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secrecy \hspace{6pt} african art that conceals and reveals

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Front cover: Mask (detail), unknown Vivi artist of Gabon, wood and pigment, H. 16 3/4 in. Collection: The Detroit Institute of Arts, Gift of Mr. and Mrs Max J. Pincus.

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Dagon sculptors of Mali claim secrets particular to their profession: they have privileged knowledge of fire, metals, plants, woods, and other elements of the natural world, and through ancestral sanction they have society's permission to manipulate this information as others may not. These sculptors are society's blacksmiths. They make talismans and likenesses for religious use, forge hoes for the fields and weapons for warfare, and mix herbal medicines with prayer in times of illness. They are historians and storytellers. They clarify and confound, reveal and conceal. In all of these capacities, the Dogon sculptor has for centuries been both artist and businessman, always exchanging services and products for goods or currency, and sometimes employing others to do his bidding.\(^1\)

Inquiries into the secret character of Dogon arts abound—primarily to affirm their sacredness. Other contexts of secrecy, however—less arcane, fully secular, and equally viable—have been little discussed. Like his father and grandfather, the modern Dogon sculptor remains a
businessman. Unlike his predecessors, who served the local community’s domestic, agricultural, medicinal, and spiritual needs almost exclusively, the modern sculptor has taken a personal initiative and expanded his venture into the international marketplace.

Primarily as a result of early French interest in Dogon material culture, Dogon peoples were made aware in the 1930s that their artefacts were desirable to a foreign audience. At the same time, Dogon sculptors began to sense the relatively extravagant wealth of European visitors, and these visitors’ ability to purchase whatever they wished. Today, when the sculptor makes art for a foreign audience, he uses both his historically based understanding of foreign perceptions of Dogon art, and the legacy of sculptural models available to him, to sculpt desirable objects and to market them under conditions that will convince a client to buy. This is not fraud but performance and theater. It is not falseness but the weaving of a credible fiction, not a malicious activity but a reflection of a refined business sense on the part of the sculptor and his middleman. The client carries home a souvenir — perhaps a valuable addition to his or her art collection — in any case, a material keepsake of his or her experience among the Dogon. The sculptor gains his livelihood.

This agreed-upon exchange is a modern, mutual seduction involving money, experience, art, and artifacts. Like most seductions, it is dependent primarily on three contingencies: first, each party’s desire to possess what the other holds; second, each party’s ability to conceal his or her holdings, ultimately destined for the bargaining table; third, the ambiguous value and character of each party’s object of desire.

In interviews with dozens of sophisticated and widely traveled European and American visitors to Sangha — generally the premier stop on the Dogon tourist circuit — I often witnessed an overwhelming sense of longing for something these visitors, in their own lives, had never experienced. This longing was more than the excitement of visiting a new place, and beyond simple adventure. Dogon country seemed to represent to the visitors something they felt they had missed in their lives. Anthropologist Renato Rosaldo (1989:108) describes this longing first as nostalgia — a word derived from the Greek nostos (to return home from) and algia (a painful condition) — and second as a particular kind of nostalgia in which people mourn the passing of what they themselves, by their very presence (or, in this case, by the presence of their Western commodities), have transformed. For many visitors, Dogon country seemed to offer a prime experience of sorts, a profound homecoming of a kind (figs. 1, 2, 3). Dogon artists, hostelers, tour guides, and children all benefit financially by preserving this illusion, which they therefore all consciously perpetuate.

Concealment, in that it preserves an illusion, is synonymous with ruse, in Yambo Ouologuem’s sense. 4 It is a sculptor playing on a client’s longing for personal connection with something primal, and his ability to convince a client of an object’s worth. It is a client claiming that he or she is a simple tourist and cannot afford the sculptor’s price. Neither forces the other’s hand; instead, in an atmosphere of congenial distrust, concealment is performed as a diplomatic shell game in which each player flatters the other and seems to offer something for nothing, or at least the possibility of finding the extraordinary veiled behind the ordinary. The artist thinks he may be able to sell an object for a high price, since the average client is no connoisseur. The client thinks he or she can corner a masterpiece at bargain rates because the proprietor does not know what he’s got.

Ambiguity figures prominently in this uneven aesthetic landscape of art production and appreciation. Ambiguity breeds intellectual disequilibrium; it is concealment’s ally. The sculptor asks himself: Is the client paying me enough? The client asks him- or herself: Am I paying too much? The sculptor or his agent assures the client: The object is old — or at least an excellent example of its kind, and therefore worth as much or more than the client pays — the object is unique. The client wants to believe, knows this may be his or her only trip to Mali, and so usually surrenders to the desire to possess the object. The client makes payment and carries home a portable piece of a picturesque Dogon paradise. The transaction is completed. Each participant is satisfied, and imagines him- or herself as having gained the advantage. Equilibrium is restored.

This assessment of concealment and ambiguity may seem uncompromising to both artist and client. It may not resonate with much of the previous scholarship that presents the concept of ambiguity in Africa as a liminal zone transcending stages of life or levels of knowledge. Anyone, however, who has traveled to Dogon country may feel it another and somewhat disconcerting kind of resonance. This assessment is not especially congruent with secrecy as we have come to perceive African ritual concealment as presented through years of visual and textual analyses of the subject; yet such concealment suggests, nonethe-
Previous page: fig. 1.

Fig. 2.

Fig. 3.
Sangha village, Mali. A path through the quarter might lead to a boutique des arts or a togu na. Photo: Rachel Hoffman, 1990.
less, as true and functional a system of secrecy as those systems of secrecy associated with social or religious rituals. In the context of this essay, concealment and ambiguity, as intentional, obfuscating maneuvers, serve a pointedly and unapologetically contemporary function: power in the form of economic or experiential advantage for oneself. It would be difficult to say that earlier merchants did not act in a similar manner, but, historically, there seems to have been an attempt made to veil self-interest behind the veneer of community interest. This is often no longer the case. As adaptive strategies in a modern social and economic setting, concealment and ambiguity are integral to methods of self-promotion used with great skill not only by travelers and buyers of art, but also by traditional Dogon sculptors and their agents.

Togu Na
The Dogon togu na (figs. 4, 5) is a traditional men’s meeting house, a place of discussion and of governance. Entrance to the togu na is normally restricted by sex and by social status; only adult males are allowed in. The togu na appears as a thick stack of flat-top thatch, supported about five feet off the ground by a series of posts forked at the top. It is the first structure erected when a village is founded, and usually sits at a geographic focal point.

Traditionally, every social unit sufficiently large to be called a village has a togu na. If the village is extensive enough to have several quarters, each has its own togu na, which may become monumental and highly embellished through friendly competition with the other quarters.

Sculptors are responsible for felling trees and fashioning the logs into the posts that
support the *togo na*'s roof. According to early research, these posts represent maleness. Yet traditionally, two unequivocally female breasts may be carved to protrude from a post's exterior surface. The posts thus manifest the presumably opposing qualities of female and male, binary concepts that many observers believe are central to Dogon thought.

During the 1980s, *togo na* posts became coveted objects among first world collectors of third world art. It is no surprise that in a demand-heavy economy, the traditional manufacturers and owners of these posts came to recognize their potential for increasing personal wealth. In consequence, modern production of old *togo na* posts has grown to meet the market.

As artificial wood-aging processes continue to be refined, they are used with increasing skill on those posts carved to replicate prototypical imagery, i.e., those posts with breasts. Original posts have been secreted away in the homes of village elders, and newly heirloomed posts have been installed in *togo na* to await eager clients, intrepidly led by Dogon guides through arduous and uneven landscapes to a cousin's village.

One defining quality of a "true attraction" is its removal from the realm of the commercial; the experience of a true attraction must be personal and transformative (MacCannell 1989:157). A tourist will pay for transport, hotel, food, and guides, but the experience of the attraction, the sating of nostalgic desire, must be preserved so as to appear pure.

These observations have also been made—perhaps made first—by the Dogon guides who station themselves in Sangha, awaiting carloads of tourists. There are hundreds of paths across the Bandiagara terrain; many of the paths lead to *togo na*; all of the paths and *togo na* are known to the guides. The guides know at a glance how challenging to make the client's experience: a half-day jaunt to be back in time for lunch, a full-day hike with lunch in a family compound, or an overnight trek with slumber under the stars. The guide can determine whether a client is looking for a walk down the road or a sprint down the cliffs, and orchestrates the trip accordingly. The guide knows, before it happens, who will end up carrying the camera equipment.

If the tourist agrees to suspend disbelief, agrees to believe that he or she is to be privileged with a pure experience, the guides comprehend no less the breadth and potency of their own authority in the eyes of their wards. By pointing out Fulani women with gourds on their heads and babies on their backs, by referring to herbs and shrines and loci of danger along the trail, by maximizing the ritual, magical, once-in-a-lifetime character of the client's experience, and by avoiding one another if more than one guide at a time is out, the guides are able to create—to perform for wide-eyed ticket-holders in an African bush theater—the experience of the true attraction.

The drive to rupture resists revision (Ozick 1991:99). In exchange for exceptional experience, the client promises to suspend disbelief. From past experience with rapturous tourists, the guide knows the successful techniques of tourist seduction. He knows that "getting off the beaten track is the most beaten track of all" (Culler 1988:162). The destination is reached. The traveler is provided with refreshment and presented to village elders. The elders remove themselves, the traveler moves through the maze of a mud-brick village to a family compound, and the vendors of art—sculptors or their agents—appear.

Whether the visitor buys a statuette, a granary door, a 300-pound carved tree trunk (uprooted with theatrical reluctance by its proprietors from its honored place in the *togo na*) that must then be gotten home, or a slingshot-sized branch whittled with breasts, almost every visitor leaves with something in hand, each having surrendered to the desire to carry home proof of the true experience. The guide is thus able to deliver both the experience of a true attraction and a satisfying deal on a piece of Dogon art.

It is worth recalling that art and illusion are everywhere tied, inherently and intimately—an intimacy to which each theatergoer has agreed to surrender. If the illusion ends up even more persuasive than bargained for, the ticket was more than worth the price. The object purchased becomes a document of survival—the survival not of the object but of its possessor, whose individual persona, through proprietorship of the object, accrues an exotic cast of its own (Stewart 1984:148).

Wall Painting at Songo

More abstract than the *togo na* post is the rock wall of painted ideograms above the Dogon village of Songo. A fifteen-minute climb up the cliffs from the edge of the village leads to a bluff on whose surface is painted a collection of images (figs. 6, 7, 8).

To the traditional Dogon community below, the images illustrate masks and other cultural paraphernalia created and maintained by the area's artists. The images introduce the viewer to myths of creation and death. The designs are mnemonic devices recalling local legends and histories; they teach adult behavior.
Fig. 6.
Songo village, Mali, from the path up to the painted bluff. Photo: Rachel Hoffman, 1988.

Fig. 7.
The painted bluff above Songo village, Mali. Note the shallow cave at left, from which bones and other objects may be pulled. Photo: Rachel Hoffman, 1988.
and responsibility. Historically, the site is a classroom full of practical knowledge, a visual narrative depicting the “social organization of truth” (MacCannell 1989:137) – the tenets fundamental to the smooth functioning of the social unit. Traditionally, access to the knowledge embedded in the paintings – like access to the *togo na* – depended on one’s community status. Direct access to the imagery was granted to the adult males of the community and also to artists, since they managed the truths depicted by the imagery.

Components of the *togo na* can be sold as souvenirs, but pieces cannot be removed from the rock face above Songo without permanently altering the site. If the monument is to remain an attraction, the visit must hold something other than material keepsakes for the visitor. In this case the attraction is the promise of a true experience. The guide puts on a performance. Wearing appropriately Dogon clothing, the guide weaves a story around the painted imagery. The Western viewer, through participation on this stage, is invited into the circle of knowers and seers. Through a staged dissolution of the proscenium, the viewer enters and lives the true experience. In this *ile mystérieuse* of Mali’s Bandiagara region – this contrived and perfectly ordered world in stasis – the modern visitor can appease his or her nostalgic longings. If the visitor wants to take something home – a piece of art – a cache of sculpture waits below (figs. 9, 10, 11).

Any personal uncertainty about the painting’s historic and spiritual value can be overlooked by the guide, who, by staging the site’s aura and spirituality, is able to make a living. The artist who maintains the wall for tourist viewing and the guide who weaves the illusion of

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**Fig. 9.**

**Fig. 10.**
A boutique des arts, maintained, as in most villages, mostly with contemporary sculpture along with a few older pieces. Ende Village, Mali. Photo: Rachel Hoffman, 1986.

**Left: fig. 8.**
reverence become, through an act common to all theatrical performers, the very opposite of what they advertise: agents of blindness, instruments of illusion and concealment, rather than mediums of clarification (Barthes 1988:76).

**Paradise Located**

One of the characteristics of modernity is the commonly held belief that authenticity and significant experience are to be found only in other places, within other cultures, perhaps only in other times (Culler 1988:160). The reasons for this may be debated, but the fact of it—among both artists and clients in Dogon country—is palpable.

The visitor to Dogon country seeks not the pampered luxury of a Club Med vacation but the significant experience of another place, another time, another culture.

The sense that significant experience exists elsewhere is not limited to visitors, however, which is why the seduction between artist or guide and client can be called mutual. Not only the client but also the Dogon artist or guide subscribes to the modern notion that profound experience exists elsewhere, in another time, another place, another culture—a future, perhaps, in Bamako or Paris or New York (fig. 12). This notion is the impetus behind the illusion weaving: the underlying desire for the camera, the travelers’ checks, the plane ticket, the green card.

If Western visitors believe that in some small measure they can gain a sense of their own past through significant experience among the Dogon, the modern Dogon artist or guide no less believes that through contact with the Western visitor he has access to a profound experience of his unfolding future. Each carries away from the other a dream—an illusion—of paradise.

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**Fig. 11.**

Traveling salesman. Wearing a transistor radio and a Cornell Track Team T-shirt, he bicycles the terrain and displays his cache of *tres ancien* artifacts: a Tellem stone head, an equestrian figure, a plaque featuring reproductions of carving tools, some beads, and other wares. Mali. Photo: Rachel Hoffman, 1990.

**Fig. 12.**

I am indebted to the Department of Art History of the University of California, Los Angeles, for making possible my dissertation research in Mali; to the UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History for making possible my work with the National Museum of Mali; to the National Museum of Mali for providing access to the richness and diversity of Mali’s cultural milieu; to the Dogon artists and thinkers who shared with me their expertise and erudition; to Herbert M. Cole for his continuing guidance and friendship; to Donald and Henrietta Cosentino for their unique wisdom and unfailing encouragement; to Cecelia F. Klein for her intellectual tutelage; and to Dana Leibsohn, Martha Berns, and Deborah Shapiro for their insights and support. This essay is dedicated to the memory of Arnold Gaty Rubin, whose commitment to personal vision paved my intellectual path.

1. In every case discussed here, artists and their agents are male. Clients may be either male or female.

2. As chief of the Dakar-to-Djibouti expedition of 1931, in which he collected thousands of African objects for Paris’s Trocadéro museum, Marcel Griaule began research in the Dogon village of Sangha. Griaule’s entourage often comprised a dozen assistants, and his research tools included a private airplane and various accoutrements normally associated with comfortable Paris life. Add to this a century of French-colonial and neocolonial domination, and indigenous peoples know what foreign capital can do. Radiodiffusion Mali, from its broadcasting tower outside Bamako, currently televizes weekly episodes of Dynasty, which is locally believed to represent the ordinary Western life-style. The Dogon sculptor’s awareness of Western capital, tastes, and lifestyle determines, in part, his art-production practices.

3. Hayden White (1978) makes a convincing case for the distinctions (or lack thereof) to be made among fact, fiction, and falsehood.

4. Yambo Ouologuem is a Dogon author educated in France and currently living in Mopti, Mali. His brilliant and disturbing novel Bound to Violence (1986), which interprets five centuries of West African history, begins with the admonition, “Since this book is a work of fiction any resemblance to real persons would be fortuitous.” When he writes that “the very essence of the game of diplomacy is to replace force with ruse,” I suspect he is alluding to strategies of concealment and ambiguity.

5. Ritual knowledge and social initiation take important forms in all societies, including those of sub-Saharan Africa. It is noteworthy that in Africanist studies of knowledge and initiation, attention has been paid almost exclusively to secrecy as it buffers extraordinary public display. That is to say, among the Mande, Igbo, Akan, Yoruba, Bantu, and other societies the concealed preparation of masks, costumes, feasts, and processions as heralds of public festival and sense of community has been examined in detail. The same cannot be said of the secrecy grounded in the everyday power economies of the individual.

6. I use the word “traditional” here as Susan Vogel does (1991:10), to signify activities or arts that emphasize their “connection to received forms more than the invention of the individual.”

7. I refer again to Griaule and his followers, who presented their data within a structuralist framework. Lévi-Straussian Structuralism, adopted by the Griaule school, is a method of analysis founded on the construction of a series of opposing compartmentalized phenomena. From the interrelationship of these individual phenomena, universal experience is deduced. In the early literature on the Dogon, researchers explained their social, psychological, religious, and artistic existence within a structuralist framework.