

But the study of these collections by anthropologists as "material culture" cannot satisfy the conditions of humanistic study, where the relationship to the rest of history is necessary. For example, anthropologists have conducted many community studies, but the arts and crafts are treated as economic subjects, never as bearers of attitude and meaning, as in the history of art.

In conclusion, the two terms of our binomial theorem here again come together. As in a regenerative circuit, the study of popular art cannot now be conducted in the absence of full knowledge of "fine" art. Nor should it be entrusted solely to social scientists. Its study is perhaps the last of the major tasks of discovery for humanistic study in the visual arts. From it we can gain altogether new insights about fine art, much as historians like Marc Bloch have studied rural society to clarify the complexities of the oldest history of modern institutions.

All the arts are brothers,  
Each one is a light to the others.

Voltaire

## *Folk Art from an Anthropological Perspective*

### Johannes Fabian and Ilona Szombati-Fabian

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The reflections that follow are offered as a somewhat indirect contribution to the study of folk art in Euro-American contexts. Our own empirical material is chronologically and culturally removed from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America that produced the objects which the twentieth century reevaluated as folk art. Our observations derive from research, conducted since 1972, on a vast corpus of paintings which we discovered in the urban-industrial region of Shaba in southeastern Zaire (formerly known as Katanga).<sup>1</sup>

Created by artists of the people and for the people, these paintings are displayed in private homes and in places of commerce and entertainment. Land- and city-scapes and, above all, historical-political scenes and portraits are striking to the outside observer (Figs. 1-4). Buyers of this art are the urban masses, people who left the rural and traditional worlds and now form an

<sup>1</sup> Research was initially part of a project on conceptualizations of work and creativity among Swahili-speaking workers, supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Further aid was received from the Rockefeller Foundation program at the National University of Zaire and from Wesleyan University. Their help and the kindness and cooperation of many artists is gratefully acknowledged.

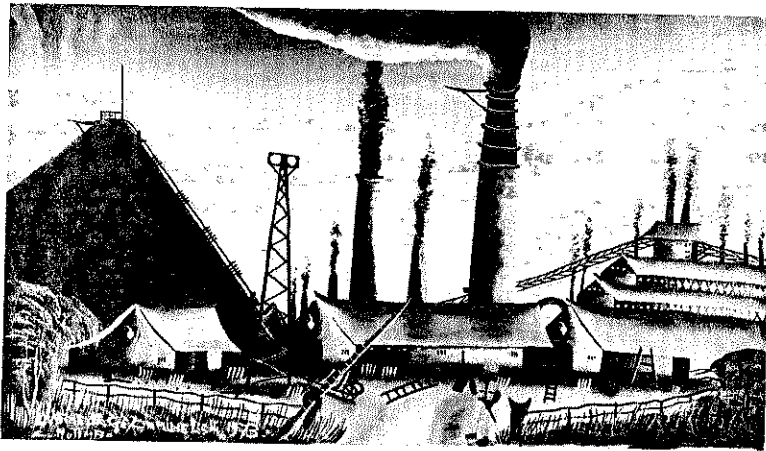


Figure 1. C. Mutombo, *The Smelter (mumbunda na mampala)*. Lubumbashi, 1974. H. 39 cm., W. 68 cm. The smelter, a landmark of the city of Lubumbashi, represents the genre "city-scape" in the category of Things Present. (Photo, Ilona Szombati-Fabian.)

aspiring *petite bourgeoisie*, affluent enough to be concerned with furnishing and embellishing their habitations. Realistic presentation, narrative intent, and a surprising richness of generic differentiation characterize popular paintings in Shaba. Equally impressive is its sheer quantity. By now, the number of paintings in one of the major cities alone may be in the range of twenty to thirty thousand.<sup>2</sup>

These remarks may suffice to show the importance and interest of the art form we are investigating. But what is the relevance

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise specified, all paintings of the popular variety are in commercial oil paints or acrylics on unprepared canvas generally called *amerikani* (an old Swahili term for calico). In Shaba most painters use flour sacks from local and foreign mills. Because much of the imported flour comes from the United States, the local popular etymology of *amerikani* also points to the origin of these imports. The titles of paintings are, with some exceptions (Figs. 6, 11, 14, 15, 20-23), generic-descriptive as used by the painters and their clients. Whenever possible we note the Shaba Swahili or French version in parentheses. For further explanation, see Ilona Szombati-Fabian and Johannes Fabian, "Art, History, and Society," *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1976):1-21; see esp. pp. 4-6. All paintings are part of the authors' research collection.



Figure 2. E. Nkulu wa Nkulu, *Arab Slave Trader (waarabu, arabises)*. Likasi, 1974. H. 36.5 cm., W. 49 cm. An example for historical genres in the category Things Past. (Photo, Ilona Szombati-Fabian.)

of popular painting in an African country, as a corpus and an activity, for the study of folk art in general? Its most immediate significance, as is often the case with contemporary ethnography in relation to historical research, is that this particular corpus offers the spectacle of a folk art in bloom. People relate to these paintings without the slightest antiquarian interest. No one collects these objects (except us, the emissaries of an antiquarian culture). Most paintings can easily be traced to their creators. Information about socioeconomic conditions, materials and techniques, topics and meanings is available in a quantity and quality usually unknown to students of folk art.

But is it "folk art"? The question is important because the answer would seem to determine what we have to offer: Is it only interesting as an ethnographic parallel, or are we dealing with a phenomenon that is comparable to, and perhaps actually connected with, Euro-American folk art on aesthetic as well as on his-

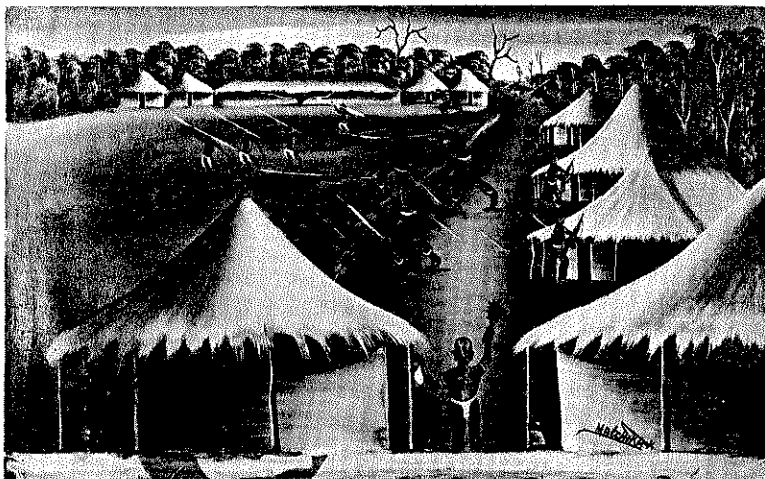


Figure 3. K. Matchika, *War (vita, matroubles)*. Kolwezi, 1974. H. 42 cm., W. 72 cm. A remembrance of Things Past, depicting a skirmish between Tshombe's Katangese army and Luba rebels of northern Shaba fighting in traditional garb and with traditional weapons. (Photo, Ilona Szombati-Fabian.)

torical grounds? Since it is an avowed aim of this book to provide the basis for a better understanding of the term *folk art*, these questions need not be resolved unequivocally. Nevertheless, we can offer some tentative observations.

The suspicion that we might simply be dealing with a degenerate form of "primitive art" is easily disposed of. Traditional art in central Africa has been overwhelmingly tactile, mobile, and audial: sculpture (including pottery), dance, music, and oral lore. Representational painting on detached surfaces (i.e., other than walls, vessels, and the human body) is a recent import whose origins are quite well known.

Is popular painting in Shaba (and in many other parts of Africa) therefore only an import, an ill-digested imitation, or a contact-phenomenon of the tourist or airport-art type? We believe we can demonstrate that this is not the case. This art form is an integral part of cultural expression in an emerging postcolonial

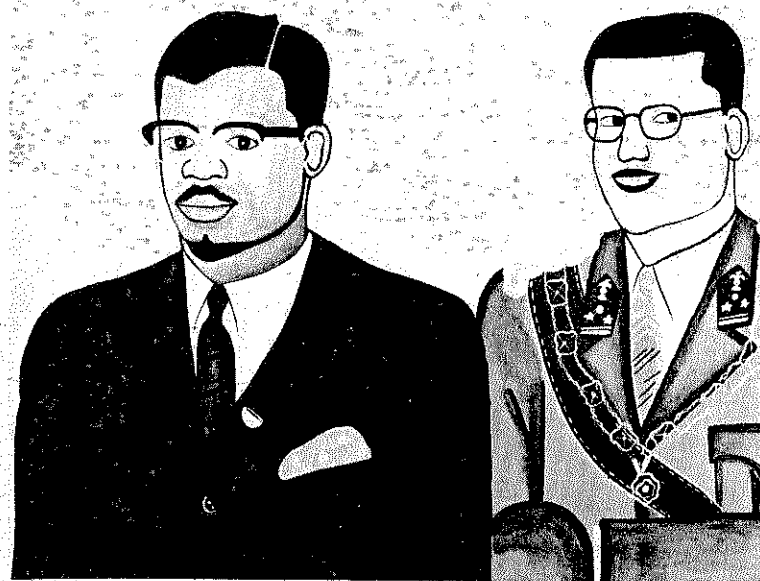


Figure 4. Unsigned (Kayembe Ndala-Kulu), *Lumumba and King Baudouin of Belgium*. Kipushi, 1974. H. 48 cm., W. 60 cm. This painting belongs to the category of Things Present and to the genre of political portraits (*nsula, foto*). (Photo, Ilona Szombati-Fabian.)

society. For this reason, it might be one of the most interesting parallels with American folk art.

Is it "folk," if the meaning of that term is restricted to rural, peasant-based production of images? Should it, perhaps, better be characterized as "popular art" (as our own use of the attribute might suggest)? Clear distinctions between folk and popular are notoriously difficult to draw and even more difficult to apply outside the situation for which they were devised. This is the case with Henry Glassie's tripartite definition of culture as folk (conservative-individualist), popular (normative-mass oriented), and elitist (progressive).<sup>3</sup> These psychological cum political criteria

<sup>3</sup> See Henry Glassie, *Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968), pp. 1-33, and Glassie, "Folk Art," in *Folklore and Folklife*, Richard M. Dorson, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), p. 258.

may describe a de facto situation in American history (although to think of elitist culture as inherently progressive seems even less plausible than to qualify all folk culture as conservative). His distinctions would not work at all in countries of the Third World, such as Zaire where an art form that is manifestly mass oriented and "popular," namely, recorded music, shows conservative tendencies; where the social and intellectual elite appreciates academic "shlock" in painting and sculpture; and where the people's painters give expression to a changing historical consciousness.

Nor do we think that technological conditions are sufficient to separate popular from folk productions. One might point out that hardly any of the objects considered to be folk art, and certainly very little that counts as American folk art, can ever be defined against, or outside of, the aesthetic and material conditions of industrial production and commercialization. If some pioneers of American folk art seem removed from the conditions and mechanics of industrial reproduction, such distance was only temporary. Since the late eighteenth century, and certainly since the development of chromolithography and photography, all folk painting occurred in the context of industrial reproduction.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, what remains to be done is to specify these relations. Cases where mass-produced images have served as models for folk artists are well known. More important is the overall life experience of an industrializing and urbanizing society and the ways that it affects folk art. Popular painting in Shaba offers vivid illustrations for such a situation. It is, as yet, radically different from Euro-American folk art in one respect. The paintings, apart from serving in transactions between producers and consumers (without intermediaries), are not part of a market.<sup>5</sup> It seems to

<sup>4</sup> The industrial context of American folk art was noted by some of the more critical contributors to "What is American Folk Art?: A Symposium," *Antiques* 57, no. 5 (May 1950): Holger Cahill, p. 356; Carl W. Drepperd, p. 357; John A. Kouwenhoven, p. 359.

<sup>5</sup> The transaction is not far removed from primitive exchange. Like other craftsmen in these towns, the painter sells his product at a price just high enough to give him a daily income comparable to that of other workers and artisans. If, in 1972-74, he sold a painting at about one to five dollars then he would have to paint about one every day. The price of the painting reflects the value of materials (and therefore varies with size) and the artist's labor.

us that the character of art in the West as merchandise, folk art not being an exception, is the most basic, if not most salient, quality to which a critical reflection must address itself.

#### FOLK ART, THE LOGIC OF THE MARKET, AND ANTHROPOLOGY

Let us begin by observing that there are always two "movements" operating when folk art (and probably any art) is evaluated. One is directed to individual objects, sometimes individual producers, whose value is gauged according to a set of criteria beauty, originality, formal perfection, elegance, etc.). As a general attitude toward art, this may be called "aesthetizing." This is not to say that such an attitude is merely aesthetizing, in other words, that it is contemplative and rather inconsequential. On the contrary, when it is directed to, and pronounced over, concrete objects, it has the practical effect of assigning to them a distinctive value, something that might be called a denomination.

The other "movement" of evaluation goes in the opposite direction. Denomination of objects implies a scale; in fact, it presupposes a corpus (a currency or reserve) which guarantees comparability and actual connection between valued objects. The search for contexts and connections gives rise to an attitude we might call "sociologizing." One often is led to believe that the corpus is then given (and hence the natural starting point for inquiry), whereas the objects are the problematic aspect. In reality, as in the case of folk art evaluation, the object is found (collected) and the corpus is problematic. Because it is problematic, the corpus needs legitimation (like a currency) and such legitimation is necessarily abstract. By this we mean a tendency which not only does not seek to fill its corpus-concepts (such as folk art) with concrete historical, social, and political significance but which, in a way, must avoid concretization. The reason is that concretization jeopardizes the currency value of a corpus, hence makes clear denomination difficult or impossible, hence annuls the value of individual objects. Let us call this process the logic

A separation between use/exchange value and market value (one that would permit the "circulation" of paintings) has not yet occurred.

of the market. Notice that we use the term *value* equivocally. Do we mean artistic or commercial value? The answer is that we mean a system of exchange of which this distinction is as much an integral part as those between form and content, structure and function. Under conditions that govern our relationship to art in the Western world, art appreciation is always also, and sometimes nothing but, art appraisal.

If there is any validity to this view—that sociologizing of art if carried out in complicity with the logic of the market espoused by our own society must lead to abstraction from historical-political concreteness—then it follows that an anthropology of folk art cannot have the simple task of providing ethnographic data for a “better” sociology of the corpus. At best, this would amount to projecting the logic of the market onto societies other than our own or on classes other than the leading elites. Being purely projective—in this sense hallucinatory—anthropology would have no power whatsoever to generate new knowledge. At worst, it would be actual, practical complicity with the many attempts our society has made to absorb the creations of other societies into its logic of the market. This happened some time ago with “primitive art” (Eastern and pre-Columbian art included). More recently, the market has turned its attention to various contemporary art forms such as Eskimo carving, Haitian, Balinese, and Australian painting—in short, the many “contact” arts.

Of course, one might ask, what is wrong with the logic of the market? Some answers come immediately to mind: it leads to grave-robbery and cultural thievery on a grand scale; it creates a kind of market where profits realized by intermediaries are in no relation to the benefits that go to producers, i.e., it creates a kind of exploitation that can be explained but not excused by the mechanics of a free market. In the long run, this sort of art market creates a kind of dependency which is not only political or economic but also intellectual and aesthetic.

Another question is even more vexing theoretically: Can any “art of the others,” be it primitive, folk, naïve, or contact, be confronted (experienced, researched, understood, interpreted) outside the logic of the market? Notice that this question does not

regard motives or moral intention but rather epistemological conditions. Does the fact that we belong to societies in which objects of art are inextricably part of a market and its laws condemn us to a specific kind of relationship to, and view of, folk art? A negative answer seems obvious if we consider that the same bourgeoisie that created the market brought forth many different, often violently opposed attitudes toward, and theories of, art. On the other hand, one may look at things the other way round and wonder why such a variety of aesthetic and historical approaches to art is espoused, given the rather unvarying nature of the market. One is then tempted to conclude that all that theoretical pluralism is only superficial and that it really functions as a verbal screen concealing the hard reality of a worldwide market in a commodity called art.

In any case, for the anthropologist who is aware of the logic of the market but must try to carry on a dialogue with other cultures, the choice of a theoretical position and its methodological consequences become a matter of very careful and critical reasoning. On his choice depends not only whether he will be close to one or the other school in the vast field of art studies. Something more fundamental is involved. Theory, in this case, will determine and in a way constitute his object of study. This must be so because the anthropologist as a mediator between cultures and societies (and increasingly between classes and ethnic groups) cannot naively rely on a tradition of art production, nor can he naively join a school of interpretation. He is essentially without support from the two pillars of science: empiricism, which rests on an ultimately metaphysical assumption that there is a reality out there to be observed, conceptualized, and classified, and conventionalism (to avoid “positivism”) which dictates that these operations be carried out according to established canons of logic and procedure. This is the meaning, perhaps not fully realized by its author, of Jacques Maquet’s remark that there “cannot be an anthropology of art.”<sup>6</sup> “Art”, we need to be reminded, is an estab-

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Maquet, *Introduction to Aesthetic Anthropology* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1971), p. 17. This essay should be of much interest to students of folk art, although it does not, in our opinion, overcome the two alternatives of aestheticizing and sociologizing.

lished object of inquiry only within the limits—epistemological, but also political and economic—of our own Western societies.

Maquet's radical formula signals the limitations on the possible use of anthropology for established art studies in the more narrow sense. But it also points to its potential for any attempt to transcend the intellectual boundaries circumscribed by the logic of the market. Anthropology can, specifically, address itself to the more subtle paradoxes created by bourgeois aesthetics, such as formalism vs. substantivism or contentism, contemplation vs. explanation, *l'art pour l'art* vs. sociological reductionism, art theory vs. art history, and so on and so forth.

Most recently, the anthropologist Clifford Geertz located his own conception of "art as a cultural system" in one of these paradoxes: Somehow we feel, he observes, that all talk about art is vacuous, but we cannot resist talking about it. He points out that as a solution to this dilemma some societies have developed discourses about art that are defined in craft terms, as technical languages (so that some may talk about art and others shouldn't). But, he maintains, our society is the only one in which "some men . . . have managed to convince themselves that technical talk about art, however developed, is sufficient to a complete understanding of it; that the whole secret of aesthetic power is located in the formal relations among sounds, images, volumes, themes, or gestures." As he shows later on, through examples as varied as Javanese ritual choreography, Yoruba sculpture, and Arab verse making, most talk about art in most societies is not of that kind. This leads him to conclude, from an anthropological perspective:

The definition of art in any society is never wholly intra-aesthetic, and indeed but rarely more than marginally so. The chief problem presented by the sheer phenomenon of aesthetic force, in whatever form and in result of whatever skill it may come, is how to place it within the other modes of social activity, how to incorporate it into the texture of a particular pattern of life. And such placing, the giving to art objects a cultural significance, is always a local matter.

This may sound as if Geertz had opted for the sociologizing shortcut in approaching art. But the thrust of his essay is directed

against this tempting way out. In looking for connections between art and society, one must reject aestheticizing as well as functionalizing. The connection worth looking for, Geertz insists, is a semiotic one: "Art is ideationally connected to the society . . . not mechanically," or, put in a slightly different way, works of art "are directly about [society] not illustratively." Paintings, statues, etc., "connect to a sensibility they join in creating."<sup>7</sup>

These few quotations suffice to evoke, if not adequately justify, a theoretical position similar to our own. Stated in a summary and axiomatic fashion it maintains: (1) That artistic expressions ("objects") in our own society and, *a fortiori*, in societies other than ours cannot be presumed to constitute ensembles, corpora, systems; nor can such ensembles simply be established on the basis of immediately observable formal or substantive properties. Hence, the inevitable necessity to talk about art which in turn rests on the connectedness of art with all expression of human life. (2) That this connectedness and talk about it (i.e., discourse about art) is irreducible to mechanical or functional (economic, psychological, sociological) links. The connection of art to culture is not given but made; it is not structure but process. Hence, it is uninteresting (and probably misleading) to look for ways in which arts match other aspects of culture. Anthropology seeks to understand how art realizes and produces culture.

If the connection of art and society lies in processes, it becomes crucial to have a conception of the nature of such processes. Geertz, as we have seen, maintains that the connection is semiotic. We can accept this as a general frame, but we do think, based on our own research experience, that this concept needs further precision. To hold a semiotic concept of culture is to assert that cultural expressions have a sign function ("symbols" in American anthropology, signifiers-signifieds in French structuralism). Cultural process, then, is semiosis: the transformation of human experience into shared significations. Such a view is preferable to many other approaches in anthropology, past and present, which tend to do away with culture, either by declaring

<sup>7</sup> Clifford Geertz, "Art as a Cultural System," *Modern Language Notes* 91 (1976):1474-75, 1478, 1480.

it a secondary product of socio-economic adaptation, or by insisting so much on its autonomous character that culture is in effect removed altogether from human praxis. But the notion of semiosis alone is too general and too abstract and therefore susceptible to as much ideological misuse as, for instance, the logic of the market.<sup>8</sup>

Methods and techniques derived from semiotic theory make possible intricate analyses of objects, or classes of objects (if one follows the French bent); they may result in superb contextual accounts (masterfully exemplified in the work of Geertz). However, both procedures, although they start with a process-oriented conception of culture, tend to result in synchronic, static accounts. This is because a conception of culture as semiosis alone, i.e., either as signification or as symbolization, may describe the nature of relationships between things cultural but it does not really address the problem of their genesis or, more precisely, of their production. In other words, we feel that we can only go along with Geertz's postulate that connections between art and society are "ideational" if ideation is seen as a practical activity, a mode of production. A theory of art- or image-production is needed precisely because it is the only way in which we can ask questions of

<sup>8</sup> It should be remembered that Ferdinand de Saussure was quite conscious of homologies between this theory of semiosis and political economy (especially with regard to the notion of value); see Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, Tullio de Mauro, ed. (Paris: Payot, 1975), pp. 114f., 157. Many observers have noted this but it is probably Jean Baudrillard who drew some of the most astute and disturbing conclusions; see Baudrillard, *L'échange symbolique et la mort* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976). See also Ferruccio Rossi-Landi, *Sprache als Arbeit und als Markt* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1972), especially the chapter on Wittgenstein. In our own work we have found that semiological analysis may be descriptively useful; see Szombati-Fabian and Fabian, "Art, History, and Society." But we do not think that a formalized theory of semiotics will be of much use to the anthropologist; for example, see Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976). The reason is that anthropology must be concerned more with the production of signs than with the mechanics of signification if its aim is to interpret culture as process. Furthermore, we do not think that philosophical problems such as that of the "subject of sign interpretation" have been resolved; see Karl-Otto Apel, "Szentismus oder transzendente Hermeneutik?" in *Hermeneutik and Dialektik*, Rüdiger Bubner, Konrad Cramer, and Reiner Wiehl, eds., 2 vols. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1970), see esp. vol. 1.

art that go beyond the logic of the market in our own society, questions that reach beyond mere projections of that logic onto the arts of other societies.

In this sense, we advocate a genetic constitutive view. But we do not propose that our understanding of an art form will be guaranteed if we know its origins and subsequent evolution. For us "genesis," "constitution," and "production" are epistemological concepts. The only way, we feel, to avoid projecting extraneous schemes on art forms, in fact, the only way to be sure that a set of objects is actually a kind of cultural expression which may be designated as art is to gain access to the concrete, material conditions of their production. Only if knowledge is mediated in such a way can we hope to understand the process of semiosis in societies and classes other than our own. Paradoxically, or perhaps not at all, to emphasize material production leads one to give all the more importance to talk about art, more precisely, to communication with producers and consumers about their products. Such talk is an important part of ethnography, and this is the main reason why anthropological investigations of art production can contribute to our understanding of art in general. Our work, carried out *in situ*, can complement approaches which, by necessity or by choice, have been guided by contemplative or classificatory, i.e., noncommunicative, discourse.<sup>9</sup>

The question is now what difference such an approach—

<sup>9</sup> That position is summarized in the following statement from our earlier essay: "For us, anthropological knowledge of this art form is neither mere classification of objects according to the schemes of a logic of inquiry, nor simply transformation of a presumed ethnographic domain into a structured system. Rather, the kind of knowledge we are seeking *constitutes* its object through confrontation with its material, visual, and observable manifestations, and through *Verständigung*, a process of understanding of, and agreement about, these manifestations based on communicative interaction with their producers and consumers. In other words, we neither assume a 'given' reality in the form of discrete objects ('painting'), nor do we presume a domain of thought and action (such as 'art');" see Szombati-Fabian and Fabian, "Art, History, and Society," p. 1. We might here acknowledge a general debt to the writings of Benjamin, Lukács, Raphael, and others, although we cannot in this context discuss specific elements of their theories of art production. We should like to point, however, to a very interesting study by Hans Heinz Holz, *Vom Kunstwerk zur Ware* (Darmstadt and Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1973).

semiotic, genetic, and communicative—would make with regard to problems encountered in the study of folk art. Because folk art is not our field of competence, we are not prepared to offer a systematic statement. Instead, we will select a small number of issues that we, from our limited readings in the field of folk art studies, perceive to be recurrent, indeed perennial, challenges faced by students of folk art. We will assume that, in the present world, barriers to understanding that exist between different cultures (the traditional domain of anthropology) and those between different classes (the traditional domain of sociology) are essentially homologous. In other words, anthropology can, in theory at least, bring insights to the study of folk art seen as a differentiation of artistic production in our own society.

#### ANTHROPOLOGY AND SOME RECURRENT PROBLEMS IN THE STUDY OF FOLK ART

Having noted our reflections on a number of typical problems arising in the study of folk art, we found that they could be grouped around three issues: identity, quality, and meaning. Identity asks what should be counted as folk art (in the sense of belonging to a recognized domain, corpus, or period). Quality goes beyond classificatory or genetic problems and regards the nature of folk art as it is visible in a given object. Meaning signals the difficulties we seem to have in understanding and appreciating folk art. The question of meaning is especially urgent because we, the interpreters, do not usually belong to the class or society that produces (or produced) this art.

In art historical praxis, the question of *identity* of works of art and their components arises first. Anthropologists cannot presume to contribute much to a craft established in several centuries of historical and iconographic research. The standards of attribution, historical derivation, authentication, etc., that were developed in this tradition constitute a craft which probably can be challenged only on its own grounds. Yet, as we tried to show by bringing up such notions as the logic of the market, any search for the identity of an art object raises questions of a higher order

than those that regard attribution to an artist, a school, or a period.

In fact, it may be precisely the high standards and achievements of identification in high art that tend to create or reinforce the first recurrent problem in folk art to which we want to address ourselves: its fragmentariness. The fragmentary character, not only of our knowledge but of almost any given cultural record, has been an anthropological problem since the beginnings of the discipline. We can pass some of its more obvious aspects in rapid review: There is, first, the problem of what one might call *de facto* fragmentation due to two main reasons and often to a combination of both.

The first reason is fragmentation caused by accidents of preservation. A given corpus of objects may appear fragmentary and disjointed because, and as long as, we try to establish its identity and coherence *only* on the basis of properties displayed by the objects. This is a situation that will lead to great emphasis on formal attributes—shape, decoration, and a host of other criteria often subsumed under the cover-all term *style* (as in pottery style) or even *culture* (as in megalith culture). The early study of material culture and the emerging field of preclassical archaeology (i.e., archaeology without support from written sources) were dominated by these concerns until a praxis of anthropological fieldwork in living contexts was firmly established. Together with the latter there appeared a theoretical trend often called functionalism and characterized by an emphasis on the systemic nature of culture and its socioeconomic determination. It was at the convergence of these practical and theoretical developments that the so-called “new archaeology” emerged in the late 1950s (later to be bolstered by computer techniques and cybernetic views of cultural systems). What interests us here is the theoretical optimism generated by the new archaeology which at times almost made a virtue out of the vice of fragmentariness in the archaeological record. Archaeologists and prehistorians no longer felt limited to a few objects and some stratigraphy; they now revealed in relationships *between* objects, in micro- and macro-contexts and in the relationships between assemblages and ecological data. Vertical stratigraphy (the analog to art historical chronology) be-



came less important with the advent of  $C_{14}$  dating; complex and far-reaching systemic relationships, synchronically and diachronically, now generated the research problems and often led to impressive results. Students of folk art who are often plagued by the fragmentary character of their collections and who are searching for models to overcome this state of affairs might profit from consulting recent archaeological literature.

In passing we might also note the developments in post-classical archaeology (often called historical archaeology and industrial archaeology in which these new techniques are applied to periods that were not traditionally the domain of archaeology (e.g., eighteenth- and nineteenth-century New England factories and workers' settlements). Finally, although this may at first seem a bit far-fetched, we perceive intellectual affinities between these new achievements and the approaches advocated by George Kubler and the "archaeology of knowledge" proposed by Michel Foucault. What they all have in common is that considerable intellectual energy is directed to the problem of fragmentariness (or "dispersal"); all seem to agree in their refusal to accept fragmentation as a mere fact.<sup>10</sup>

Fragmentariness due to inadequate preservation is not unrelated to another kind of fragmentation which, ironically, is often caused by the very concern for preservation: collecting. Much as archaeologists have been plagued by the havoc created by grave robbers and amateurs, the study of folk art must constantly confront the damage caused by collectors (although the study itself would probably not exist without them). Collecting almost inevitably results in fragmentation, sometimes because it is done at random, sometimes because it is carried out with a narrow purpose. But, unlike grave robbery and amateurism, which are now universally disdained, the art collector's privileges are rarely questioned and frequently exalted. We find this reaffirmed with disarming frankness in a recent catalogue to an important exposition of American folk art written by two eminent authorities: "The process of selection [of objects to be exhibited] was similar to

<sup>10</sup> See George Kubler, *The Shape of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), and Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Harper, Colophon Books, 1976).

that of the *Guide Michelin*, where, from thousands of restaurants and hotels in France, a small number is listed for special quality."<sup>11</sup> This sort of intellectual tourism and connoisseurism is adopted, magnified, and consecrated by the dictates of a publishing industry which has made the coffee-table art book the principal vehicle for the popularization of scholarship.

Students of folk art may profit from discussions and developments in anthropology, especially from recent studies of primitive art and a renewed interest in material culture. In our own area of competence, African art, we can point to a growing number of excellent critical appraisals.<sup>12</sup> Their most striking common trait is, perhaps, an increasing subtlety and complexity in tracing the contextual determinants of art production. Even more important are the signs of an epistemological breakthrough: the realization that new and significant knowledge in this field can be generated when the ethnographer/collector interacts through the objects with their producers and consumers. Ethnography then becomes a communicative activity, and we find a growing awareness that communication is the only basis on which to build a discourse about an art form that does not amount to mere projection of extraneous and often ethnocentric criteria.<sup>13</sup> One may object to this view on the grounds that the student of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American folk art can no longer interact with its producers. Yet this condition does not altogether invalidate the theoretical significance of the "new ethnography." To show this we must first consider the other major aspect of the fragmentation problem.

<sup>11</sup> Jean Lipman and Alice Winchester, *The Flowering of American Folk Art (1776-1876)* (New York: Viking Press, 1974), p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> For instance, see Warren L. D'Azevedo, ed., *The Traditionalist Artist in African Societies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973); Anthony Forge, ed., *Primitive Art and Society* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973); Douglas Frazer and Herbert M. Cole, eds., *African Art and Leadership* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1972); and the debate on authenticity in "Fakes, Fakers, and Fakery: Authenticity in African Art," *African Arts* 9, no. 3 (April 1976):21-31.

<sup>13</sup> Regarding the theoretical foundations of such an ethnography, see Johannes Fabian, "Language, History and Anthropology," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 1, no. 1 (January 1971):19-47; and Kevin Dwyer, "On the Dialogic of Field Work," *Dialectical Anthropology* 2, no. 2 (May 1977):143-51.

The vagaries of history and the whims of collectors are often reinforced by what we would like to call "ideological fragmentation." What is to be considered fragmentary and what complete cannot simply be determined with reference to a given record for the simple reason that the kinds of totalities, of which particular objects are supposed to be parts, are themselves theoretical constructs. Let us illustrate this point with the one totality concept which supposedly is the distinctive domain of anthropology and has been freely borrowed by other disciplines: the concept of culture.

To see the result of an uncritical use of this concept, one only needs to recall the astounding temerity with which diffusionists and earlier archaeologists constructed "cultures" from a few potsherds and implements (enjoying of course the respectable company of art historians and many of their "schools" and "styles"). Then there are other, seemingly less harmful, totality concepts such as the tribe (or tribal culture) and its contemporary reincarnation, the ethnic group, which, predictably, is gaining currency in talk about folk art. Such concepts, we must insist, are never mere generalizations (i.e., convenient classificatory labels derived from the study of particular objects); they always are imposed concepts of order and consistency. Nor are they harmless in the sense that they would make little practical difference, provided they are used as mere tools. Anthropologists have come to realize that their musings about culture—whether, for instance, there should be one standard of culture as opposed to the uncultured, or whether there are only cultures, pure difference without an overriding oneness—are eminently practical and indeed often political in nature.

A short and excellent critical analysis of the culture concept in anthropology, recommended to anyone who uses the term *culture* in vain, is Zygmunt Bauman's *Culture as Praxis*.<sup>14</sup> Bauman demonstrates that culture is at best a field of discourse, i.e., a field of questions and problems in which to move, not a label on whose proper usage one could agree. Historically, culture has been used in a hierarchical sense (high versus low, Western versus

<sup>14</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Culture as Praxis* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973).

primitive) and, somewhat later, in a differential or relativist sense (one people-one culture). Confusion between the two ways of using the term has been helpful in camouflaging elitist interests (such as when we talk about acculturation and modernization). Calling a given cultural record (folk art) fragmentary may not be a neutral statement of fact at all. It may imply a characteristic of a stage, level, or kind of culture. Much of the talk about unsystematic, sporadic, individualistic creativity in folk art must be examined in light of these critical insights.

Although we would not follow Bauman in his solution to the problem, we agree with him when he stipulates that conceptualizations of culture should aim at understanding "the human praxis."<sup>15</sup> We will now report on our own attempt to see popular painting in Shaba as a cultural praxis.

To begin with, the odds were against such attempts, and we think that our situation was a fairly typical one. At the outset, there were only two models available to deal with identity in contemporary African painting. The first model is totally derivative from traditional art history and leads one to concentrate on the identification and monographic description of schools, styles, and periods. It presupposes highly visible (institutionalized) production around major artists or workshops and often, also, a sort of bridgehead in Western society in the form of collections or galleries that promote particular art forms.<sup>16</sup> Such situations exist and were typical of the colonial period during which African painters gained recognition and patronizing support because their work was European-initiated, -evaluated, and -marketed. Until and unless these art schools are restudied in their historical context, they are of little theoretical significance for our problem. Popular painting in Shaba is not organized around masters or schools; it was neither directly initiated by expatriates, nor has it reached their markets.

Another model could have been that of tourist or airport

<sup>15</sup> Bauman, *Culture as Praxis*, p. 117.

<sup>16</sup> Exemplified by Ulli Beier, *Contemporary Art in Africa* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1968); Marshall W. Mount, *African Art: The Years since 1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973); and Judith von D. Miller, *Art in East Africa* (London: Frederick Muller, 1975).



Figure 5. Y. Ngoie, *Mermaid (mamba muntu)*. Kolwezi, 1974. H. 49 cm., W. 75 cm. Mermaid paintings are quantitatively the most important product of popular painting in Shaba. Their generic status is that of a "totalizing symbol" for the entire corpus. (Photo, Ilona Szombati-Fabian.)

art. Here is a field of inquiry that was often conceived in revolt against elitist, Western-imported aesthetics, but it is addressed to products that are the result of contacts with an outside world and that depend on commercialization in an outside world.<sup>17</sup> In regard to popular painting in Shaba, the first model applies, although it would need much specification, whereas the second model—commercialization outside—exists in rudiments only as inner-African trade.

We chanced upon popular painting in Shaba in the course of other pursuits—without a scholar's project or a collector's purpose. We found our first two paintings in two cities, two hundred miles apart, one in the house of a mine worker (Figure 5 is an example of the genre; we did not acquire this particular painting); the other (Fig. 6) was on a street where a man carried it to-

<sup>17</sup> For the first attempt to gather results of research and to construct a theoretical frame, see Nelson H. H. Grabum, ed., *Ethnic and Tourist Arts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).



Figure 6. Tshibumba Kanda Matulu, *One People, One Leader, One Party*. Lubumbashi, 1974. H. 39 cm., W. 69 cm. The title is a slogan of President Mobutu's Movement of the Popular Revolution. (Photo, Ilona Szombati-Fabian.)

gether with others (it was the first painting we actually bought). We had never seen paintings of this kind in the curio markets of Zaire, nor had they been offered to us by the many traders in "genuine" African art who called on us with exasperating regularity. In other words, our first encounter with popular painting had all the marks of accidental, in this sense fragmentary, curiosity. In retrospect, we know that the concrete situation in which we came upon these two paintings contained many of the ethnographic elements which later allowed us to overcome initial impressions of disjointed curiosity and to describe popular painting in Shaba as a distinctive cultural process. These ethnographic elements were: (1) One painting was part of the furnishing of a living room. The room was itself the result of a differentiation of living space directly related to socioeconomic conditions of incipient embourgeoisement. As a concept, the living room (*salon* in local parlance) gave rise to a distinctive set of objects such as furniture, certain textiles, but also "decorative" objects crafted from wood or metal. (2) The two paintings were (topically) quite different from each other, suggesting thematic and,

probably, stylistic variations whose magnitude and significance was, of course, impossible to assess at that time. (3) When it turned out that the first painting was bought locally, and when we found out that the person selling the other one was the painter himself, we had our first glimpse at the "relations of production" that characterize this art form.

The theoretical and methodological significance of these few observations is this: In every one of our encounters with problematic objects, the particular painting mediated, i.e., signaled, gave access to, total contexts (urban life style, economics, a certain aesthetic sensibility, and, indeed, a kind of consciousness or world view). The full implications of these initially perceived totalities had to be worked out in a long ethnographic process. We had to enter not one but many houses, follow producers and networks connecting them, join, through the local language, in talk about these pictures, research regional political history, and so on and so forth. But the point is that these totalities were not simply generalizations established by classifying a large number of objects. They were arrived at in a constant back and forth movement from particular object to often surprising connections and between different objects defying quick and easy classification. In this sense, the fragmentariness with which a folk art presents itself, if understood as differentiation and dispersal in a cultural context, is an essential prerequisite toward establishing an identity that is not merely imposed from the outside.

Finally, another problem which is related to the question of identity is the often observed and sometimes lamented *anonymity* of folk painting. This issue is frequently clouded by comparisons to the self-effacing anonymity of medieval masters; it also carries romantic, nineteenth-century overtones of nostalgia for the anonymous, collective soul of a people as a creative source of art. Concretely, the problem may be approached with regard to the role of signature, and here again we can offer some observations based on our research. Most of the popular paintings in Shaba are signed; in our sample less than 1 percent were unsigned. Yet the presence of a signature is very often an equivocal datum. Discarding cases of false or faked identity, we encountered the following complications.



Figure 7. E. Nkulu wa Nkulu, *The Belgian Colony* (*finbo, colonie belge*). Lubumbashi, 1973. H. 40 cm., W. 55 cm. This represents the most important genre in the category Things Past. (Photo, Ilona Szombati-Fabian.)

Paintings signed by one painter were in fact produced cooperatively (sometimes approaching assembly line conditions similar to those known from the production of schlock art "originals" in our own society (shop and procedure are illustrated in Figures 7, 8, 9). Paintings were signed, not by the artist who executed them, but by the owner of the means of production (paint and canvas, brush, stretcher). Painters signed with a *nom de pinceau*, e.g., "Laskas". One outstanding painter, very intent on establishing his authorship, often signed with "d'apres . . ." (Fig. 10). According to Western conventions this suggests a copy after an original. The same painter hid his name elsewhere in the picture. See figure 11 where the shop sign "galerie Laurent Marcel" contains his Christian names. In a variant practice the painter's home town or territory was used as an inscription on a colonial building (Fig. 7).

There are probably other examples, but these are sufficient



Figure 8. The painter Nkulu wa Nkulu at work at his "studio" in Likasi, 1974. (Photo, Iлона Szombati-Fabian.)

to suggest that identification through signature is not merely a matter of labeling and attribution. The signature is but a special case of the interpretation of linguistic messages and their relation to iconic messages.<sup>18</sup> Such interpretation must be addressed to the process of image production, which in turn calls for attention to the total context as it was described earlier. Concretely, the examples of problematic signatures are challenges to our own cultural canons which predispose us to attach the identity of a work simply to its author (a Rembrandt or a Pollock). From an anthropological point of view, conceptions of authorship (and also of ownership) cannot be treated as transcultural constants. Like all things cultural they are semiotic; they call for interpretation.

We now turn to a second group of often discussed issues in the study of folk art. These issues treat the question of whether

<sup>18</sup> This is dealt with in Szombati-Fabian and Fabian, "Art, History, and Society," p. 13f., for further references to literature.

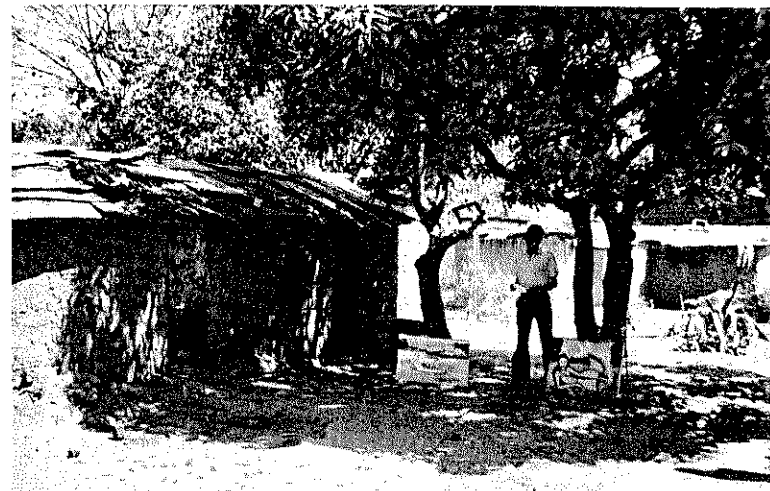


Figure 9. The painter Matuka showing his work at his "studio" in Likasi, 1974. (Photo, Iлона Szombati-Fabian.)

the "folk" in such art is reflected in the quality of its products. *Quality* here has two different but not unrelated meanings. One refers to a descriptive question: Are there formal or stylistic characteristics typical of folk art? The other aims at evaluative statements: Is folk art inherently of "minor" quality (a rule only confirmed by occasional bursts of genius) or, if this is not the case, what makes of certain instances of folk art "masterpieces" comparable to the products of academic art? To us, the interest of these two questions of quality lies in the fact that they are not easily separated. We will illustrate this point by discussing some stereotypes commonly used in evaluative talk about folk art: repetitiveness (or repetitiousness?), decorativeness, and triviality.

As is often the case with stereotypes, "repetitiveness" may hide any number of understandings. We will try to disentangle some of these. First, when attributed to folk painting, repetition or repetitiveness may carry a positive connotation. In that case, it may point to the craft-character of image production. Like the

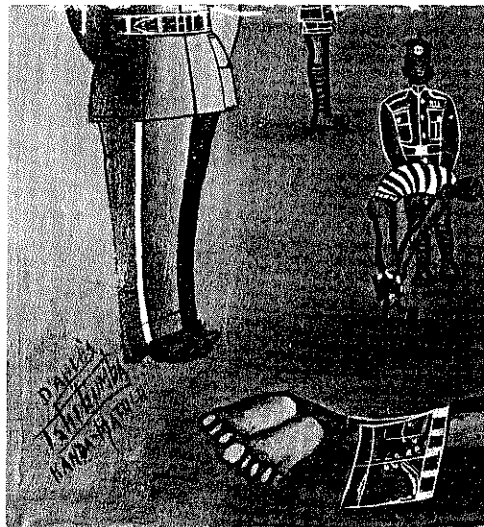


Figure 10. Tshibumba Kanda Matulu. The detail shows the painter's signature on a "Belgian Colony." (Photo, Ilona Szombati-Fabian.)

master cabinetmaker who builds his furniture in recognizable forms and always with the same excellence, the folk artist may be depicted as a reliable but predictable creator. Careful execution and solid appearance are the results of such craftsmanship. Of course, such an image is not without its ideological underpinnings. True artistic creativity, it seems to imply, comes in rare bursts and results in rare, nonrepeatable achievements. In this way, repetitiveness, even if at first it may appear to have a positive value, serves to distinguish folk art from high art.

But repetitiveness is not only predicated on an artist's *oeuvre* (i.e., on a sequence of products); it is often pointed out in individual paintings, as if the routines and rhythms of craft production had crept inside the image and affected its form and composition. This type of evaluation underlies one of the common denominators of folk art stipulated by Lipman, namely, that "lack of formal training . . . made way for interest in design rather



Figure 11. Tshibumba Kanda Matulu, *Long Live the Thirtieth of June—Zaire Independent*. Lubumbashi, 1973. H. 44 cm., W. 70 cm. A remembrance of Zairean Independence Day, in 1960, this painting belongs to the category of Things Past. (Photo, Ilona Szombati-Fabian.)

than optical realism."<sup>19</sup> Formulas of this kind are packed with unarticulated critical standards. One need only follow lines of association inspired by the terms *formal training* and *optical realism*. They suggest nothing less than nineteenth-century academic art as *the* standard of formal training and artistic excellence. "Design," on the other hand, evokes a reduction of expressive means and a certain standardization; from there to "decorativeness" is but a small step, and who doesn't know that decorativeness is a typical quality of the minor arts? Somewhere in these associations there lurks a persistent commonplace of evolutionary (more specifically nineteenth-century evolutionist) thinking: decorative design (especially geometric design) is thought to be characteristic of a stage preceding the capacity for naturalistic rendition. Little does it matter that this sort of logic has long been shattered

<sup>19</sup> Lipman and Winchester, *Flowering of American Folk Art*, p. 6.



Figure 12. Kabuika Mukendi, *Mermaid*. Kipushi, 1974. H. 44 cm., W. 61 cm. (Photo, Ilona Szombati-Fabian.)

from two ends, so to speak, by prehistoric cave painting and post-impressionist art. It continues to inform discourse about primitive and folk art both as an evaluative standard and as a rule for historical reconstruction.

There is only one way to counteract the invidious implications inherent in this view, and that is to unpack the loaded notion of repetitiveness. Repetition, or replication, in regard to a sequence of products must first of all be seen in the context of cultural postulates. Exact copies from a recognized ideal model may be called for by metaphysical or magical notions in terms of which the efficacy of an image is thought to depend on the fidelity with which it reproduces the original (or a culturally shared mental image). We think that such a magical logic is involved in at least one of the genres of popular painting in Shaba, namely in the endlessly repeated pictures of the mermaid (Figs. 12, 13). Certain cultural premises concerning the act of visual expression



Figure 13. Muteb Kabash, *Mermaid*. Kolwezi, 1974. Acrylics on rubberized textile used in industrial filtration; H. 46 cm., W. 83 cm. (Photo, Ilona Szombati-Fabian.)

itself may have to be considered. If, as is the case in Shaba, the source of a painting is consistently defined as "intellect," "memory," or "thought" (not "nature," or "event," or "vision"), it is, perhaps, not surprising—in fact it is logical—that artists render successive paintings of the same genre as more or less exact copies. (In figures 14 and 15 the artist no longer used any model, although he probably did so initially.)<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, repetitiveness must be seen in the context of certain historical and economic conditions whose impact on folk art is often noted but not sufficiently clear. Since the late

<sup>20</sup> Notice that Henry Glassie proposes a similar explanation for repetition and variation in Pennsylvania German benches; Glassie, "Folk Art," p. 259f. His is a psychological model which generalizes relationships between concepts and material objects. Our material allows us to concretize that relationship. Notions such as "thought" (Shaba Swahili *mawazo*), intellect (*mayele*), and memory (*ukumbusho*) are gleaned from conversations with painters and are part of an explicit aesthetic vocabulary. Many thoughtful observations on repetitiveness and its opposite in the context of contemporary art may be found in a study by Dieter Hoffmann-Axthelm, *Theorie der künstlerischen Arbeit* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974).



Figure 14. Tshibumba Kanda Matulu, *Calvary of Africa*. Lubumbashi, 1973. H. 41 cm., W. 69 cm. This painting is part of a series, the "Passion of Patrice Lumumba." (Photo, Ilona Szombati-Fabian.)

eighteenth-century (a period which saw the flowering of American folk art), all production of objects has been drawn into the system of industrial production which is, inherently, reproduction of identical objects in a series. It has been argued that this relationship (together with the rise of photography) has profoundly changed the attitude of our society toward all objects.<sup>21</sup> Therefore it is only to be expected that it had effects on folk artistic production.

Again, this point can be illustrated from popular painting in Shaba. Consider the chromolithograph (oleograph?) depicting the disastrous results of selling goods on credit (Fig. 16). This imagery was reproduced in countless examples. It was displayed not only in Europe and the United States (we assume that it was

<sup>21</sup> This is the topic of Benjamin's classical essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"; it also figures prominently in Abraham Moles's theory of kitsch; see Moles, *Psychologie des Kitsches* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 1972). William Morris's work should be seen in this context since it relates directly to modern concerns with folk art; see Glassie, "Folk Art," p. 254f.

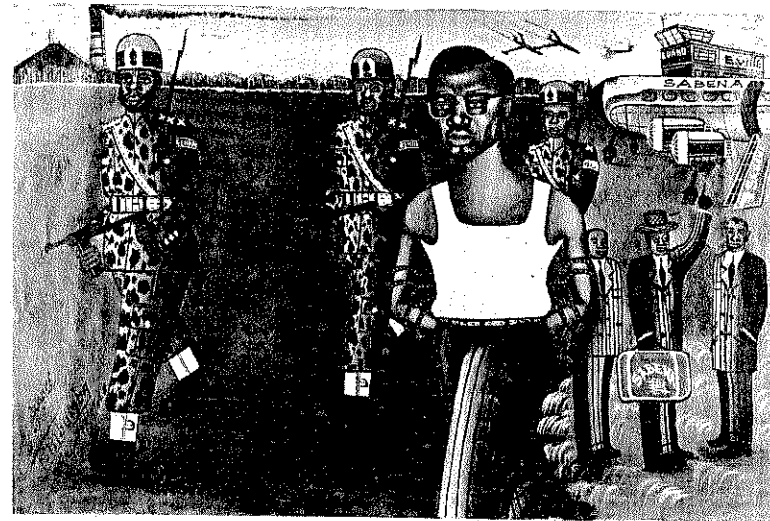


Figure 15. Tshibumba Kanda Matulu, *Calvary of Africa*. Kipushi, 1974. H. 45 cm., W. 70 cm. This version was painted exactly one year after the one depicted in figure 14. In both cases the artist worked without a model. (Photo, Ilona Szombati-Fabian.)

manufactured by Currier and Ives) but also in innumerable trader's shops throughout the colonial world, where the legend was translated into local languages. In Shaba, where it is called *credit est mort*, it was taken up by popular painters and again reproduced, but non-industrially, in numerous paintings. Interestingly enough, it is the only genre of which we have seen local graphic reproductions (Fig. 17). Notice that we have here a case where industrial reproduction of an image preceded its artistic reproduction which allows us to compare the two kinds of repetitiveness. First, the popular paintings of *credit est mort* never exactly reproduce the original (Figs. 18, 19). This is by no means due to a lack of ability on the part of the painters. The reason for inexact copies lies in a premise that is characteristic of this culture (but perhaps operative in most folk art): The unity behind a series of images is not simply, and not primarily, a visual template. What links successive renditions of *credit est mort* is



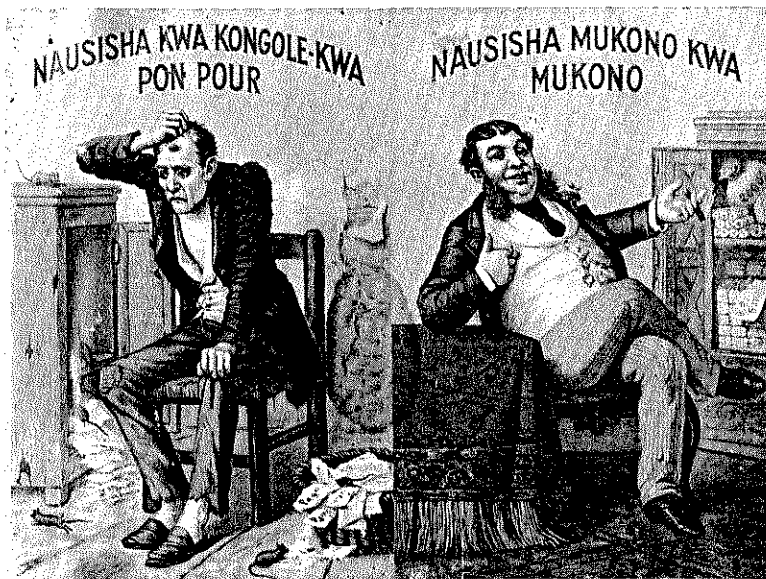


Figure 16. Anonymous, *Credit is Dead* (*credit est mort, hakuna deni*). Chromolithograph; H. 32 cm., W. 42 cm. This print was found in a bakery in Lubumbashi formerly owned by a Greek merchant. The new Zairean owner would not sell it but agreed to have it replaced by a painted version. (Photo, Ilona Szombati-Fabian.)

that each can be recognized as realization of a narrative unit, the story of the rich and the poor merchant. That is not to say that these images are mere illustrations of a cultural complex that "really" exists in another medium, verbal lore. Usually the story is not told except through images. In other words, the iconic realization is an integral part of a larger context of sign production. That larger context can be discerned on the level of generic differentiation. Without generic differentiation, i.e., without unfolding of the global message into distinct narrative units, popular painting in Shaba could not be described as a semiotic, hence cultural, complex. But genres could not be established if it was not for the repetitiveness of images through which they are

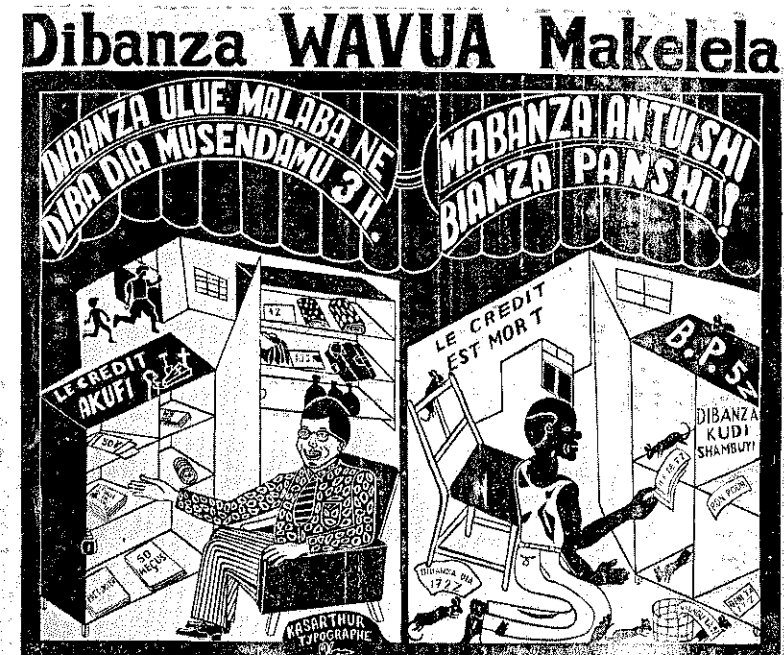


Figure 17. Signed "Kasarthur Typographer," *Credit is Dead*. Linoleum cut; H. 35 cm., W. 43 cm. Found in a gasoline station in Lubumbashi. (Photo, Ilona Szombati-Fabian.)

realized. Understood in this way, repetitiveness is an index for the degree to which the production of images has come to express a communal or societal consciousness.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Any cultural expression that is recognizable as such has this aspect of repetitiveness (although the linguistic notion of recursiveness is perhaps better suited to the idea). Repetitiveness in this sense is a central element in the theory of genre we are presupposing in these remarks. Such a theory was formulated for a different medium, oral expression, in Johannes Fabian, "Genres in an Emerging Tradition: An Anthropological Approach to Religious Communication," in *Changing Perspectives in the Scientific Study of Religion*, Allan W. Eister, ed. (New York: Wiley-Interscience, 1974), pp. 249-72. But theorizing about repetitiveness becomes questionable when this formal condition of semiosis and communication is projected onto the nature and

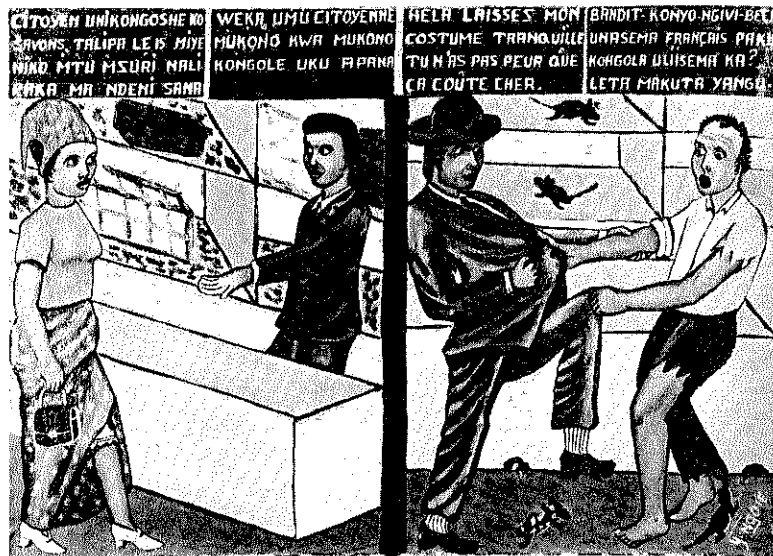


Figure 18. Y. Ngoie, *Credit is Dead*. Kolwezi, 1973. H. 49 cm., W. 70 cm. (Photo, Iлона Szombati-Fabian.)

Let us now consider repetition inasmuch as it evokes emphasis on design and decorativeness. The short history of painting in Shaba offers some interesting perspectives. Soon after World War II, a French nobleman, colonial officer, and marine painter, Pierre Romain-Desfossés, established an atelier for African painters in what was then Elisabethville, the capital of Katanga. His ideas and approaches to painting and African culture were rather complex; perhaps the best short formula to describe his role is to say that he aspired to be the midwife of a genuinely indigenous popular art, Western in its techniques and materials, but African in its expression and content. By the 1950s, several of his painters had received international recognition with their "typically Afri-

history of society. It is in the latter sense that anthropologists have talked of primitive societies as "repetitive," i.e., ahistorical. Repetition has also been recognized as a philosophical issue which will continue to have an impact on aesthetic theory; see Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et répétition* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968).



Figure 19. N. K. M. Kamba, *Credit is Dead*. Kolwezi, 1973. H. 39 cm., W. 56 cm. (Photo, Iлона Szombati-Fabian.)

can" products (Figs. 20, 21). Desfossés had pointed out connections between his project and contemporary revival of the folk arts in France and elsewhere.<sup>23</sup> It is, therefore, not surprising that he and other European mentors of new African art propagated decorativeness. The painters as well as the exclusively expatriate clientele were educated in its uses and meanings. We know from surviving members of the Desfossés school that they were taught to define their identity by means of a characteristic decorative style. Usually repetitive patterns filled the backgrounds for scenes which, in turn, were rendered in stylized, i.e., recognizably "African," forms. Colors were either natural earth tones or they were gaudy. To the tortuous colonial mind, these canons of *art populaire* were more plausible than realistic pigments, representational images, and the illusion of depth and perspective—in short, the achievements of Western academic realism.<sup>24</sup>

Some of the painters from the Desfossés school and an art academy that succeeded his workshop achieved remarkable re-

<sup>23</sup> See also Pierre Desfossés, Preface to *Hommage à Pierre Romain-Desfossés* (Elisabethville [Lubumbashi]: Imbeico, n.d.).

<sup>24</sup> It should be noted that the Desfossés school was typical of the intellectual climate in the former Elisabethville. In Kinshasa (formerly Léopoldville), always considered the most advanced and open of the big cities in Zaïre, the academy taught "modern" European techniques and styles, from academic realism to "abstract" art.

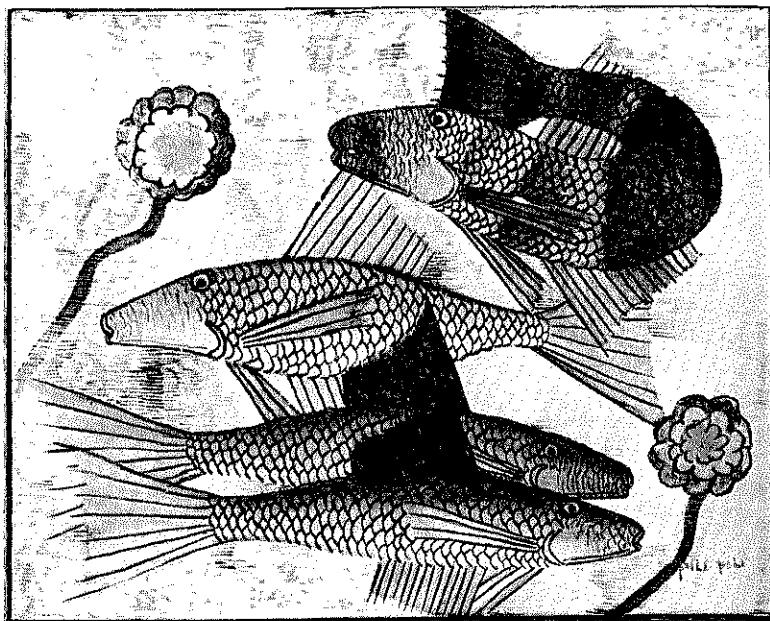


Figure 20. Pilipili Mulongoye, *Fish and Flowers*. Lubumbashi, ca. 1965. Oil on canvas; H. 24 cm., W. 30 cm. (Photo, Ilona Szombati-Fabian.)

sults within the constraints imposed by an extraneous aesthetic. Under the guise of decorative serenity, they managed to express a good deal of the strife and anguish that was characteristic of their life in colonial urban Africa (Figs. 22, 23). As soon as Zaire achieved political independence, however, this colonial *art populaire* became a thing of the past. To be sure, it continues to serve expatriates and the emerging upper class of the country; collectors in Europe and in the United States look forward to its rediscovery. But the new urban masses ignore or reject it precisely because of its stylized decorativeness. The popular painters of Shaba have, without exception, opted for representational painting.<sup>25</sup> As a result, popular painting in Shaba, although it signals

<sup>25</sup> Thus our findings would be difficult to align with Henry Glassie's notion of the "symbolizing nature of the folk filter" (Glassie, "Folk Art," p. 264) and the following generalization: "The beginning of Renaissance art

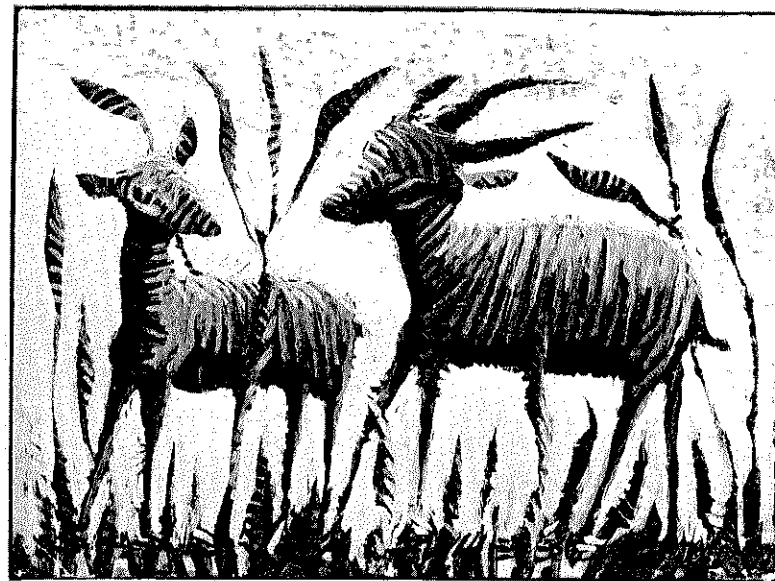


Figure 21. Mwenze Kibwanga, *Antelope Couple*. Lubumbashi, ca. 1965. Oil on canvas; H. 27 cm., W. 37 cm. (Photo, Ilona Szombati-Fabian.)

a process of liberation from colonially imposed canons, looks more derivative from Western models and less "typically African" than colonial *art populaire*.

Derivative and imitative are two more connotations of repetitiveness. Both are but a small step away from the verdict of triviality which is the third stereotype. Trivial, as applied to musical, literary, and visual art connotes two kinds of critical judgment.

was marked by a move from convention to realism. Folk art is characterized constantly by moves from realism to convention" (Glassie, "Folk Art," p. 266). For one thing, realism and convention make a doubtful logical contrast, certainly as far as the Renaissance is concerned; on the many conventions (economic, perceptual, linguistic) in Italian Renaissance painting, see Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974). If, on the other hand, the reference to Renaissance realism is to stress the "liberating" effect of this development, popular painting in Shaba would not be folk art in terms of Glassie's categories.

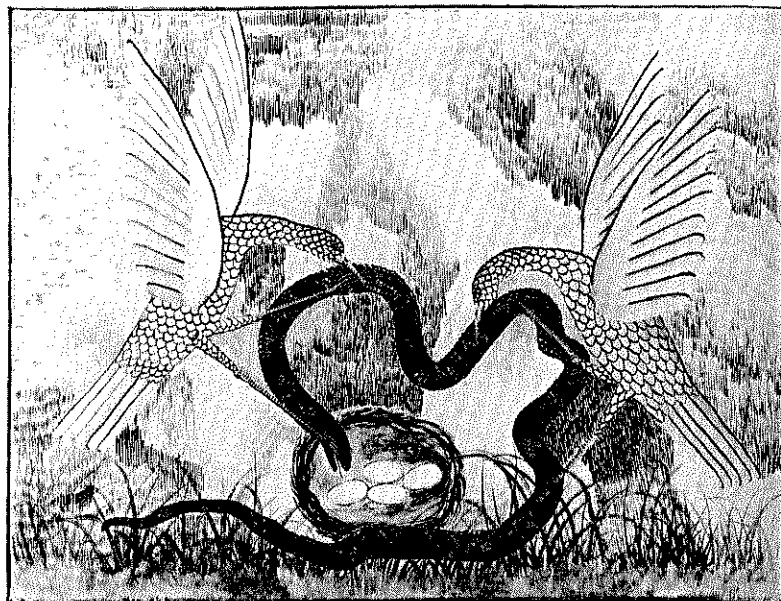


Figure 22. Pilipili Mulongoye, *Bird's Nest Attacked by Snake*. Lubumbashi, 1974. Oil on canvas; H. 46 cm., W. 60 cm. (Photo, Ilona Szombati-Fabian.)

One says that the product so characterized makes an uninteresting, uninspiring, perhaps vulgar statement; the other implies that trivial products, as a corpus, are without inner consistency or systematic connection (as in "sports trivia"). The anthropologist is reminded of stereotypes that used to be pronounced over "primitive thought" and, slightly earlier, "primitive language": shallow, pragmatic, undifferentiated. One of the few lasting achievements of our discipline has been to show that semiosis, the transformation of experience into coherent systems of signification, is a universal feature of culture. It is true that since Marx and Freud we must also consider the possibility of breakdown and antagonistic development; from such a point of view, the study of triviality in art might be a fruitful subject. Alleged or true triviality, then, assumes a symptomatic significance. It can serve as a



Figure 23. Mwenze Kibwanga, *Fight between Hunter and Buffalo*. Lubumbashi, 1969. Oil on canvas; H. 50 cm., W. 36 cm. (Photo, Ilona Szombati-Fabian.)

cultural diagnostic instead of being dismissed summarily. Elitist art criticism has come to grips with pop art and Andy Warhol; it has confronted kitsch and rediscovered the delights of nineteenth-century academicism. Naïve and primitive painting has been exhibited in the temples of high art. All this should help us to see triviality in folk painting in a new light. Practicing artists have appreciated triviality at least since the 1920s; without their rediscovery of the plain and ordinary, we might not be talking about folk art now.

Inasmuch as triviality is predicated on the message of a paint-

ing (not just on artistic means), it leads us to a third set of recurrent questions concerning the *meaning* of folk art. What kind of meaning does the folk artist give to his products and how do these products convey meaning?

The first commonplace that comes to mind is that of the so-called functional or utilitarian significance of folk art (perhaps a spillover from talk about primitive art). Murals in commercial places, shop signs, images on otherwise "useful" objects, are often cited as examples of such functional art. Of course, no one cares to debate that some objects of folk art are functional, or that all folk art may also be functional. What concerns us is an underlying, far-reaching ideological implication which expresses itself in formulas such as this opening passage in an essay on traditional and contemporary art in Africa: "Art historians and anthropologists, the first [are] concerned primarily with objects and the second with functions."<sup>26</sup> Such division of labor condones the vices of aestheticizing and sociologizing we denounced at the outset. We need not repeat our reasons; instead we might pause briefly at this point and examine the logic that underlies talk of functionality in folk art.

Let us say functionality evokes only a rather harmless and foggy contrast between *art pour l'art* and art for a use or purpose. Applied to folk and primitive art, attributes such as functional and utilitarian may then have a positive connotation. They would qualify art that is less alienated, less divorced from reality, than certain kinds of high art. It is our impression that this is the meaning most often found in discourse about folk art. The anthropologist is reminded here of the Noble Savage, a figure of speech conceived to express Enlightenment disdain for purposeless cultural refinement. Just as talk of "savages" really expressed concern with "civilized man," we must assume that whenever folk art is called functional and utilitarian, the real subject is high art. In fact, the contrast that appears to be established between aestheticizing high art on the one hand, and sociologizing low art on the other, is internal to ideological positions held by the Western

<sup>26</sup> Daniel J. Crowley, "Traditional and Contemporary Art in Africa," in *Expanding Horizons in African Studies*, Gwendolen M. Carter and Ann Paden, eds. (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1969), p. 111.

bourgeoisie.<sup>27</sup> The mundane world of utilitarian pursuits is transcended simply by conceiving of a notion of "pure" art (with all its implications, e.g., that art history may have to be explained in terms of its own inner laws, not by the events of mundane history). This position is ideological because it dissimulates, camouflages, what must be the first thing the proverbial man from Mars would notice about high art, namely its merchandise character and its total immersion into the logic of the market. What a splendid paradox; the most useless art fetches the highest prices! As such, high art is *the* symbol of our economies; it could not exist without the separation of value from function preached by the guardians of high art.

The situation is so wicked that even those who criticize functional views of folk and primitive art cannot help completing the circle of the logic of the market. By exalting some of the timeless qualities of folk art and by declaring them comparable to the greatest achievements of high art, one does, in fact, affirm the logic that led to denigration in the first place. In short, many well-meaning attempts to aestheticize folk art may be only symptoms of its being absorbed by the market.

We should also remember that both functionalism and utilitarianism have served in many combinations as paradigms for the social sciences. Anthropology, which has had some particularly disconcerting experiences with functionalism,<sup>28</sup> is now in a position to offer interesting theoretical alternatives for the interpretation of art forms other than high art. Whether or not one cares to subscribe to the Wittgensteinian "meaning is use" (and hence treat as a false problem all oppositions between pure significance and utilitarian value), we can now safely maintain that the study of folk art cannot leave "the object" to the art historian any

<sup>27</sup> Nicos Hadjinicolaou, *Histoire de l'art et lutte des classes* (Paris: Maspéro, 1974), p. 38f.

<sup>28</sup> Functionalism was a powerful paradigm in anthropology. Its critique has produced a literature too voluminous to be quoted here. Examples of such criticism from three totally different directions are: Ian C. Jarvie, *The Revolution in Anthropology* (New York: Humanities Press, 1964); Marvin Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1968), esp. chap. 19; and Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

more than it can leave "function" to the anthropologist or sociologist. Without the object, without, in our case, attention to its specific constitution as a painting, we would have no access to the process of semiosis, and we would be talking past, or around, the purposes of anthropology. To investigate social functions only, if that is possible, would make of art a mere occasion for sociological theorizing; in the end it would produce neither understanding of art nor new knowledge about society.<sup>29</sup> This is why students of folk art who look for ways of making their analysis culturally and socially more meaningful should be especially wary of aid from the social sciences.

Thus we can see how stressing its utilitarian functions does injustice to folk art by skipping, so to speak, its visual-material aspects. Yet similar injustice may be done by yet another stereotypical attitude that appears to be the exact contrary. This is the claim that folk art is best understood if one lets objects speak for themselves. Some of the paintings from Shaba are likely to trigger such reactions (Figs. 24, 25). Outsiders will find them quaint, charming, touching, naïvely powerful, or perhaps just cute. One may note in passing that these are attributes our society reserves for children, and that they evoke classical colonial associations between the primitive and the infantile.<sup>30</sup> But there is a more interesting theoretical element underlying these attributes. We will call it the stereotype of *positivity* in folk art.

Later on, we will argue that positivity is a problem of much wider significance; let us first see how it manifests itself in the discourse on folk art. Positive labels, such as quaint, charming,

<sup>29</sup> Such a position is gaining acceptance. For instance, Pierre Francastel insists that a "true sociology of art," "ne se présentait pas comme une certaine méthode de classement des connaissances sans remise en cause de la nature même de l'objet considéré"; see Francastel, *Etudes de Sociologie de l'art* (Paris: Denoël, 1970), pp. 10, 14. One may argue, therefore, (as does Hadjiniolaou, *Histoire de l'art et lutte des classes*, pp. 57-63), that a sociology of art whose object would be different from the history of art does not exist.

<sup>30</sup> We found examples for this in a recent exhibition of naïve art where contemporary popular paintings from Africa were placed together with prehistoric art and paintings by children and inmates of mental institutions; see *Die Kunst der Naïven*, catalogue of an exposition of naïve art, 1974-75 (Munich: Ausstellungsleitung Haus der Kunst, n.d.). (Note that the numbering in the catalogue does not reflect the fact that these categories were exhibited in the same space.)

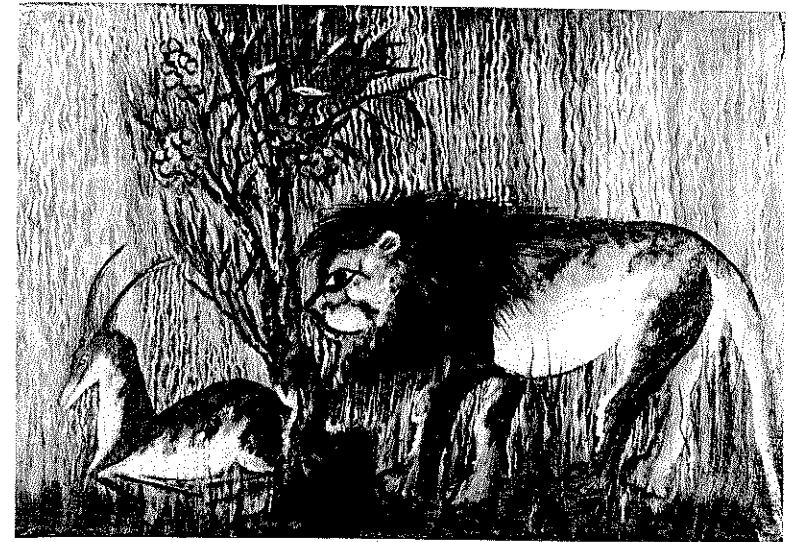


Figure 24. Unsigned (Kabinda), *Lion Stalking Antelope*. Kolwezi, 1973. H. 53 cm., W. 79 cm. (Photo, Ilona Szombati-Fabian.)

etc., we submit, are not attributes of objects; they are attitudes in the beholder. This can be demonstrated, for instance, with regard to the animal paintings in figures 24 and 25. Endearing adjectives, such as charming and quaint, are totally absent from the critical language used by producers and consumers of popular painting in Shaba. Furthermore, the images of leopards, lions, and buffaloes, which are likely to trigger such reactions in us, have their symbolic significance in terms of a genre we call "powerful animals." For the African beholder they are images of power and danger; they inspire awe. They recall a village past (where they were, above all, symbols for political and magical authority) and thus have a definable position in history.<sup>31</sup> Like all paintings of this corpus they are reminders, things that make you think; they are intellectual as well as emotional, never just vehicles of diffuse sentimentality.

Conversely, when the outside viewer uses attributes such as

<sup>31</sup> For detail, see Szombati-Fabian and Fabian, "Art, History, and Society," p. 4f.

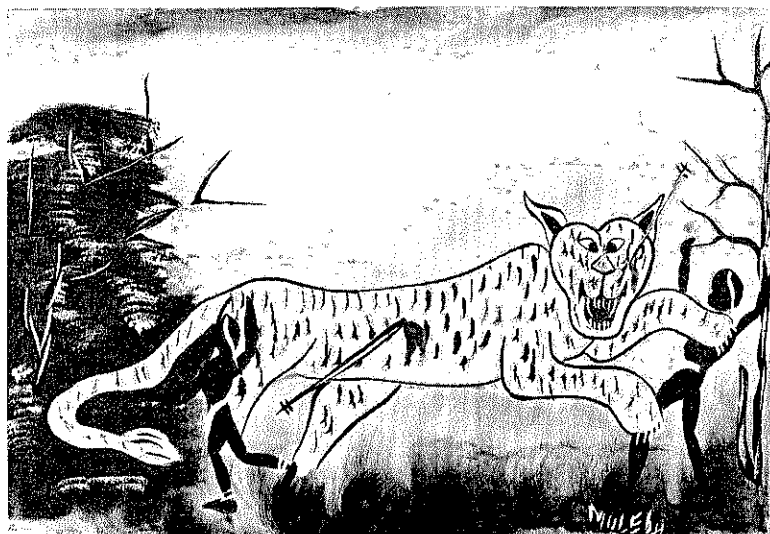


Figure 25. Muleba; *Leopard (chui)*. Likasi, 1974. H. 36 cm., W. 52 cm. This is an example of the genre "powerful animals" in the category Things Ancestral. (Photo, Iлона Szombati-Fabian.)

quaint and charming, he never simply expresses an appreciation of wholesome, unspoiled simplicity. When applied systematically, these terms signal a far-reaching rejection of the problematic, critical, and often disturbing intents of folk art. Such language implies that folk art is "to be seen, not heard," one more way in which the folk is assimilated to childhood. We all know that, at one time or another, folk and primitive art has been presented as *speechless* (devoid of any complex, discursive messages in need of interpretation); as *nonproblematic* (not fraught with the kind of tensions and drama we associate with creativity in the high arts); as *timeless* (expressive either of totally unique individual visions or of archetypal, mythical images); and, alas, as *artless* (untouched by the formal aesthetic problems which must be confronted by the producers and critics of high art). Cumulatively, all these negative labels add up to the stereotype of positivity.

Positivity, then, amounts to yet another ideological verdict.

To praise it as a virtue in folk and primitive art serves to assign a subordinate status to its producers and to the class or people for whom they produce. Aesthetic initiatives and decisions (which are also economic and political decisions) are the prerogative of the ruling class or of the Western world. The two terms are practically synonymous in the present situation. One need not be a rabid Marxist to see through this kind of discourse and maintain that what masks as aesthetic theory is often dictated by interests to control and dominate.

This is not to say that aesthetic theory, because it serves class interests, is nothing but a mere reflex of class structure. Critical shortcuts of this kind are themselves ideological, for they prevent recognition of intellectual issues which, logically, must precede class analysis. Let us mention one of these before we conclude our survey. In the last instance, positivity signals an epistemological position which constantly needs to be examined by the anthropologist.<sup>32</sup> Applied to the objects and images of folk art, it asserts their "givenness," their status as objective data, or perhaps social facts. The corollary of such a view, as in all variants of positivism, is that the prime task of a science of folk art should be a thorough description and classification of objects and behavior, to be followed by generalizations regarding relationships or causal attribution. That is what scientific social science means by "explaining" culture. Yet anthropology has come to realize, in a painful process, that its materials are never simply given; and that is true even of such manifestly objectlike things as paintings. Everything cultural is *made*, hence part of activities, processes from which it cannot simply be lifted for inspection. No science of culture can be built on mere contemplation of pristine givenness. Every cultural expression, indeed every object produced by humans, is immersed in processes of semiosis. To treat it as if it

<sup>32</sup> And by art historians, one might add. A most interesting argument for the "negativity of the image" has recently been developed by Oskar Bätschmann, *Bild-Diskurs* (Bern: Benteli Verlag, 1977). Perhaps one should also recall the fact that in the Western tradition the history of visual art always seems to have been paralleled by a history of anti-art movements; see the interesting study by Horst Bredekamp, *Kunst als Medium sozialer Konflikte* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1975).

were a fact in and of itself, a mere datum to be fed into the interpretive machinery of science, is not to save objectivity but to destroy it in its roots. All cultural knowledge is mediated and art is such a mediation. A science of folk art that seeks its meaning beneath the surface of its images and behind the backs of its producers is forever condemned to manufacture purely projective knowledge.

*Folk Art:*  
*The Challenge and the Promise*  
Kenneth L. Ames

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At the 1976 annual meeting of the Society of Architectural Historians, folklorist Henry Glassie chaired a session on vernacular architecture, a subject generally ignored by architectural historians. In his published summary, Glassie emphasized the innovative aspect of the session and drew an analogy to the Trojan horse. He spoke approvingly of scholars with a new orientation who were invading the discipline of architectural history. Once inside, they would "upset the comfortable life within the walls" by challenging not only the dominant methodology and theory of architectural history, but that field's basic assumptions as well. As Glassie saw it, these invading scholars would pose questions that would go beyond buildings and their architects to the people who lived in them and eventually lead to a reexamination of cherished and fundamental concepts about humanity.<sup>1</sup>

Although Glassie was writing about architectural history, his analysis can be extended to other aspects of material culture study. If the troops within the Trojan horse alter the direction of architectural history, we may expect similar invasions of related disciplines. In fact, in recent years there have been notable changes in studies of material culture, both in the kinds of artifacts examined and the questions asked about them. Yet there has also been,

<sup>1</sup> Henry Glassie, "Vernacular Architecture," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 35, no. 4 (December 1976):293-95.



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# Perspectives on American Folk Art

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EDITED BY

*Ian M. G. Quimby  
and Scott T. Swank*

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