters.

The conclusions that both Hackenbroch and Alsop draw from the story are fascinating in their own right. But there is an additional lesson to be gleaned from them when we set them side by side with the widespread anonymity of "primitive" artifacts in Western settings. Scholars of the Fine Arts spare no effort in their search for the true origin of masterpieces (and even lesser pieces); they learn many languages, they fly around the world, they hire technicians to peer through microscopes, they sit for endless hours in libraries, they undertake immensely tedious research in archives and museum storerooms, and they engage in countless learned discussions and published debates with their equally intense and well versed colleagues on the probability of alternative attributions. The process often consumes the researcher's working hours for a period of many years, without even mentioning, as one scholar did in his reply to Alsop's commentary on the "Cellini Cup" (Lee 1986: 76), all the sleepless nights. Partly because of the traditional segregation of art history and anthropology as disciplines, it is rarely suggested that the same kind of energy might be devoted to establishing the identity of the person responsible for, say, a piece of statuary from Nigeria. Given that a relatively small proportion of such objects predate the 19th century, there is a good chance for most that their authorship is as ascertainable as that of Reinhold Vaster's gold cup. In the case of early 20th-century art from the rain forest of Suriname, for example, Richard Price and I have found specific attributions to be a challenging task (dependent on language learning, methodological skills, and theoretical background), but certainly no more of an impossible undertaking than most research on provenances as described in traditional art historical scholarship.

What are we to conclude from this differential attention span in the investigation of the original provenances of Western and non-Western art? I believe it is time to acknowledge that it represents a motivated choice. If the Western world substitutes, as it does, the names of collectors for the names of artists, it is not because the artists are "anonymous." Nor is it because the people who crafted the objects were not artists, in terms of their vision, their intent, their aesthetic awareness. If provenances are abandoned in favor of

pedigrees, it is as part of an appropriation of other cultures that goes on at many levels and in many contexts. The physical possession of art objects from other peoples' worlds is complemented by the conceptual possession of their artistic intent. The appropriation of non-Western art is complete.

Vincent Price once remarked that in "primitive societies," the artist chooses to "write himself out of his creation" (Anon. 1972: 22). And certainly it would be hard to disagree with the idea that "primitive" artists rarely play star roles in the world of recognized artistic creativity. But perhaps we should not forget that one of the most time-honored criteria used to distinguish "civilized" and "primitive" societies is the presence or absence of literacy. And in that light, it may be appropriate to ask -- in thinking about the idea that the "primitive artist" chooses to "write himself out of his creation" -- whether he is in fact the one who has taken pen in hand.

Built firmly on the anonymization of the Other-as-Artist, the Western assumption of artistic responsibility for "primitive art" is also helped along by a process of conceptual infantilization. Within the global brotherhood of humanity, there is a Western-authored sibling order, invoked with particular frequency in situations of friendly patronage. Albert Schweitzer once noted that although he considered Africans to be his brothers, it was important never to forget that they were his younger brothers. And other, equally distinguished, commentators continue to envision the Family of Man in this mode today. For E.H. Gombrich, arguably the most influential authority on art history in the Western world, the "primitive artist" is very much of a child. Gombrich is now in his eighties, but his authority has not waned a bit and he continues to write prolifically, using arguments about the nature of "primitive art" as a central component of his positions. In 1990, he published a long article in the New York Review of Books that chastised art historian David Freedberg for failing to heed the lessons of his (Gombrich's) insights about "primitive art," as laid out in the first chapter of his classic book, The Story of Art. Here is what those insights sound like, in Gombrich's own words:

If most works of these civilizations look weird and unnatural to us, the reason lies probably in the ideas they are meant to convey ... Negroes in Africa are sometimes as vague as little children about what is a picture and what is real .. they even believe that certain animals are related to them in some fairy-tale manner ... [they] live in a kind of dream-world ... It is very much as if children played at pirates or detectives till they no longer knew where play-acting ended and reality began. But with children there is always the grown-up world about them, the people who tell them, 'Don't be so noisy', or 'It is nearly bed-time'. For the savage there is no such other world to spoil the illusion. [1966: Chapter 1, "Strange Beginnings"]

Gombrich illustrates his point by the reactions that "we" and "they" would experience to a scrawled doodle of a face: "To us all this is a joke," he says, "but to the native it is not." This is very much the kind of

interpretation that was proposed in a major 1984 exhibition of the difference between look-alike sculptures by Alexander Calder and an artist from New Guinea (Rubin 1984: 58-59), or the one that Lord Kenneth Clark used to begin his best-selling book, Civilisation: A Personal View, in which a Greek statue was used to illustrate enlightenment and reason, while the African mask printed next to it was said to represent fear and darkness (1969: 2).

From the perspective of these Western scholars, each one more distinguished and influential than the next, and all attempting to explain how Western art differs from art of what we might call the "small" civilizations, the "primitive" world is a sober place indeed, where doodled faces and sculpted branches are perceived as living monsters. No wonder, then, that its inhabitants are imagined as having no time or inclination for such pleasurable pursuits as aesthetic discussion, intellectual history, or art-for-art's sake, preoccupied as they are with chasing spirits and demons from their midst, and with no grown-ups to remind them that it is all just a game.

Today, the standard question about objects crafted by our Others has become whether to conceptualize them as Art (and hence view them from the perspective of our own aesthetic sensitivities) or as ethnography (and hence to view them in the context of their makers' social and ritual life). That is, we may regard them as being pleasing to the Western eye for reasons that derive from our own aesthetic (whether universal or culturally constructed is a secondary debate); or we may focus primary attention on the ways they function in the physical or ritual life of their makers and original owners. But neither of these alternatives allows for the possibility that the original creators of these objects were playing out sophisticated aesthetic visions, manipulating them with skill and sensitivity. Perhaps it is time to acknowledge the degree to which such objects may be legitimized by a cultural authority other than our own, by a system of aesthetic criticism with rules and principles other than those of our own connoisseurs, by an artistic vision that we can only learn to appreciate by opening our ears to the voices of our Others.

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