Portraiture in Africa

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_African Arts_ is currently published by UCLA James S. Coleman African Studies Center.

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A portrait depicts a specific person, and the idea of portraiture springs from a common impulse to remember and be remembered, whether the reasons are personal or political, ritual or social. The nature of portrayal differs from culture to culture, however, subject to concepts of individualism, the prevailing aesthetic, and a host of social or ritual beliefs particular to a given time period, people, or place.  

Western culture emphasizes individual identity, Western art features representation, and the portrait canon stresses physiognomic likeness—notably, the communication of personality through facial features and expression. We do not know what John Harvard looked like, yet a quite realistic sculpted image bearing his name surveys Harvard Yard. In contrast, African culture emphasizes social identity, the African aesthetic is a generalizing one, and the portrait image is individuated by name and context. Thus such widely disparate visual configurations as Kurumba antelope headdresses (Roy 1987) and dressed houses (Fig. 4) work as portraits in Africa alongside representational (Fig. 3) and stylized (Fig. 10) human images.  

Recognition of the portrait genre in Africa stems from the same interaction of situations and events that has expanded the range of African images now generally considered appropriate to study under the rubric “art”—notably developments in Western art since the late 1800s, field study in Africa by Euroamerican scholars, and the increasing participation of scholars from Africa in the academic disciplines concerned with material culture (Borgatti 1976a).  

The modern period in Western art is rich in examples of portraiture that convey personal identity without resorting to literal physical description—making them more like African portraits and making it easier for us to recognize comparable images in Africa. For example, reliance upon literary reference and indirection creates a conceptual and cross-cultural bond between such works as Charles Demuth’s I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold (Fig. 7), a symbolic portrait of William Carlos Williams that refers to his poetry (Aiken 1987), and Fon appliqué portraits (Fig. 8) that draw upon the imagery of a proverb to sug-
gest name and character. Personal artifact and emphasis on name characterize such contemporary works as Eleanor Antin’s portrait of Margaret Mead (Goldin 1975) and Armand Arman’s portrait of Andy Warhol (Fig. 5), and recall African modes of portraiture that rely on the property or clothing of the subject to evoke the individual, as in Bwa commemorative forms (Fig. 6), Ibibio funerary shrines (Salmons 1980), or Baule portrait masks (Vogel 1977). Siting reinforces the actual identity of the subject in certain portraits, and today, photographs of the subject are added to the configuration, confirming it, as in the Bwa example shown here.

The literature does not agree on what constitutes a “true” portrait, except that it depicts a specific individual. Western scholars have had to address the gap between their own expectations that portrait images be literally representational, as in a Yao headdress mask from Mozambique (Fig. 1), and the identification of many generalized images as portraits in African communities, illustrated by Bembe commemorative statuary (Fig. 10). The hedging of the term “portrait” with such qualifiers as “portrait by designation,” or a tag line like “but of course they are not true portraits” stems from this gap between Western expectation and African actuality.

In my own work among the Okpella (Nigeria), I had to come to grips with the identification of commemorative masquerades as portraits. Some of these were nonanthropomorphic. Others wore generalized human masks (Fig. 2; Borgatti 1976b). I did not think of these as portrait images during my initial research, although I documented their identities. The perception of these images as portraits depended upon my developing sufficient familiarity with the culture to recognize the social exchanges that took place between individual personified ancestors (masquerades) and their living associates (the titled elders). “Portrait” was the only category that accounted for the evocation of personality accomplished by these forms or that recognized the level of reality they held for the community.

African scholars like Rowland Abiodun and Babatunde Lawal bring yet new insights into the nature of representation-al imagery in particular, its parameters and its appropriate-ness in certain Yoruba portrait forms. Abiodun (1976) notes that completeness rather than verisimilitude is a representa-tional ideal for the commemorative Ako figures used by the Owo Yoruba. Writing about the same tradition, Lawal (1977) notes the danger inherent in verisimilitude, and the equiva-lence of name and representation in attracting and fixing a spiritual force—the function of many memorial portraits in Africa. The durable object may be seen as a more efficacious kind of name than its ephemeral verbal counterpart.
According to Kalabari Ijo sources, the spirits come and stay in their names, meaning their particular sculpted figure or headdress (Horton 1965; Barley 1988).

That portraits depict specific individuals appears to be the only undisputed issue in the literature on portraiture, even though the means used to specify the image or the mode of depiction may vary according to culturally held conceptions of the person, ideas about individualism, and aesthetic preferences. This is the point of departure that each essay in this issue takes in its exploration of the portrait mode in a particular African culture. As a background against which these essays may be read, the arguments about African portraiture as a genre, developed in my recent publication, Likeness and Beyond: Portraiture in Africa and the World (The Center for African Art, New York, 1990), are summarized here.

African portraits depict real people, people whose lives form part of the historical narrative of a family, a community, or a nation. Portrait images are identified by name, sometimes verbally and through use, or at other times via such depicted attributes as physiognomic likeness, personal ornamentation, and emblems particular to the person represented. African portraits emphasize social identity rather than personal identity and evidence an aesthetic preference for the general and ideal rather than the idiosyncratic and representational, which is consistent with African cultural conceptions about personhood and ideas about individualism.

Nonetheless, portraits identify individuals who have demonstrated their capabilities during a lifetime of success. As those most likely to be efficacious ancestral forces, such men and women are selected to be memorialized in portrait form. With the economy characteristic of all African sculpture, these portraits reference individual and social identities simultaneously, so that the image of a king may represent a particular king and all kings; a commemorative mask for a woman, a particular woman and all titled women.

African portrait images fall into three broad and slightly overlapping categories. The largest category by far is the generalized anthropomorphic image that is individuated through naming, such as an Okpella Dead Mother (Borgatti 1979) or a Fon memorial altar figure (Bay 1984); through specific sculptural reference to the deceased's coiffure and personal decoration, as in Akan commemorative statuary (Sieber 1972; Soppelsa 1988); through attributes or insignia specific to the subject, a mode exemplified by Kuba statuary (Vansina 1972); through the incorporation of relics, as noted for the Bembe (Fig. 10; Soderberg 1975); through visual narrative or biographical references such as those characterizing Antanosy memorials (Fig. 9) and Ijo funerary screens (Barley 1988); or...
simply through contextual association with the individual portrayed or with his or her family, as in Baule portrait masks (Vogel 1977).

Representational images, the second category (e.g., Fig. 3), are physiognomic likenesses based on a confrontation between artist and subject. In some cases the subject (or an appropriate relative) sits for the artist, serving as a model. In other cases the artist may simply familiarize himself with the individual to be portrayed (his appearance, personality, and biography), executing the work without further visual reference to the person. Bangwa and Bamileke royal portraits (Brain & Pollock 1971; Harter 1976), Hemba ancestor figures (Neyt & de Stryker 1975), and Dan images of favorite wives (Himmelheber & Fischer 1976) all fall into this category. Even the most representational African portraits idealize and generalize their subjects, demonstrating what Rowland Abiodun has called a "controlled naturalism" (1976) in contrast to the idiosyncratic or literal naturalism of much Western portraiture.

Just as the most representational images may be seen to draw upon the generalizing aesthetic that informs all African portraits, the emblematic portrait takes the cultural and historical markers present in all the images and raises them to another degree of abstraction. Portraits in this third category make use of symbolic devices to evoke an image of the subject in the mind's eye of the viewer. They are often nonanthropomorphic and may include an assemblage of goods or visual referents that recall the individual to the spectator, as in Batammaliba dressed houses (Fig. 4) or Fon works in cloth appliqué (Fig. 8). Generally they may be said to represent an intellectualized vision of the subject and his personality or spiritual side not normally visible. The imagery may be personal and subtle, dependent upon the viewer's specialized knowledge, or it may be public and dramatic to impress more firmly on the audience particular characteristics or achievements of the person portrayed.

The boundaries between the three categories are fluid, fluctuating according to the quality of the documentary evidence, in some instances, or personal interpretation. The categories themselves are an analytical convenience.

Idealized but recognizable images like the Owo Yoruba ako figures (Abiodun 1976)—that is, images that look as if they could be real persons even to eyes unaccustomed to reading African images and distinguishing African faces—and unabashedly symbolic ones, like the Bwa effigy (Fig. 6) documented by Roy (1987), are less surprising to the Western observer than the notion of a generalized image representing a specific individual, as is the case with Yoruba twin figures (Drewal 1984). The Western viewer comes to these portraits
with a conception of identity that stresses individual difference rather than conformity and from a visual background that is representational in emphasis. It is unquestionably difficult for such an observer to relate to many of the African images discussed here or in Likeness and Beyond as portraits, despite an intellectual appreciation of the issues. Nonetheless, these images represent specific people, and they are invested with identity in ways that are meaningful to their audience. We must accept that they are appropriate “relational models,” as art historian Ernst Gombrich refers to portraits in his classic 1972 article, and that they serve the same purposes in their own cultures as more representational images do in Western culture.

Name and use are clearly the keys to locating portraits in Africa. Investing the images with personal identity for an outsider audience remains the challenge for those who study them, whether African scholars or Western ones. Art historian Henry Drewal’s detailed biographical data on the twins memorialized by figures in one family’s shrine (1984) and historian Edna Bay’s exegesis of a Fon memorial (1985) that places it into a particular context reinforce an interpretation of these images as evocative of individual identity. Such cases suggest the background missing for many other examples of African portraiture, a background we must take on faith until scholars involved in the arts of Africa take up the challenge to investigate the relationship between name, image, and identity in their own research.

The essayists in this issue of African Arts are not the first authors to investigate portraiture in a thoughtful way. Anthropologists Hans Himmelheber (1972) and Eberhard Fischer (1984 [1970]) were pioneers in field investigation of the topic. Nor are they the first to comment on images that refer to specific individuals, for without the considerable commentary found in the literature, Likeness and Beyond could not have been written. But each author here is among the first to accept the idea of an African portrait genre with conventions of identification distinct from the Western genre, and to take the next logical step and investigate the nature of the portrait image in a particular African cultural context. The importance of these essays lies not in their being able to convince the reader that a certain African sculpture serves as a portrait image. Rather it lies in their asking the kind of question that compels both author and reader to look in an innovative way at works of African art in relation to human beings, in forcing a reassessment of the limitations of our past vision, and in making possible new insights into the nuancing of imagery in African culture.

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LEFT 9. MEMORIAL SCULPTURE BY FESIRA, CA. 1935. ANTANOSY, MADAGASCAR. PHOTO: JOHN MACK.
FESIRA SHOWS HIS SUBJECT SEATED BESIDE TWO IMAGES THAT RECALL IMPORTANT ASPECTS OF THE DECEASED’S LIFE—HIS SERVICE WITH THE FRENCH AUTHORITIES AND HIS PURCHASE OF THE FIRST AUTOMOBILE IN THE VILLAGE.

BELOW 10. MALE FIGURE. 19TH-20TH CENTURY BEMBE, ZAIRE. WOOD, PORCELAIN, 17.8cm. MARSHA AND SAUL STANOFF COLLECTION.
BEMBE MEMORIAL PORTRAITS IN WOOD ARE BELIEVED TO CONTAIN NOT ONLY THE SPIRIT BUT ALSO THE PERSONALITY OF THE INDIVIDUAL COMMEMORATED. RELICS FROM THE SUBJECT’S BODY ARE INSERTED INTO THE FIGURE, AND SCARIFICATION PATTERNS WORN BY THE DECEASED MAY BE REPLICATED.
that beadwork was one of the main activities of the period of seclusion Athapaskan women underwent during puberty and at menses. Dobrog informants told an ethnographer that they welcomed this period and its opportunity to work without interruption (p. 70). Although it may be undeniable that individual motifs may have had European origins, the work was carried out in a particularly native or indigenous context.

The gender implications of this work also remain unexplored. By equating northern Athapaskan art with beadwork, Duncan essentially identifies Athapaskan art with women. The issue raised by the bold and intriguing assertion is skirted, as are the issues of acculturation and artistic identity and the full range of meanings the work has to the women who executed it.

Northern Athapaskan Art is still a valuable book. It treats an underrepresented topic and draws on a wealth of ethnographic literature. Duncan is well steeped in her subject and brings careful, considered attention to regional styles and specialties. With rich color illustrations that make the beaded articles seem to leap off the page, as well as evocative and informative historical photographs, the book is visually stunning. It also includes a list of museums with Athapaskan collections and a comprehensive bibliography. Further, it is written in a straightforward, readable style. Athapaskans will find it interesting to follow the story of a supposedly acculturated art form, especially because there are many parallels between both the beadwork of native Athapaskans and theirs and their attitudes toward clothing adornment. Anyone interested in beadwork will find the explanations and illustrations of technique to be clear and understandable. It is unfortunate that the work promises more than it delivers and raises a host of unanswered questions, but one hopes it will stimulate interest in a neglected area and serve as an impetus for future investigation.


