

BEYOND AESTHETICS: USE, ABUSE AND DISSONANCE IN AFRICAN ART TRADITIONS

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Beyond Aesthetics: Use, Abuse, and Dissonance in African Art Traditions
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Illustrated mainly with images of objects from Soyinka's own art collection, this compact volume is based on his Richard D. Cohen lectures which were delivered in a gallery displaying these same objects, mostly Yoruba traditional sculpture. This book exemplifies the concepts of revelation, and continuity which for Soyinka is the objective of African art. He also considers the motives which animate art collectors.

Soyinka starts off in the Preface by firing a broadside at the African Renaissance Monument in Dakar, Senegal, which was constructed by a North Korean Consortium. According to Soyinka, "not a single aspect of its sculptural figuration bears the slightest resemblance to anything African!". It is illustrated on page xvi so you can see for yourself.

The renowned Senegalese sculptor, Ousmane Sow, had been commissioned to present a proposal for this monument which he did. But it was rejected by the President.

In chapter one, Soyinka identifies the sources of Yoruba feminine allure, breasts and buttocks, and their association with the ideas of fertility and procreation, essential for the continuity of the race. The mother-and-child is a recurring theme in the work of Yoruba carvers, a concrete expression of continuity which Soyinka regards as a distinguishing characteristic of African art.

Reflecting on the collector's attraction to ancient art objects, Soyinka concludes that "the antique object is a physical precipitate of history, image, and sometimes spiritual intimations" which "wafts the viewer away from the present to distant times and places". In other words, it stimulates the imagination. Soyinka recalls how his own artistic imagination was sparked in childhood by a toy kaleidoscope. This was a narrow sealed cylinder about 12 inches long which contained fragments of coloured glass and a strip of mirror. You could twist the kaleidoscope as you held it to your eye, causing the glass fragments to shift and re-assemble forming abstract patterns and "imagination was let loose!". This childhood experience laid the foundation for his later appreciation of art.

In chapter 2, Soyinka inveighs against the iconoclasm carried out for centuries and still continuing in the 21st century which targets objects connected with pre-Christian and pre-Islamic religious beliefs. He regards this as contempt and disdain “for the values of that cultural anteriority”.

He re-asserts these values by pointing out that “the orisa religion (of the Yoruba) has never indulged in other-demonis-ations, yet it has survived the assault of centuries”. In other words, those who worshipped the Yoruba orisa did not declare that people who held other beliefs were evil or demonic. For Soyinka, his attraction as a collector for “those assailed symbols” (i.e. objects connected with orisa worship) is rooted in “a protective and even combative, temperament”. He further explains “Art collecting is not abstract-it is personal, intimate, yet sometimes sociologically and ideologically, propelled”, thus it does not take place “solely within the realms od aesthetics”.

In the final chapter, Soyinka acknowledges the “phenomenal rise of women in all social directions”. He touches on *aso ebi* (family dress) as a “bonding mechanism” whereby all those related to or close to the celebrant buy the same material to show solidarity which they have made up into the styles and garments of their choice. He contrasts this with the distress felt by American or European women who turn up at a function wearing the same dress. Soyinka describes the artist Nike Okundaye’s experiments with the styles and dimensions of the gele or head-wrap as examples of “the evolution of a virtually new organism from a tradition”. This relates to Soyinka’s concept of continuity as a characteristic of African art. However, this continuity is not a sterile imitation of the forms of the past but a creative re-invention rooted in age-old concepts. The exuberance of exaggeration of Nike’s gele styles lead Soyinka to consider the nature of modern Nigerian cinema. “Nollywood” is a name he abhors, regarding it as a negation of the gravitas associated with names in Yoruba culture. The Nigerian cineaste exaggerates the violence and drama of every day living in Nigeria emphasising the sensational at the expense of quality.

The book closes with images of objects in Soyinka’s own collection which could have been enhanced by captions.

Soyinka’s home in Abeokuta, surrounded by a forest planted by himself, is densely populated with objets d’art, ceramics, sculpture, paintings. These have been documented in a publication which is in process. I am hoping it may be part of the 90th birthday celebrations of W. S. next year!

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