



The Power and Politics of Colour

Opinions of an Intuitive Collector

Painting the Picture

In the African tribal artifact market, intense colours and European paints seem to be considered more of a deterrent than a motivation for purchase.

But the reality is that with genuine African artifacts, rich colour and European paints:

- Reflect a more authentic sense of African ritualism
- Give the piece greater ritual energy and power than non coloured pieces

Additionally they are:

- less likely to be counterfeit or fraudulent (in form-for-form comparison)
- less susceptible to irrational price inflation.

If it is a choice between paint or patination on “like quality” pieces, give me paint every time. “You must be mad” I hear you say.

Before I go on to explain why, it is important that I apply a definition to “genuine African artifacts”. In my opinion a genuine African artifact must have been made by an African artist for a specific ritual purpose and also must have been used during tribal ritual ceremony.

When I say that painted pieces are less likely to be counterfeit, I qualify that with a form-for-form statement. This simply means that the statement applies to “like quality” pieces, that items of similar quality are less likely to be counterfeit if they have European paint rather than patination.

So now I will defend my opinion and hopefully stimulate some open debate that helps to enlarge, deepen or enrich our emotional response to African objects. Maybe it will even assist in discovering something that otherwise may have escaped our attention.



The Authenticity of Change

Some purists seem to share the ideal that African art is “authentic” only if the style was conceived in an environment untainted by European influence. Ironically these idealists conveniently forget that African art was highly influential on what they consider “authentic” western art, such as the cubist and abstract art movements.

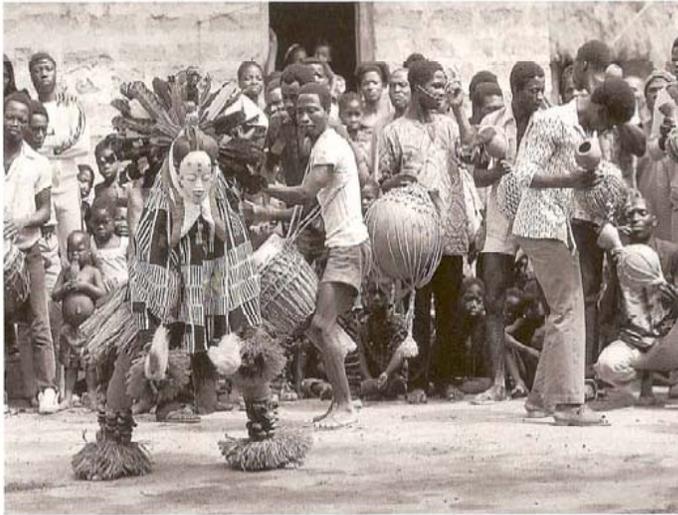
It would be like saying “only Christian Reformation art is a legitimate reflection of western religious art”.

I’m sure we would agree that all art, ritualistic or otherwise is in a constant state of flux.

Just as in the last 100 years western art movements and fashion have evolved and been adopted from the abstract (Picasso) to the expressionists (after WWII), so too has African ritualistic art. One well known example is Goli, the most widespread and typical dance to represent the Baule, which was actually adopted from their neighbours, the Wan people. Most Baule villages acquired Goli some time between 1900 and 1910, either from a neighbouring village or by sending people directly to the Wan to purchase and learn the dance.

In “African Masks of the Barbier Mueller Collection” Maria Kecskesi and Lazlo Vajada also point out that one of the best known of all art forms, the Chi Wara masks of the Bamana (a headdress with a striking antelope design) emerged only just over a century ago. Originally it was a mask consisting of a cap of wicker with two small horns and a face piece of fabric or leather.

The only certainty in African art is continent-wide evolution, innovation and creativity. Diversity has been widely promoted by local art patrons and cultural institutions, such as kings and chiefs coming to power wanting to distinguish their reigns. Much the same as it has been throughout European history.



Flali mask in performance, Bangofla, Northern Guro Region 1983

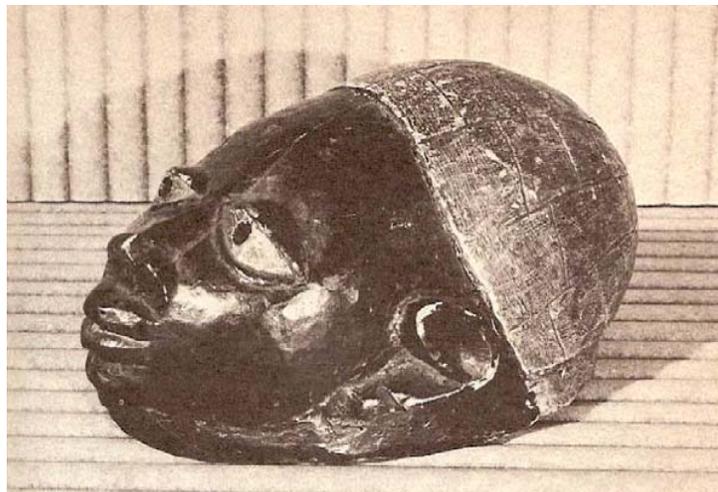
This innovation and development is obvious, and can still be seen in masquerades such as *Flali*, invented by an artist working with a performer in a Guro community in Cote d'Ivoire during 1970's.

In both ancient and more modern history, tribal groups have looked outside their local communities for inspiration, in

other cultural areas of Africa and also other continents. But how they expressed that inspiration has been unique to the group or individual. William Fagg wrote "every tribe is, from the point of view of art, a universe to itself...the tribe...uses art among many other means to express its internal solidarity and self sufficiency and conversely, its difference from all others".

It is no doubt that paint (and therefore the intensity of recent colour palettes) are certainly European influences. African artisans of pre-European times employed organic or mineral pigments.

A Gelede mask seized by Lieutenant-Governor John H Glover between 1864 and 1870 from "a heathen temple in a small town which was destroyed" can now be seen in the Manchester Museum in all its oil painted glory.



Gelede mask painted with European oil paints seized between 1864 and 1870 by Governor Glover. Ironically the photo is in black and white. Ill 65. African Art. Frank Willet.

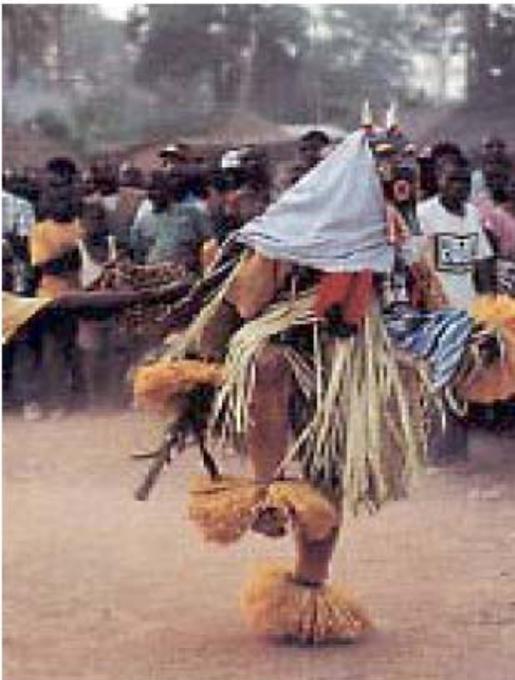


In the early to mid 20th Century polychromy or coloured masks were generally characteristic of certain geographical areas, such as southern Nigeria and the southwestern region of the DRC.

Now imported oil-based paints are widespread.

Western society is the only place that has the luxury to debate the ideological nuance of authenticity by antiquity, influence or isolation.

The evolution of African ritualistic fashion through colour and paint has created a new authenticity – it is simply a new reality in Africa. Genuine pieces of tribal African art that use paint reflect a more authentic sense of African ritualism.



A Zamble performance expressed in colour, motion and shape by dancer and audience

Colour as Ritual Energy

The African idea of a beautiful object is that it should not only correspond to tribal artistic rules and concepts but that it should have the energy to cure, place curses, to instruct, entertain and indeed to protect individuals and communities. It is not only the mask that provides the energy it is the paraphernalia, the dancer and the belief given without reservation by the audience. The rituals themselves are a physical release of emotional tension in which the mask will only play one part – whether the ritual is judiciary, social regulation, initiation or entertainment.

To paraphrase Ladislav Segy, the power of this physical release is through motion, shape, colour and musical vibrations. These combine to produce an exhilarating ecstatic effect: unconscious powers are released, reality is obliterated and a spirit of power is assumed.



“However once removed from their African context, artifacts often become fragments – literally and metaphorically. Most lose their original surfaces and their paraphernalia including jewelry, cloth and magical substances – what remains are lifeless shells, retained because they are of ethnographic interest or commercial value”.

If we accept this perspective expressed by Jean Baptiste Bacquart in *The Tribal Arts of Africa* then we must also accept that of motion, colour and music, colour is the only tangible element that can follow the raw form of the mask adding to the power and ritual energy of the “fragment” held in a collection.

In this Guro Zeiwe mask colour is not used for decoration. It is used for emphasis, light and shade, symmetrical arrangement and expression – from different angles the mask can appear nonchalant, aggressive or mischievous – revealing aspects of its energy and power beyond its ritual context.



A painted Guro Zeiwe mask collected in 1983

Western Sensory Interrelations



These two Ijo masks of similar form create different levels of visual response.

If, as Westerners, we chose to ignore the ethnographic or ritually symbolic value of colour and say that form should be considered separately of content, then the argument for paint and colour is further strengthened.

Ladislav Segy best said it in *African Sculpture Speaks*:



The experience of using one of our senses by touching the sculpture and adding this sensation to our visual perception is comparable to other sensory interrelations, such as “warm” and “cold” colours, also “weight” of colours and the colours of musical compositions. When we see a form, its perception will depend upon our position. And that which we see can be intensified by different stimuli – touch, colour, smell and so on.

Defining Value

Many commercially driven collectors (coincidentally those that sometimes define themselves as “purists” and therefore often with the loudest share of voice) seem caught up in the need for stylistic unity – without criteria how else can the value of their pieces be quantified? Rarity and especially uniqueness have been set up as the supreme values. These “commercial” collectors will always be externally referenced ie. driven by commercial intent. If a piece fits neatly into a criteria and/or is defined as rare it is easier to categorise as “good” or “bad” (valuable or not) and of course, that is how they make their money.

Which is OK.

Amateur collectors sometimes bemoan that genuine painted artifacts have not been given the credit they deserve by these collectors. In fact, the less painted pieces fit into a commercial criteria and the less credit they are given the better. It means that they are less likely to be reproduced en-mass and less likely to suffer irrational price hikes.

Is Colour More Genuine?

There were two quotes that triggered my consideration of this topic.

The first was a sentence in Frank Willets book African Art. It said “Most African sculpture in Western collections is unpainted, yet in Africa, sculpture is probably more commonly painted than not” (page 152)

The second was from an email conversation I had with Bob Ibold from www.masksoftheworld.com who said:



“I have a suspicion that painted masks stand a better chance of being authentic. The market's preference for earth tones and "old" patinas is well understood by commercial carvers and traders. If you look at the photographs taken by anthropologists working almost anywhere in Africa over the past 40 years, you see that bright colors are the norm”

Both these statements are reflected in a case study on colour and collecting reported in a 1989 paper on the African art movement by Christopher Steiner.

In November 1987 an illustrated book entitled *Potomo Waka* appeared on display shelves in Abidjan bookstores. It contained 120 colour photographs of sculpted slingshots from the private collection of one of the co-authors Giovanni Franco Scanzi. In the preface to *Potomo Waka* the authors took great pains to emphasize that wooden slingshots are not products of the colonial era but pre-date the advent of European contact. The reason the authors were so concerned with proving a pre-colonial era is that the collectors were defining African art as “authentic” only if the style was conceived in an environment untainted by European influence.

Because of this, when Scanzi started his collection of slingshots, he refused to purchase those that had been painted. As a result, all painted slingshots were sanded down and stained with potassium permanganate before being presented for sale at his home. (In his paper Christopher Steiner reported that in a sample of 500 slingshots seen over a year over 50% had been painted) – (Christopher Steiner – *African Art in Movement: Traders, Networks and Objects in the West African Art Market*. AH Number 3. 1989.)

He also reported that traders found that brightly painted objects did not sell as well as faded, older looking ones (even when they were genuine) so even older, genuine pieces were stripped back, losing their original surfaces and painted with permanganate to give them an “older” look.



This action by traders and attitude from commercial collectors makes brightly painted objects less prone to the commercial activity of counterfeiting and replicating for commercial gain and they probably are more likely to be artifacts made by an African artist for a specific ritual purpose (bearing in mind our criteria of “form-for-form” comparison).

So when you’re looking for your next mask acquisition, leave the patina pursuit to the so called “purists”. And instead of considering the power and politics of colour a curse, consider it a blessing.

References:

1. A History of African Art, Harry. N. Abrams Inc Publisher NY 2001.
2. African Masks of the Barbier Mueller Collection. Prestel Verlag Munich. 1998.
3. African Art, Western Eyes. Susan Vogel. Yale University Art Gallery. 1997.
4. The Tribal Arts of Africa, J.B. Bacquart. 1998.
5. African Art, Frank Willet. Praeger Publishers Inc NY. 1971.
6. African Sculpture Speaks. Ladislav Segy. 1975.