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“An outsider looking in: Observations on the African ‘art’ market.”

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4. AN OUTSIDER LOOKING IN: OBSERVATIONS ON THE AFRICAN 'ART' MARKET

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In this short contribution I can do little more than offer an outsider's perspective on the Western fetish for 'tribal art' and the damage that it is causing to African cultural heritage. A more substantial review would be book length, and indeed several books have already been written on the subject, including Steiner's (1994) *African Art in Transit* and Christiana Panella's (2002) *Les Terres Cuites de la Discorde*, and the edited volume *Plundering Africa's Past* (Schmidt and McIntosh eds. 1996). Raymond Corbey's *Tribal Art Traffic* (2000) also includes much that is relevant, and important insights into the Western reception of African heritage are offered in Sally Price's (2001) *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*. These books, taken together with the campaigning efforts of journalists such as Michel Brent (1994; 1996) and Jos van Beurden (2001a; 2001b), now constitute a solid evidence of the baleful effects that the commercial market exerts on African heritage, what Gill and Chippindale (1993) would call the intellectual and material consequences of esteem for 'African art'. Not least, perhaps, of these consequences has been the submergence of African histories and identities within a romanticised vision of Africa, in which the anonymous creativity of African tradition stands opposed to the individual authorship of the West.

The plundering of Africa's past is intimately related to the demand of Western museums and collectors for African heritage, and, latterly, the development of a commercial market. 'Ethnographic' or 'anthropological' material from Africa was first collected during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as part of the European imperial project, but it was not until the 1920s and 1930s that a viable commercial market became established as the aesthetic merit of some African material was 'discovered' by Western artists and connoisseurs, and awarded a price. However, by the 1950s, the supply of what Steiner calls the 'classic genres' of wooden face masks and ritual statuary had begun to dry up and the trade expanded to include household or other utilitarian objects. It also triggered a search for archaeological – in the sense of buried – objects. Most notably in West Africa the large scale and illegal excavation of terracotta statuary has been noted in the last thirty or so years.

The gradual rediscovery and removal of a West African terracotta figurative tradition can easily be followed in general syntheses of African art. For example, in the 1960

volume *Africa: the Art of the Negro Peoples*, by Elsy Leuzinger, terracottas are hardly mentioned. Indeed, Leuzinger notes that 'African clay sculptures are very delicate, and are rarely to be found in museums – and then usually in fragments' (Leuzinger 1960: 40). The book does however include a brief discussion of Nok statuary, based largely on the work of Bernard Fagg. However, by 1984, things had moved on. In Werner Gillon's *A Short History of African Art*, which was published that year, there are extended sections on Djenné and Nok terracottas. Six Djenné pieces are illustrated, two from Western museums and four from private collections. Nine Nok pieces are illustrated, seven from Nigerian museums and two from Western Museums. Gillon tells us that the first Djenné terracotta was found in 1940. In 1970 it was exhibited in the Zurich Kunsthhaus, and after that date a considerable number were discovered as 'surface finds in the mud of the Inland Niger Delta' (Gillon 1984: 91). In reality, Djenné figures had been known from at least the late nineteenth century (McIntosh 1996: 53; Panella 2002: 140–54), and probably earlier, and by the late 1960s could be bought quite cheaply in Europe, although it may be true that the Zurich exhibition sparked off a collecting frenzy as prices underwent a sharp escalation after 1973 (McIntosh 1996: 47; Panella 2002: 157). In parentheses, it is interesting to note that the two promotional quotations on the back cover of the Gillon book were taken from *Antiques Dealer* and *World of Interiors*, which may perhaps indicate the books intended readership.

Gillon did not include any discussion of Bura statuettes from Niger, as these were only discovered in 1983 during excavations carried out by that country's *Institut de Recherches en Sciences Humaines* (IRSH). They were featured in an international exhibition *Vallées du Niger* which toured West Africa and France from 1993 to 1998, and once this exhibition had brought them to the attention of Western collectors the large scale looting of sites in Niger followed (Gado 2001: 58). Soon Bura statuettes were on sale in the West. In 2000, for example, the Hamill Gallery of African Art in Boston held an exhibition and sale entitled 'Africa Unearthed' (see <http://www.hamillgallery.com/>). This sale included 44 Nok pieces, predominantly heads, 4 Katsina terracottas, 6 Sokoto terracottas, 46 Bura terracotta heads, and 14 Djenné pots. Interestingly, the Djenné pieces were not for sale:

"NOT FOR SALE, although we are not personally opposed to the sale of unearthed African terracottas, we are complying with the U.S./Mali 1997 Agreement prohibiting their importation" (<http://www.hamillgallery.com/>).

Outrageous as it seems, it can only be assumed from this unashamed statement that the gallery's owner, Tim Hamill, is not concerned about the lost contexts of the material he sells. Indeed, as the 2002 trial of Frederick Schultz – ultimately convicted for handling antiquities illegally moved out of Egypt – shows, it is a point of view shared by most of the US trade fraternity (Gerstenblith 2002: 29). As part of a 'statement on African Art', Hamill explains why:

"I personally collect African Art because of its power, beauty, magic and craftsmanship. My viewpoint is as an artist, not as an anthropologist. I choose pieces based on formal visual criteria, some knowledge of the tribal traditions, how well I feel the piece succeeds in what it attempts and whether the work gives me an inner sense of satisfaction, pleasure and mystery. It is certainly not necessary to fully understand African art to enjoy it with a sense of wonder and awe". (<http://www.hamillgallery.com/>)

It is true that we are largely ignorant of the function of terracotta statuary (although see the interesting discussion in McIntosh 1996: 48–9), and we will stay that way while they are unearthed with no record and sold as art. Yet, in answer to Hamill, we can legitimately ask that if African art is not fully understood, how can the damage caused by its illicit removal be properly assessed, and dismissed?

Many of the Hamill Nok terracottas are offered with a thermoluminescence date from the Bortolot Daybreak Corporation. Bortolot's website makes for interesting reading (http://www.daybreaknuclear.com/bortolot_daybreak_frameset.html). It claims that before 1993 most Nok terracottas appearing on the market were fake, and that genuine objects were usually poorly-preserved fragments. Then, in 1993, a consortium of European dealers organized systematic looting of the Nok area, whereupon there was a flood of genuine heads and the fakes all but disappeared. Darling (2000: 17) corroborates the Bortolot story when he reports that large scale looting commenced in the Nok area in mid-1994. By 1995 two main local traders had emerged, each able to employ about 1000 diggers (*ibid*: 18). The price of Nok figures plummeted accordingly (*ibid*: 15). In 1996 visits to a small number of Parisian dealers revealed more than 50 Nok objects for sale (Shyllon 2003: 142).

We must not forget, however, that outside West Africa many different types of archaeological site are being plundered. They range from neolithic rock art sites of the Sahara (Coulson 1999; Keenan 2000) to historical shipwrecks (Abungu 2001: 45; Almeida and Lima 1995). Nor is the continent's rich Christian and Islamic heritage safe; the Christian church treasuries of Ethiopia continue to be targeted (Begashaw 1995; Van Beurden 2001b), and Islamic documents and decorative elements are also in demand (ICOM 1997: 77–9; 113–6). On the ground, local

people are still forced by poverty to sell heritage, and governments have more pressing priorities than its protection. The depredations of the market are made easier by the wars that continue to afflict many African countries. Writing this in summer 2003 in the aftermath of the highly-publicised attack on Baghdad Museum I have found it difficult to obtain much news of Somalia's national museums which were ransacked when fighting broke out there in 1991 (Brandt and Mohamed 1996). Most material has now left the country but by all accounts it is still possible to buy the odd object in Mogadishu's Bakara market. Yet the press has remained remarkably quiet about the fate of Somali museums.

In 1994 the International Council of Museums (ICOM) released *Looting in Africa*, a volume in its 'One Hundred Missing Objects' series. It listed and illustrated objects or categories of objects that were known to have been stolen or in danger of illegal removal from museums or archaeological sites throughout Africa. By August 2003 several objects had been recovered from the possession of European dealers and collectors. No doubt more will follow (see ICOM 1997: III–IV for details). However, by the end of the 1990s the threats posed to the archaeology of West Africa were so serious that ICOM felt constrained to publish a 'Red List' of African antiquities under imminent threat of looting or theft. The list was drawn up at the AFRICOM-sponsored Workshop on the Protection of the African Cultural Heritage held in Amsterdam in October 1997 and released in May 2000. It contains eight categories of material:

- Nok terracottas from the Bauchi Plateau and the Katsina and Sokoto regions (Nigeria)
- Terracottas and bronzes from Ife (Nigeria)
- Esie stone statues (Nigeria)
- Terracottas, bronzes and pottery from the Niger Valley (Mali)
- Terracotta statuettes, bronzes, pottery, and stone statues from the Bura System (Niger, Burkina Faso)
- Stone statues from the north of Burkina Faso and neighbouring regions
- Terracottas from the north of Ghana (Komaland) and Côte d'Ivoire
- Terracottas and bronzes, so-called Sao (Cameroon, Chad, Nigeria)

It is depressing to find that a mere 17 years after their first discovery, the Bura statuettes had found their way onto the Red List of endangered objects. The Red List notes that: "These objects are among the cultural goods most affected by looting and theft. They are protected by national legislation, banned from export, and may under no circumstances be put on sale. An appeal is therefore being made to museums, auction houses, art dealers and collectors to stop buying them".

Many museums around the world already refuse to acquire such objects, but sometimes the appeal falls on deaf ears. For example, the Musée Barbier-Mueller in Geneva houses

a large collection of African objects (including one identified by ICOM as stolen (ICOM 1997: IV)), and in 2002, its director, Jean Paul Barbier, offered a chilling rationale for indiscriminate collecting. In a short piece headed 'On war and scruples' (Barbier 2002: 316–7), and illustrated with an image that superimposed a Bamiyan Buddha upon one of the collapsing towers of the New York World Trade Centre, he warns of the plight of terracotta statues in the northern states of Nigeria that practice Islamic Sharia law. The terracottas, according to Barbier, face reduction to dust, and he hopes that as many as possible "find shelter in Western Europe, in the New World, and in Japan." (Barbier 2002: 317). We might question Barbier's choice of Western Europe as a safe haven when we remember that during World War II something like 70,000 objects were lost from the Hamburg Museum für Völkerkunde, while at the Leipzig Museum für Völkerkunde 30,000 were destroyed in one day during an aerial bombardment (Corbey 2000: 49), although, as we have seen, historical sensibility is not a faculty that is well-developed in the hardened 'tribal art' collector. But what of the alarmist vision of extremist clerics which Barbier conjures up to frighten his readers, said to be responsible for the destruction of Christian churches and the kidnapping of European tourists, and set on the destruction of the idolatrous terracottas? The truth is that the local Muslim communities are quick to recognise a business opportunity and are happy to dig up and sell pre-Islamic artefacts (Darling 2000: 18). They are not likely to spend time and energy digging up objects only to destroy them. (Barbier omits to mention the underground provenance of these pieces, not wanting perhaps to dispel the illusion of the 'surface find' that comforts his patrons and visitors). And we should not forget the past role played by the Christian Church in destroying cultural objects for similar reasons of idolatry (jegede 1996: 133).

In 1997 Barbier sold 276 Nigerian objects to the French Musée National des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie for something like 40 million French francs (Corbey 2000: 128). In 2004, this museum, together with the Musée de l'Homme, is due to be incorporated into a new and prestigious Musée des Arts et des Civilisations (officially known as the Musée du Quai Branly), a project conceived by collector and dealer Jacques Kerchache, and carried through with the support of French President Jacques Chirac. As a foretaste of what is to come, on 13th April 2000 the Louvre opened a new Pavillon des Sessions of 'tribal art' to display objects destined to be incorporated into the new museum. The Louvre display consisted of 117 artefacts including two Nok terracottas, bought from a Belgian dealer for a price claimed to be 2.5 million French francs, and a Sokoto piece. (Bailey 2000: 1). The Louvre, and Chirac, were immediately criticised for the appearance of these terracottas, not least by ICOM and the Nigerian embassy. However, in 2002, the governments of France and Nigeria reached agreement whereby France recognises that the three statues are the property of Nigeria, while Nigeria agrees for them to be retained by France on loan for a period of 25 years, on a renewable basis. Again, this agreement has been criticised as dishonourable, an outcome of French chauvinism and a neo-colonial mentality (Shyllon 2003).

Closer to home, the Royal Academy of Arts in London came under attack in 1995 when it organised an exhibition 'Africa: The Art of a Continent'. The exhibition catalogue illustrates nine Djenné terracotta figures (seven from private collections and two from Western Museums) and ten Nok figures (three from Nigerian museums and seven from private collections). The destructive origins of this material were not ignored, however, and in the section on Nok terracottas, AF spoke of "an archaeological catastrophe" (Phillips 1995: 525) and for their Djenné cousins TFG drew attention to the "Hundreds, probably thousands, of ancient sites ... ransacked and severely damaged" (Phillips 1995: 488). The Royal Academy's decision to display these pieces was met by widespread protest and a threat by the British Museum to withhold its own proposed loans if the Academy went ahead (Shaw and MacDonald 1995; Sweetman 1995). In the event, the Djenné pieces were withdrawn from the exhibition. However, in the catalogue's introduction, the editor Tom Phillips was unrepentant. While lamenting the destruction caused by the commercially motivated looting, he went on to state that it was the Royal Academy's conviction that "in the long term to show such works in this present context would not only enhance the artistic reputation of countries like Mali and Nigeria, but provoke public interest in the furtherance of archaeological activity in Africa, even to the point of attracting enabling funds" (Phillips 1995: 16–17). The exhibition was held at the Royal Academy of Arts from 4 October 1995 to 21 January 1996, nearly ten years ago, and time enough at least to allow the mobilisation of enabling funds. There is little to suggest that this has happened though.

And this is, perhaps, the crux. From the vantage point of a British university desk it is all too easy to point an accusing finger at the art market, or to ask governments and international organisations to supply political answers to African poverty and under-development, but part of the problem is simply that very few Western archaeologists work in Africa, and thus very little Western research funding finds its way there. Part of the answer to the problems posed to Africa by the art market is simply that more archaeological research should take place there.

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