Towards an Art History of pre-contemporary Africa

Deadline: Jan 30, 2017

Claire Bosc-Tiessé, CNRS

Towards an Art History of pre-contemporary Africa: Methodology, Historiography, Epistemology

Call for Contributions to a thematic issue for 2018 (issue No. 9) of the online journal Afriques. Débats, méthodes et terrains d'histoire (http://afriques.revues.org)

African material culture is featured in art museums around the world, but the proliferation of exhibitions often masks a poverty of research into the history of all but the most recent African art. If ancient African cultures constitute the poor cousin of African historical studies, the history of early art forms - with the notable exception of Ife and Benin - can barely be said to exist.

The special issue No. 9 of the French online journal Afriques. Débats, méthodes et terrains d'histoire addresses the questions: How and under what circumstances can one undertake the writing of pre-contemporary African art? And how can African art history contribute to the broader task of writing African history? The period and the geographical space addressed by this call for papers could vary, depending in part on whether one focuses on « ancient » African art, or on « pre-contemporary art, » which continued to be produced well into the twentieth century. At the heart of this issue of Afriques stands the fact that artistic production is necessarily situated in an historical moment. How does one write a history of these objects and of the circumstances in which they were created and from which they derive their meaning? Only by historicizing the works can we begin to access the original meanings and social significance of objects from a distance place and time.

African material culture was first recognized as art through its "discovery" by western collectors and its subsequent inclusion in art museums. Africanists have, in recent years, added their voices to the medievalists who, for a generation, have contested a narrow understanding of what constitutes "art." Central to the debate, of course, is the question: What role do/did the objects play in their society of origin? With this is mind, we welcome essays that focus on the cultural context in which specific objects were created and used. We invite essays that focus on dating, context, and attribution. In the case of precolonial objects, iconography in the Panofskian sense may help to establish chronology or geographical origin. But as a general rule, iconographic interpretation is necessarily contingent upon context.

The editors of this special issue are seeking articles with a historiographic, methodological, or epistemological focus. Contributions should reflect the current state of research in the author's particular domain. What, for example, are the methods or the problems or orientations specific to the case study in question? Essays should present contextualized analysis of selected objects, viewed diachronically. We especially encourage authors to reflect on the different kinds of docu-

ments they have used as historical sources, as well as on the manner in which the objects may serve as sources for their own history. For example, is it possible for a given work to illuminate its own contextualized iconographic interpretation? Or is such an interpretation, by definition, an exercise in circular reasoning?

The editors also welcome contributions that reflect critically on the use of categories traceable to the colonial situation, and to the effort by European administrators and anthropologists to classify subject peoples. For example, we invite a critical reassessment of artistic "style," whether associated with individual artists, schools, or ethnic groups; this might show how contemporary art historical method connects to a colonial past.

Even today, museological considerations and commercial interests drive some research into African art, such as catalogs of private collections. Political factors and recent history, crucially the colonial and post-colonial situation, have also molded approaches to the subject. For this special issue, we invite essays that focus on art historical research in a given country. We hope to address the question: How does the recent history of colonial engagement - or the historical absence of colonies - affect the subsequent evolution of African art scholarship?

In recent decades, African art history has been enriched by exchanges with anthropology, archeology, and other fields. History, however, and more specifically historical methodology remains largely outside the accepted purview of African art history. This special issue of Afriques is a call to establish closer ties, both theoretical and methodological, to the discipline of African history. It is time to historicize African art history.

Editors
The editors of this special issue are Claire Bosc-Tiessé (Institut des Mondes Africains [IMAF], CNRS) and Peter Mark (Wesleyan University - Centro de História da Universidade de Lisboa).

Deadline
Proposals for an article (including the working title and a summary, about 500 words) should be sent both to claire.bosc-tiesse@univ-paris1.fr and to pmark@wesleyan.edu before January 30, 2017.

The definitive article corresponding to the proposal retained should be ready before November 1, 2017.

Reference:
CFP: Towards an Art History of pre-contemporary Africa. In: ArtHist.net, Nov 10, 2016 (accessed Nov 9, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/14168>.