

**BURNT EARTH:
PAINT, POTS, FURNACES, TERRACOTTAS AND BRICKS
AS ART FORMS IN NIGERIA**

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Everyone knows what is meant by art; yet, on closer examination, a strong whiff of commerce can be detected in nearly all its defining features. One sales ploy involves promoting the essence of a product, not the product itself; so one sells 'fire', not matches. This usually involves manipulating language: for example, in the context of this article, mud is more mystically rendered as 'ochre' and fired clayey grit becomes magically transformed into 'terracotta'. Other sales ploys 'restrict' perceived supply, so as to increase demand and inflate prices. Art dealers, assisted in no small measure by academics, have 'sold' aesthetic impact, spiritual symbolism, technical skill, antiquity and uniqueness to restrict what can be considered 'art', so promoting the commercial value of their art objects and flattering the 'discernment' of rich patrons. What their eloquence does not state, however, is that a dealer's most important consideration is none of these attributes: it is portability. If an article is portable, then it can be transported from producer to purchaser - it becomes fungible and marketable, making international 'art' a covert form of capital flight.

Paint, pots, furnaces, terracottas and bricks all derive from the same material - burnt earth - so valid comparisons can be made between them. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to examine and compare examples of these artefacts in Nigeria, then to explore the possibility that they share attributes identical to those so exclusively reserved for the veneration of 'art' objects. If it can be demonstrated that they do indeed share all or many of the same attributes, then the only distinguishing feature of 'art' becomes its portability, which in Nigeria, sadly, has come to mean its export potential. This would go some way towards explaining the 'spate of thefts' of items from Nigeria's museums and quasi-legally digging of its ancient terracottas on one hand, and the almost total neglect of Nigeria's superb ancient monuments and 'utility' items on the other hand.

Paint: Paint was probably the most ancient use of burnt earth - rendered as 'ochre' in the glossy, coffee-table art books. In the flat, featureless landscape of the Kari-Kari people around Jalam, in north-east Nigeria, an open-cast mine and adjacent caves show where a rich slanting seam of a yellow, loess-like deposit has been dug progressively deeper over the years. This is left yellow or burnt to red, then mixed with calabash seed oil to create a waterproof yellow or red paint, which is applied as a background colour wash over calabash interiors. Similarly, kaolin and charcoal create white and black paint, which is patiently applied with quills to create intricate geometrical designs onto these backgrounds. This mode of Kari Kari decoration is quite distinct from the incising and searing of calabash exteriors practised elsewhere in Nigeria. The paints are waterproof, not detergent proof, so

the painted calabashes (*jonde*) cannot be considered 'utility' items, especially since, over the centuries, they have been presented to brides on their weddings and ceremonially stacked safely inside their new homes. In terms of 'art' criteria, therefore, they feature quite highly in aesthetic impact, technical skill and uniqueness but fare less well on antiquity and spiritual symbolism, almost entirely because these aspects have not been well researched and published.

If the same use of burnt earth as paint is transferred a few hundred miles north to the Tibetsi caves, or north-east to the ancient Egyptian tombs, or north-west to the caves at Lascaux or Altamira caves in Europe, then the results cross that invisible boundary into 'art'. The two key attributes that make this possible are their antiquity (some are up to 30,000 years old or more) and the guess that there is some powerful spiritual symbolism in their depiction of animals. Descriptions of such paintings¹ include phrases, such as 'vigour of the handling ... perfection of the attitudes ... sureness of the line ... exceptional sensitivity and masterly skill' but, perhaps, these are as much a tribute to their antiquity and rarity as to their actual artistic merit. Invaluable though these painting are to world heritage, there can be no realistic market price put on them because, fortunately, their contexts are not portable.

Pots: The advent of fired pottery in Nigeria dates back some 3,000 years and Sylvia Leith-Ross' eclectic collection of Nigerian pots at Jos museum indicates much of the aesthetic impact of this ancient art. The dictionary definition of 'art' refers almost entirely to skill; and adults attempting to make large thin pots can attest to the high level of technical skill required. This skill, however, usually means that the finest pottery is too fragile to survive intact down the ages and is not amenable to easy transport today; so most intact pots have limited antiquity and usually only the smaller items come onto the international market.

In terms of religious symbolism, though, some pots are unequalled in their potency throughout most of sub-Saharan Africa. In Nigeria, flat-based shrine pots associated with potsherd pavement plinths and deep sacrificial pits (*ihan*) attest to some deep spiritual magic at the centre of power in the C14th Benin City palace area.² Oba Ewuare placed charm pots under the entrances of the magnificent 20m deep Benin City rampart ditch to define a periphery in the mid-C15th;³ inverted pots were placed under the foundations of later palace walls;⁴ and a very special shrine pot with a flared rim, long ribbed neck and wavy line cordoned body, known as Idia's pot was placed by the Ovia shrine at Unuame to commemorate Benin's victory over Udo in the early C16th. This unusual cult pot type

¹Benoist *et al.*, 1961, 1.

²e.g.: Connah, 1975; 28-29, 126, 200 and plates 2, 3 and 6. Darling, 1984; 273-277. Prince Aiguobasimwin in Wyndham, 1926.

³Egharevba, 1953; 15. 1968; 14, 90. Bradbury, n.d.; BS 35. 15/11/1957; BS 550/1.

⁴Connah, 1975; 52. Darling, 1984; 167-8 Plate J.

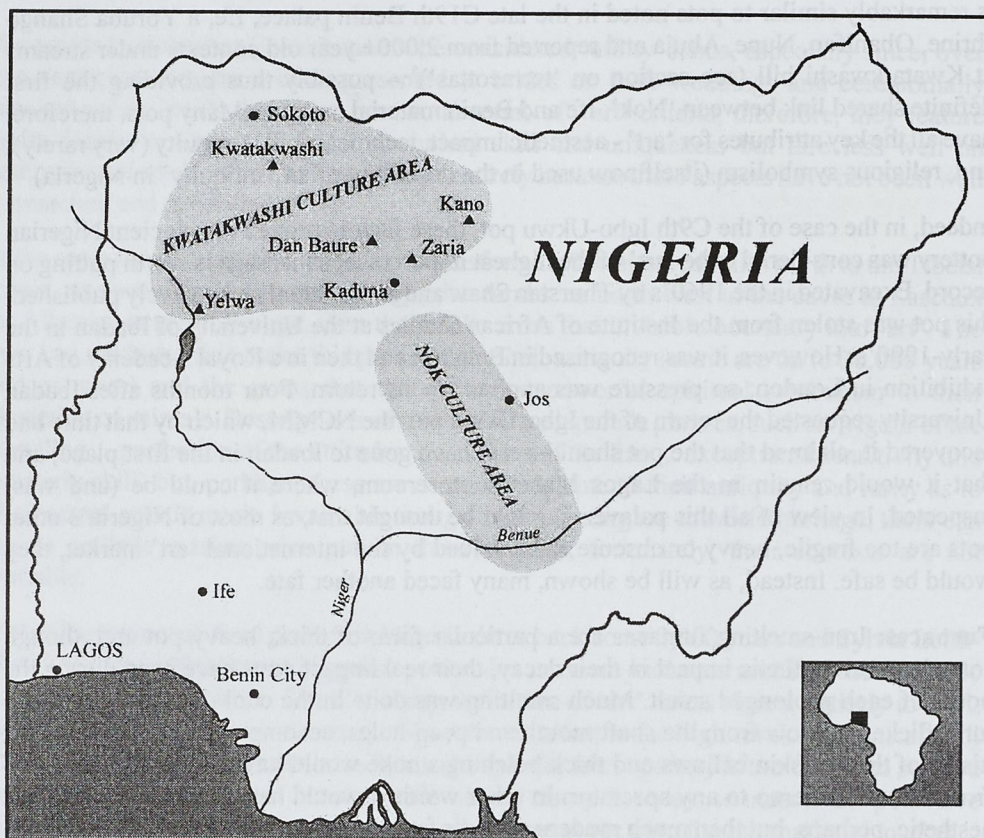
is remarkably similar to pots noted in the late C19th Benin palace, Ife, a Yoruba Shango shrine, Obanifon, Nupe, Abuja and reported from 2,000+ year old contexts under streams at Kwatarkwashi hill (see section on 'terracottas')⁵ – possibly thus providing the first definite shared link between 'Nok', Ife and Benin material cultures. Many pots, therefore, have all the key attributes for 'art' - aesthetic impact, technical skill, antiquity (very rarely), and religious symbolism (itself now used in the definition of an 'antiquity' in Nigeria).

Indeed, in the case of the C9th Igbo-Ukwu pot, these factors proved that ancient Nigerian pottery was considered to be 'art' of the highest importance; so its saga is worth putting on record. Excavated in the 1960's by Thurstan Shaw and subsequently extensively published, this pot was stolen from the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ibadan in the early-1990's. However, it was recognised in Belgium and then in a Royal Academy of Arts exhibition in London; so pressure was applied for its return. Four months after Ibadan University requested the return of the Igbo-Ukwu pot, the NCMM, which by that time had recovered it, claimed that the pot should never have gone to Ibadan in the first place; and that it would remain in the Lagos Museum storeroom, where it could be (and was) inspected. In view of all this palaver, it might be thought that, as most of Nigeria's other pots are too fragile, heavy or obscure to be valued by the international 'art' market, they would be safe. Instead, as will be shown, many faced another fate.

Furnaces: Iron-smelting furnaces are a particular form of thick, heavy pot and, though some have an aesthetic impact in their decay, their real impact must have been during the hours of each prolonged smelt. Much smelting was done in the cool of the night; so the lurid flickering glow from the shaft mouth and peep-holes, accompanied by the pulsating hisses of the goatskin bellows and thick belching smoke would have seemed like a scene from Dante's *Inferno* to any speciator. In other words it would have had an impact – not aesthetic, perhaps, but then much modern art aims for impact, not aesthetics. Smelting was a difficult technical skill to master; and every smelting family retained its secrets, as well as creating a whole variety of new techniques. These included shaft furnaces with six horizontal tuyères and those with one slanting vertical tuyère incorporated in the shaft structure, drip-pits with a thick dividing baulk, and multiple drip-pits creating mini furnace bottoms.

Every smelt was risky, and the crucible-like charm pots containing magic potions were part of a wider range of magical practices, including fire-walking and playing with fire. The magic, though, focused on the furnace, where the key transformation of golden goethite, red-brown limonite, grey haematite and black magnetite ores into iron tools and steel

⁵Benin: Roth, 1903; 75 Figure 79. Abuja: Cardew, 1952; 196. Obanifon: *Nigeria Magazine*, 1969, 17 No. 4; 167. Unuame: Darling, 1984; 165, 263. 1998; 188-190. Shango: Schaedler, 1997; 230 Figure 440.



weapons took place.⁶ Thermoluminescence (TL) dating controversially places some 'bowl furnaces' in northern Nigeria to a few centuries before the earliest smelting dates elsewhere in the world; and slag-tapping shaft furnaces appeared in northern Nigeria sometime between 200 and 500 A.D. In all ways, therefore, furnaces also fit most of the distinguishing criteria of 'art'; and their extreme weight and fragility if moved is probably the main reason why they have not been marketed.

Terracottas: Ancient, two to three thousand year old 'Nok', 'Sokoto' and 'Katsina' heads and figurines of fired clay and grit are seen as marking the birthplace of African sculptural art. Most of the earliest recorded fired figurines are found here, and their forms spread and developed from the adjacent Bantu Cradle Area to much of eastern and southern Africa in the Bantu Migration over the last two millennia. During the 1990's, mass diggings without archaeologists present and illegal export of these two to three thousand year old terracottas

⁶Web-site A.



began at Kwatarkwashi.⁷ Coffee-table art books emanating from Europe mention 'Kotorkoshi' but fail to identify which pieces came from it.⁸ Accordingly, the published photographs of terracottas were shown independently to first-hand Kwatarkwashi informants, who distinguished 'similar' from 'identical' in comparing the photographs with items they had seen dug up. Where two or more informants identified the same terracotta, its burial context was visited and everything recollected *in situ* was recorded. From this simple *post hoc* procedure, a very disturbing story emerged.



It seems that a well-connected art dealer linked up with a wildlife smuggler, who then paid an informant to reveal his grandmother's secrets of the ancient terracotta sites on Kwatarkwashi hill – a massive granite inselberg surrounded by gigantic boulders over its lower slopes. Deep amongst these boulders, terracotta heads had been buried in soil right next to the mother rock.⁹ Three-legged bowls with lids accompanied these heads and water-pots had been placed under nearby stream-beds – food and water for the spirit world, perhaps. On habitation areas on the higher plateau of this molar-like inselberg, female figurines had been buried with similar bowls.¹⁰ Both these types were of a simple but effective 'Katsina' style. Buried near the ephemeral streams were full figurines in the conventional Nok style.¹¹ From a high, secret small valley came the biggest and best of the terracottas – all of bearded elders, with their chins resting on their drawn-up knees.¹² These were probably the statues of ancient past leaders, *Gemen Dodo* ('beard of the fetish'); for

⁷Web-site B.

⁸De Grun 1996, Schaedler 1997.

⁹De Grun, 1996; 73 Figure 29, 81 Figure 37, 83 Figure 40.

¹⁰Schaedler, 1997; 205 Figure 385 ('Katsina' female figure). Similar to Sango shrine pot and Nupe pot depicted in Schaedler, 1997; 230 Figure 440 and 265 Figure 510 left respectively. If correct, this would supply a 2000+ year old link to similar unusual pots found at Abuja, Obanifon, Benin and Unuame (fn 5 refers).

¹¹Schaedler, 1997; 207 Figure 396 ('Nok' torso).

¹²Similar to De Grun, 1996; 43 Figure 7; 49 Figure 13 and Schaedler, 1997; 209 Figure 403, this last found by a small rocky hill near the main road south of Kwatarkwashi.



Some "Nok" terracottas



Kwatarkwashi was once the major centre of *Magiro* – the grandfather of all fetish (*Kakan Tsafi*) rooted in ancestor worship – for a large area extending into the middle Niger region.¹³

In the spate of digging, other terracottas – including those of the heavy-lidded 'Sokoto' style - were found around the base of the hill and amongst the 90 villages that still lay under Kwatarkwashi control in the early C19th.¹⁴ No skeletal evidence was reported; and local burials used to be made near the base of the hill. It would seem, therefore, that the terracottas and associated pottery were neither grave goods nor idols for worship around an altar: the market-oriented speculations of one art book¹⁵ are wildly out. They were most probably stylistic models of the role in life held by the deceased, whose actual mortal remains were buried at the base of the hill or, in many cases, many hundreds of kilometres away, so explaining the presence of 'Katsina', 'Sokoto' and 'Nok' styles at Kwatarkwashi. There is no substance to the claim that their export helped 'cleanse a nation of its idols'.

Sadly, there is, as yet, no published picture of any of the bearded elder terracottas from Kwatarkwashi hill, nor of the associated pottery, most of which was smashed in the mass excavations here and elsewhere. For the process continued, as vast swathes of Nigeria's landscape were systematically dug by two teams of about a thousand diggers each.

Many terracottas had considerable aesthetic impact, displayed good technical skill, were associated with powerful religious symbolism, and were of great antiquity. They fully met all the criteria of art, though 'cruder' 'Sokoto' and 'Katsina' styles were less marketable than 'Nok' styles. Sadly, even the biggest terracottas were also portable. Many believe that

¹³Usman, 1976; 7-8.

¹⁴Johnston, 1967; 151. De Grun, 1996; 109 Figure 66. Similar to Schaedler, 1997; 201 Figure 372. Darling, 2000.

¹⁵De Grun, 1996. Schaedler, 1997.



the absence of archaeologists to record the contexts of these mass diggings was the greatest tragedy ever inflicted on the art of Africa. It displaced an irreplaceable heritage; it destroyed the pottery and other contextual data of a largely unknown past culture; and it rewarded venal national custodians,

dangerous overseas dealers and unethical buyers. Redress of this injustice, therefore, has been left to the hundreds of thousands of ancient spirits, whose afterlife has been so rudely violated. Hopefully, eternity will be long enough for them to exact full, painful retribution.¹⁶



Bricks: Bricks were the basic building unit of many walls; and most walls which survive in West Africa's archaeological record are thick town or city walls – each an expression of that past community's top priority at the time. In Nigeria, fired bricks were made in the former Kanuri capitals of the north-east; and the past ruins of the Gambaru palace,¹⁷ for example, indicate that the structures were probably beautiful and skilfully constructed. In most of the northern Nigeria's densely populated plains, though, the walls were made with *tubali* - sun-dried, pear-shaped bricks – *i.e.* half-baked earth. Using old books, old maps, aerial photographs, military reports, ground surveys and questionnaires, *African Legacy* has identified over three thousand walled settlements in northern Nigeria as part of its quest to produce an illustrated gazetteer of Nigeria's visible archaeology. From the air, the layout of some walls has a deep aesthetic impact, the smooth curves of the Bauchi city walls and the bold outline of Katsina's city walls with *sakakkiya* - thorn thickets.¹⁸ On the ground, the Kano city walls were described by Lugard in 1902, who stated that "*the extent and formidable nature of the fortifications surpassed the best informed anticipations of our officers. ... I have never seen, or even imagined anything like it in Africa*"; and old photographs and quotations collected by Moody endorse the impact of this magnificent structure.¹⁹ In 1906, some 58 years after its initial construction, Bauchi town wall evoked an almost poetic response from Hastings:

"I saw the high earth walls of Bauchi town shining red in the morning sun,

¹⁶Darling, 2003. Adeseri A. 1999a & b. Henley J. 2000. Jegede D. 1996.

¹⁷Palmer, 1936, Plate XXV f.232.

¹⁸Darling, 2004

¹⁹Moody, 1969.

curving away in a long oblong shape to enclose the city and its urban farms..."²⁰

In hilly areas, walls incorporated stones into their structure. Sometimes these were freestone walls, such as those characterising the ambience of the Sukur Cultural Landscape, which is why it was surveyed by *African Legacy* in 1996 as part of its successful joint quest with the NCMM to obtain Nigeria's first UNESCO World Heritage Site).²¹ In other areas, natural coursed rubble walls (with alternating layers of stone and mud) adapted to the rapidly changing Basement Complex geology: at Old Birnin Gwari, for example, the wall structure varies from square cobble-like structures, to thin slabs set slantwise, to horizontal slabs, and to coarse gravel mud layers.²² Set within this variable structure were loop-holes, most with a miniature lintel; and Paul O'Keefe notes that some were set too low for bows and arrows, so may have been made for muskets.²³ Further south, the savannah Yoruba, at least, built coursed mud walls, each massive course being allowed to dry before a new course was added, tapering slightly upwards.²⁴ Monochrome photographs do not always do justice to these walls, as their red, brown, black, grey, yellow and/or white structures contrasted with the surrounding vegetation – the juxtaposition creating a landscape with aesthetic impact.

At Banga in Kebbi, a metre thick deserted town wall of laterite blocks was cemented together by a white clay mortar. At Surame, laterite and stone blocks were bonded together with a hard red mortar (*tsukuwa*) using water from a five mile long human bucket chain; whilst late Nupe arrivals had to make their mortar with shea-butter.²⁵ At the old Nupe capital of Raba, honey and oil palm nuts were used; at Dahomey, skulls were incorporated; at the Kumasi palace in southern Ghana, guides maintain that blood and gold dust were included; and in northern Ghana, it is claimed that yoghurt was used.²⁶ Clearly, all this was highly symbolic; but the full extent of religious symbolism connected with walls and similar boundaries has survived best in the rainforest zone constructions.

Here, heavy rainfall rapidly dissolved away walls, leaving linear earthworks as the only practical means of demarcation. Originally, it was thought that these earthworks were dug with their characteristic V-shaped profile; but cross-profiles at Oyo, Ijebu-Ode and Old

²⁰Hastings, 1925, 36.

²¹Darling, 1996.

²²Darling, 2004.

²³Paul O'Keefe, Pers.Comm. 2004.

²⁴Agbaje-Williams *et al*, 2002, 53. Website C.

²⁵Arnett, 1922: 130. Hogben & Kirk-Greene, 1966: 243.

²⁶Darling *et al*, 2004. T. Insol, Pers.Comm. 2004.

Owu provide spectacular evidence that this only applied to the dump rampart bank.²⁷ The ditches were dug with vertical sides then, in some cases, there was sufficient red-stained aeolian clay (seared by the Saharan sun then blown south), silt and iron-oxides migrated to these exposed sides and became indurated as 'laterite' – a fairly close approximation to 'burnt earth'. The various powerful associations with religious symbolism have been spelt out elsewhere: they included *obi* (poison or magic) tested on Benin's City Wall and sufficiently strong to kill the C15th *Oba* Ezoti; charm pots under this wall's main entrances; shrines along Sungbo's Eredo (Ijebu) and the use of water to provide spiritual protection around the whole city or kingdom.²⁸ Many of these rainforest earthworks were constructed over a thousand years ago - earlier than almost all the known walls in the savannah. In terms of the criteria normally applied to 'art', walls and earthworks score quite highly: yet, as one high official mumbled sadly, these monuments could never be exported from Nigeria.

Summary: Matrix comparing 'burnt earth' items and artistic criteria or attributes.

| | Red Ochre | Pottery | Furnaces | Ancient terracottas | Bricks, walls and buildings |
|----------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|---|
| Aesthetic impact | Moderate to strong | Moderate to very strong | Weak when inert ruins. Strong when in action | Varied, but can be very strong | Once very impressive; some aesthetic |
| Technical skill | Moderate to great | Moderate to great | Smelting a very skilled process | Moderate to great | Variable, some great buildings |
| Spiritual symbolism | Probable, but do not really know | Some special pots extremely potent | Once deep 'magic' was integral to smelting | Unknown, but a well marketed feature | Extremely potent walls, and mortar for palaces etc. |

²⁷Websites E, F, G, H, I.

²⁸Egharevba 1953. Darling 2002.

| | | | | | |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|---|---|--|-----------------------------|
| Antiquity/ Uniqueness | Up to 30,000 years, very rare | Up to 9,000 years or so Intact old pots rare | Up to 3,000 years. Intact shafts now rare | 2,000-2,500 years. Once rare. Market now glutted | Mainly last two to five |
| Portability | Almost impossible | Size and fragility a deterrent | Almost zero | Fairly easily moved, so highly | Zero Context remains |

Conclusion

The above matrix summarises the arguments; and it will be noted that almost all the items and features noted meet all of the criteria of 'art' to a greater or lesser extent. Subjectively, one can rank the various items into an artistic order of merit (say, 1st terracottas, 2nd pottery, 3rd cave-paintings, 4th furnaces, 5th walls). From this, one can then begin to determine which criteria are the most important in one's own perception of art. Purists choosing aesthetic impact alone put 'art' in a contextual vacuum, perceiving 'art' objects, like photographs, in isolation with special lighting against a plain artificial background.²⁹ Many Nigerians do not share this sanitising of 'art': they consider museums to be little more than 'juju houses' containing objects once encrusted with sacrificial blood. These, respectively, are the key underlying pull and push factors exacerbating Nigeria's lucrative illicit 'art' market. Whatever the point of view, it is still likely that most people will still find that their choice of artistic merit from the above summary table is strongly weighted with portable items (cave paintings being the probable exception). The 'burnt earth' sample across very different objects and features indicates that 'artistic attributes' once permeated the whole cultural landscape of Nigeria – not just the narrow spectra of portable items that have been spirited away to European and USA museums and private collections.

To find out more about why this happened, it is worth critically analysing what one 'brilliant young expert' chose to publish as Nigeria's 'art' items.³⁰ Of the 100 items he selected, only about 38% have a positive aesthetic impact (*e.g.*, beauty, serenity, dignity), about 57% have a more neutral, intellectual impact (often described as 'primitive art' and the basis of much stylistic 'modern art'), and about 5% have a negative impact (grotesque, repulsive). About 76% of the items exhibit good technical skill but, although it is apparently the main justification for including a few 'utility' items, the exclusion of technically superb work (such as the Igbo-Ukwu bronzes or Hausa leatherwork) indicates that it is not really a key determining factor. Similarly, antiquity is also not a determining factor, as 65% of the items are relatively modern.

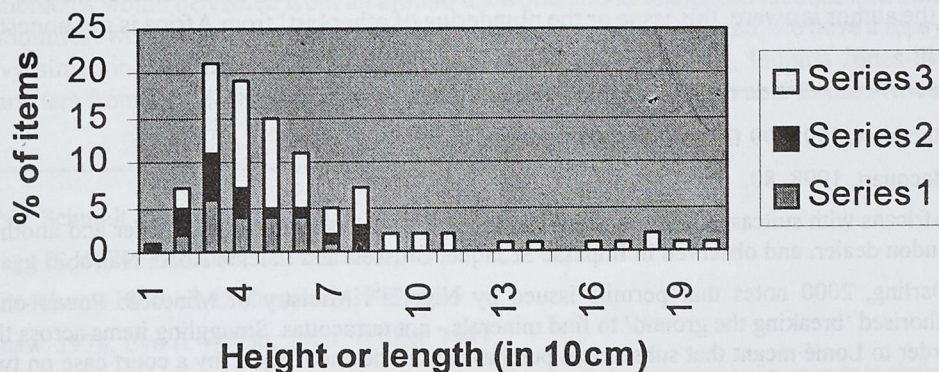
²⁹Davidson, 1967. Dark, 1973. Eyo & Willett, 1980. Harris, 1996. Bacquart, 1998. Loos, 2002.

³⁰Bacquart, 1998.

| | | Aesthetic impact | | | Matrices of criteria for Nigerian 'art' Partial analysis of Bacquart, 1998 (% values apply to each mini matrix) | | | | | |
|---------------------|---------|------------------|---------|----------|---|------|-------|-----------|----|----|
| | | positive | neutral | negative | | | | | | |
| Technical skill | skilled | 37 | 38 | 1 | | | | | | |
| | fair | 0 | 12 | 2 | | | | | | |
| | crude | 1 | 7 | 2 | Technical skill | | | | | |
| | | | | | skilled | fair | crude | | | |
| Antiquity | ancient | 12 | 0 | 0 | 12 | 0 | 0 | | | |
| | old | 13 | 10 | 0 | 22 | 1 | 0 | | | |
| | modern | 13 | 47 | 5 | 42 | 13 | 10 | | | |
| | | | | | | | | Antiquity | | |
| Religious symbolism | potent | 32 | 46 | 5 | 59 | 14 | 10 | 12 | 15 | 56 |
| | utility | 6 | 11 | 0 | 17 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 8 | 9 |

Spiritual potency (association with ancestral cults, secret societies, fertility, covert rituals, open ceremonies and other perceived links with the spirit world) emerges as a key factor, underlying at least 83% of the 'art' selected. As in the 'tail' of many statistical analyses, it

Portability of Nigerian 'Art'



is the smaller, negative factors that reveal what is really going on. Items categorised as 'crude' or 'aesthetically negative' (grotesque) are included solely on the basis of their spiritual potency. Odd-looking, crude Chamba figures display "seemingly non-human features, which may relate to their function as intermediaries between the spirit and human realms" and "the lack of detail" on an almost featureless Eket mask "contributes to the power of the mask."³¹ A grotesque, zoomorphic Ekoi head-dress has "its power .. enhanced by added paraphernalia, including magic substances."³² Most iron and wooden objects are relatively modern and are only defined as 'antiquities' because of their use in rituals. Many art dealers talk up the perceived 'spiritual potency' of African art objects; and links between this 'art', African religions, and secret 'pagan' practices in Europe and the USA (including Faustian pacts for demonic power by some rich patrons) cannot be discounted. Where positive aesthetic impact, technical skill or antiquity are lacking, spiritual potency or 'mystery' provides the crucial fallback rationale. It is as though it is not really the 'art' of Africa that is perceived as being carried away: it is Africa's raw primaeval power, her very soul, that is being marketed.

Key: Series 1: metal; Series 2: terracotta and stone; Series 3: wood and ivory.

Yet even this key rationale vies in importance with portability. 88% of items selected were less than 60cm high; and those which were larger were made of wood or ivory - not terracotta, stone or metal (below). In other words, most items were small or light enough to be carried in suitcases and, as noted by two London art dealers and by the author, these suitcases are now carried unopposed by proactive African nationals taking over the dangerous export stage in yesteryear's role of European and USA art dealers.³³ No genuine export permits exist for many items in most recent publications on African art: these items only achieved their 'legality' by dubious means, including diplomatic bags.³⁴ The book under analysis notes "a number of terracotta heads in the 'classical' Nok style have been excavated in Katsina" (*i.e.*, Kwatarkwashi) – data that could only come from the thieves concerned.³⁵ The distinction between "excavations" and "official excavations" also shows an awareness of the dubious ways in which Nigerian terracottas were obtained yet, as far as the author is aware, this issue or the plundering of other 'art' from Africa is not honestly

³¹Bacquart, 1998; 99 figure C and 94 figure B.

³²Bacquart, 1998, 80.

³³Africans with suitcases full of antiquities reported from Portobello Road dealer and another London dealer, and observed in Impasse St Jaque, Brussels and Latema Road, Nairobi.

³⁴Darling, 2000 notes that permits issued by Nigeria's Ministry of Mines & Power only authorised 'breaking the ground' to find minerals - not terracottas. Smuggling items across the border to Lomé meant that subsequent purchases were deemed 'legal' by a court case on two large 'Nok' statues exhibited in Maastricht.

³⁵Bacquart, 1998, 80.

addressed in this publication.³⁶ Almost all of Africa's 'art' items published are from European or USA museums and private collections – that is, they have been irrevocably removed from their original cultural context. The 'portability' of this 'art' is not just pragmatic: it is obscene.

If all this is along the right lines, then it begins to answer the question raised at the beginning of this investigation: western artistic perceptions do seem to have become increasingly conditioned by market forces. This has not always been so. Pitt-Rivers "believed that antiquities should remain in the neighbourhood in which they are found" and, like Roth, noted the realistic context of 'art' items.³⁷ However, as with Underwood after him, he mistakenly attributed this 'art' to European influence;³⁸ so later archaeologists went out of their way to affirm the African origin and *in situ* cultural context of this art, including its architecture and monuments – without having any eye on the market.³⁹ With an increasing emphasis on participatory research, though, one USA researcher joined the Olokun cult, sacrificing a chicken and using a bottle of Fanta as libation; then another USA researcher interested in marketing Benin textiles became an Olokun Priestess with full sacrificial ritual and a shrine in her bedroom; and, years later, a UK researcher went through a 'drowning experience' in related rituals at Urhonigbe. If Asante 'fertility dolls' and one Belgium art dealer's bedroom shrines are any guide, then this shift in research methodology reflected (or triggered) similar changes in demand for (or New Age marketing of) African 'art'.

Today, there should be no place for publications promoting 'art' out of its cultural context, nor for using that cultural context as a sales pitch for spiritual potency, nor for glorifying the illegally exported plunder with plausible gobbledegook, similar to: 'this cephalomorphic art transcends the apotopaic functional limitations of its local context to embody the essence of a universal naturalism.' The time to reject such pretentious nonsense and sales talk is long overdue. If artistic perceptions had fully incorporated all the criteria noted, giving proper weight to the cultural context of the items,⁴⁰ then Nigeria's spectacular monuments would be visited from all around the world and its ancient terracottas and other 'antiquities' would have been left *in situ* in its cultural landscape. Instead, we have a topsy-turvy situation with the values reversed; and, in the name of 'Art', Indiana Jones-like characters from European and USA galleries and museums have been able to use African

³⁶*Ibid.* Schmidt & McIntosh, 1996.

³⁷Fagg B., 1976. Pitt-Rivers, 1900. Roth, 1903.

³⁸Pitt-Rivers, 1900, vi. Underwood, 1949, 14.5

³⁹Shaw, 1978. Eyo & Willett, 1980. Willett, 1981.

⁴⁰Harris 1996 belatedly notes that African art items "were never intended to be seen in isolation (whether in museums or photographs), but were part of a larger experience given by dances and rituals, with emotions heightened by drumming, singing and poetic declamation."

intermediaries to carry out predatory activities with scarcely a murmur about their unethical behaviour. In an imperfect world, though, there are no easy or unequivocal answers to these problems; and, like life, it may turn out that the journey of this enquiry has been more certain and rewarding than its destination.



**Other terracottas
removed
from Nigeria**



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