

Dilettantism and plunder— illicit traffic in ancient Malian art

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Illicit international trade in antiquities has two dimensions. One is the sheer volume of this commerce, measured by the absolute numbers of art pieces plundered from archaeological or historical sites and by the profits accruing to a very few as a result of their transport and sale. The second is the ethical dimension.

The ethical dimension is set out clearly in the preamble of the 1970 Unesco Convention on the illicit import, export, and transfer of ownership of cultural property, which states that 'cultural property constitutes one of the basic elements of civilization and national culture, and that its true value can be appreciated only in relation to the fullest possible information regarding its origin, history and traditional setting'. That sentence is preceded by the observation that: 'interchange among nations of cultural property and information from research about cultural property ... increases the knowledge of the civilization of Man, enriches the cultural life of all peoples and inspires mutual respect among nations'.¹

The clandestine excavation of Inland Niger Delta terracottas and their sale on the Euro-American market is a classic example of the flaunting of these principles. The way these statuettes were recovered in the past and the dilettante approach of those concerned to the ethics underlying their acquisition and study have caused the irrevocable loss of information which is essential to an interpretation of their function in their original culture. As we shall see, the loss of this information was a major cause of our earlier ignorance of the flourishing urban civilization which existed over a thousand years ago in the Inland Niger Delta.²

From nothing, nothing can be made

Those involved in the illegal art trade may be placed into three categories according to the role they play in the process: procurement, acquisition or service (see Fig. 48). The culpability of the first group, the procurers, is clear even to its members, notwithstanding protests to

the contrary made to various national legislative bodies during debates on ratification of the 1970 Unesco Convention. Similarly disingenuous arguments ('exposing' art to the public; 'saving' art from decay) are put forward by private collectors and by some public museum administrators, the players on the acquisition stage. Certain articles of the 1970 Unesco Convention are directed principally at these two sets of actors. The ethical arguments in this article are directed at those who service the trade.

However much one publicly deplors the illicit art trade, or distances oneself from individuals involved in procurement and acquisition, any contact with the trade corrupts.³ Art historians, museum personnel, or archaeologists who validate or authenticate art works without first scrutinizing accompanying export permits share complicity. Museums

1. Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, hereafter referred to as the 1970 Convention.

2. The Inland Niger Delta is a monotonous alluvial flood-plain of over 80,000 square kilometres. It is formed by the confluence of the Niger River with its principal tributary, the Bani, and the rivers separate downstream of the confluence into tributaries. Jenne, formerly Jenne-jeno, is the principal town of the southern Inland Niger Delta.

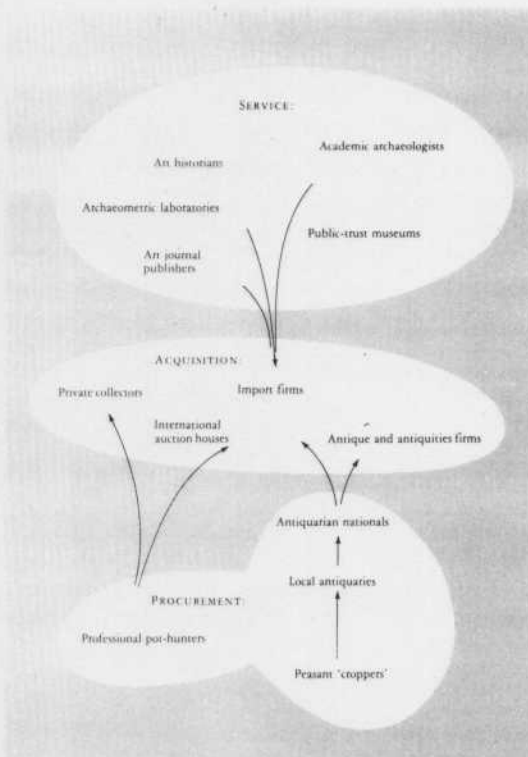
3. The argument is most eloquently made by Jan Vansina in his recent book *Art History in Africa*, London, Longman, 1984 (p. 20): 'Even today scholarly studies have insufficiently disengaged themselves from mercantile interests and are partially crippled by them. Meanwhile, for over a half century, large private collections have been assembled, and have saved many art works from destruction. Nevertheless, the proliferation of forgeries, the keeping of precise origins as trade secrets, and the publications, written or directed by dealers, touting their holdings, have certainly blemished the services that the market had rendered.'

For much too long an attitude fostered by some entrepreneurs of the market-place was that of African art objects as *art trouvé* (found art), like pretty pebbles on a beach, and further fed the aesthetic involvement of collectors by titbits of exotic sensationalism. Unfortunately, students of African art were not totally free from such influences and still must beware of them.'

The now generic term *art trouvé* refers to art (usually exotic or 'primitive') which art historians are prepared to analyze without knowledge of its makers' culture. This is opposed to the art historical study of Western art which considers such knowledge necessary for any analysis.

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The illicit commerce in international ancient art comprises three spheres of participation: procurement, acquisition and service. The several participants in each sphere and the flow of art or information supporting the commerce are illustrated in this diagram.



which display these pieces, usually in the interpretive vacuum of a sterile showcase, feed the trade. Archaeometric laboratories which provide conservation services are equally at fault, as are scholars who publish articles on works they know to have been illegally obtained.⁴ Publishers and editors of art journals in which these articles are published also share complicity, which is magnified many times if their journals run advertisements for clandestinely obtained items. We would reject as cynically self-serving the argument that such advertisements pay for the publication of scholarly information.

To those, such as art journal publishers, who might argue that illegally marketed art already in circulation represents a corpus of knowledge which will be lost if not recognized by scholars, the response is simple: *Ex nihilo nihil fit* (from nothing, nothing can be made). The information provided by *art trouvée*,⁵ lacking a chronological and cultural context, is so restricted and so flawed as to be virtually negligible. By their complicity in the commerce, however marginal, these providers of services help to escalate prices, give legitimacy to dealers' categories (i.e., legitimate marketing devices which add 'value' to the art), and unquestionably encourage the looting of more archaeological and historical sites. The tragedy is that, if context were respected during the process of exposure at an ancient site, these same art works could greatly enhance our appreciation and understanding of the social picture and underlying dynamics of African history and prehistory. This assertion is predicated upon the belief that all art, whether ancient, 'exotic', or modern Western abstract, serves as an instrument of communication, with a set of real references in the social life and history of its makers' communities.

A work of art is a metaphor or constellation of metaphors crafted as an instrument of communication and information storage. The artist or craftsman necessarily revealed himself as a communicator within a 'consuming' community by tapping a larger ideological repertoire shared with that community. This is not to say that he or his contemporaries were necessarily aware of the richness of that ideological repertoire, nor that every member participated equally in the referencing of that repertoire. Indeed, as we will see below, the archaeologist can be alerted to the growing complexity and the emergence of hierar-

chies in a society by the burgeoning diversity of symbolic expression. However complex it may be, this art corpus has an explicable logic referring ultimately to social, economic, and material realities, the traditional domain of the archaeologist. These realities together comprise the historical context without which the ancient art remains inexplicable.

The interpretive approach followed here is that which has been applied successfully to, for example, the ancient rock art of the Sahara and southern Africa.⁶ Fundamental to this approach is trust in the integrity of communicative metaphors as presented in the people's own media, be they rock art, folk lore, or fine lost-wax statuary. These metaphors have a corroborative potential and may be cross-referenced by ideological fragments retained in myth and lore, which may be further cross-referenced by material patterns expressed in spatial distribution of artefacts, settlement patterns and the like. Comparison between these quite different data sets provides confidence in interpretation. The possibility of such corroboration is, of course, eliminated if the art is isolated from the archaeological context providing the material for such comparisons.

Art serves a double function. In the living society, it provides the symbolic syntax (along with *inter alia* language and ritual) necessary for ideology to satisfy its universal function of mediating between material, economic, social, and belief systems. For the archaeologist, ancient art is often also the clearest window on the integrative logic of past cultures, on the complex systems of ritual acts and beliefs, of everyday experiences and perceptions. As we strive to make prehistory an ethnography of the past — and one which can become even more powerful than traditional synchronic ethnography because of our special perspective on change and causation — the contribution of the aesthetic sphere holds enormous

4. This marks a departure for one of the authors (RJM) who, in order to decry the situation, wrote a review of a catalogue of Malian items illegally obtained, and thereby contributed to the validation of those pieces (see R. J. McIntosh, Review of *La Poterie Ancienne du Mali* by B. de Grunne. 'African Arts', Vol. XVII, 1984, pp. 20-2). Hence in this article, we will avoid all specific reference to publications concerned with illicitly-obtained antiquities.

5. *Ibid.*, note 4.

6. D. Lewis-Williams, The social and economic context of southern San rock art. 'Current Anthropology', Vol. XXIII, 1982, pp. 429-49 and W. Davis, Representation and knowledge in the prehistoric rock art of Africa. 'African Archaeological Review', Vol. II, 1984, pp. 7-35.

potential. This position is clearly a rejection of the 'art for art's sake' argument presented by some to explain the creation of so-called exotic or primitive art.⁷ Indeed, in Africa this argument has too often degenerated into a racist exposition of cognitive evolution.⁸

For the purposes of such archaeological ethnography of artistic production,⁹ the need for date and context is absolute. We must undertake not only an investigation of the circumstances which gave rise to manufacture but also the cultural situation within which the art functioned. For those in Figure 47 who provide their services in the study of ancient art, this is the arena of most direct confrontation with the ethical issues raised by illicit commerce. A piece of art taken from the ground without record made of the associated archaeological stratum becomes a chronological orphan. Further, art exposed without recording the archaeological provenance is art divorced from the economic, social, ideological and historical context without which ancient art remains inexplicable. Only by scientific, stratigraphic excavation and radiometric dating can the works avoid the interpretive limbo into which all other art pieces enter when clandestinely removed from archaeological sites. This is a position concerning ancient art as cultural property is clearly stated in the preamble of the 1970 Convention, '... its true value can be appreciated only in relation to the fullest possible information regarding its origin, history and traditional setting'.

During the past century, hundreds of terracotta statuettes have been exposed on sites in the Inland Niger Delta of Mali with no record being made of their archaeological context. Turning now to this terracotta tradition, the lesson is unambiguous. Ancient art considered as a symbolic syntax and retrieved in a secure context is much the most illuminating window on prehistoric life.

Statuettes from Jenne-jeno

Before controlled excavations were undertaken at the Inland Delta site of Jenne-jeno, the hundreds of terracotta statuettes purported to have come from this region were studied in a most superficial manner. Dating was restricted to stylistic typologies, usually based on single, discontinuous attributes. Many context-less terracottas have been dated by thermoluminescence (TL). The unreliability of these dates, the widely

Episodes	Terracotta statuettes			Terracotta appliqué			Total representational art	Other Clay 'toys' of domestic animals	
	Statuettes in original context	Fragments <i>in situ</i>	Total	Human motif	Snake motif	Other animal	Total terracotta		
c. AD 1200-1350 Settlement decline <i>Triumph of Islam</i>	2	4	6	-	-	-	0	6	(6)
c. AD 1000-1200 population and building explosion <i>Crisis of Proximity</i>	6	3	9	2	8	2	12	21	(13)
c. AD 500-1000 maximum areal extent and prosperity <i>Clustering: Identity and Distance</i>	-	5	5	1	3	-	4	9	(28)
c. 250 BC to AD 500 Foundation and growth <i>Low Conflict Specialists</i>	-	-	0	-	-	-	0	0	(19)

varying dates procured from the same statuette and the tendency for TL dates to cluster a couple or more centuries more recently than do radiocarbon series from probably related sites, are problems encountered elsewhere in Africa.¹⁰ These weaknesses in TL application in the Inland Delta case are entirely predictable because of the lack of samples from the interment environment which should accompany each piece being dated.¹¹

Interpretation has been limited to a search for motifs or attributes recalled in local oral traditions which are then used as the devices to 'explain' the art. Beyond the tautological weakness of the method, this low-level inference by analogy is unverifiable. Any one art piece might be equally 'explained' by several traditions,

7. The case against 'art for art's sake' is pursued in R.J. and S.K. McIntosh, 'Archéologie et histoire de l'art africain', *Atlas de l'Archéologie*, Paris, Encyclopædia Universalis (in press); and in Davis, op. cit., see also Vansina, op. cit.

8. For example, A.R. Willcox, *The Rock Art of Africa*, pp. 255-61. New York, Holmes & Meier, 1984.

9. Davis, op. cit., p. 12.

10. D. Calvocoressi and N. David, 'A New Survey of Radiocarbon and Thermoluminescence Dates for West Africa', *Journal of African History*, Vol. XX, 1979, pp. 11, 19; P. De Maret, 'New Survey of Archaeological Research and Dates for West-Central and North-Central Africa', *Journal of African History*, Vol. XXIII, 1982, pp. 6, 9.

11. J. Michels, *Dating Methods in Archaeology*, pp. 194-5, New York, Seminar Press, 1973.

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Chart illustrating the terracotta statuary, appliqué art, and terracotta animal figurines from Jenne-jeno, by episode of settlement change.

myths, or aphorisms evoked by the same design motif. Once removed from its archaeological context, the piece is forever removed from any hope of the greater interpretive confidence which might easily come if the same or analogous works were found repeatedly and predictably in the same context for which we also knew the economic, social and political significance. Such knowledge can be provided by cross-referencing to archaeological data such as artefact distribution and associations or settlement patterns.

The following example from Jenne-jeno, where just such a well-documented context exists for terracottas, will demonstrate that the gain in knowledge is not simply additive. Art recovered from its stragaphical context has considerably higher potential for better illuminating the fundamental principles of prehistoric change.

Jenne-jeno has been the location of intensive excavations since 1977¹² (Fig. 48). Founded in the third century B.C., the settlement extended to a minimum of 12 hectares by the mid-first century A.D., 25 hectares by A.D. 300 and by A.D. 750 had expanded to its maximum area of 33 hectares and was enclosed within a city wall. The site yields unambiguous evidence, in the earliest levels, of long-distance trade and specialist production. Saharan stone was brought to Jenne-jeno, imported iron ore was smelted on site to make a medium-carbon steel, and potters made a sophisticated ceramic ware. For the middle of the first millennium A.D., evidence abounds of occupational specialists (potters, bronze and gold smiths, iron smelters and forgers, stone and glass bead workers), of subsistence producers (fishermen, rice and sorghum farmers, herders, hunters), and of an expression of as yet unclear membership differences within the community (ethnic, class, ideological hierarchy?) expressed in a bewildering variety of burial practices. We have argued¹³ that this burgeoning of providers of services and specialized functions at Jenne-jeno and the complementary evidence from the hinterland of an integrated and hierarchical regional settlement network is clear evidence of indigenous African urbanism.

We focus here on the light cast by the terracottas excavated at Jenne-jeno on this particular instance of indigenous urbanism and on the larger issue of emerging hierarchically-organized society. It is important to explain why we can even attempt to reconstruct the indigenous

evolution of urban life at this site. We know from the extensive studies of emerging cities in regions such as the Mesopotamian lowlands, north China, central Mexico or the Yucatan, that economic intensification and specialization, social hierarchization, control of information distribution by one or a few subgroups, expanding frontiers of trade and cultural contact, emergence of integrated hinterlands in which settlements were distributed by population size and by diversity of the inhabitants' occupations, and more are the multiple threads woven together in the fabric of urbanism. These threads, however, are spun out over a long pre-urban period and in a form scarcely recognizable to most archaeologists as leading to city life.

Ideology is a critical thread in any social or political fabric. It is especially so in urban situations where diverse occupational groups, élites and commoners, different ethnic groups, etc. need to be bound together in peaceful co-existence. Ideologies may be expressed materially in the form of religious regalia, insignia of ethnic membership, or sumptuary items and laudatory art devoted to the legitimation of the élites' rule. Ideologies are often reflected in material items that function as signs or symbols designating behaviour appropriate to the context in which they are used. These items, then, function as models of the complex ideologies, that is, as partial representations in which detail is economized in order that complex ideas and mental associations may be invoked by the observer. The meaning of the art metaphors is deepened by association with other symbolic artefacts (usually in repetitive relations) and by the spatial context. Prehistorians who try to reconstruct the ideology from the often highly abstract symbolic model reduce their chances of success when they ignore the multiple evidence and corroborative potential of context. Interpretation of the thirty-six terracotta art pieces now available from scientific excavation at Jenne-jeno illustrates art in context as a part of our efforts to understand the

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Excavation at the largest of the units sunk into Jenne-jeno. Cultural deposits were continuous from the surface to 5.5 metres. Photograph shows excavation of levels dating to the third and second centuries B.C., when the settlement was founded.

12. S.K. and R.J. McIntosh, *Prehistoric Investigations in the Region on Jenne, Mali*. Cambridge Monographs in African Archaeology, No 2 Oxford. Bar (2 Vols.): 'The Inland Niger Delta Before the Empire of Mali', *Journal of African History*, Vol. XXII 1981, pp. 1-22; and Djenné-jeno, cité sans citadelle', *La Recherche*, No 148, 1983, pp. 1272-75.

13. S.K. and R.J. McIntosh, 'The Early City in West Africa: Towards an Understanding', *African Archaeological Review*, Vol. II, 1984, pp. 73-98.

