ART HISTORY AND ITS INSTITUTIONS

Foundations of a discipline

Edited by Elizabeth Mansfield

London and New York
Since it is commonplace that every work of art requires both a creator and a spectator, it became evident that some exploratory inquiry was in order to determine the role of the patron and collector. Through the centuries he has held the balance between the artist and the layman and has handed down with courage and a spirit of adventure the tangible remnants of the history of civilization.

Francis Henry Taylor, *The Taste of Angels*

Before every trip to Africa, I always pay a visit to one of the leading tropical disease doctors in Manhattan. Although he practices out of a swank apartment building on the upper eastside, the doctor’s office itself is unassuming with a starkly appointed waiting room stocked with a bare assortment of tattered books and dated magazines. Among this odd array of reading materials laid out for his patients’ perusal, one book that always catches my eye is an autographed copy of the 1971 exhibition catalogue *African Art: The deHavenon Collection*, which was published by the Museum of African Art in Washington, D.C. Like most African art exhibition catalogues of this period, the book contains surprisingly little text – a half page of gratitude and praise for the collector written by the museum’s director; a half page of gratitude and praise for the museum’s director written by the collector; and two pages of introductions about the history, function, and diversity of African art written by an unidentified author. The catalogue’s remaining two hundred or so pages contain mostly grainy, black-and-white photographs of African masks and statues, all of which are shot on white backgrounds so that they appear to float on the surface of the page. Like the spartan waiting room in which it now resides, the catalogue contains little extraneous matter: each object is identified plainly by a number, a “tribal” affiliation, a short descriptive term (e.g., “ancestor figure” or “ritual head”), and a single measurement taken in inches. In this particular copy of the catalogue, the inscription penned in black ink across the title page also includes words of gratitude and praise by the collector for the good doctor.
Since there is hardly any other worthwhile literature in the waiting area, I am always leafing through the pages of this now dog-eared exhibit catalogue when the doctor suddenly emerges to call me into the examination room. “Are you familiar with deHavenon’s collection?” he routinely asks. “Sort of,” I reply, stumbling through some version or other of a noncommittal answer. The doctor then interrupts to recount to me a story that I have by now heard well over a half-dozen times. Gaston deHavenon, the story goes, visited the doctor some time in the late 1970s before undertaking a trip to Zaire, where he was to receive a medal of recognition for his contributions to the collection and understanding of African art. “He was incredibly nervous,” the doctor recalls. “‘But surely,’ he remembers asking his patient, ‘aren’t you far better off traveling to Africa today than in the ’50s when you put together your collection?’ ‘But I’ve never been to Africa,’ deHavenon reportedly replied, ‘I bought everything in Paris.’” The doctor’s laugh is timed precisely to the sting of his hyperdermic needle, which always sneaks up unexpectedly from behind.

The story of Gaston deHavenon is a familiar one not only because I have heard it so many times, but because it is a truism that almost every major collection of African art in Europe and the United States was not acquired in Africa. Why have so many collectors chosen not to procure objects directly from their site of creation and use? Why is Africa perceived as the last place on earth from where to build a “serious” collection of African art? What is the special mystique of African art objects in Europe and the United States that distinguish them in the eyes of collectors from their material counterparts on the African continent? Fear of malaria, cholera, and dysentery may account for part of the answer, but I think it is a minor part or, as it were, only a smart punchline to the doctor’s well-rehearsed anecdote. Rather, the answers to these questions, as I will suggest in this chapter, lie elsewhere – pointing us not into the logistics of international travel in the Tropics but into the trenches of some of the most fundamental art-historical debates about authenticity, the parameters of canonical ideals, and the subjective constructions of value and taste.

Perhaps more so than in any other field in the world of art, collectors have dominated the formation of taste and construction of aesthetic value in the study and exhibition of African art. Collectors have dealt a heavy hand in structuring research agendas and fashioning the content of exhibition catalogues and textbooks alike; these publications in turn have become canonical models guiding the formation of subsequent collections, and thus creating an institutional cycle for the reproduction of aesthetic norms and ideals. Unlike some art genres, where scholarship has guided public desire, in African art it has often been the other way around. As art historian Susan Vogel once remarked, “More often than not it has been the collector who led the institution (museum or university) to become involved in African art. The institution in turn influenced the general public.”1 In this chapter, I approach the collector as one of the primary “institutions” responsible for the formation of African art history. The collectors’ cultural assumptions and aesthetic preferences are not only reflected in scholarly
and museological approaches to African art but are indeed woven into the very art-historical fabric that structures these fields of inquiry and exhibition.

ENVISIONING AFRICA

One of the most common explanations for why collections of African art have been developed largely outside of Africa focuses on the collector’s skewed and somewhat fragile vision of “Africa” itself. Like an antique glass lantern slide, the collector’s image of Africa is said to be so delicate that even the slightest dose of historical reality threatens to shatter a collective fantasy about the idyllic qualities of art from the pre-colonial era. According to those who share this particular longing for an imagined past, “authentic” African art is thought to have existed only before the first European presence on the African continent. Thus, the arrival of missionaries, colonial officers, school teachers, and other agents of social change is said to have led inevitably to the demise of African creative genius and a decline in the overall quality of Africa’s arts. A typical statement on this perspective comes, for example, from an early book on African sculpture by Paul Guillaume and Thomas Munro, who described the period immediately after 1907 in the following way: “The coming of the white man has meant the passing of the negro artist; behind him remains only an occasional uninspired craftsman dully imitating the art of his ancestors ... The art-producing negro, then, was the negro untouched by foreign influence.”2 A similar declaration was made just a decade later by Michael Sadler in his book on West African art: “Thus the conditions which fostered the older art are passing away, and will not return. With them is passing the art which was sustained by the ancient traditions of ritual and worship.”3 And, writing in 1957, Margaret Webster Plass introduced her catalogue on The Classical Art of Negro Africa by noting: “All of the sculpture collected for this exhibition is ‘pure’ in the sense that it derives from ancient African traditions, unaffected by non-African influences.”4 Operating under such assumptions, collectors who seek to mine this utopian past for desirable art have resorted to acquiring works from a fairly restricted pool of so-called authentic objects that have been in a state of nearly constant recirculation in Europe and America since they first departed Africa, riding, as it were, on the crest of a receding wave of foreign arrivals.

Again, we may turn to Susan Vogel who sheds some light on the logic behind these collecting practices:

The feeling that the art they own comes from lost civilizations is reflected by the general agreement among collectors that it is not important or even necessarily enlightening to visit Africa. Collectors may be disconcerted by the idea that sculptures like those in their living rooms could be dancing today in Africa. The sweaty reality of use and sense of things recently removed from their origins affront
both aesthetic and ethical scruples. The elevation of African art to the status akin to that of antiquities ennobles and aestheticizes it, and also moves it further from a possibly questionable recent traffic in cultural property, with its sordid implications of theft or purchase at low prices from poor people.

The perspective outlined above is also confirmed by the words of collector Brian Leyden, whose objects were included in Vogel’s 1988 exhibition *The Art of Collecting African Art* at the Center (now Museum) for African Art. In an interview quoted in the exhibit catalogue, Leyden explains to Vogel why he has never traveled to Africa: “If Addidas [sic] sneakers and Sony Walkmen were absent from the Ivory Coast, I might reconsider my position, but, at present, my romantic vision of pre-colonial Ivory Coast is too fragile to tamper with.”

The irony in this and other statements of its kind is that African art collectors, perhaps more so than any other type of art collector, claim to have a deep, personal connection to the artists and cultures responsible for the creation of the objects they acquire. In contrasting his collecting practices to those who devote themselves solely to European or American painting, for instance, deHavenon notes in the forward to his exhibition catalogue:

> Unlike the purchase of a western painting which is unavoidably influenced by the name of the artist, what is challenging and exciting for the collector who selects an African sculpture is that you are completely on your own. You may have the satisfaction of looking at the painting, but as you turn a fine object between your hands you experience an emotion which is heightened by your physical contact with its detailed form and the quality and patina of the wood. This experience gives you the feeling that you become closer and somehow part of the artist who has created such a miraculous work.

Close encounters such as these are often accompanied by a deep incorporation of objects into the collector’s home, where works of African art become seamlessly integrated into their new domestic environments. Under such conditions, an object’s presence attests not so much to a reality that exists outside the collection and its particular decor, but rather, as Bourdieu might say, it speaks to the good taste of the collector herself. As Matty Alperton noted in a column advising collectors on the appropriate placement and use of “primitive art” in interior design: “By decorating your home properly, you can make every acquisition more than just another addition to your collection. It can become an important part of the environment in which you live.”

Note, however, that the “closeness” to the artist that collectors of African art such as deHavenon and Alperton experience comes in a rather unusual way and at an odd price – namely, a marked physical and intellectual distance from the artists themselves. Unlike collectors of contemporary European or American art,
such as Robert Scull or Victor and Sally Ganz, for instance, who often came to appreciate and understand “difficult” art through direct contact and dialogue with the artists whose works they acquired, many collectors of African art appear to value (rather than lament) their distance from the artists and the cultural environments from where the art originates. There is, in fact, in many instances an assumption made that African art communicates so perfectly and effectively across cultural divides that knowledge of Africa is unnecessary and sometimes even an impediment to proper aesthetic appreciation and understanding.

**UNIVERSALISM’S BLACK HOLE**

The capacity of African art to spark ubiquitous feelings of appreciation and universal transcultural aesthetic response has been noted again and again since the earliest moments of African art collecting and exhibition. One point that has often been stressed is the fact that African art can withstand public observation in the bright light of the gallery display case without the support of interpretive text or contextual information – i.e., any knowledge that might be derived from an art-historical perspective on Africa. In the early twentieth century, these claims were made out of necessity due to the massive gaps and deficits in the art-historical record on Africa. Witness, for example, Herbert Spinden’s remarks from his 1937 catalogue to the Brooklyn Museum’s exhibition of Frank Crowninshield’s collection: “African sculptures have certain qualities which are absolutely esthetic, producing rhythms of beauty which drum inevitably upon sensitive nerves.”

He then goes on to note that such works “are products of creative imagination and it is possible for us to enjoy them as such without too much deference to ethnological fact” (emphasis added).

Given that the field of African art history did not even exist when Spinden voiced these remarks, we might interpret his deference to the “innocent eye” as a practical solution to an information gap. However, even as we move ahead into the second half of the twentieth century, when the discipline of African art history developed and as art-historical knowledge about Africa began to expand and deepen, the argument for “pure” appreciation unencumbered by cultural data continued to be heard. As one critic noted in his review of the newly formed Museum of Primitive Art in 1962, the museum “judges its acquisitions and collections by modern esthetic standards. In other words – by what looks best to the best informed eyes. It does not attempt the impossible act of putting itself in the minds of the primitive artists nor does it try to revive a sense of the blood and magic which originally informed so many of its possessions.”

And, writing in the early 1980s, in an essay intended for potential investors in African art, dealer Charles Bordogna emphasizes the potential of African art to stir the individual’s imagination: “The emotional intensity of African art ignites the collector’s passions. The sculptures and masks are thrilling to look at and exciting to touch. The stories behind the pieces of tribal rituals can inflame the imagination.” Finally, writing in 1990, collector Eric Sonner described his approach...
The observer of a piece of African art,” he says,

is not influenced by the possible importance or fame of the artist. The Western observer has in most cases no particular insight into the meaning of a piece in the tribal context. The only relationship of the Western observer to a piece is the visual impact in the context of his world, not the possible intent or purpose of the tribal world. The message of the piece is a direct confrontation with the spectator.14

One way, of course, to interpret the kind of pleasure that is achieved in this surprising context of blissful ignorance, or what William Fagg once referred to as the lure of an “uninformed nègrerie,”15 is to take the position that Africa has been perceived by Westerners as somehow undeserving of the more serious scholarly attention devoted to other world art traditions. As Marcel Griaule argued years ago: “However much the Negro is esteemed, he is not thought worthy of the scrupulous attention reserved for the classics of our latitudes.”16 Yet, at the same time, this peculiar brand of artificial intellectual innocence is also open to a very different interpretation, and one that may be more germane to the point of this chapter. That is, African art since its earliest excursions through the studios of European modernist artists has always been perceived as a blank slate upon which to project one’s own meanings and illusions – whatever those may be. This has been true in art as well as in literature. As literary historian Christopher Miller rightly points out in his critique of the history of Africanist discourse in texts:

Favorable descriptions of Africa can be as detached from reality as negative ones: the axis between realism and fantasy does not run parallel to that of desire and loathing. Desire is the desire for realism, for the documented, reified presence of the object. The peculiarity of Africanist discourse has been the slight and constant tease between what the author proposes and what he can prove; for, as often as not, what he wishes to describe is the presence of an absence.17

The idea that African art, to borrow Miller’s own phrase, is a “blank darkness” upon which individual interpretations, fears, and desires are projected might explain why some people believe that the arts of Africa are so easily approached and understood. While one might assume that cultural distance would present a difficult obstacle that must be surmounted before iconographic interpretation can begin, many have argued that African art transcends the interpretive boundaries of any aesthetic alterity. “The sensitive observer,” Susan Vogel once remarked, “responds to unfamiliar works intuitively without knowing their cultural context.”18 In his introduction to the exhibition catalogue for African
Negro Art (an exhibition held in 1935 at the Museum for Modern Art in New York, which largely established the canon of accepted African sculptural forms to this day), James Johnson Sweeney acknowledges that African art had reached a “place of respect” in spite or, perhaps, because of the public’s shallow depth of understanding. “We can never hope to plumb its expression fully,” he admits. “For us its psychological content must always remain in greater part obscure.”

Reviews from some recent exhibitions of African art confirm the persistence of this perceived ignorance and the optimistic assertion of its impact on our understanding and appreciation of African art. “Few people entering the galleries,” begins a review of the exhibit Masterpieces from Central Africa at the Art Institute of Chicago, “can be indifferent to the emanations of faith, fertility and enduring peoplehood that are rampant here.” Or, thinking along similar lines, an equally sanguine reviewer noted of the Kilengi exhibit at the Neuberger Museum of Art: “It is easy for many Americans to say that they understand African art after having seen just a few exhibitions.”

In 1946 Alain Locke began his essay for the catalogue to the Baltimore Museum of Art’s first exhibition of African art by noting the ease with which such works could be understood by even the most unacquainted viewer. He refers not only to African art as the universal “revelations of the common denominators of mankind’s creative urge toward self-expression and beauty,” but also suggests that in contrast to the intellectual challenges posed by contemporary European or American art, interpretive access to African art by Western audiences should be quite effortless. “Its messages,” Locke wrote, “should not be dark and cryptic to anyone who can understand and appreciate contemporary art, as any glance at our abstract painters and sculptors should make clear.” Some fifty years later, in a revealing commentary in The Washington Post, Baltimore Museum of Art director Doreen Bolger described the on-going efforts of the museum to make contemporary art more accessible to a wide public. She, like Locke writing for the same institution in 1946, contrasts contemporary art to the “more familiar” art forms that inhabit various corners in the museum building.

Visitors entering our contemporary wing may have just viewed an 18th-century American period room, a Flemish Old Master painting or an African Baga mask in another part of the museum. The obvious craftsmanship, skill and historical or cultural significance of these works make them seem more familiar. But what’s to be made of Carl Andre’s “Zinc-Magnesium Plain” installed on the gallery’s floor or Bruce Nauman’s blinking neon work “Raw War”? What makes the meaning of an African “secret” society sculpture, such as a Baga initiation mask, more transparent to a Baltimore museum-goer than an installation piece by an American Minimalist or a neon sculpture by a conceptual artist born in the American heartland? The Baga mask or headdress, after
all, is not representational, in the sense that it can be identified with any recognizable animal or human form; even in its original cultural setting its spiritual references were oblique and shrouded in secrecy; and the type of mask to which the article probably refers fell out of use over a half century ago when such objects were torched by incoming Muslims or exported routinely to Western museums. How then could such an elusive object be open to such straightforward, universal interpretation?

SPIRIT POSSESSION

If part of the draw to the art of Africa has been its infinite possibilities of iconographic interpretation and the apparent ease with which its meanings and values cross cultural divides, another attraction that has been identified by some collectors at least is its spiritual magnetism. Just as African aesthetic appreciation is thought to be universal, so too are its metaphysical forces which putatively travel across the Atlantic, wielding their relentless seductive powers on audiences in museums, galleries, and living rooms across Europe and America. To return for a moment to deHavenon’s remarks in his exhibition catalogue, it is instructive to look at the language he uses to describe his initial emotional pull to African art. “I became more and more enchanted with the diversity of tribal styles which taught me to understand and love the seemingly endless ingenuity of those African artists who worked such emotion and spirituality into their three-dimensional forms” (emphasis added).25

While it is arguable that art collectors in many fields are “enchanted” by the alluring spell cast on them by a work of art, and drawn inexplicably to acquire what they collect, the significance of an object’s perceived “magical” force takes on a slightly different character in the context of African art collecting. After all, it is the “black” magic associated with certain African objects that first laid the groundwork for their removal by missionary zeal and later wholesale colonial conquest. Fetishes were prohibited or confiscated by the Christian church, and sacred arts were often seized as symbolic acts of colonial violence. Yet, following their arrival in Europe and America, many collectors, such as deHavenon, refer to the magical power of African art to seduce and draw them in. Sometimes this power is even described as being so forceful that it actually overcomes any initial distaste that the viewer might have had. Pablo Picasso, for example, when he first encountered African art in his famous visit to the Trocadéro in spring 1907 is reported to have felt immense disgust and an overwhelming desire to flee the museum. “I was alone,” he recounted to his friend André Malraux, “I wanted to get away. But I didn’t leave. I stayed. I understood that it was very important.”26 Decades later, Wactaw Korabiewicz described a similar process of what might be called the “reluctant attraction” experienced by European collectors more generally: “African art is spellbinding. It may perhaps not appeal at first glance, although it attracts and holds attention by its extraordinary power of vision.”27
In some cases, it is a disinclined spouse who seems to be overtaken by the “magical” presence of African art. As one collector’s wife noted after explaining her initial resistance to her husband’s acquisitions: “But when Hans returned a month later with three dominating works carved by those same ‘uncultivated’ tribesmen, I took my first objective look – and the spell was cast” (emphasis added). Or, consider what renowned collector Paul Tishman says in the preface to the catalogue of his collection: “Although my interest in collecting African art was at first not fully shared by my wife, who was absorbed in Western art, it was not long before the purity and force of the material worked their spell on her” (emphasis added). Like the rhythmic drumming of African vodun, which possesses its devotees (sometimes even in spite of themselves), African art has often been described as hypnotic in its ability to captivate, sometimes unwittingly, the viewer’s senses. “These ceremonies,” says collector Nancy Noorder, “usually with masked dancing, are rich in color, motion, and the sound of contrapuntal music. We were enchanted” (emphasis added). Or, like a forbidden fruit, African art is sometimes described as enticing its prospective audience in spite of obstacles pitched in their path. “I was strangely attracted to and fascinated by some strange figures I saw in the distance,” collector Serge Brignoni reveals in an interview. “They had large heads, long arms and exaggerated genitals. Our teacher wouldn’t let us look at them more closely, so, on arriving back home I asked my father to take me back.”

These lingering “magical” powers that have been attributed to African art parallel the kind of universal aesthetic appeal described in the section above. Just as it is claimed that anyone can understand the intentions of an African artist, so too it is argued anyone can become possessed by the universal spiritual forces that are sedimented in the core of every transplanted African religious object. Spiritual references are no longer taken to be specific to any particular African religion or belief system, but rather are described as transcultural in their exercise of power and spiritual jurisdiction. In an otherwise sophisticated and nuanced essay rebutting a recent attack by Patricia Penn Hilden on the ethnocentric and hegemonic agendas she associates with the Museum for African Art’s exhibitions of decontextualized objects, art historian Carol Thompson falls back on a rather naive argument about the “universal spirituality” of African art in order to rebuke Hilden’s accusations. “Even removed from its original contexts,” Thompson writes, “African art has the power to communicate socially therapeutic values cross-culturally to people of all ages, transcending differences of race, gender, and class, and uniting generations, living and deceased.”

**METAPHORS OF CONQUEST AND DISCOVERY**

In his brief catalogue remarks, Gaston deHavenon acknowledges the help and participation of his wife by noting that “Anna Lou has been the most influential
companion during these years of the ‘African hunts,’ and it is through her generous advice and encouragement that our collection is now presented for you to share some of these great joys with us.” It is ironic that a man who had never been to Africa before the award ceremony held for him in Zaire during the late 1970s should describe his collecting activities with a metaphor that conjures an image of the great white hunter exploring an uncharted African wilderness – Teddy Roosevelt shooting down a Black Rhinoceros on the windswept plains of the Serengeti. But the image of the hunt, which is a common metaphor in almost all fields of art collecting, takes on special significance in the context of African art.

Like John Hanning Speke setting out to discover the source of the Nile, collectors of African art have sometimes fancied themselves as intrepid explorers voyaging into the uncharted waters of the international art market. Consider, for example, Herbert Baker’s description of his early adventures as a bargain hunter searching for African art: “As an ‘explorer’ seeking treasures in second-hand stores, attics and basements, I found that I could afford African and Oceanic ‘curios’ that looked like copies of a Picasso, Braque, Modigliani or Vlaminck.” More recently, a collector of my acquaintance in the Ivory Coast spent his weekends scouring through warehouses of African art in search of “authentic” materials. Before setting out on these little adventures, he would don his “African art clothes,” rugged attire specially selected to withstand the dirt and dust generated from overturning piles of wooden sculptures and artifacts. Unlike some collectors who collect objects for their aesthetic appeal, this African art enthusiast preferred to acquire works with little or no aesthetic value because, he claimed, there was less chance that such objects might have been faked for the market. As he once exclaimed when finding such a piece, “It’s so ugly, it’s gotta be real.” Finally, the wife of a collector in New York told me once that her husband saw nearly every African “runner” that called him at his Manhattan office. “He keeps hoping to find that one masterpiece, like a real Fang reliquary figure or something, buried somewhere in the junk that the runners usually sell.”

**FASHIONING THE CANON**

In the first decade of the twentieth century, American scientist Frederick Starr traveled to the Belgian Congo to collect specimens and artifacts for the American Museum of Natural History. In his carefully kept diaries, which have been analyzed recently by Enid Schildkrout (1998), Starr discusses some of his strategies to acquire “authentic” objects of art and material culture for the museum’s burgeoning ethnographic collections. His remarks reveal not only his preferences for “old” and “used” objects, but more importantly the effect his desires had on local traders, and the messages that they in turn communicated to indigenous artists and craftsmen. In an entry from December 1905, Starr writes:
Yesterday a well-carved wooden figure was offered. I refused it because it was rather new and empty [of medicine] in its stomach hole. Today it appeared again, this time with a fat round belly neatly sewed up and well smeared with cam and oil. I agreed to the price, getting it down to 1.50 francs.\textsuperscript{36}

Eventually, Starr’s sources became so familiar with his taste that they only brought objects that fit the Western criteria of authenticity – at least, as they perceived it. Starr, however, began to turn down these “manipulated” objects as he came to realize the effect of his choices on the integrity of the collection. In February 1906 he wrote:

I felt really badly when four little fellows came from Ndombe loaded down with beautiful new figures which they had prepared with much care, painting them fresh and bright and sticking feathers in them … Now we had to draw the line and refused most of them.\textsuperscript{37}

Nearly a century after Starr’s adventures in the African interior, Dutch collector Harrie Heinemans recounts in the preface to his collection catalogue (1986) his experiences in purchasing objects. His relationship with suppliers, and the exchange of information that went on between the two parties, is strikingly similar to the situation Starr described in the Congo during the early 1900s. When Heinemans invited itinerant African traders into his home in Holland, he says, they were not only concerned with selling their objects “but they were also interested in books with pictures of masks and figures. In this way they could find out what we considered beautiful and then they could have it made.”\textsuperscript{38} He goes on to note, like Starr, that his choices and commentaries often influenced the type of works he was later shown. “During those first visits I told them in all innocence what was wrong with their figures and masks. As a result that defect never occurred again. They take their time perfecting things and they have a patience and stamina which is unknown to us.”\textsuperscript{39}

The influence that collectors such as Starr and Heinemans have had on the body of collected works from Africa should not be underestimated. Although few collectors have articulated their influence or impact as clearly as these two men, the history of African art collecting is essentially characterized by an ongoing mediation of knowledge between Africa and the West, in which objects deemed canonical by collectors have either been reproduced or recirculated along highly developed and specialized lines of trade. These collections, in turn, have come to form the basic reference points for the canonical forms and ideals of African art history. Unlike many fields of art, where collectors and the academy have worked in step to develop and deepen knowledge of a particular period or style, in the context of African art, scholarship and collecting have all too often been at odds. Whether it is in the collector’s uncritical appeal to universal aesthetics, in their conviction of the lingering magical potency of
African material objects, or in their desire to recapture innocent virginal sensations of “discovery,” collectors have often perpetuated (through the presentation of their collections in museum exhibitions and catalogues) a particular vision of African art that either eclipses the complexity and contradictions that exist within specific African social systems, or obscures the messy and unpleasant socio-political realities of modern Africa. Although African art history has made great strides in recent years to bring into the fold of the art historical canon modern African art and expressions of contemporary popular material cultures, collectors have generally resisted such “alien” intrusions into their watchfully guarded, carefully constructed object world. While it is true, as Francis Henry Taylor pointed out in *The Taste of Angels*, that collectors have provided art historians with the physical tools of their métier – “the tangible remnants of the history of civilization”\(^{40}\) – the specific relationship between African art collecting and scholarship needs to be (re)viewed through a more skeptical lens.

In catalogues of African art, collectors have generally been extolled for having the vision, perseverance, and resources to collect and preserve Africa’s “dying” heritage. “When universal appreciation of the significance of Africa’s creative tradition is finally achieved,” begins Warren Robbins prefatory remarks to deHavenon’s exhibition catalogue, “the important role played by the private collector must be recognized. For it has been the efforts of the discerning collector to assemble examples of the many different tribal styles comprising that tradition that have contributed immeasurably to its preservation as a resource for posterity.”\(^{41}\) But not all references to collectors have been as favorable as Robbins’s acknowledgment to deHavenon. With characteristic mordancy, William Fagg years ago warned of the impact “undisciplined” collecting might have on the field of African art history and the public perception of Africa’s arts.

Does my heart swell with Africanist pride when I see in the expensive magazines that So-and-so, the well-known film star, innocent alike of taste and of intellect, has had her home decorated on her behalf in the latest style by Such-and-such, the avant-garde interior decorators, and that the necessary note of surrealist incongruity … has been provided by a fake Negro sculpture? No, these gentlemen are applying to the appreciation of African art a kind of hormone weed-killer which could well kill the plant by promoting excessive and weak growth. The activities of “collectors” who are not prepared to become genuine and critical connoisseurs are anything but praiseworthy, especially if they proceed to fix their defective taste upon the community by giving their collections to museums – all or nothing.\(^{42}\)

While Fagg would probably not have lumped deHavenon into the category of collectors he describes in this passage, his remarks underscore the power of
material collections to shape art historical knowledge and the intellectual paradigms of the field.

NOTES
5 Vogel, The Art of Collecting African Art, p. 4.
6 Leyden quoted in Vogel, The Art of Collecting African Art, p. 58
11 Ibid.
37 Ibid., pp. 182–3.
39 Ibid.
42 Fagg, “The Study of African Art,” p. 44.