Known Artists but Anonymous Works
Fieldwork and Art History
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We have come to a watershed in the study of African artists. Streams of information from many divergent sources in the field have gathered over time, have multiplied and grown, running together to form a deep body that, reexamined as a whole, yields some surprising consistencies. The paradox expressed in the title above emerges in virtually all the in-depth field studies of artists in Africa: in their own societies, African artists are known and even famous, but their names are rarely preserved in connection with specific works of art they have made.1 Can this be established as a research finding? Why was it not recognized as such before? How widespread is it? What might this reveal about concepts of the artist and the creative process—and about the nature of the art object? What paths does it indicate for the discipline of African art history?

Since the 1940s African art history has followed methodologies similar to those used in Greek and Medieval to early Renaissance art history—among others.2 On stylistic and documentary grounds, scholars identify the hand of an individual master and assemble an oeuvre, identifying the artist by a name of convenience until a personal name comes to light (e.g., "The Master of Flemalle" is now thought to have been Robert Campin).3 African art history painstakingly assembles the oeuvre of individual African artists while recognizing that this exercise is not one that would normally have been practiced or have been meaningful in the African societies where these artists worked (as was likely the case in Medieval cultures as well).

Despite its emergence in many different studies, the paradox of the well-known artist with unattributed works has generally been seen as a research flaw or problem rather than a research finding or conclusion. As John Picton has put it, in reference to Yoruba art: "...the memory of artistry is preserved but with no means of relating that memory to material artifacts; but it is a problem that will need to be addressed" (1994:5). Since a negative hypothesis can never be proved, it has seemed reasonable to assume that more, or better, record keeping would produce the missing artists' names. Over the past fifty years, however, a relatively large number of thorough, highly motivated, and qualified researchers have sought information on artists, and most report this same lacuna while succeeding in collecting other kinds of data about artists (their working techniques, practices, training) and about objects (their names, meaning, uses, symbolism, etc.). I would argue that, because cultures preserve the knowledge they value, any information that has so consistently eluded researchers should be taken to indicate areas of little or no cultural relevance to the people under study. Had the artists' works been known but the information withheld from researchers (which I do not believe), one would still have to conclude that artists were not publicly named as the authors of particular artworks.

Authorship as an Attribute of the Artwork
Baule and other African patrons who traveled long distances to procure sculptures by given artists generally did so because they desired the fine objects which they were assured of getting—not because they wanted to own a work of art by a particular artist, as a Western collector might. Authorship per se is seldom a significant attribute of the artwork in its original African context, in sharp contrast to Western art history and collecting where the artist's name is the first and most central attribute. How often is a work referred to simply as "a Cézanne"

All sculptures illustrated in this article were made by Baule artists in Ivory Coast. Objects shown in color, and the jar in Figure 11, are exhibited in "Baule: African Art/Western Eyes," currently on view at the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution. The exhibition was curated by Susan Vogel and organized by the Yale University Art Gallery in collaboration with the Museum for African Art, New York.

1. Moon mask. Wood. 21 cm (8.3'). Collection of William W. Brill. The Mblo entertainment masks illustrated here and in Figure 3 show the kinds of personal interpretations individual artists bring to a rigidly defined object type.
or “a Botticelli” rather than as “a landscape” or “a Madonna?” In the original setting, the name of an African artist, in fact, is usually linked only loosely with the objects he has made, even the most public of them. This information dissipates with time, not because it is secret but because no special effort is made to preserve it. More often than not, the African sculptor becomes virtually irrelevant to the life of the art object once his work is complete. There is much evidence that fine works of art were highly valued, but there is no evidence that their value attached to the fact of their authorship. (Compare this with the Western art market, where value is directly related to verifiable authorship, so that even an immature or mediocre work by an acclaimed artist has market value and art historical significance apart from its success as art.)

Essentially, the very concept of authorship in African art (and in Roman, Medieval, and most world art traditions) differs from the contemporary idea of the sculptor as the object’s main creator. Field studies stress that it is relatively easy to discover many other names associated with the art object: the name of the spirit or god served by the work; the personal name of the sculptor; the name of the individual or group who owns or commissioned the piece; and above all, diviners, and priests who activate it. These people may be considered to be its makers, for they play key roles in making the object what it is. Many works of art become animate, capable of action in the sense that their presence, when consecrated, allows things to happen. The person responsible for consecrating the object may thus be more essential than the carver, since the unconsecrated object would not “work”; it would only be a hollow form.

The art object’s location in a web of connections is more significant than its identity as part of the artist’s oeuvre. More durably and tangibly, the object will be attached to a known private owner or to a communal group or shrine which maintains the work’s essential identity. Finally, it may belong to a ritual, architectural, or regalia ensemble, as well as a lin-

eage of objects that have the same name, each made to replace its decayed predecessor. All of these attributes of the work of art are likely to be more widely known and carefully remembered than its ascription to a particular artist.

The Context of Western Politics and Scholarship

The anonymity of African artworks (not artists) has been noted all along in the literature. Nonetheless, a spate of anthologies on the artist, tradition, and individual creativity in Africa appeared during the 1960s and early 70s. And in the years fol-
Among the most pressing (except among artists!), inquiries specifically about artists (Himmelsheber's, Fischer's, and Homburger's are among the earliest and most sustained) naturally produced much fuller information about them.

The other reasons may be found in the intellectual and political contexts of the original scholarship. In the United States the study of African art as art has been more or less dominated by two different objectives, appearing in two overlapping phases: the first of discovery, beginning around 1915, and the second of justification, beginning around mid-century. These are now largely completed, and the field seems to be at the beginning of a third phase marked by broadening perspectives. The desire for justification gained importance during the 1950s and '60s, as major art institutions and individuals invested more of their fortunes and reputations in African art, and as pioneers in universities and museums argued for the inclusion of African art in the corpus of world art.

Significantly, the late '60s was also the period in which America's simmering racial tensions erupted dramatically, with inevitable impact on the study of African art. In this charged context it was less possible than ever to create apolitical exhibi-
tions or publications, and many professional Africanists became advocates for the material they studied. During the 1970s a generation of professors and curators was trained, often young people who had lived in Africa and had a deep personal commitment to the continent. They—or rather we, for at that time I became the Metropolitan Museum’s first curator of African art—were often motivated by an explicit desire to justify the inclusion of African art in the art institutions in which we worked.

For these scholars and curators, it seemed necessary to establish that African art had the basic qualities of other fully accepted art traditions, none more prestigious than European art of the Renaissance and later. They (or we) were eager to contradict the stereotype of an art that emanated almost unconsciously from a collective culture, anonymous and devoid of history—a notion of sub-Saharan Africa that had left it outside the history of art to which art museums and art history departments were dedicated. Above all, it was important to establish the work of art as an autonomous object of aesthetic contemplation and the artist as a creative individual with total control of his tools and materials. The relationship between tradition and creativity was a central issue.

With the zeal of missionaries, we did field research on artists, collecting evidence of individual creativity and local aesthetic criteria. It was important to document African masks and sculptures as richly meaningful symbolic objects made with training and knowledge, like those in the European canon. Papers and articles on African art frequently cited Irwin Panofsky, and later Michael Baxandall, associating the study of African art with that of Renaissance art. Little matter that perhaps a majority of the artworks exhibited in the Metropolitan Museum and taught in most art history departments had been created in contexts much closer to the African one than to the Renaissance model. Chinese bronzes, Egyptian tomb sculptures, Greek vases, Medieval ivories, French furniture, Tiffany windows, virtually all religious art, many drawings, wax and clay studies, and a dozen other things—being well established in the canon of world art—and less charged with contemporary racial politics—were automatically accepted, while many curators and professors maintained that African objects were not really art.

My own work was typical of the movement to justify African art in academic art history and fine art museums. One of my early exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum was “The Buli Master: An African Artist of the 19th Century,” which named and celebrated an individual hand in 1980. There were both scholarly and political reasons to present African art like Greek or Medieval art—the Metropolitan had just spent a record amount to acquire a stool by the Buli Master, and a substantial “one-man show” for a traditional African master had never been held. This artist, considered comparatively “old,” could uphold the message announced in the title: Africa, too, had old masters.

The final years of the twentieth century have witnessed a broad acceptance of African art as one of the great artistic achievements of humankind: its place in the canon now seems assured. It may not be to everyone’s liking, but virtually all the leading American art institutions that might be expected to commit to African art in their programs have done so. We now seem to be entering a third phase, free from the need to claim for African art the qualities of the European art tradition and liberated to reclaim for Africa some of its own singularity.

**Baule Artists**

Whenever I asked Baule konye, or trance diviners, they were willing to tell me who had carved their sculptures. Some could not produce the artist’s full name, but they usually remembered his given name or the name of his village. This was true of works they had commissioned themselves; most did not know who had made inherited objects. I noticed, however, that artists’ names were rarely, if ever, volunteered by any of the owners of objects,

These men’s masks, whose name means “gods in (or of) the bush,” appear in fearsome spectacles featuring violent behavior and magical feats. Because they are sacred masks, their sculptors are not publicly acknowledged.

and I eventually realized that my questions would not have been appropriate for a Baule person to ask. Though his sculptures might be visible, the artist’s identity had no place in the important communication with wild spirits that occurs during a divination session. Komjen virtually never perform without accessories made by more than one artist: a decorated hat, carved wooden gong mallet (Fig. 2), and sometimes sculptures placed on display. Yet most diviners were emphatic: no one could ask the name of the artist who made their objects—not their clients, not their neighbors, and certainly not other komjen, their competitors. During a performance the main focus of attention is the diviner him- or herself, and the spirits that speak through their human partner. The sculptors are only some among many individuals who contribute to the performance’s aesthetic appeal, its drama, and the impact of the messages divulged there—the assistants and musicians who perform with the komjen being the most conspicuous. In private, a client might bring a figure sculpture to a diviner to evaluate after the death of the relative who had owned it. The first question the diviner would ask is whether the object was known to be efficacious. The name of the maker would never come up, not even out of curiosity. What matters is the name of the spirit it was made to serve, and possibly the type of wood from which it was made.

When Baule artists’ names are publicly mentioned, however, it is in discussions and recollections quite unrelated to the critical context in which such discussions occur in art history. The contexts in which artists are remembered reveal much about the role of the sculptor in Baule culture, and they go a long way toward explaining why the artist may be well known, even though the objects can be rightly described as “anonymous.” In the Baule case, the author’s identity is treated as a minor fact of no relevance to anyone but the person who commissioned the object or a person seeking to order a similar work. So, while the artist is often remembered as a man who did certain remarkable things and went certain places, he is often “forgotten” in connection with specific objects. Among the Baule (again as elsewhere in Africa), the acquisition of sculpture is made directly from the artist face to face, without a middleman. He is thus more likely to be personally known to the purchaser of the art object in a Baule village than to a collector in contemporary Paris or New York who purchases from a gallery.

The first and most explicit discussion of a Baule artist’s identity and his skills centers around the commissioning of sculptures, mainly spirit-spouse figures. If a recently acquired sculpture is impressive, people will ask where it was carved and by whom, questions that are appropriate only in relation to newly made objects. Adults explain that they want to know where a sculpture was made, and the name of the artist, in case they or someone they know needs to commission one in the future. Where the object was made is more important than the sculptor’s personal name, because so many Baule people have the same names. It would be impossible to find an artist if he had only his name, whereas he could be found fairly easily if one could go to his village and inquire. This kind of dis-
cussion is utilitarian and contributes only minimally to an artist’s fame.

The other context in which Baule men and women may discuss a given artist is as a conspicuous character in society. In the Baule world, people are the most interesting and most discussed thing, and artists certainly excite comment as personalities. They are talked about and remembered for their behavior, their idiosyncrasies, and their remarkable abilities, but not particularly for having made this or that specific work. Significantly, they are no more likely to be remembered than other members of the community who distinguish themselves one way or another. Their genealogies are known and discussed—as are the kinship relations of most people. As individuals, sculptors are of course known to everyone in their villages and sometimes over a much wider area. Baule people, like other peoples in Africa, do not prize or even emphasize individuality as a general social value. The artist is esteemed for what he can do rather than for the singular individual he is.

The artist’s name is similarly dissociated from entertainment masks, even though they are surrounded by few interdictions, and do not embody spirits (Figs. 1, 3). The names of the performer and of the mask itself are likely to be mentioned by many spectators, but the name of the carver is irrelevant. Dancers who wear masks (Fig. 4) say that the most important aspect of their performance is the movement of the dance. (Aliisa LaGamma [1998:22] reports a similar finding among the Punu of Gabon.) Kalou Yao of Kami, a great dancer, said that he had been born with this talent, and that since he was the best dancer, he should be given the best carved mask to wear. He remarked that the aesthetic quality of the wooden mask was finally secondary. In the case of the men’s sacred masks, the bo nun amain (Fig. 5), the artist is even less publicly acknowledged.

Women are not supposed to ask who carved a mask, not even if it is an entertainment portrait mask of a woman (Fig. 7); they are not supposed to know (or at least acknowledge knowing) anything at all about the subject—where a mask comes from, who makes or keeps it, or who wears it. This means that men should be careful about identifying mask carvers in conversation for fear that women or children might overhear.

Public knowledge of the artist’s identity may actually impinge upon the prestige, power, or success that is supposed to attach to the owner. The spiritual weight of the object, the locus of an immaterial presence, matters much more than the ordinary mortal who did the carving; the success of a mask performance may depend on its separation from the everyday or on a certain amount of mystification that would be compromised by a recognition of the prosaic facts of its making. Baule owners of traditional sculptures acquire them from distant carvers if they can afford to, or from itinerant ones, perhaps because these artists can be most conveniently “overlooked” later. The practice of artists carving in solitude may serve a related purpose—among others—of distancing the finished object from the everyday. The fact that virtually all other creative artists—such as potters, casters, weavers, wall painters—as well as carvers for the tourist trade, routinely work in public among the Baule would tend to support this explanation.

Adje Loukou Gondouss, a Baule kompon with whom I discussed these issues in Lolobo in 1998, compared the artist to a parent, saying the sculptor was
like the mother of the object. But when I probed, he changed the analogy, saying the sculptor was actually like a midwife who delivered the spirit into material form. Baule cosmology holds that the unborn already exist in the Nolo, the other world, waiting to be born, so in Baule belief parents, like midwives, bring beings into this world without bringing them into existence. So too, the spirit preexists the creation of the sculpture (which is its temporary abode), and the spirit will survive its loss or destruction. Gold face pendants and beads in the adja, the Baule sacred family treasure, belong to the ancestors. If they were melted down and cast in other shapes, they would still harm anyone who tried to appropriate them, for the gold belongs to the ancestors, while the aesthetic form given it by an artist is incidental.

Kongo and Other Artists

More extreme than the Baule case is that of the Kongo: the sculptor’s work is not even necessary. Wyatt MacGaffey writes: “The nkisi-object is thought of as a container for the nkisi-force. Often its ‘body’ (nitu) is a gourd, a bag, a bark box, a pot or a snail shell, but it may well be a wooden figure to which ‘medicines’ (bilongo)
have been added. Without the medicines the container is nothing...” (1991:5). The Kongo example is an extreme because of the great variety of objects that can be interchanged with a carved figure, but it serves to underscore a widespread belief that the sacred work of art is usually just the container for a supernatural force that is far more important.

As the maker of the container for a preexisting spirit, or of an object which is the embodiment of meaning already known to all, the artist is probably not the absolute creator or originator we mean in the modern sense of “artist.” Bogumil Jewsiewicki writes this about the artist in premercantile Central African societies:

> The artists...may have given birth to forms, but those forms did not become the bearers of the artists' social identity. And the artist held no copyright over any form unless politically authorized to do so. A Kuba king, for example, could proclaim himself the author of any new form created by the artists of his court (Bope n.d. 12-13, Vansina 1978). The distinction between the material act of creation and the social title of creation is analogous to a social group’s treatment of parenthood: the father is considered a parent only if—through an agreement such as marriage, adoption, or purchase—he has the right to engender the relationship that brings his offspring into a given group. (Jewsiewicki 1991:135)

For the Kono of Sierra Leone, Kris Hardin reports a similar disjunction between the literal maker and the socially recognized author of a cloth. Even though women do no weaving, a Kono woman “will say that she wove the cloth, which means she hired the weaver, who then wove it for her. In addition, people tend to forget the name of the man who wove a particular cloth: it is much more likely that they will remember [the woman] who spun the thread, as this is usually the person who gives the cloth away as a gift (or alternatively still possesses it)” (Hardin 1996:36-37). Warren d’Azevedo writes: “When one admired the work of a singer, a musician or a woodcarver, one was usually informed of the name of the patron as though the identity of the actual producer was insignificant” (1973:332). And Simon Ottenberg observes, “Sometimes the client was considered the maker of the object, the artist only the mechanism of its production.” Daniel Biebuyck, half a continent away among the Lega of the Congo, had found the same selective memory: “It is most noteworthy that the living owners of the artworks, in tracing the history of individual pieces, provide the names of successive owners of the object, then invariably wind up with the first owner of the piece, ignoring or simply not knowing its maker” (1976:141).

Yoruba Artists

Surprisingly, the Yoruba area provides the fullest evidence for the dissociation of the artist’s reputation from particular objects, because it has the richest and deepest art historical research. The paradox of known artists and anonymous works that I observed among the Baule is mentioned repeatedly in *The Yoruba Artist* (Abiodun, Drewal & Pemberton 1994), which is the most extensive and thorough as well as the most recent book on artists in Africa. Rowland Abiodun frames the issue most clearly: “The problem of identifying individual artists among the Yoruba is still very much with us. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that many Yoruba artists do not sign their works in the way artists in other societies have” (Abiodun, Drewal & Pemberton 1994:41). John Picton describes his own extended field research on artists in the mid-1960s, following upon William Fagg’s which had succeeded in locating and naming a dozen of the most important artists or workshops:

I was able to establish relative chronologies for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in regard to who was the father of whom, and who taught whom. Nevertheless, one of the most tantalizing aspects of research in Opin was the apparent impossibility of identifying the variety of individual hands with all the names of sculptors of the previous hundred or so years, except in a very few cases. To what could one attribute this apparent loss of memory?...I was shown many sculptures...but such was the inconsistency of attribution that, with the exception of Dada Owolabi [the present-day carver in Isara], names could not be put to hands with any certainty....The name Rotimi Babajide Ololaj was widely remembered throughout Opin, but like the sculptors [cited]...he too is an
example of the memory of a sculptor surviving without reference to specific works.

(Picton 1994:8–10)

Most of the sculpture in question had been made within living memory, and some of the masters were still alive. In all likelihood, what Picton encountered was not an accidental loss of memory but the result of a deliberate choice—like the artists’ choice not to mark or sign their works in some way. Cultures preserve the information that they value, and African traditions conserve copious and complex bodies of information about material things—such as the precise boundaries of their fields and forests. Oriki, Yoruba praise poems, memorialize great carvers’ names and reputations, but they remember the artist as a man, without linking him to specific works. None seem to tie even the most famous artists to specific, material artworks, though a few mention towns in which a sculptor worked and cite general features or types of objects at which he excelled. Wande Abimbola writes:

I have attempted to demonstrate the knowledge that we can gain from oral literature in our study of the Yoruba tradition of wood carving. We may never be able to find a single wooden object that can be recognized as an authentic carving of Lagbayi [who is celebrated in oriki], but our knowledge of his work and the society in which he lived will certainly continue to enrich our understanding of Yoruba wood carving.

(Abimbola 1994:142)

Identifying Artists: Methodologies

I would like to describe three familiar examples of Baule workshops or individual hands, each identified by different means: 1) an artist and a substantial body of his work encountered in person and recorded (this is the only means completely free from conjecture); 2) a single object recorded in the field, with some information about the artist to whom other works can be attributed on the basis of style; 3) a group of closely similar objects assigned to an artist or workshop purely on stylistic grounds, with a name of convenience attached to this hypothetical artist. A fourth method is presented here for the first time: a series of objects are securely assigned to a single hand and time period by examination under magnification of what I call the adz signature.

Kouassi Koffi Joseph

The first and most certain method confirms the identification of an artist and his oeuvre absolutely, but I have found that it also suggests deep flaws in all the other methods of attribution we rely upon. I met the sculptor Kouassi Koffi Joseph in Yakouakoukro village in the Warebo area in 1982. He showed me a dozen pulleys (Figs. 8a, b) carved in anticipation of clients (as was often the case for such personal, decorative objects) and a figure he had made some years earlier and never sold (Fig. 9). His body of work represented a remarkably wide range of types and even styles—something I had found before when examining the objects a sculptor showed me in the field. Comparing the eyes carved by Kouassi Koffi Joseph, for example, one can find crisply faceted ones and soft, ill-defined ones, as well as an example delineating open upper and lower lids.
This container for shea butter is one of many works from an unnamed workshop located around Dimbokro during the first half of the twentieth century.

All his pulleys had a generic similarity when they were photographed, but I am sure that if one encountered them today, scattered in a dozen collections and displaying disparate patinas of time and use, it would be impossible to assert that all were by a single hand, much less to connect the figure to any of them. The pulley with a horned head on the extreme right in Figure 8a might even have been mistakenly attributed to a Guro artist. A figure that is closely similar to the one Kouassi Koffi Joseph showed me can be attributed to him with relative confidence. That works by an artist look similar when grouped together but are hard to connect when scattered sounds a loud warning. It is certain that many artists’ works are too varied in style to ever be correctly attributed using only stylistic similarity, the principal tool of historians of African art.

The Nzipri Circle of Artists

The second means of identification is exemplified by a single old figure I was shown in a village I scarcely knew (Fig. 10). The owner remembered the name of the original owner, his great-grandfather, and that he had commissioned the piece in the Nzipri Baule region (between Didievu and Tiebissou). He brought it home to the Agba Bonou region probably in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The owner knew nothing else about the fine female figure, though he doubted that it was for a komyen trance diviner.

I suspect there was what I shall call an Nzipri Circle of artists carving in the central Baule area during the late nineteenth century. They produced a small but distinguished group of figure sculptures; among the more prominent are the superb pair of figures in the Metropolitan Museum and the bearded male figure exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in 1935. This corpus seems too varied and too numerous to assert that they are all from a single hand (despite the provocative example of Kouassi Koffi Joseph), and since none of the examples show characteristics of twentieth-century Baule art, I conjecture that they are the work of a single generation of colleagues who influenced each other, rather than by successive generations of master and followers. The style of the Nzipri Circle of artists is characterized by a long, supple line, the body having a soft, rounded belly, the face concave and heart-shaped with large round eyes, and the asymmetrical coiffure often showing unusual, large, raised ornaments. The idiosyncratic treatment of the lower leg is an easily recognized trait: the ankle is usually behind the center of gravity, well behind the knee, and the ankles are small, pulled close together, giving the figure tension and a sort of lift off the high, tight, deeply ribbed base.

An Unnamed Corpus

The third corpus, built solely on stylistic grounds, includes scores upon scores of figure sculptures made probably by a number of hands over a long period of time in a workshop whose location is still unknown to me. I have never found a sculpture that could be documented in the field, or in a museum, and I can only suspect that this workshop was in the Agba area somewhere near Dimbokro. The workshop apparently specialized in figures and seems also to have made ointment jars surmounted by heads (Fig. 11). It was extremely prolific and most active after 1920, continuing through the mid-twentieth century. The earliest example I know is an unpublished male figure in the Musée de l’Homme, Paris; the records are muddled, but it probably entered the collection in the early 1930s. This workshop style is marked by a long, round-chinned face with round eyes, a full stomach grasped by hands with long fingers curling below the navel, and a high, squared-off plinth that is usually textured. The leg is often treated as a bulging form constricted all around the knee. A diagnostic of this workshop is often a clearly marked groove across the biceps which may resemble the edge of a sleeve. These
works exhibit a wide range of competence and refinement, seemingly because a number of hands worked together in a given place over a long time.

**The Totokro Master**

Of greater significance artistically and art historically than those above is the oeuvre of a single great master whom I have come to know as the Totokro Master. His oeuvre was recognizable initially on stylistic grounds, but working with it led to my discovery of an unmistakable "adz signature" on his sculptures. The objects by the Totokro Master that were first known to me resembled the canonical bearded portrait mask that was for many years in the Charles Ratton collection, Paris (Fig. 12). In the 1970s Jerry Vogel and I acquired a similar bearded mask on the market in Abidjan (Fig. 13); a third was in the Franco Monte collection, Milan, in the 1970s (Fig. 14). A fourth example was a female, perhaps the mate to the Ratton mask; it was published in Budapest in 1911 and subsequently disappeared (Fig. 15). In addition to their obvious similarity, the first two revealed a singular particularity that made it likely they were by the same hand. The artist had carved a depression behind each eye and then cut through to form the slits for visibility (an unusual technique). On both of these masks, he had made the same mistake of miscalculating the height of the eyeboles, piercing through too high and making a small hole in the big eyelid before correctly locating the slits where the upper and lower lids join.

As for dating, Ratton told me (1970) that his mask had arrived in Paris before the First World War; it had layers of wax consistent with a long stay in a European collection of the time. The other two had left Africa half a century later, and both showed more damage and wear. In Abidjan I had been shown a page with notes about the second mask that were said to have been transcribed by the schoolteacher of the village from which it came. According to the notes, the mask came from Totokro village in the Agba area; the personal name of the mask was given as Bela, but no artist's name was mentioned. Totokro is one of a group of three Agba villages (with Boreakpokro and Boreahoussoukro) near Dimbokro that are known for the large numbers of sculptors who have worked there for several generations. In 1993 I encountered a later, but related, bearded portrait mask in Boreakpokro by an artist whose name had been forgotten (Vogel 1998:140).

While I was working on Baule collections in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris,
Left: 14. Bearded portrait mask by the Totokro Master. Wood, tacks, 30.5cm (12"). Formerly collection of Franco Monte, Milan; present collection unknown. From Abbate 1972:50. This mask showed signs of extended use when it was acquired in Bouaké in 1960. It would appear to be an early experiment in asymmetrical elements, but the artist has balanced his composition with the opposed directions of beard and hair. His other masks do not return to this compromise.

Right: 15. Female portrait mask by the Totokro Master. From Keleti Kiállítás a Művésztházban ("Oriental Exhibition at the House of Artists"). 1911. Present collection unknown. This sculpture was published in Budapest in 1911 and has not been recorded since. The photograph suggests wear. The mask is particularly beautiful and close to the Retton example in Figure 12—they may have formed a pair.

An inquiry with photographs of five objects labeled "Senufo?" arrived in the mail from the municipal museum in Agen. A donation perhaps from the 1930s (the records were lost) included a pair of masks by the artist I thought of as the Totokro Master (Fig. 16), a pair of figures that could easily be by the same hand (Fig. 17), and a monkey figure that was hard to place (Fig. 18). I traveled to Agen and examined the five pieces: all had been newly made when they were collected, and had been blackened by an identical formula.

The Adz Signature, a New Research Tool

Searching for evidence that all were by the same artist, I first discovered that under magnification they all showed traces of the same red fibers embedded in the surface—not useful for my purposes, since the red lint could have come from packing materials or other sources. Finally I realized that the entire group had to have been carved by the same tool: adz strokes in the unsmoothed areas (the backs of the masks, the undersides of the figures' bases) were still fresh and clearly visible, and on every piece they showed evidence of a distinctive, certainly unique damage to the cutting edge of the blade that had shaped them.

Baule adzes and other traditional tools have locally made iron blades that today are sharpened with a steel file, but formerly were sharpened on a stone. Wedged in the courtyard or in the forest, they may be used to strike various things, and more often than not the cutting edge becomes nicked and damaged by blows. The deepest of these are not effaced by sharpening—at least for a period of time—so that each blade has a unique profile, like a key. This unique profile will mark every cut made by a given blade for a limited period until sharpening, rusting, or fresh damages alter it. And because the distinctive profile changes as time goes on, we can locate objects together not only in space, but in time. Objects that can be found to have identical adz profiles must inevitably have been made with the same tool, very probably by the same hand. (Assistants and others nearby could theoretically use the same tool, but artists working together tend not to share tools). At the very least, two objects marked with identical adz profiles must have been carved in the same workshop or workspace, and within a relatively short time.

The fact that the Agen objects were newly made when they were collected established that the Totokro Master was alive and working after the arrival of the French. Such a varied group of objects—
almost a sampler of major Baule sculpture types—is quite unusual and is likely to have been acquired on order from the artist. Totokro is near the colonial administrative center of Dimbokro, which had a growing French presence once the railroad to Bouaké was completed in 1912, and a very small one before that time. Circumstantial evidence, then, suggested that the Totokro Master was active in the lower Agba area at least.

Counterclockwise from top left:

17. Pair of figures by the Totokro Master. They were newly carved when collected. Musée Municipal, Agen. Photo: Susan Vogel, 1982.

18. Monkey figure by the Totokro Master. The attribution to this artist could not have been made on the basis of style alone. The distinctive adz signature provided confirming evidence. Musée Municipal, Agen. Photo: Susan Vogel, 1982.
through the second and third decades of this century. (A male figure by this artist entered the Cleveland Museum of Art in 1931.) Research in Totoko confirmed its reputation as the home of many sculptors over several generations, but I could find no one there who could connect any individual name to these works.

Among a number of sculptures I was shown in Boreahoussoukro, the village next to Totoko, was a female figure surely by this hand (Fig. 19). In 1994 it belonged to an old man who had inherited it from his father. He described its meaning and told me that the artist had been an Agba Baule, but he did not know the artist’s personal name or his village. We calculated that this figure had been carved around 1920. I was delighted to be able to make a connection between field information and collection objects, but this was a serendipitous finding: it was only the third time in many years of art research that I have ever encountered in a Baule village an object by a hand I recognized.

The Search for Artists

There can be no doubt that the artist is central to the study of art history, and that African art history is no exception in this regard. It is crucial to record artists’ biographies, their methods of production, what they have to say about their work, and especially to build inventories of their art. It is clear, however, that to accomplish this we will have to rely heavily on collection data in museum files and on diagnostic methods such as close examination for an adz signature. The reliance upon sources other than field data is necessary in part because few African cultures have been as interested in these questions as Western scholars.

From the field we know of a small number of twentieth-century African artists’ names and life histories, and we have a small number of works attributed to named artists. Like other researchers in the field, I accumulated enough information to build a small corpus of works I could attribute to a dozen otherwise unnamed artists. Only later did I realize that this interest of mine was not shared by the Baule people I knew who were involved with art. If I had been collecting the names and histories of previous generations of individuals who were especially accomplished farmers, orators, or healers, I believe I would have found at least as much information preserved. As a research tool, I have taken photographs of Baule objects from museums and collections into the field, seeking attributions and other information. Like John Picton, I have never been able to establish a consensus on the local origin of a single sculpture, much less a more precise attribution to an individual with a name.

From collections, scholars can group works into the hands of masters and their circles, linking these works when possible to names known from fieldwork. Because so little information is obtainable in the field, it is clear that these corpora can only be enlarged with data primarily from museum collections, scientific analysis, and other methodologies. Perhaps my accidental discovery of the distinctiveness of adz marks may lead to other confirmed attributions. This evidence, at least, is very persuasive of authorship—not only for Baule but for all African artists—for it is as close to the artist’s hand as we will ever get.

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As a consequence, concepts of "personal realization" and cultural values of "social multiplicity" have been seriously misrepresentsen in studies of Equatorial African societies (pp. 104-5).

References cited


tive institutions. During the 1950s Columbia University's art history department began its uninterrupted teaching of African art. Nelson Rockefeller, one of the nation's most visible and influential patrons of the arts, established the Rockefeller University Press in 1953 and announced that the acquisition completed the last chapter of the great encyclopedia of world art that was the Metropolitan. Nelson Rockefeller's involvement and the patronage of other leading institutions, however—such as the National Gallery of Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, Yale's Art Gallery, and its art history department—integrated African art into the world of art education and research. Over the years, and UCLA began to support the publication of this journal, *African Arts*, the focus on the subject.

8. In a 1936 issue of this same debate was heard loudly again in the general press in New York as well as in London during the recent exhibition "Africa: The Art of a Continent," organized by the Royal Academy of Arts and the Guggenheim Museum.

9. For a record of this exhibition see Vogel 1980. The exhibition included a number of objects and works by unknown artists which were compared with related sculptures by unknown artists.

10. In his book *The Decline of the Smithsonian, Harvard University, and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts have made major commitments*

11. Personal communication, August 1960

12. Some of the earliest field studies on sub-Saharan artists were conducted there. The most detailed information about traditional master carvers, was gleaned early (1940s-50s) by Kenneth Murray, Kevin Carroll, William Fagg, and John Picton (beginning in 1961) in inquiries specifically about artists at a time when their identities were not fully known. These masters were still living or only recently deceased. In the near- by half century since that time, several generations of scholars of African art have developed, among them, exploring African and Wodaabe artists, so that today we benefit from over a half century of sustained and cumulative work on Wodaabe art.

13. Photographs of two of the bottom corners of at least some of his pieces with an inscribed triangle, but we can only guess at the date based on the incising. Unfortunately, the fact that the put forth by Fagg that "the signature within a triangle" was a personal signature of Owebe de Abudzin, Drewell & Pemberton (1994:103).

14. See the couple in Vogel 1998:236, the male figure in Sweeney 1935: fig. 69. Interestingly, a number of figures in this style have come out of Ironde Coast in the 1960s, and the same appears to be the case.

15. See Vogel 1981:74-75 for a discussion of this corpus. A number of authors have written about this sculpture form, but it appears to have been lost its documentation. The catalogue information and number currently bears (029.1) are the only data of a female figure collected by Dallol in 1980. The male figure probably entered the collection in the 1930s. See Vogel 1997:250 for this history.

References cited:


Lee, Martin. 1993. "Blacks in the World:

Lighting (300 vs. 400) francs (Magnin 1997:10-11). The most expensive impression, then, would have cost 375 francs. The only impression that was higher than 375 francs on any of the direct 1884-1885 portraits, was in the case of French state, was made in Mali until 1962. In 1954 it lost quantity, it was 290 CFA francs; a pack of cigarettes, 25 francs.

11. Keita identifies his prime competitors as Vieuxsou Cissé, Moustapha Traoré (also of Bamako-Koura), Moussa Traoré (also of Bamako-Koura), and Boubacar Remo (also of Bamako-Koura).

12. Michel Siclair, the other subject of exhibitions in France and a monograph (Magnin 1998), was at a younger generation, and better known for photographies of club life than for portraits. See statements about Keita’s competitors by the photographer and his uncle (Magnin 1997:10, 17) and on Misseron’s and Keita’s environments in Boubacar Remo’s, *Bahende Ferk’s Study of African studio photography (1998).*

13. Keita worked consistently in black-and-white; he has said that it was his way to use "the memory given its greater resistance to discoloration (Magnin 1995:33). The only exceptions I have seen were commissioned by Hepworth (see frippot and the photographs in this article). The increased popularity of color photography, particularly since the 1980s, has required many African studio photographers to order a significant chunk of their profits to external labs that develop their prints; this issue is incisively addressed in Wendi and du Plessis’ film on this continuous narrative (1994) and it might be contrasted to the approach taken by Johannes Fabian in his published monograph. 14. Magin’s continues to act as liaison between the photographer and galleries wishing to sell or exhibit his work. See Magin’s *Theological Dialogues* in *Painting and sculpture collection (1991)* and John Picton’s comment on the *CAAC* (1993); see also Dagnan-Bouveret’s interview with Aliou Sissokho (1999, see above).

15. Keita’s exhibitions in France include one curated by Magin and Hervé Chandon for the Fondation Cartier pour l’Art Contemporain, Paris (1996), which opened in March 2003 and was shown in France in 1993, in conjunction with two photography festivals: the three Rencontres Photographiques in Roson and the Biennale de l’Image in Contexte in Versailles.

16. Magin’s presence as questioner is removed from these interviews (Magnin 1995, 1997), so Keita’s statements read as a continuous narrative (1994) and it might be contrasted to the approach taken by Johannes Fabian in his published monograph.