Collecting African Art: Part Two – Provenance



A rare nail fetish known to have been collected in 1962 near Kisangani in the present day Democratic Republic of Congo

Item #A0900-060

By Misaki Imagawa

In the first part of this series, we learned African art has been given a specific set of criteria that must be fulfilled to be considered traditional and authentic. First, the work must have been created by non-European Africans, free from any Christian or Islamic influences; and second, the artworks must have been *used* by the respective African tribes in ceremonies, festivities or daily life. Some observers and collectors may think authenticity is limited to a specific time and place – an idealized Africa of the past that modernity has destroyed and lives on only in the form of artifacts. However, it is important to realize that contemporary influences and adornments do not in any way, take away from the authenticity of a piece. This leads us to the following questions: how does one tell if an artwork is *truly* authentic; and what does *provenance* mean in the context of traditional African art?



Terra cotta bust from the Nok culture in Nigeria; scientifically tested and shown to be 2,000 years old
Item #A0700-491

In the case of most western art, provenance is the key to figuring out the history of the piece: the artist, origin, and the chain of ownership or auction houses the work has previously passed through. It is an important aspect in measuring the authenticity, quality, desirability, and value of a work of art. However, when it comes to African art the traditional view regarding provenance does not always apply; most often because the information itself is not known or available. For example, artists of traditional African art do not sign their works. Additionally, in many cases a group of artists work together to complete a piece; so even if an artist could be named, it would be irrelevant. Unlike western art, the value of a traditional work of African Art is not dependent on the artist.

In addition, the attributions applied to any particular piece – even the provenance itself – may not always be reliable. As the value of traditional African art has risen in the world art market, the production of fakes has also tended to rise. For example, signs of wear and use on tribal art usually help validate authenticity, but scratch marks and chipped surfaces as well as other signs of use can be intentionally inflicted by forgers. Artwork may also be scientifically tested to determine if it was truly made at the time it was claimed to be made, but even scientific testing can be misleading. What if a wooden mask was scientifically shown to be well over a hundred years old, but was carved just months before using centuries old wood? In a similar fashion, documents can also be faked to appear authentic by making up a list of previous owners or exhibits. Even old auction house labels have been

faked. Finally, provenance cannot always tell you if something was made to be used versus made to be sold.



Above: Bracelet from the Tuareg People in Mauritania, West Africa. The piece shows all the signs of use, its edges worn down over time; Part of a much larger collection, some shown based
Item #A1300-213



Part of a collection of based brass bracelet currency from the Tuareg people

Does all this mean provenance is useless when it comes to traditional African art? The answer is, hardly. Although reliable provenance is great to have and can enhance one's understanding and appreciation of authentic tribal art, what cannot be so easily fabricated are relationships with honest dealers and other collectors who are passionate about what they present and collect. Reputable, honest dealers are in the business for the long-term and

usually go to great lengths to determine the authenticity of a piece while wading through mountains of fakes and mediocre works to select those they deem to be the finest. Conversely, the same thing can be said about collectors. Yet, speak to anyone familiar with collecting traditional art from Africa or anywhere else and they will tell you the same thing: an authentic work of art has an indisputable feeling. It has a voice that speaks about the journey it has been on and the numerous lives it has touched, and this voice can be heard and interpreted by those willing to listen.



Bamana / Bambara people · Kasal Village, Mali · West Africa · 20th C. · Organic composite · 29 W x 12 D x 24 H inches

Item #A0602-413" rel="lightbox"> This Boli fetish calls out to anyone familiar with the rich art and culture of the Bamana people in Mali, West Africa; its abstract, yet formal qualities are the exact same qualities appealing to today's collectors of modern art Item #A0602-413