

Art and Music in Modern Africa¹

The idea of “traditional” African art has changed considerably since the 1960’s, notes Susan Vogel, executive director of the Center for African Art, in the catalogue to *Africa Explores*.² The continuing historical changes of the twentieth century have linked the world’s cultural traditions ever more deeply. “Pure” traditions are so difficult to find that many observers now assume that such purity was never there: the peoples of the world have always been caught in cross-currents of influence, and early Western visions of self-contained and harmonious African communities are now often seen as naive and romantic. Formerly, collectors of African art prized pieces that had been given a stamp of authenticity by use in a traditional setting of cultural meaning such as a ritual ceremony. Now, perhaps because many of the old traditional arts are not practiced as before, the aficionados have to deal with new stuff. Most of the old art pieces are in museums and collections. One can get copies, but the copies seem to lack depth. Or did we just imagine the depth?

Now, the aesthetic canons are blurred, and there is new art. Scholars and critics are therefore turning to the creative work of people who are not bound by local cultural horizons. Today’s artists are not the ciphers of inherited canons we used to meet in discussions of “primitive” art. These artists are establishing continuities, reinterpreting and recreating their heritages, revising historical images, assimilating the presence of the Western world (“digesting” it, in Vogel’s phrase) with new materials and techniques, pulling together cultural symbols with both informed remembrance and reckless abandon. Judging from the art on display, it is obvious that contemporary Africa is a paradise for post-modernists. Everywhere, we get pastiche, assemblage, irony, relativism, adaptability, kitsch. The exulted social meaning of traditional art has been transferred to a giddy new world of clashing values and lifestyles. Artists, as usual, are responding and giving the people what they need to make personal connections.

But what kind of patrons does this art have? And to what are they connecting? It looks like our world, but evidently things that look alike are not the same. For us, the familiar is made unfamiliar. For us, the new African art, like the old, is invigorating and thought-provoking in its imagery and its juxtaposition of concepts. The plastic arts are like that. In a museum, one looks at the pieces — and thinks. The continuity of subtle motifs is clear at first and then obscure: paradoxically, we find intimations of a sensibility that links modern African art to the expressive goals and positive values of those traditional cultures we now say we never saw clearly.

Africa Explores is a wonderful exhibit. To me, however, it is strange that the exhibit, which displays such a rich diversity of contemporary African arts, should lack reference to contemporary African music. Modern African music already has its international audience, though, and it exists in a different commercial world as a major industry. Still, I wonder how the exhibit would look if a heavy sound system were pumping West African Highlife music throughout the place. Imagine horns, delicate guitar work, a loud bass, bells, rattles. Better yet would be a live band. The band has a lot of people in it, and they are all doing something. The audio speakers should be big. Set tables up and serve beer. Turn off the air-conditioning. People would start to sweat a bit. Realizing that they could not help getting a little funky, some might start dancing. It would be nice to sit with a beer and watch the exhibit like that. The music need not be limited to Highlife. People who do not know the names of the modern styles use words like Worldbeat and Afropop and Techno-hut, but the exhibit could do well with styles like Juju, Fuji, Makossa, Bikutsi, Mbalah, Palmwine, Ziglibithy, Mbaqanga, Soukous, Chimurenga, Afrobeat, Taarab, Ozzidi, Kwela, Isicathamiya, Rai, Benga, or many others.

The music would be cooking. It would take all the categories and labels like traditional, modern, rural, urban, class, ethnic, Western, African, and so on, and throw them into a big pot to be softened up. In Africa, the stew is spilled onto a social landscape where the novel social bodies of urban and national life sop up seemingly exclusive traditional categories and tribal identities with indiscriminate gusto. Music is the food of the soul, said one leading African pop musician, and Africa is the home base of good music, said another. The master chefs set a fine table and serve their concoctions with amazing resonance. Afterwards, satisfaction lingers in increased perception of how the various ingredients have been blended. Yes, music would definitely enhance the colors and rhythms and textures of the pieces in the show, just as it has traditionally been used to enhance whatever else was happening around it.

Modern African music reflects the same world as the plastic arts: it has much the same story and it carries a complementary message. A generation ago, many commentators thought that Western instruments and dancehall settings condemned modern African music as derivative; in comparison to the music of indigenous historical traditions, it lacked depth, symbolic complexity, cultural inspiration. Now it is hard to find an Africanist ethnomusicologist who studies traditional music. With the same perspective as those who selected the current exhibit, scholars of African music are exploring the ways in which people use new musical forms to manipulate symbolic meanings and articulate imaginative and conscious expressions that help them interpret and act upon their own experience.

Somehow, though, when transported to the West, the music works on a different level from the plastic arts. It is either easier to understand, or maybe it evokes a different kind of understanding. Among its indigenous patrons, and seemingly for its international fans, it is a harbinger of many new mixes in a world torn loose from its moorings.

Within a generation, and within the imagery of artistic criticism as well, African art has been transformed from an icon of realities that have passed to an icon of realities that are coming. Even sleepy places like Pittsburgh are waking up to the pertinence of African prescience of the postmodern world. African bands have been touring the United States for years, and some of them are now stopping in Pittsburgh. WYEP, a local community radio station, used to play two hours of African music every weeknight around dinner time, though now the show airs only on Sundays. Dinner time is the perfect time. After a surprisingly brief habituation, nothing about the music seems strange. Miraculously, the table gets set and the dishes get washed, and best of all, table conversation perks up. That is the gauge. The art is not supposed to be strange; it is supposed to improve the situation. This point about the spirit of African art was expressed well by a Nigerian contestant in a magazine poll, who responded to the question, "Who is your favorite musician and why?" His subtle answer was that so-and-so's "understanding of the modern social problems incorporated in his music beautifies them." What a concept.

Notes:

1. This essay was written for the magazine of The Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh to accompany the exhibition "Africa Explores" from November 1992 to January 1993. The exhibition was coordinated by Susan Vogel. After opening in New York in 1991, the exhibition was shown in Pittsburgh, Dallas, St. Louis, Washington, Charlotte NC, Berkeley CA, Miami, Aachen, Barcelona, Lyon, and Liverpool.
2. The exhibition was accompanied by the book, *Africa Explores: 20th Century African Art*, edited by Susan Vogel (New York: Center for African Art; Munich: Prestel-Verlag, 1991).