Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie. *Making History: African Collectors and the Canon of African Art: The Femi Akinsanya African Art Collection.* Milan: 5 Continents Editions, 2011. 278 pp. $70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-88-7439-571-2.

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African Art History from an African Perspective: Canon and Critique

Professor Ogbechie has written an important and engaging study for scholars and collectors of African art. Focusing upon the Femi Akinsanya collection of Nigerian art in Lagos, Nigeria, the author argues that "the emergence of African collectors expands the horizons of African art studies and provides an opportunity to revisit the canon" (p. 24). Ogbechie is distressed by the ignorance due to an inability or unwillingness on the part of many scholars and collectors to deal with the existence of African-owned collections that operate outside the established canon. What the Akinsanya and other collections reveal is that there is a rich, lengthy, and complex artistic heritage among Nigeria's many diverse peoples that Western (and some African) scholars and collectors fail to understand due to a canon established in the context of colonial perceptions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and European minimalist aesthetics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Ogbechie begins his study with a brief survey of collections of African art in Lagos, with particular attention given to the collection of Femi Akinsanya. He is intrigued with Akinsanya's discussion of developing his collection over several decades, his reliance upon African "dealers," and the development of his aesthetic perception in relation to issues of canon and history. Ogbechie is especially interested in Akinsanya's concern with "authenticity." These themes are developed more fully by the author in subsequent chapters

Akinsanya has traveled widely in Africa and visited many of the finest collections of African art in European and American museums. He is impressed by what he has seen and dismissive of the assertions that all of the "great sculptures" are no longer in Africa and that African artists are no longer creating objects of aesthetic significance. His travels among Benue villages and his acquisition of sculptures through Nigerian dealers revealed the work of skilled artists past and present, the movement of objects, ideas, and sculptural forms from one community to another, and the importance of art objects and their ritual and social use in the preservation of African culture. Indeed, African art, even in the context of museum and private collections where the objects are often confined within a vitrine or spotlight, continues to "represent the numinous powers of the ... [spiritual realm and the] fragile nature of human existence" (p. 48). The splendid photographs by Kelechi Amadi-Obi of many artworks that Akinsanya acquired over the years provide ample evidence of creativity past and present and their continuing aesthetic and spiritual significance in new cultural contexts.

One of the most important aspects of his collecting was (and is) his increasing concern for "authenticity." Not only did Akinsanya want to know the context in which an object was used and had its value for indigenous peoples, but he insisted that the dealers he relied upon knew the family and community history of an object, as well as the social and ritual contexts in which it was used, and he insisted that their information be verifiable.

In this context, Ogbechie pursues one of the most interesting discussions in *Making History* in an examination of the sculptural genius of Olowe of Ise, whom William Fagg called the greatest Yoruba artist of the twentieth century. Akinsanya and Ogbechie are acutely aware of the frenzy surrounding Olowe's carvings in the current art market. Hence, concern with authenticity is of the first importance. All five of the Olowe sculptures in Akinsanya's collection were acquired through African dealers. A very impressive palace door panel was purchased through the art dealer Theophilus Adedoja, "who brokered its sale from a representative of the Alawe (king) of Ilawe's palace at Ilawe-Ekiti" (p.123). Ilawe-Ekiti is located near Ikerre-Ekiti, where Olowe worked in his lifetime. Since Akinsanya and Ogbechie believe

that "the style of the door is recognizably Olowe's" (p. 124), they conclude that the door is part of the Olowe corpus. Ogbechie analyzes the door at length in comparison with the well-known Olowe palace door from Ise in the collection of the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian. Excellent photographs of both doors are provided. Although the criteria for authenticity, verifiable source, and stylistic similarity appear to be met, I do not find Ogbechie's argument convincing. Palace doors carved by Olowe are known to have been sold by members of a royal family. See R. Walker's discussion of the palace door from Ilesha and my brief essay about the door in Sotheby's auction catalogue when the door was sold by Sotheby's in New York three years ago.[1]

While the dealer's account of the origin of the Ilawe-Ekiti palace door is important, Ogbechie's stylistic analysis is problematic. The forms on the Ilawe-Ekiti door are not carved in the extraordinary high relief as on the Ise palace door, although the carver sought to follow Olowe's deep relief of figures that were almost three-dimensional. The figures are more static, the illusion of movement is less convincing, and they are more often confined to the register in which they appear. Hence, they appear to be copies by a competent carver or skilled apprentice who may have worked with Olowe.

Ogbechie's discussion of a verandah post, an Epa mask, an Ogboni drum, and a small door is more convincing in attributing them to the hand of Olowe, even though collector and writer believe that the small door may very well be an early work in which the figures are beautifully modeled even though much less three-dimensional than those in his later palace doors. Based on my own field studies in southern Ekiti, I believe Ogbechie is correct when he asserts that "many authentic Olowe sculptures are undocumented and remain in the possession of descendants of their original owners who still live within the Ekiti region where Olowe lived and worked" (p.152). However, I also believe that there are many carvings that are in the style of Olowe, some possibly created even while Olowe was alive or shortly after his death, and others being created today. Akinsanya is well aware of Olowe forgeries created in Lagos today (p. 143).

Furthermore, scholars of African art need to be aware of a time line in the artistry of a carver or a lineage or school of carvers. Skills are developed, ideas and styles are influenced by seeing the work of other artists in neighboring regions. Ogbechie's discussion of sculptures from the Opin-Ilorin region of northern Ekiti, where the great carvers Bamgbose and Arowogun worked in their lifetimes, and sculptures from the Owo area to the south of Ise and Ikerre-Ekiti is almost breathtaking in challenging the propensity of art historians to confine their studies to particular areas, failing to discern subtle artistic relationships due to the travel of artists and their artworks across regional areas.

Turning to Benin bronzes in the Akinsanya Collection, Ogbechie continues his discussion of authenticity but with greater attention to the issue of the history and development of a "canon" and its role in judging authenticity. What impresses Akinsanya and Ogbechie is the long tradition of bronze casting, beginning prior to the sixteenth century and continuing into the twenty-first. However, what distresses them is the way in which collectors and scholars have "largely ignored or stereotyped as a homogenous tourist art" bronzes produced by Edo-Benin artists since the British invasion of 1897 (p.177). The British sack of the royal palace and treasury and the distribution of the extraordinary bronzes and ivories to museums and private collectors in Europe and Britain was a tragedy for Benin kingship and the guilds that created the plaques, which documented the history of Benin-Portuguese trade and the historical and political significance of sculptures for the royal altars and shrines. Furthermore, it "initiated a process of value creation in relation to Western art protocols of collecting and authentication" (p. 177). Scientific and historical studies and stylistic analyses were developed for the purpose of establishing authenticity and economic value under the guise of understanding Benin cultural value. Hence, Benin bronze works of art were determined solely in terms of the objects looted from the palace in 1897. The canon was fixed! The problem was that even though the king was forced to leave the Benin palace, the tradition of kingship remained and its prerogative of patronage of bronze artworks continued. The guilds also remained even though less beholden to the throne. Their clientele included Benin chiefs and other important indigenes, as well as persons from Europe and Britain. And there was the concern of Oba Eweka II, who had returned to Benin following his father's death seventeen years after his exile to re-establish the royal treasury and incorporate bronze objects in the ritual and social life of the palace. The bronze casters in Benin may have been descendants of the original guild members, the Igun, but another generation was arriving. Some created skillful reproductions of traditional Benin art. Others brought with them a wider experience and innovation in technique and artistry, adapting their work to the styles of contemporary art. By 1900 Benin bronze castings were in abundance; and by 1970 many casters were signing

their art works.

However, as Ogbechie observes, "Edoid bronzes have been strenuously dismissed in African art studies as inauthentic forms of Benin cultural production and derided as reproductions and forgeries of canonical archetypes. But there may be some value in incorporating aesthetically accomplished examples of such artworks into analysis of Benin art as authentic cultural objects. Also, such dismissal does not fully take into account their uniqueness or the different ways that Africans and African Diaspora people use these kinds of artworks. Given the 'social/ritual-use' paradigm that is mainly employed to authenticate African art, it is illogical for a discourse that values evidence of an object's use in traditional African societies to discredit contemporary processes in which newer African art objects are inserted into local ritual, religious, political, and social life; these objects should be equally important but are often disregarded" (p. 177).

Ogbechie's discussion of several very fine Benin bronze sculptures in the Akinsaya collection is riveting and invites young scholars to take up the challenge he lays down in his questioning the historical relationship between canonical standards and authenticity. His discussion is even more challenging as he acknowledges the widespread practice of bronze casting in southern Nigeria and searches the historical relationship between Benin and Owo artistry in terms of a large collection of Benin objects located for several generations in the Sodeka compound in Owo.

Ogbechie's study will require art historians and collectors to recognize the extent to which their understanding and appreciation of African art have been shaped by (and confined to?) twentieth-century Western thought and circumstances. It is a critique that is a call to realizing the limitations and dangers in the concept of "canon" and the need for an awareness of the cultural and historical determination of our understanding of creativity in the visual arts of Africa. With this book Ogbechie is himself making history.

Note

[1].Roslyn A. Walker, *Olowe of Ise: Yoruba Sculptor to Kings* (Washington, DC: National Museum of African Art, 1998), 38; John Pemberton III, "Lot #166," in *African, Oceanic and Pre-Columbian Art 15 MAY 09,* Sotheby's Auction Catalogue N08552 (New York: Sotheby's, 2009).

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