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Critical Analysis Essay

The thesis of author and museum curator Susan Vogel's introduction to her exhibition of African art, *Art/Artifact*, states that the way African art is portrayed by western culture and society (including art galleries and historical museums) and perceived by their respective audiences misrepresents the true meaning and intentions of the original authors of said art. Vogel poses many reasons for this misrepresentation throughout the course of this introduction, including western culture itself being different from African culture in that it is more heavily based upon a visual aspect. This difference in cultures forms the basis for understanding the misrepresentation of African art by western society. There is a clear difference between what the author of a work of African art wants to portray and the art that is actually portrayed within the confines of an exhibition in an art gallery.

From reading the introduction, it becomes evident that Vogel's intention is to inform the reader of the history of how African art was collected and documented and how it was misrepresented. Vogel does this by using evidence and rhetoric. Several different reasons for the misrepresentation are given and explained by Vogel at length. Vogel notes that although the misrepresentation may be unintended or as a result of an unconscious or inadvertent decision, the "translation" of African art from its original culture to a more visually based western culture "render[s] them unrecognizable or meaningless to the culture they came from" (11). Even though the modifications made to the art may be slight, they are a byproduct of the visual culture

established in western society and entirely changes the meaning of African art and the message the author intended to convey.

Vogel also writes extensively about the difficulty in differentiating between what should be considered African art and what should be considered African history. This problem was unique to African art in that there were clear and well-established distinctions between, for example, western art and western history and European art and European history because of the experience of seeing such things in both categories and knowledge about their characteristics. For roughly the first half of the twentieth century, almost everything that could be placed in either category was classified as African history and collected by historical museums and institutions because there was a lack of eyewitness accounts regarding the demonstration and intended purpose of the products in question and a lack of experts in the field of African art. Additionally, there were very few museums dedicated to African culture and even fewer art exhibitions, unlike western art and history. Anthropologists and historians were quick to collect abundances of items from African culture to add to their sparse collections. Vogel writes that as art galleries seek to identify unique objects to purchase and avoid duplicity and redundancy, historical museums focus on informing the audience and documentation try to collect many artifacts to form sets and series. Many objects were also similar to one another, which ultimately made it more difficult to classify them solely as art or history.

The problem of classification was complicated by the fact that there were many different objects created that were hard to distinguish whether they should be considered one item or another, as they possessed primary characteristics of both and appeared to be some hybrid of the two. Vogel notes more clearly: "The continuum of objects runs unbroken from freestanding figures, for example, to figures that are incorporated in staffs or musical instruments, to staffs or

instruments with fine nonrepresentational decorations, to rudely formed, purely functional staffs and instruments. The material—usually wood—provided no obvious demarcation between fine and applied arts” (13). There was little chance of drawing a definitive line between any of these objects and classifying them as art on one side of the line and history on the other. Additionally, many of these objects were produced with the intention of having a practical use instead of simply for artistic observation, as there was usually no distinction made between a functional object and one produced as art; in fact, they often overlapped and served a dual purpose.

I do not think that Vogel has a strong preference for any setting over the others. She does write that “It is interesting, however, to note that one of the earliest exhibitions of African sculpture in an art gallery presented it much as art museums do today—isolated for aesthetic contemplation, completely removed from its cultural context or any suggestion of use” (13). This suggests that Vogel may hold a slight preference towards an art gallery setting. However, as a museum curator, Vogel does display her extensive knowledge of historical exhibitions throughout the introduction and goes into detail regarding the display of series of African art inside museums, and could favor a museum setting slightly.

Personally, I do not find any setting more appropriate for displaying African art than the others, as it is difficult to generalize all pieces of African art under a single environment. The most applicable setting for the display of African art depends on the object(s) being displayed and the intention of the author and the exhibitor as well as the amount of context they choose to provide to the audience. It is difficult to choose one setting over the others without being provided additional context about the object being displayed and, in the case of African art, the function or practical purpose of the object when it was created.

Vogel takes the reader in depth on the history and evolution of the representation of African art. She notes multiple times that the process of collecting and exhibiting African art is a relatively modern venture and points out the inefficiencies and inaccuracies of both the art galleries and the historical museums in their attempts to “decipher” their true meanings for understanding by a western audience. Vogel also provides several reasons for the disconnections between African and western cultures and warns that the true meaning of these objects in the scope of African art will be lost if misrepresented simply to cater to a wider audience.

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