Anthropologists and art historians have long recognized that African art forms can be classified into reasonably distinct ethnic styles. In addition, extensive research demonstrates that they are deeply embedded in the social, political, and religious structures of the societies producing them. Many writers, in fact, see these art forms as visual embodiments of the values and principles governing indigenous life. Given this close correlation between art and culture, an interesting question arises. How may members of one African ethnic group, steeped in the traditions of their own culture, react when confronted with the unfamiliar art of other African (and even non-African) societies? Will their exclusive backgrounds in one particular art tradition render foreign styles completely senseless to them, resulting in a random as-sortment of confused impressions? Or will viewers develop a set of coherent evaluative criteria that will guide their judgments of foreign art in a consistent and culturally meaningful manner?

Speculating upon this topic, William Fagg unequivocally states that "the sculpture of one tribe will be meaningless and unintelligible to people of another tribe, because it is art divorced from its content of belief" (1965:12). Fagg bases his argument upon the assumption that because of Africans' predominant concern with the functions of art, they have no traditional concept of art for art's sake, and this lack inhibits their ability to respond to what he calls "the universal values found in all good art" (1965:12). Fagg also goes on to say that the average African's ability to appreciate the traditional art of other groups is unlikely to improve even within the more panethic context of modernization.

At the opposite pole, Robert Thompson labels as untrue any assumption that states "Africans cannot, or are unwilling to, evaluate art... from outside their immediate cultural universe" (1974:5). He attempts to support his point by demonstrating, through a field project involving the use of videotapes, that Africans from one culture can respond enthusiastically to the performance arts of other African groups. Thompson then uses these findings to hypothesize the existence of an African sensibility that he believes may help mold aesthetic values throughout the continent.

The contrasting positions offered by Fagg and Thompson do not, however, exhaust all of the modes of response available to African viewers when they evaluate art from other cultural groups. This paper, for example, suggests a third alternative, which in a sense occupies a middle ground between these poles. Through use of an original field study, I will demonstrate that while viewers from one African culture are capable of responding consistently as a group to works from other cultures, the criteria they employ in their judgments are not based upon the existence of perceived pan-African values. Instead, viewers may simply apply the criteria governing aesthetic choice in their own societies to artworks of foreign origin.

Some precedent for this position already exists in the literature. Crowley, for instance, indicates that Chokwe artists of Central Africa quite willingly critique the artistic capabilities of their Lunda neighbors. Furthermore, these artists go so far as to state that any objects of aesthetic merit attributed to Lunda carvers are really of Chokwe origin (1972:28). In another example, Picton reports the case of an elderly Igbara carver from Nigeria who was asked to evaluate a mask produced by the neighboring Basa Nge. After carefully examining it, the carver suggested a series of aesthetic “improvements,” which in essence would have transformed the piece into a typical Igbara mask (see Willett 1971:206-8). Finally, in a detailed study of aesthetics among Nigeria’s Okpella people, Borgatti (1982) clearly shows that when local viewers are called upon to judge masks from other African regions, they reserve their highest ratings for those most closely resembling a set of preferred Okpella prototypes.

This study, based on empirical data I collected among the Asante of Ghana, augments these intriguing accounts. Fieldwork was conducted principally in Ahwia, a town located approximately eight kilometers from the Asante capital of Kumasi. The town originally was established in the early 19th century as a carving community devoted to the production of regalia for the Asantehene and other prominent chiefs. Today over 300 townsmen continue to carve professionally, supplementing traditional regalia commissions with a thriving business in tourist art (Silver 1981). In addition, since 1960 the town’s population has increased dramatically because of an influx of migrants from all parts of the Asante region. Seeking modern commercial employment, they were attracted to Ahwia by the prospect of cheap housing within easy commuting distance of the capital. None of these new residents ever learned to carve, and, in fact, few ever expressed more than an average interest in local art and aesthetics.

Findings here are based on the administration of a simple ranking procedure that matched two Asante works against a selection of art from other cultures, African and non-African. The test was composed of ten photographs of sculptures, taken from books I had on hand in Ghana. They were reproduced here exactly as they appeared to test subjects. Two items were popular carvings of local Asante origin, six came from other areas of West and Central Africa, and two were from the Maori and Sepik traditions of Oceania. It was hoped that the results would help answer the question of whether viewers were able to identify a distinctive African style among objects of diverse origin and, if so, whether they judged these African objects superior to those produced outside the continent.

The two locally made carvings were prime examples of contemporary Asante tourist art, each one offering an interesting blend of modern and traditional themes. One showed an akwaaba fertility figure portrayed as a modern market woman (E), while the other presented a man in traditional robes holding an open book (F). Both were expertly carved in a style of "restrained naturalism" (Vogel 1979) and, in several preference tests administered earlier during research, had proved very popular with local residents.
The six items selected from other areas of Africa were of museum quality and had been frequently published. Three were full figures (C, D, I), and the remaining were masks that depicted heads alone (A, B, G). All six were anthropomorphic, though some representations were clearly more naturalistic than others.

The Oceanic carvings also were museum-quality pieces and representative examples of their respective cultural styles. Item H, a Maori anthropomorphic statue, had easily recognizable facial features and clearly delineated hands. Moreover, in a manner typical of Maori art, the figure was covered with elaborate incised surface patterns. Item J, a Sepik carving, combined an anthropomorphic body with a highly stylized bird's head that featured a prominent hooked beak.

To obtain a set of responses representative of the entire local community, the test was administered to two groups of people in the Ahwia area: 31 village carvers (N=31) and 36 noncarvers (N=36). Every carver tested worked as a full-time professional and, as revealed through pretest interviews, possessed a sound knowledge of local aesthetic traditions. Nonartists lacked the average carver's expertise concerning local Asante sculpture. Yet, through years of informal exposure, even they had learned to identify readily many objects that either were sold commonly to tourists or were used prominently in major rituals. Neither group, however, displayed familiarity with any of the non-Asante art traditions represented in the test sample.4

Each person was shown the ten photos randomly arranged on a flat, well-lighted surface, and was told to rate them in order of preference.5 Subjects were encouraged to explain the rationales behind their ratings. Their comments, which were carefully recorded, enabled the researcher to determine whether low rankings given to objects indicated absolute judgments of inferiority, or whether they simply reflected relative preferences within a general class of items all deemed good. The following analysis will show that subjects' evaluations did indeed reveal some tendency to separate test objects into positive and negative classes, a distinction that gains added significance when interpreted with reference to broader themes in the Asante conceptual system.

Every sculpture was assigned a score equivalent to the rank it received on the test (e.g., an object rated first was given a score of one, a tenth-rated object a score of ten). The scores compiled for each item were averaged for each test group, and the ten mean scores were then arranged on an ordinal basis, providing a new set of rankings that reflected absolute preferences for each sample group. Finally, the level of rank-correlation was measured between the two populations.6 Results of these procedures are summarized in the table.

As the table demonstrates, the ratings offered by both groups were extremely similar. Furthermore, the reasons commonly given by members of each group to justify their rankings were also nearly identical. Both carvers and noncarvers, for example, consistently included the two local sculptures (E and F) among their top three selections. Item E, the highest-ranked piece, earned particularly wide praise for its mixture of modern and traditional elements. On one level, it was a well-carved akuba possessing such traditionally valued features as a broad forehead, prominent eyebrows, layered neck, and full hips. Yet it also displayed several unusual elements, including naturalistic facial features, carved waist-beads, and a hands-on-hips stance. Members of both groups described the carving as a well-rounded representation of the contemporary Asante woman—aggressive in many spheres of economic life (as evidenced through what subjects termed her "assertive" posture), but also sensitive to the traditional role of women (as reflected in her use of waist-beads and her conformity to many established standards of physical beauty).

Item F, the other figure produced in Ahwia, also earned high scores for its synthesis of traditional and modern themes, as well as for its naturalistic portrayal of the human form. Nearly all subjects interpreted the indigenous robes and rigid posture as clear indications of chiefly rank. The book, however, was said to reflect the literacy and probable Christianity of the person depicted. (Many believed the book to be the Bible.) Members of both groups appreciated this combination of diverse traits, praising the figure as a nicely carved portrait of the ideal modern leader, in short, an educated man unafraid to retain his ties with the Asante past.

Item D, an Ife bronze, also appeared among each group's top three selections. Both artists and nonartists marveled at the highly naturalistic presentation of what they referred to as "a real person." They expressed particular delight with the carving's detailed depiction of elaborate necklace and headgear adornments interpreted by most viewers as probable signs of regal status. Substantial agreement between groups also emerged on the ranking of the next three objects, items C, H, and I. Each of these figures was anthropomorphic in face and body in a style again recalling Vogel's term "restrained naturalism" as well as Thompson's related concept of "mid-point mimesis," a quality found in imagery that is "not too real and not too abstract, but somewhere in between" (1974:26). In evaluating these foreign items, respondents generally focused upon specific characteristics that they could readily reinterpret into meaningful Asante themes. For instance, nearly everyone commented on Item C's elaborate feather headdress. Although a few people disliked it, most found it fascinating, saying that it reminded them of similar adornments worn by local priests during ceremonies.

Item I received positive evaluations for two reasons. First, the two figures suggested twins to most observers, and twins hold a revered (though somewhat dangerous) position in Asante culture (Rattray 1923). Second, many subjects were attracted by the positioning of one of the figures' arms, interpreting this gesture as an indication of friendship. Some older people even claimed that a specific Twi proverb about friendship was being represented, though no one ever explicitly identified this adage.

Reviews of the Maori figure (H) primarily focused upon its elaborate graphic designs, interpreted as scarification marks by nearly all the Ghanaians. Most respondents in both groups
liked the designs, but a few found them unattractive. Many people also commented on the unusual positioning of the figure’s hands, which they felt produced a pleasing naturalistic effect similar to that found in Item E.

The four remaining test objects garnered lower rankings and increasing amounts of negative verbal criticism. Item J, the Sepik figure, received rather poor ratings primarily because of its characteristic anatomical features, but they also bore other traits that, regardless of their creator’s intentions, could be translated into locally comprehensible, and positively valued, referents. For instance, when viewed through Asante eyes, a foreign object’s unusual headdress became the symbol of a chief of priest (C, D), incised facial designs represented ethnic (or medicinal) markings (H), and paired figures recalled proverbs about friendship (I). However, negative judgments of naturalistic carvings resulted when selected traits linked them with unpopular local cultural referents. Item A, with its “prayer cap,” was perceived as Muslim, and Item B, with its threatening expression, became a ghost.

The remaining test data suggested that the absence (or minimization) of naturalism indeed may have helped consign foreign objects to consistently low rankings, as in the case of items G and J. Both pieces—each, no doubt, easily understood in its own culture—failed to communicate because Asante viewers could not decipher their stylized human (G) or animal (J) heads. When pressed to explain their dissatisfaction, most subjects simply replied that they could not understand what the carvings were trying to portray. The unfamiliar stylistic codes interfered from the start with their efforts to uncover a locally meaningful message in the objects. Whether this proposition generally holds true for the cross-cultural appreciation of non-naturalistic art, though, is a question requiring a good deal more research.

Asante viewers frequently stated that good art “portrays the world as it really is.” Based on this study, a more accurate statement would assert that they evaluate art by assessing its capacity to reflect the world as the Asante see and value it. In this respect, the test findings closely parallel Vogel’s description of Baule aesthetics (1979, 1980). Like the Baule, Asante viewers interpreted specific works of art as representing phenomena that, from a local cultural perspective, either sustained or threatened the existing sociocultural order. For example, viewers did more than merely offer an objective identification of a sculpture as a chief, a priest, or an Asante woman. In addition, they effectively placed the object and its cultural referent into a class of phenomena that we may loosely term “civilized.” In other words, a category that reflected human (i.e., Asante) ability to order the world in a productive manner. In objects earning high esteem, selected details of posture, expression, and costume became emblems that, at a broader conceptual level, recalled the chief’s power to structure social relations, the priest’s manipulation of supernatural forces, and the Asante woman’s capacity to perpetuate society through her fertility. At the same time, unpopular objects were often interpreted as representing Muslims, ghosts, and evil spirits—precisely those phenomena lying outside the bounds of Asante civilization; dangerous phenomena that must be guarded against or controlled if society is to function smoothly.

This argument clearly suggests that the act of aesthetic appreciation forces viewers, on a subconscious level at least, to reflect upon much more than art alone. As the analysis of viewers’ comments revealed, Asante aesthetic tastes closely articulate with other Asante moral and social values. In particular, when judging artworks the viewers consistently considered how objects (and their referents) could be placed into broader categories representing order and disorder in the Asante universe. Consequently, foreign art was assessed in light of the objects’ perceived conformity to well-established Akan values. No attempt was made to understand or even to speculate upon the functions and meanings these objects carried in their own cultures. In this sense, foreign art did not serve as a window through which to view the ideas and values of others; it acted, instead, as a mirror reflecting the face of Asante society itself.
books

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and the traditions of his people. He knew that we could not ask them for more.

All of this came back as I read Harold Courlander’s conversation with Peter Nuvamsa in which he said: “I am not against anything new. If there’s something new that is good for us without destroying our traditions, I have no objection to it.” He felt strongly that missionaries should not ask him and his people to give up being Hopi and become Mormons or Mennonites. Still, he understood that the Hopi could not stop them from speaking because of the American tradition of freedom of speech. “One day, though,” Mr. Nuvamsa said to Courlander, “I gave a long talk to one of those missionaries and told him why I thought they ought to give up being a Mormon and become a Hopi. I never saw him after that.” That is exactly what the Peter Nuvamsa knew would happen.

This is the man who sent his grandchildren and granddaughters to the best schools available without destroying our traditions, I have no objection to it.” He felt strongly that missionaries should not ask him and his people to give up being Hopi and become Mormons or Mennonites. Still, he understood that the Hopi could not stop them from speaking because of the American tradition of freedom of speech. “One day, though,” Mr. Nuvamsa said to Courlander, “I gave a long talk to one of those missionaries and told him why I thought they ought to give up being a Mormon and become a Hopi. I never saw him after that.” That is exactly what the Peter Nuvamsa knew would happen.

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ROY, Notes, from page 46

I would like to thank the many scholars who have generously provided advice on acquisitions and data based on their field research. Most of these are mentioned in the catalogue African Sculpture: The Stanley Collection (Roy 1996; see also Bell 1988; Biebuyck 1979; Chaffin 1996; Chevrier 1986; Cornet 1971; Fagg 1968; Himmelheber 1968; Perrois 1979; Robbins 1966; Roy 1981; Roy 1979; Talbot 1983; Talbot 1987; van Geluwe 1967; Westermann 1993; Yamada 1981; and Yorke 1979). I would also like to thank those dealers in African art who have shared their knowledge of the provenance of objects, especially James Willis, who provided the letter concerning the stoll collected by Cecil Rhodes, and Marc Felix, who provided much of the background for the Pendj magical figure. Finally, I would like to thank Professor Roy Sieber, my teacher at Indiana University, who has helped me with advice on acquisitions, and innumerable other ways, for almost ten years.

1. The exhibition coincided with a symposium on African art at the University of Washington Fieldwork was conducted from June 1973 to May 1974. I wish to thank Monni Adams, Jean Bor- gatti, John Chance, William Dorn, Karl Eggert, Jonathan Haas, Sarah Nelson and, especially, Suzanne Silver for their generous advice on problems encountered during writing and research. As always, however, I assume full responsibility for any errors in my writings.

2. For a good selection of articles on this topic, see Jopling and Sander 1979.

3. This statement is based upon data obtained from a questionnaire administered to noncarving residents of Ahwia. The purpose of this questionnaire was to investigate the extent of noncarvers’ interests in Asante art. Analysis of the results revealed that, on the whole, noncarvers seldom bought, used, or even actively talked about art. Furthermore, while many noncarvers were indeed able to recognize extremely famous (or common) Asante carvings, few could accurately interpret the deeper serious and religious symbolism traditionally associated with these artworks.

4. Most carvers did display a very limited knowledge about several other African art styles that were not represented in the test. They were familiar both with Bambara Chi Wara figures and with selected Senoufo masks, expressing an interest in these objects because they believed that European consumers were eager to buy them. As a result, village carvers studied photographs of these sculptures and then tried to copy them, all in the hope that tourists (and even wealthy Chamanas) would purchase these local productions. Interestingly, though, neither Chi Wara figures nor Senoufo masks are traditionally carried in a very naturalistic style, and, as the present paper would suggest, Asante artists personally expressed a low opinion of these art forms—even when evaluating their own versions of the pieces (Silver 1979).

5. Throughout the project, no one ever expressed difficulty in understanding test instructions or in interpreting photographic conventions.

6. Zimmerman’s hypothesis was calculated to measure this level. It is, in essence, a test that measures the degree of correlation between sets of rankings offered by two populations. A result of P less than .05 indicates a very strong correlation between the responses of the two groups.

7. Several of the subjects remarked that the figure might represent Chi Wara, a goddess whose spirit lives deep in the local forest. Folk descriptions of Sabasam- sam, however, do not generally include references to a

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