

animalistic inner self stands opposed to the civilized, reflective male.

- ♦ Movie poster of *Splash*, by Daniel Laeryea with the mermaid transposed from the film's healing angel to biting devil. Large breasts, bulging eyes, open mouth suggest the demonic aspects of the mother goddess.
- ♦ *Santa Marta la Dominadora*, by Hochi Asiatco—tintillating and pornographic.
- ♦ *La Siren* by Nancy Josephson—an example of female independence and a threat to traditional female roles.

Drewal discusses the mermaid image as having

populated the human imagination for millennia... some of the earliest have their origins in the fertile river valleys of Mesopotamia ... the Mediterranean world of the Phoenicians, Minoans, Greeks, and Romans ... symbolized danger (p. 33).

Giving a nod to the appearance of mermaid stories and female deities back to c. 1000 BCE in Assyria, Drewal's narrative crops the frame within Africa and follows its tributaries to the Diaspora for the theme of the exhibition. However, although he narrows his thesis subject, as in other exhibitions Drewal has curated, he drives the theme of his passion—in this case the term “water deity”—to the edges of extraordinarily inclusive and fluid boundaries, indeed “... the imagining of Mami Wata and other water deities in Africa and its Diasporas appears limitless” (p. 206). Drewal's intellectual seriousness and fascination with hyperbolic visions of mermaids would suggest that he has been seduced by his own fantasies, and that the many sides of Mami Wata on display are perhaps versions of himself. This is, no doubt, Drewal's most personal curatorial effort, one in which he loses track of exploring versus indulging. The undercurrents of Mami Wata blur certain distinctions between predator and prey, profit and affection. When you think about it, many of us in our countless cultural worlds can be paid for something that can easily be mistaken for love. Less concerned with coherence than an on-the-lookout for anything and everything H₂O, I would argue that aesthetic editing would be effective in this serious concentration ... dilute with one part fresh water. Let's keep the conversation going.

DEBORAH STOKES is Curator for Education at the National Museum of African Art Smithsonian Institution, leading Youth and Public School Programs. DStokes@si.edu

References cited

Drewal, Henry John, ed. 2009. *Sacred Waters: Arts for Mami Wata and Other Water Spirits in Africa and the African Atlantic*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

report on the state of the discipline

Between Cultural Lag and Confusion: The Reception of African Art in Italy

by Giovanna Parodi da Passano

“African art is not a settled presence on the Italian scene.” There is a categorical tone to gallery owner and anthropologist Leonardo Vigorelli's opening sentence in his foreword to *A Hidden Heritage. African Sculptures in Private Italian Collections* (Carini 2004:7–8).¹ Nonetheless, for all its peremptoriness, Vigorelli's assertion is incontrovertible. The book's other two articles, the first by its editor, Vittorio Carini, and the second by Aldo Tagliaferri, reaffirm this clear-cut verdict and underline the historical deficit that marks Italian culture in the specific field of the research and study of African objects. In the preface (*ibid.*, p. 9–13), Carini, a noted Italian art collector, is drawing on his own rich personal experience when he points out that collecting African art in Italy is seen as an eccentric and minority intellectual adventure. Tagliaferri—in the book's closely argued main article (*ibid.*, pp. 15–36), which magisterially sums up the story of Italian collecting in the field of African art with all its light and shade—writes that “the results achieved so far by private collecting in Italy are surprisingly dynamic considering its difficult beginnings” (*ibid.*, p. 22). If the picture painted by both Tagliaferri and Carini gives an idea of the extraordinary passion, not to say “obsession” that characterizes the small but nonetheless eager group of well-informed and discriminating Italian collectors,² it also forcefully demonstrates the unfavorable conditions they have to cope with, given the deep cultural roots behind the marginalization to which African arts have been condemned on Italian soil.

Things have still not changed, and the six years that have passed since the book came out have certainly not been sufficient to bring African arts into Italy's cultural mainstream, to judge if nothing else from the sense of exotic extraneity they continue to arouse in the man on the street. Indeed, although over the last few decades African visual arts (in particular those labeled “traditional”) have acquired a level of recognition and a market of their own even in Italy—where they are now well known to collectors and where there are a fair number of connoisseurs³—Italians lack famil-

ilarity with the artistic and spiritual legacy of extra-European culture, and particularly with the artistic production of the societies of sub-Saharan Africa (which they generally regard as the most distant or “other” from the West).

Even if we turn to the world of experts and *soi-disant* experts, we find plentiful confirmation of Italy failing to keep up in the field of the research and study of African objects. For example, the various figures (of varying levels of competence) that operate on the rather fragmentary and confused scene of specialists who work outside the institutions frequently betray their outdated perception of African art and seem not to take into consideration the constructed nature of tradition and authenticity; and in their turn the exponents of the institutional world—be they anthropologists or museum curators—find themselves accused by the community of art dealers and collectors of poor aesthetic sensibility and an inability to put a correct value on African masks, statues, and the like.⁴ In both critical and curatorial practice, as well as in the market and in the world of collectors, the dominant feature in the approach to the esthetics of sub-Saharan Africa is a generic and anachronistic primitivist perspective that fails to address the problematic issue of “African cultural specificity” (Muller 2002:119)—despite signs of a trend reversal, reflected in more recent museum displays and designs and in some courageous publishing and exhibition initiatives undertaken by a small band of open-minded and knowledgeable connoisseurs and collectors. The fact of the matter is that in Italy the critical reformulation of the Western dialectic between modernism and primitivism that has developed within the context of postmodernism has had difficulty moving beyond the academic world.

If we step outside the institutional bodies, we see how, on the one hand, our image of so-called traditional African art has not made a clean break from the prejudicial primitivism of the modernist tradition and, on the other hand, how our approach to contemporary African production is dominated by the “neo-primitivist” canon, with virtually no discussion of the question of the diaspora in contemporary African art, a question abundantly discussed by cultural studies scholars in other countries. Consequently, we are still a long way from the rethinking of today's African works through the filter of conceptualism carried out by militant African critics active in the critical debate on the very definition of African art.

On the threshold of the third millennium, this repetition of formulas from early twentieth-century European culture betrays, if not a complete disconnect from all the forms of delegitimation of the modernist tradition produced in the late twentieth century, then at the

very least a lack of familiarity with the methodology developed by postcolonial theorists and artists and the deconstruction work carried out by postmodernity on the notion of the "authenticity" of African art. This despite the fact that deconstruction was the focus of "Authentic/Ex-Centric," curated by Salah Hassan and Olu Oguibe and put on in 2001 on the occasion of the 49th Venice Biennale.⁵

MULTIPLE AND INTERACTIVE FACTORS BEHIND THE LAG

A century after the historical recognition accorded to *arts nègres* by the artistic avant-gardes, in Italy exhibition curators, art critics, art gallery managers, dealers, and collectors consciously or unconsciously remain true to primitivism. Together with the fact that the debate about the display of African art objects continues to center around the obsolete controversy between aesthetic gaze and ethnographic approach, this shows that Italy lags behind in respect of the reception, consolidation, and historicization of African arts. It lags behind in both the world of collectors and institutions, as well as the cultural sphere in general.

This delay is reflected in, among other things, the fact that African art in Italy has little weight in the world of museums and exhibitions, in cultural policies, or on university curricula. Similarly, the idea of a dialogue with a vast public sensitized by ongoing information and education programs that focus on the expressive forms of the African worlds remains wishful thinking. One consequence of the continuing predominance of the classical tradition is that even among cultured people and art historians it appears to be perfectly acceptable to know nothing about the culture and aesthetics of black Africa (or indeed, more generally, about all forms of expression formerly labeled "primitive").

This delay—which has meant that the approach to African art in Italy is still out of synch with what is going on beyond our national boundaries—is the result of several factors. First of all, interest in the "primitive" is a phenomenon that was very late in finding its way into our artistic consciousness and indeed has remained extraneous to a cultural context shaped by powerful mechanisms of projection of identity that are based on Italy's Greco-Roman roots and artistic traditions.

The question goes beyond the legacy of classical and neoclassical culture: the true perception of African sculptures in Italy has not been helped either by the Futurist movement⁶—which from this particular point of view lagged behind the debate conducted within the avant-garde movements that began in Paris—or indeed by the climate of cultural provincialism which, in line with the nationalist and racist approach of the Fascist regime, was the hallmark of the that period in Italian history.

Equally, knowledge and appreciation of African objects have not been well served by the belated and marginal character of our colonial experience. (The small scale of Italy's colonial past has not, however, prevented a certain stereotypical imaginary embodied in the ambiguous African reverie known as "*mal d'Africa*" from surviving tenaciously into the present). It is also true that the traditions of Italy's former African colonies did not conform to Western expectations of "typical" African art in terms of the rich production of sculptures, masks, and regalia found in the sub-Saharan and forest areas of western and central Africa formerly governed by the leading colonial powers.

Unlike other European nations such as Great Britain, France, and Belgium—countries that have had to deal with longer and more complex colonial pasts than ours, where interest in the cultures and the arts of black Africa is a deep-seated phenomenon, where there is no lack of solid institutional points of reference or institutional and private support for African arts, and where initiatives in the worlds of museums, commerce, and publishing have been a driving force—Italy lacks a long-standing tradition of cultural exchanges and flows of trade with the black African world, just as there is no consolidated tradition of African studies.

Given the relatively recent professionalisation of African anthropology (in the academic world interest in the study of the cultures of Africa and, above all, field research, have had great difficulty in gaining a foothold),⁷ and given the institutional indifference to African arts (a lack of interest that has been a particular problem for our public collections, whose pieces vary significantly in quality), the number of university courses and training centers is small. It is also true that, on the one hand, Italian academic articles about the African world are limited in appeal and, on the other, in the university world outside Italy our publications in the specific field of African ethno-aesthetics have a small readership, if for no other reason than the size of the linguistic catchment area, and indeed few are translated.⁸

Another factor working against a wider-ranging and more critical view of African arts is the lack of acceptable popularizing material on the subject in Italian and the shortage of well-read journalists who realize that African art is a phenomenon that demands a more international approach. Moreover, all too often the local officials who shape cultural policies and draw up programs for various venues lack the authoritativeness to evaluate the scientific caliber of relevant initiatives on the subject. Such people rarely possess specific expertise in African studies or even that minimum level of up-to-date knowledge which would help them recognize the presence and importance of theoretical and ideological factors in the representa-

tion of African otherness.

Significant proof of Italy's continuing of partial isolation and lagging behind of northern Europe in this field lies in the fact that—despite the now generally accepted that the Western idea of "primitive art" as well as the related notion of an "uncontaminated tradition") has run its course—in the events that give visibility to African art, the appeal to the "original" or "spontaneous" components that are historically linked to the expression "African art" seems to be unavoidable. This approach (which reflects knowledge that is still at a precritical phase) is often made even less acceptable by the terminology otherwise found only in the areas of African studies and redolent of scientific theories (when not in thrall to the fascination of colonial times).

The fact is that conventional opinion still clings to the "invention of Africa" theorized by Mudimbe (1988). African identity is largely associated with a "traditional" idea of an "African essence" which is the product of ignorance and commonplaces and, like African art is seen as art that is distant from the course of history and essentially "original." On the whole, African arts are conceived as something fundamentally different from the West and are set in opposition to the West and a dichotomy is established between the categories of "traditional art" (seen as the "true" African art) and "modern art" (seen as exploiting its "natural" exotic vocation so as to avoid being labeled as art that imitates the West). Any evaluation of a work of African art is based on its implicit endorsement of the idea of the "African soul" (to be sought in a primordial archetype). The "primitive" given to African artistic production is seen as the result of a cultural contingency and African cultures end up being viewed as unique and ahistorical, denied any process of social transformation. On the one hand, this leads to an emphasis on the idea of authenticity interpreted as the hallmark of an eternal legacy and linked to the idea of exoticism in line with cultural determinism (Hassan and Oguibe 2001). On the other, it reinforces the notion of ethnic identity whilst failing to analyze its problematic nature in the specific cultural context, where "tribal" arts and temporary African arts are profoundly shaped by their markets.

As we can see, concepts such as Homi Bhabha and Ranger's "invention of tradition" or Walter D. Mignolo's "emerging authenticity" are far from making any impact: a clichéd view of Africa still dominates the imagination of Italians. Critical knowledge of the African world is only to be found within a very small circle of people, while mystifying labels and misleading conceptions about African culture and art are widespread. The result

it is normal procedure in the Italian media⁹ to spread a stereotypical depiction of African reality and past and present African art, a depiction that deprives any interpretation of reality and art of its problematic and political component.

Given all this, it is no surprise to find that Italy, faced with a limited number of specialized galleries and exhibitions curated by recognized experts, has seen a significant number of exhibitions put in the hands of so-called experts who possess neither up-to-date knowledge nor the necessary scientific grounding and who for the most part are guided by market interests (with frequent concessions to mercantilism of the lowest sort).

THE PERSISTENCE OF PRIMITIVIST STEREOTYPES IN THE RECEPTION OF AFRICAN AESTHETICS

For insight into the cultural delay which prevents Italy from seeing Africa as a contemporary reality one need only cast a rapid glance over two exhibitions recently held in Turin, one of the Italian cities most responsive to African art. Both media-driven products, though very different from each other (one was a large-scale show of traditional African pieces, the other a selection of works by contemporary African artists), the two exhibitions had in common the tendency to subject African arts unilaterally to the verdict of Westerners.

The first, bearing the title "Africa: Masterpieces from a Continent" (October 2, 2003–February 15, 2004) and staged at great expense at Turin's GAM – Modern Art Gallery, put on display more than 400 extraordinary African exhibits, but excluded modern and contemporary works completely (Bassani 2003–2004). The second, held from October 6, 2007–February 3, 2008 at the Giovanni and Marella Agnelli Foundation (Pinacoteca del Lingotto), presented under the title "Why Africa? The Pigozzi Collection"¹⁰ about a hundred works by contemporary African artists selected from Jean Pigozzi's contemporary African art collection (Magnin 2007–2008).

What came out of both exhibitions—despite the strong underlying difference in content, experience, and approach and despite the different scale of their planning and relative budget—was that they were, albeit in different ways, operations of aestheticizing the arts of others according to *our* parameters. Thus African arts continued to occupy an evocative space defined by the Western imagination, and once again no real attempt was made to re-examine and bring up to date our way of evaluating African art.

So while on the one hand both exhibits reflected a new popular interest in African creativity, on the other the public was given no incentive to reflect either on the masterpiece as a cultural construct (in the first case),

nor on the Western projection of the "natural" artist as a construct of identity that is sought or assigned on the basis of our perceptions of continents or cultures (in the second). In other words, neither show helped us to get to know the real Africa (and accordingly to leave behind the "phantom Africas") or to reposition the practice of art in African societies in Italy by moving on from the view propagated by magazines and newspapers, namely that there is such a thing as an African "essence" in the continent's culture and art.

The persistence of the myth of the "immobile continent" is evident in particular in the case of "Africa: Masterpieces from a Continent." Paradoxically enough, even though the layout of the exhibition represented an attempt to place African art in a historical context, the exhibits on display remained, as it were, suspended in mid air, aphasic, void of any depth. Many examples could be given of Italy's persistent delay with regard to African art, but the fact that a "traditional" exhibition such as "Africa: Masterpieces from a Continent" was celebrated by the media as both truly innovative and revelatory is particularly significant. The exhibition did indeed put on display a wonderful otherness, but it remained within our aesthetic mainstream. So, while undoubtedly extraordinary, the show was not innovative,¹³ neither in terms of planning (selecting the "best of the best"), or design and display ("showing" rather "helping to understand"). Certainly the decision made by the organizers to evaluate African art using the same tools and criteria that are applied to Western art (while neglecting to explain the theoretical and ideological implications inherent in this perspective)¹⁴ did not allow us to move on from the "*the West and the rest*" position vehemently criticized by postcolonial studies.

Curated by Ezio Bassani—a scholar who has played a crucial role in both raising the profile of African art in Italy and forming the taste of the Italians (as well as being the most celebrated and highly regarded Italian expert on African art outside Italy)—the exhibition in question already betrays the lack of topicality of its approach in its (banal) title. Indeed, however unique (it was certainly the most sensational exhibition of African art ever staged in Italy) and unrepeatable (in particular it will be difficult to see again outside Nigeria the extraordinary pieces on loan from the museums of that country), this exhibition-event was in part a missed opportunity.¹⁵

If it is true, as indeed it is, that all exhibitions, even the most neutral, always involve theoretical and ideological assumptions, then it is equally true that the apparent neutrality of the selection of objects in the name of the universal esthetic criterion of "Africa: Masterpieces from a Continent" once again demonstrates how in projects of this type the

relationship with the image of the Other necessarily involves the ambiguity and the manipulation which have historically been part of relationship with African Otherness. Indeed the very concept of the exhibition touches the delicate question of the circulation of objects, or to put it better, the "trade" in objects. This question has a corollary in the art market, where the "raw" object is transformed, by virtue of a genealogy acquired in the West, into a "piece chosen" by such and such a collection.

Far from being restored to their complexity, the African sculptures catalogued as works of art, and what is more labeled "classic" by Bassani, were subjected to an idealization which erases fractures and contaminations in order to privilege reconstructed affinities and continuities. In presenting the objects to the admiration and amazement of a public of "devotees of beauty" without providing keys of interpretation that might include the counterdiscourse of the Africans, the type of display chosen by the curator thus once again uses the tried and tested formula of an exhibition of "masterpieces" (in other words, a formula which lends additional properties to the aura of the works). It is also a formula which diverts attention away from the historical, critical, and identity issues underlying such artistic practices. Exhibiting African cultures in such a "neutral" way not only means removing the objects from their historical and artistic, sociopolitical, and philosophical context, but also—and this is something we cannot forget today—on the one hand concealing the power relations that pervade the aesthetic field and on the other adopting the criterion of ethnic authenticity in a non-problematic way, ignoring the fact that it constitutes one of the most difficult questions in the study of African arts (Steiner 1994:100).

Last but not least, enhancing the visual impact of African works (as Bassani did at the Turin exhibition) is tantamount to using the aesthetic principle as a way of measuring degrees of exotic emotion, isolating the formal qualities of the objects on display and playing with the "revelation" factor in the face of the disconcerting evidence that "primitive" societies are capable of producing forms that are surprising in terms of perfection and beauty.

In short, some twenty years later, "Africa: Masterpieces from a Continent" had not moved on from the methodological and critical approach of the memorable 1984 MOMA exhibition "Primitivism' in 20th Century Art," curated by William Rubin, an exhibition which, as is well known, was accused by post-colonial critics of an ideologically oriented gaze.

The point needs to be repeated: so far the two most common characteristics (present in various combinations and to various degrees) of the planning, preparation, and curation of the exhibitions organized in Italy have been, on the one hand, "freeze-framing"

African works of art in a sort of ethnic inventory (selected as such by our Western culture) by introducing the notions of "ethnic group" and "masterpiece"—the latter a notion that is linked to the centrality of the collector's gaze and has been so badly misused by art collectors and dealers (Tagliaferri 2004:26)—and on the other, working within the modernist perspective which links ethnic or tribal arts to atavistic, spontaneous traditions—in this way anchoring them to a past without history and separating them from the life of the communities that have produced them and continue to produce them.

Echoes of these Eurocentric positions—positions that result in a failure to reflect on the material, discursive, and imaginative practices that create the space of the collection and which point us back towards the Western rather than the African world (whereas, in fact, the crucial thing now would be to address the most problematic issue and the most deeply buried roots of the construct we have made of the "authenticity" and the "identity" of the African Other, a construct stimulated today by the demand for a broader market of art consumption within an art system where the market represents the essential component)—also reverberated in the exhibition "Why Africa?" While admittedly the works selected from the Jean Pigozzi collection exhibited at Turin's Pinacoteca Giovanni e Marella Agnelli—together with the controversial pavilion at the 2007 Venice Biennale—have given us the opportunity to gain a broader and more diversified vision of artistic research on the African continent, it is still embarrassing to be asked to endorse the essentially "neo-primitivist" strategy that underlies the choices embodied in such a collection. Moreover, some of the statements made by André Magnin¹⁶ during a round table on "Contemporary African Art: Its Meaning and Implications" held on October 6, 2007, at Lingotto on the occasion of the exhibition¹⁷—observations which leave no doubts as to his criteria of choice¹⁸ and which clearly show that the organizers do not acknowledge some of the historical implications of their project¹⁹—seem to confirm this feeling of embarrassment. Speaking of African art using the language of the Pigozzi collection amounts to continuing to privilege the search for "spontaneity" and "authenticity." Contemporary African production is given the seal of authenticity by Magnin if it offers "radically different representations of the world" (2007:128). The fact that in contexts that are as extraordinarily "contaminated" and complex as contemporary Africa, Magnin and Pigozzi focus on "authentic" artists²⁰ not "contaminated" by models imported from Europe, demonstrates that the debate continues to be conducted in completely Western terms²¹ even after the concep-

tual involvement of African culture (Parodi da Passano 1999:4–13; Eulisse 2003:11–38).

There is thus nothing arbitrary about citing as a further demonstration of Italy's cultural lag the fact that in Turin it was decided to introduce an "underfed" public to contemporary African esthetics by choosing objects from the Pigozzi collection. As Gianni Baiocchi has written (1999:15), this collection still follows in the path of Pierre Romain-Desfosés, who in the 1940s inaugurated the so-called exotic tendency by setting up an opposition between "spontaneous" African creativity and Western art.

Clearly, despite the fact that today new critical perceptions of concepts such as authenticity, tradition, and so on have become established elsewhere, in Italy the outworn opposition between African world and Western world continues to persist in many of the spheres involved in spreading African culture, history and art. The only conclusion we can draw from this—and it is a conclusion that echoes many of the observations made in this article—is that we Italians still have a lot to learn in this field.²²

GIOVANNA PARODI DA PASSANO teaches the *Anthropology of Art* at the Università degli studi di Genova, Italy. She has conducted research on *Gelede masks in Benin* and on *fétiches* among the *Bobo-Madare (Burkina Faso)* and the *Èvhé-Ouatchi (Togo)*. Maria.Giovanna.Parodi@unige.it

Notes

1 The book contains the first inventory of African art in private Italian collections.

2 The title of Tagliaferri's essay is "But it does move..." The point he makes is that despite the general climate of disinformation and imprecision with regard to African art, and despite "the ongoing fragility of relations between collectors and institutions in Italy" (2004:33), the Italian situation is moving toward a "clear-sighted if elitist awareness of the game in hand" (ibid., p. 18).

3 The Italian interest in collecting African objects began toward the end of the 1950s. At first a rather elitist phenomenon with small numbers of isolated individual enthusiasts, it spread progressively, albeit unsystematically, in Italy in the 1970s with the growth of communities of experts and connoisseurs as well as limited numbers of small but active institutions. Cf. Tagliaferri 2004.

4 On the not very veiled criticisms leveled by the "party of aesthetes" at the "party of anthropologists," see Tagliaferri 2004:27.

5 In Italy, the "Authentic/Ex-Centric" project—which investigated the concept of the "authenticity" of African art in relation to the deeply rooted stereotype, common among not only the general public but also in neo-primitivist critical and curatorial practice, that links it to exoticism—was practically ignored by critics and both the specialist and non-specialist press. The sole exception was Angela Vettese in *Il Sole*—24 Ore (June 17, 2001) and Teresa Macri in *Il Manifesto* (June 2001). International critics and journalists, on the other hand, saw this provocative exhibition as an innovative project and gave it favorable reviews.

6 To give one example: the negative views of French "négrisme" expressed by Carrà.

7 The first Chair in Ethnology at the "Università La Sapienza" in Rome was awarded to the African studies scholar Vinigi Lorenzo Grottanelli in 1960.

8 Among these should be mentioned Bargna 1998, apparently aimed at a hard core of enthusiasts, which aroused so much interest that it was also published in France, Great Britain, and the United States.

9 One need only think of the systematic use in the Italian media (and in particular in popularizing TV programs) of three categories that have long since been deconstructed: tradition, authenticity, and ethnicity. In a media age like ours, this lexicon confirms the broad mass of people in their "idea of Africa" (Mudimbe 1994) as a continent frozen in an eternal present, of African society as a society without history, and African arts as arts devoted to the primordial, the picturesque, and the exotic.

10 This collection, which began in 1989 after the meeting of Jean Pigozzi and André Magnin—co-curator of the epoch-making exhibition "Les Magiciens de la terre" being held at the time at the Centre Pompidou in Paris—is in continual evolution and is added to from year to year with works by artists of various generations from sub-Saharan Africa. One of its distinctive characteristics is its direct relationship with the artists themselves, a factor which contributes to their recognition on the international art scene.

11 Without going into the question of how much the media—helped by the Italian public's lack of familiarity with the genre—have contributed to making the Turin Gallery of Modern Art's project an "event" by presenting as a sensational "discovery" what had already been "discovered" by the historical avant-gardes in the early years of the last century, the two key-words of the title—"Africa" and "masterpieces"—are sufficient to show that this is no innovative project. On the one hand, it appears arbitrary to talk of Africa and not "Africas," reducing the continent to a one-way image selected by our gaze; on the other, the use of the term "masterpieces" is inflated and debatable since it implies a project of hierarchy and a principle of classification according to which "those in the know" (Us) reduce its object to esthetic categories not necessarily shared by those (the Others) who have created the masterpieces.

12 In Italy, independently of whether exhibitions embody the aesthetic perspective or the ethnographic approach (the fact that both are now outmoded is rarely taken into consideration), they continue to make reference to the discursive construct of the Other inside which the unilateral appropriation of the world by the West has taken place. Thus, while the "Westernist syndrome" has been subjected to large-scale critical revision outside Italy, it still reigns supreme in exhibitions put on in Italy, exhibitions which continue to stage the "betrayal" of the "primitives" (Price 1989).

13 It should at all events be emphasized that we are talking about one of the most important exhibitions to have taken place in Italy in the last few years. This is true in terms of the quantity and the quality of the works exhibited and its high media profile, the attention of scholars and art-lovers that the exhibition attracted, as well as the vast public of cultural tourists who visited it—something almost unprecedented in Italy.

14 Not to mention his paternalistic attitude toward the artists present.

15 By way of demonstration of his thesis that the contemporary African artist is someone who creates fantastic works in a topical manner, in his catalogue essay "A Continent of Lights" (2007:128–33) André Magnin quotes Chéri Chérin, an artist active in Kinshasa: "Contemporary African art is the 'reflection of the African soul.'" It is no surprise then that Chéri Chérin, in order to satisfy Magnin's tastes, declared himself to be an artist by vocation and not by academic training, despite the fact that he

had attended a Fine Arts Academy.

16 To quote one exemplary statement (made in my presence during the round table): "I choose the artists who do something that makes sense for me." This declaration establishes and lays claim to the one-way nature of the aesthetic gaze of the curator on objects.

17 There is no trace here of the attempt to "decenter" the West carried out in the last few decades by postcolonial and subaltern studies that came to the fore in the "postcolonial constellation" that was the 2001 "Documenta XI" (to use the words of its curator Okwui Enwezor). As is well known, "Documenta XI" was a radical exhibition which reflected many of the profound fractures in contemporary society and even today can be seen as one of the highest points of reflection in contemporary art on the world as it goes through the phase of globalization.

18 However, if we venture into this territory, the importance of an adequate critical reflection on the questions of memory and identity—themes which above all pose the problem of the representations of African works and contemporary artists in the international art system—becomes evident.

19 Magnin and Pigozzi seem to wish to ignore the fact that for years now many of the most successful African artists are no longer self-taught (and, even if they are, the level of contamination is at all events high). Equally, it is generally true that the language of African artists today is very technology-driven and that if it uses manuality then it does so in a critical vein.

20 It should be added that in Italy recently the boundaries of contemporary art have expanded to include among other things contemporary African creativity by means of a more advanced approach that we might term "conceptualist." Among the exhibitions that have taken this direction we should mention the 2000 show "Mirror's Edge," held in the Castello di Rivoli. In particular, in the richest exhibition among the fringe events at the 2001 Venice Biennale, titled, significantly enough, "Authentic/Ex-centric: Africa in and out of Africa," (curated by Salah Hassan and Olu Oguibe), the question was posed whether a handwoven basket or a high-tech video was more "African" and what can be called authentic in a culture that is now far removed from "the stereotype of the jungle."

References cited

- Baiocchi, G. 1999. "Come guardare all'arte africana: l'opinione di un collezionista." *Arte africana contemporanea*, ed. G. Parodi da Passano, special issue of *Africa e Mediterraneo* 2/3:14-16.
- Bargna, I. 1998. *Arte africana*. Milan: Jaca Book.
- Bassani, Ezio, ed. 2003-2004. *Africa: Masterpieces from a Continent*. Milan: ArtificioSkira.
- Carini, V., ed. 2004. *A Hidden Heritage. Sculture africane in collezioni private italiane*. Milan: Galleria Dalton-Somare.

Carini, V. 2004. "Presenze segrete/A Hidden Heritage." In *A Hidden Heritage. Sculture africane in collezioni private italiane*, ed. V. Carini, pp. 9-13. Milan: Galleria Dalton-Somare.

Eulisse, E. 2003. "Introduzione." In *Afriche, diaspora, ibridi. Il concettualismo come strategia dell'arte africana contemporanea*, ed. E. Eulisse, pp. 11-38. Bologna: AIED editore.

Hassan, S., and O. Oguibe, eds. 2001. *Authentic/Ex-centric: Conceptualism in Contemporary African Art*. Ithaca, NY: Forum for African Arts.

Lionnet, F. 1993. "The Mirror and the Tomb." *African Arts* 34 (3):50-59.

Magnin, A. 2007. "Un continente di luci/ A Continent of Lights." In *Why Africa?*, ed. A. Magnin, pp. 128-33. Milan: Electa.

Mudimbe, V.Y. 1988. *The Invention of Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

_____. 1994. *The Idea of Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Muller, J.-C. 2002. "Rester sur sa réserve ou en sortir? Dans le ventre du musée cannibale." In *Le musée cannibale*, eds. M.-O. Gonseth, J. Hainard, and R. Kaehr, pp. 111-29. Neuchâtel: Musée d'ethnographie.

Parodi da Passano, G. 1999. "Introduzione. Le 'loro' Afriche." *Arte africana contemporanea*, ed. G. Parodi da Passano, special issue of *Africa e Mediterraneo* 2/3:4-13.

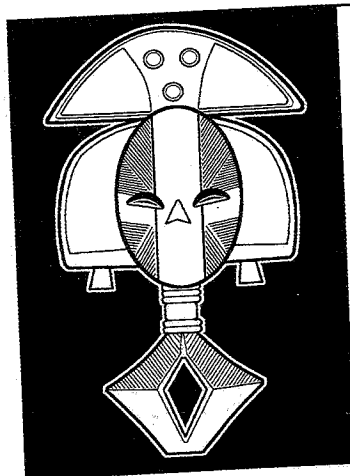
Price, S. 1989. *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Rubin, W., ed. 1984. "Primitivism" in 20th Century Art. New York: The Museum of Modern Art.

Steiner, C.B. 1994. *African Art in Transit*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tagliaferri, A. 2004. "Eppur si muove... / But it does move..." In *A Hidden Heritage. Sculture africane in collezioni private italiane*, ed. V. Carini, pp. 15-36. Milan: Galleria Dalton-Somare.

Vigorelli, L. 2004. "Foreword." In *A Hidden Heritage. Sculture africane in collezioni private italiane*, ed. V. Carini, pp. 7-8. Milan: Galleria Dalton-Somare.



Wm. Darrell Moseley TRIBAL ARTS inc

by appointment: 615.790.3095
email: wdmoseley@webtv.net

Mailing address: P.O. Box 1523
Franklin, TN 37065 USA

Gallery: 427 Main Street
Franklin, TN 37064

correction

Due to a digital image transmission error, the drawing *Head* by William Kentridge was printed in the wrong orientation in *African Arts* 43 (1), p. 15, Fig. 2. The correctly oriented image is reproduced to the right.

2 Head (1994)

William Kentridge, born 1955, South Africa
Charcoal, pastel, and tempera on paper; 50cm x 66.3cm (19 3/4" x 26")
Purchased with funds provided by the Annie Laurie Aitken Endowment
98-12-1

PHOTO: FRANKO KHOURY, NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN ART, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

