

# CONSTRUCTING AFRICAN ART HISTORIES FOR THE LAGOONS OF CÔTE D'IVOIRE

MONICA BLACKMUN VISONÀ



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ASHGATE

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## Preface: Acknowledgements and Libations

When male elders of Lagoon communities gather to discuss the past, or to come to decisions about any weighty matters in the present, palm wine or other drinks appear. As each man invokes and praises his ancestors, he tips the drinking vessel so that the liquid splashes to the floor. He then drinks and passes it to his neighbor. In a similar fashion, I would like to thank many people for their support before beginning to speak of serious things.

My first invocation is to Philip Ravenhill, to whom this book is dedicated. Trained as an anthropologist, passionately engaged with art, utterly smitten with Africa, Phil was a mentor and friend. Many of the questions raised in this book spring from ideas he planted in my mind some twenty years ago. I also thank Judith Timyan and Geoffrey, Brendan, and Amanda Ravenhill for providing me with friendship, wisdom, wonderful meals, and a comfortable bed during my retreats to Abidjan.

I am grateful to the researchers at the Institut d'Histoire, d'Art et d'Archéologie of the University in Abidjan for providing me with an affiliation and a base of operations in the Côte d'Ivoire. I am indebted especially to Jean Polet, who invited my husband to participate in his archaeological research, thus giving him his first connection to African land and African people. I thank the members of the Catholic mission at Memni, the nuns who offered both physical and emotional solace (especially during my first pregnancy), and the Italian priests who welcomed my husband and me in so many ways.

My research was made possible by men and women throughout the Lagoon region who provided me with food, lodging, and personal support. Although I have listed the communities rather than the many individuals that hosted me, I remember and appreciate the generosity and kindness of hundreds of men, women, and young people who assisted me during my travels.

Funding for fieldwork in Côte d'Ivoire, and for research in the archives and museums of Senegal, the US, the UK, The Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, and France, was provided by the University of California at Santa Barbara's grant from the Kress Foundation (in 1981), and by the Fulbright Foundation



(in 1984). My trip to the Côte d'Ivoire in 1989 was made possible by Jerome Vogel's invitation to teach part of a summer program for Parsons School of Design. A Senior Fellowship of the Smithsonian Institution at the National Museum of African Art in 2004–05 allowed me to review research materials after a long hiatus – surrounded by the friendship of wonderful colleagues – while a Summer Research Grant of the University of Kentucky enabled me to write most of the manuscript's first draft.

Many scholars in the US have contributed to this project, beginning with Herbert M. Cole. In addition to advising and guiding me through my graduate work, he has continued to serve as a mentor and friend. Both he and Robin Poynor have been fabulous comrades through over a decade of work on the ACASA Textbook Project. While they have both labored to make me a better writer and scholar, I am particularly indebted to Mark Getlein for his patient instruction as he guided me through the first edition of *A History of Art in Africa*. That project also allowed me to work with teams of extraordinary individuals, especially Eve Sinaiko, Kara Hattersley-Smith, and Julia Ruxton, who have all helped train me for future writing projects. Helen Ronan, our editor for the second edition, encouraged me as I drew up the prospectus for this book. Gitti Salami, who is collaborating with me on a challenging new project, provided a critical review of the preliminary manuscript that shaped this final version, and she helped me address concerns that had been raised by Jacqueline Ettinger. Of course, I am most grateful to Meredith Norwich, at Ashgate Publishing, for the book would not have been possible without her patience, her interest, and her support.

A lively group of friends, all art historians once based in Colorado, encouraged me to ponder some of the issues discussed in this book; I particularly remember discussions with Charles Scillia, Erika Doss, Karen Mathews, Moyo Okedjedi, Annette Stott, M.E. Warlick, Shannon Hill, Vernon Minor, Timothy Standring and the late Jane Comstock. Pat and Chip Coronel reviewed the manuscript and made valuable recommendations, and I am grateful (as always) for their continued friendship.

During my years at Metropolitan State College of Denver, I shared many challenges with my fellow faculty members, and their dedication to their students is still an inspiration to me. I also thank the thousands of men and women who shared their enthusiasm, their varied experiences, and their intelligent questions while enrolled in my art history and art appreciation classes at 'Metro.' Special thanks are due to my former chair, Greg Watts, who forced me to re-evaluate my personal and professional goals, and who thus facilitated my return to this scholarly work.

Colleagues at the National Museum of African Art nominated me for a Senior Fellowship at the Smithsonian Institution, assisted me throughout my residency at the Museum, and made my stay enjoyable as well as productive. While each colleague at the museum provided me with important insights,

I am particularly grateful to Janet Stanley and Chris Kreamer for their contributions to this project and to my development as an Africanist.

When I joined the faculty of the University of Kentucky in 2005, the entire art department extended a warm welcome, and Robert Jensen, Anna Brzyski, Alice Christ, and Jane Peters have helped me reconnect with the discipline of art history. Ben Withers worked hard to help me compose a proposal for the Summer Faculty Research Grant, and his efforts launched the manuscript for this book. Monica Udvardy, an anthropologist and an Africanist at the University of Kentucky, generously read through the entire text and provided me with detailed comments that have made this a better book.

My parents, Rupert and Barbara Blackmun, supported me through years of education, fieldwork, and research. My father, whose recent death has left a gaping hole in our lives, was a constant source of strength. My mother continues to be an inspiration to me, and to our colleagues in African art history. My husband's parents, Teresa Busato and the late Vittorio Visonà, have also been unstinting in their assistance, both practical and spiritual. Marian Visonà and Mark Visonà, who are now both forging their own ties to Africa, continue to give me joy. And most of all, I am grateful for the love of Paolo Visonà, whose dedication to his own scholarly projects has been an example to me throughout the years.

After the libations have been poured by Lagoon elders, it is customary for all of the participants to thank the person who donated the beverages. Donors may politely acknowledge the thanks of the assembly, or may instead lift their hands and say 'God is thanked.' I defer to Lagoon understandings of a world where good work is only made possible through divine grace.

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## Art History in the Lagoons of Côte d'Ivoire

*Is the history of art as presently practiced adequate to meet the challenges of dealing with the art of the whole world? Is it correct to assume that there exists a single cluster of approaches that can be defined as the appropriate intellectual and methodological tools for research and discourse on the history of art? In short, is there a universal history of art and, if so, is it the one evolved in the early decades of this century and refined since then? (Grabar 1982: 281)*

This book was originally intended to be a unified account of the spectacular visual arts of the Lagoon Peoples, or *lagunaires*, a dozen populations who live in the southeastern Côte d'Ivoire, just west of the country's border with Ghana. Yet as I have discussed my research with art historians in other fields, they seemed to be wondering how (or even why) I had investigated the arts of these relatively little known cultures. Art historians seemed to be particularly curious about my studies of performances, and by the participatory nature of my fieldwork. Gradually I realized that they were puzzled, even skeptical, about my application of art historical practices in African contexts. Therefore this book, while still intended to give the reader insights into the creative contributions of Lagoon artists, and into the multivalent roles of the visual arts in Lagoon communities, is a personal assessment of the role of Africanists within the discipline of art history. It thus foregrounds the theoretical and methodological approaches I have used (or I might have used) to construct separate yet intersecting art histories for this region of West Africa.

This is an appropriate time to address the questions posed by Oleg Grabar (1982) and by Henri Zerner (1982) in their editorial statements for *Art Journal's* issue on 'The Crisis in the Discipline.' In 1989, Monni Adams (1989) and Paula Girshik Ben-Amos (1989) surveyed the contributions of art historians and anthropologists to the study of African art in two encyclopedic reviews, but Africanist art historian Henry Drewal wrote that 'in feeling a sense of urgency about documenting the vast array of art traditions across Africa (and beyond), we have concerned ourselves primarily with the content of

our writing ... reflexivity about our own practices and products has not even begun' (1990: 50; see also Blier 1990). Today considerably more references to anthropological, philosophical and art historical theory may be found within specialized studies of African art, and scholars are beginning to re-visit earlier fieldwork data in order to place their own studies within the historiography of African art history (Kasfir 2007).

However, there is still little explicit analysis of the relevance of the work of Africanist art historians to the larger field of art history, even if some leading scholars have been invited to participate in a wider dialogue concerning the practices and goals of art historians (Blier 1993, Okoye 1996), and even though two recent publications engage artists, anthropologists and art historians in debates that echo Grabar's questions (Elkins 2007, Westermann 2005). Creative tensions exist between anthropologists and art historians who study African arts, but one scholar laments that '... the real divide is between the art history that is framed solely within a Eurocentric geographical position and the one that for decades has taken as its purview the whole world and its many peoples and art histories' (Berlo 2005: 183–4).

Any discussion of the practice of art history in Africa must address contested notions of 'art' in the US and Europe that pit conservative art historians against advocates of visual studies, that separate art critics and collectors from practicing artists, and that divide the academic world from popular culture. My students have patiently explained to me that Americans define 'fine art' as paintings (and perhaps statues) intended to be beautiful (or, at the very least, engaged with aesthetic issues). In their view, 'art' serves no useful function in daily life (that is, it is not 'craft'), and has no larger role in society; paintings are merely 'art for art's sake.' Most expect 'art' to act as a window or mirror reproducing a scene in an attractive but recognizable fashion.

According to Gombrich, European art has been literally 'framed' in this way since the sixteenth century, when an heir of the Medici family placed Botticelli's magnificent *Primavera* over his bedstead, creating the world's earliest documented example of art chosen to match the sofa (2000: 108–9). Gombrich clearly documents how paintings lost their religious roles and faded into a secular existence as decorative objects for wealthy homes during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (2000: 79). During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, European philosophers and critics were therefore writing in reference to paintings whose roles in society were exceedingly circumscribed. Their limited experiences of art produced a discourse whose definitions still inform the views of the general public (and my students) today. Art historian Irene Winter has called this set of definitions 'essentially a folk terminology of the European West' that has been used 'to determine both the categories and the standards of measure' of art of all times and all places (2002: 8).

If the word 'art' is still tied to this 'folk terminology' in popular thought, is it still linked to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century definitions by art historians? For most art historians (especially those who specialize in periods other than eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe) the answer would be a definite 'no.' As art history developed as an academic field during the twentieth century, art historians explored the meaning and the context of much older European art forms,<sup>1</sup> and these earlier paradigms have been challenged. Medievalist art historians link art objects such as twelfth-century chalices to theologies and philosophies of the period, and no longer see them as 'minor arts' compared to icons or murals. The shifting social roles and multivalent messages of paintings have been interrogated by generations of art historians, and it would now be unthinkable to limit an analysis of a Dutch still life to a discussion of its formal elements. Much European art, according to scholars, was intended to express reverence, support political figures, flaunt wealth, communicate layered levels of meaning, or create social solidarity – all roles shared by Lagoon arts.

It is also worth noting that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European definitions of 'art' no longer apply to American art being produced today, much to the consternation of the general public. Artists began to challenge those formulations as early as 1912, when Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* demonstrated that art was no longer primarily concerned with aesthetic issues. Granted, much art in the twenty-first century is still useless (not a 'craft') and of limited value to society (as 'art for art's sake'). But it now includes performances, installations, interventions, and multi-media works completely unattached to the earlier conceptions of 'art' as a window or a mirror of the world. Given the inapplicability of nineteenth-century frameworks for twentieth- and twenty-first-century European and American art, there is really no reason to assume that older formulations might somehow be relevant to non-European art of the twentieth and twenty-first century. Blier (1988–89) and MacGaffey (1998) have argued in influential essays.

Thus when Africanist art historians use the term 'art,' they are not suggesting that African creative activity can be evaluated using eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European 'standards of measure' – for art historians no longer use those standards to judge European art created prior to the modern period, or art of the contemporary world. Although a very sophisticated discourse has arisen to both challenge and support their point of view, many Africanist art historians believe that they cannot impose a 'Western definition of art' upon African experience if a 'Western definition of art' simply does not exist.<sup>2</sup> Use of the term 'art' does not imply that the user is referring to a category of human production that is uniform or timeless; the 'art' studied by an Egyptologist is not interchangeable with the 'art' studied by a specialist in Northern Song landscapes. For art historians, 'art' has

few (if any) universal qualities, even if humanity's impulse to manipulate materials to create visually compelling images has appeared in most places and in most periods of time. Recent essays by philosophers would support this belief that 'art' need not be seen as a Western construct (Davies 2000, Dutton 2000).

The question, then, is not 'What do Africans consider to be "art"?,' but 'Which African practices and products can be profitably studied as "art"?'. Reports from peoples scattered across the vast continent provide a variety of culturally specific responses to the aesthetics and meaning of objects (Vogel 1985, van Damme 2006). In the Lagoons of Côte d'Ivoire, no umbrella term covers sculpture, goldwork, ceramics, textiles, and murals, even though there are separate terms for each of those individual categories. However, in each Lagoon language, there is a single word for a talented person, a gifted individual who is able to create surprising, effective, and unusual objects. In Europe and North America, even today, such people are called 'artists.' A Lagoon definition for 'art' would therefore be 'the products of a talented individual.'<sup>3</sup>

This Lagoon definition of 'art' as 'a work created by an artist' would only partially apply to the most expensive 'art' now being sold in American and European galleries today, as leading artists of the West no longer actually 'make' or 'craft' their art, but hire anonymous workers (or fabricators) to manufacture it for them.<sup>4</sup> However, even these designers claim to be the 'creators' of their art, so perhaps the Lagoon definition would be valid in New York. And admittedly, my own working definition of a Lagoon 'artist' does not always overlap with the ways the word is used in Lagoon contexts. For example, the terms are usually masculine, and some men I interviewed would therefore exclude the inspired women who create clay vessels from these linguistic categories. And as in Western Europe, women have become sculptors and painters even when all artists have been assumed to be male.

I have also been fascinated with the complexity of the interwoven messages communicated by the visual displays of festivals in the Lagoon area, and I follow the lead of twenty-first-century artists and art historians in considering these choreographed spectacles to be 'art' – even if they are group projects rather than the creation of a single person. I have chosen to study them as if they were 'performance art,' just as other art historians have applied 'performance theory' to their study of Renaissance festivals or Huichol ritual. Of course, all festivals in the Lagoon region allow men and women to display objects made by single artists, and can thus also be studied as contexts for works that many cultures and many periods would categorize as particularly accomplished examples of 'art.'

The next chapter presents my reasons for choosing Lagoon arts as a research topic, and then surveys the interdisciplinary approaches I explored



as I sought to locate, describe, and evaluate Lagoon art forms. It is thus a brief survey of the perspectives on art and Africa offered by specific fields within the academy. The third chapter describes the general framework of the tasks involved in this research. It compares the specific methodologies I chose to the research projects of other Africanists, and to the practices of art historians specializing in European art. It is thus an examination of practical rather than theoretical issues in the study of African art. After these introductory sections, subsequent chapters focus upon separate categories of Lagoon artistic expression. Each weighs the diverse narratives employed by foreign observers and local specialists in order to demonstrate how each may produce a different form of analysis, or a different history of that particular form of art. The last section returns to our initial questions but reverses them: are the methodologies developed for the study of African art appropriate for the study of art from European cultures? To what degree may scholars choose 'hybrid' or 'non-parochial' approaches to the study of art (Blier 2007, Okoye 2005) and still contend that they are constructing art histories?

## Notes

1. A copious literature traces the history of art history. See Hatt and Klonk (2006).
2. See Apter (2007) for insights into the sophistication of African critiques in general.
3. Practices of Lagoon artists have been discussed in an earlier publication (Visonà 1987d) and will be the subject of a future project, an exhibition on the 'divinely inspired artists' of the Akan. See also D'Azevedo (1989).
4. Most African artists still make their own art. Exceptions include Rachid Koraichi, based in Algeria, Tunisia and France, who regularly hires men and women to dye and embroider fabric for his installations, and El Anatsui, whose assistants help him sew foil and bottlecaps together for his huge sculptures.