



African Women in the Visual Arts

Author(s): Lisa Aronson

Source: *Signs*, Vol. 16, No. 3, (Spring, 1991), pp. 550-574

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174589>

Accessed: 04/08/2008 21:41

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=ucpress>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

AFRICAN WOMEN IN THE VISUAL ARTS

LISA ARONSON

The arts of sub-Saharan African societies offer a window for viewing the cultural construction of gender through which we are able to see the complex ways in which different groups of African men and women act out their roles in social, political, economic, and religious arenas. The arts are also valuable indicators of socioeconomic change as reflected by changes in their styles, materials, production, technology, and modes of distribution and consumption.

Scholars of African art have been unusually slow to consider theoretical issues of gender. While many have studied women in the arts, few grapple with gender-related issues or attempt to interpret the data from a feminist theoretical perspective. A preliminary discussion of the art biases and research strategies underlying African art studies may help to explain why.

African art was first recognized by Europeans as “art,” and therefore worthy of study, in the early decades of this century. Until the late sixties and early seventies, however, the only true African arts, from a Western perspective, were masks and figurative sculpture. Those very arts were produced only by men, since women in Africa seldom if ever carve wood or work in metal. Such craft

I wish to thank Monni Adams, Marla Berns, Charlotte Goodman, Kris Hardin, Phyllis Roth, and Trudi Renwick for their helpful criticisms and suggestions.

[*Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1991, vol. 16, no. 3]
© 1991 by The University of Chicago. All rights reserved. 0097-9740/91/1603-0005\$01.00

objects as ceramics, basketry, and calabash decoration, often the work of women, were deemed to be of less value and therefore ignored.

Women's arts were also overlooked because they tend to be less visible to outsiders than are men's. Women confine much of their activity, including their arts, to the domestic arena, which is often set apart from the public space of the compound. Men's arts, by contrast, are more public and, in the case of masquerades, more dramatic in their presentation and thus more accessible for study than women's.

In the late sixties and early seventies, Western scholars began to produce significant studies of women's artistic roles in both secular and sacred spheres of the community. At the same time there was a new appreciation of the aesthetic and technological merits of the so-called crafts, including many produced by women.¹ Few of these studies, however, examined those crafts as part of the household economy or as instruments of power within the woman's social sphere.

To consider these gender issues requires a more feminist theoretical approach than has been usual in African art studies. African art attracts scholars from a wide range of disciplines, including archaeology, history, and sociology but, mainly and most influentially, art history and anthropology. Art historians have contributed much in the way of studies on style and iconography, whereas anthropologists have offered more of the contextual and theoretical framework. From the marriage of these two disciplines, African art scholarship became—and still remains—largely stylistic and functionalist in its perspective.²

Functionalists see art, and all other cultural components, as working collectively toward a sense of harmony and social solidarity. Art even may be the vehicle by which this harmony is maintained. Because a functionalist would not see art as a mechanism of empowerment or male domination, gender-related discord has no place within a functionalist's apolitical view of culture.

The limited scope of African art studies has also inhibited discussion of feminist-related issues. Research is devoted mainly to "traditional" arts, loosely defined as those that operate within the

¹ In 1980, Roy Sieber created a major exhibition of African household objects that circulated around the country. For details on that show, see Roy Sieber, *African Furniture and Household Objects* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980).

² For a more detailed discussion of the history of African art studies, see Monni Adams, "African Visual Arts from an Art Historical Perspective," *African Studies Review* 32, no. 2 (September 1989): 55–103. In her article, Adams notes the paucity of research on gender and women in African art.

tribe and village. Arts affected by urbanization or colonialization are thought to be little more than polluted versions of the real thing and, therefore, not worthy of serious attention. Contemporary arts are equally neglected because they are not considered real arts. Instead, most scholars spend their time preserving the “traditional” by feverishly gathering and describing field data in order to record it on paper and in visual form before it disappears entirely. Unfortunately, theory—feminist or otherwise—has no place in this preservationist perspective.

Despite these limitations, research on women has carved a small niche in the study of African art. This essay is designed to explore the depth of that niche. I have organized my discussion according to the following categories: women in relation to men’s arts, division of labor in the arts, women’s arts and the domestic sphere, women’s arts and initiation, women’s designs and techniques, and women’s arts and economics.

These categories reflect the interdisciplinary nature of African art studies. Anthropologists have drawn our attention to such topics as initiation rituals, division of labor, and the related theme of complementarity in the arts. Along with sociologists and historians, they have brought into focus the important issues of economics and the changing patterns resulting from socioeconomic change. Topics related to artistry, designs, and techniques fall largely within the domain of art history and archaeology, whereas the issue of women and the domestic economy derives mainly from feminist scholarship, which is itself interdisciplinary in nature.

While varying disciplines can be credited with drawing our attention to these categories, the scholars whose works are discussed within them are not necessarily confined to those disciplines. For example, eight of the ten studies cited in the section on initiation arts were done by art historians in spite of the anthropological nature of the subject matter.

Moreover, only a portion of the studies in this essay directly address issues of gender. The essay emphasizes these gender-specific studies while also drawing on and contextualizing data derived from the more descriptive works.

Women in relation to men’s arts

Cultures throughout sub-Saharan Africa use sculptures, masks, and other artistic forms to control, manipulate, and make publicly accessible spirits that are an important source of power. For many years, Western scholars thought masquerades were entirely male-controlled and exclusionary of women. In truth, the study of

masquerades was dominated by male researchers who relied on male informants and thus were blind to the female sphere. Anita Glaze was the first female art historian to study in the field and to recognize the significant role women can play in ostensibly male artistic spheres.³

Glaze went to Ivory Coast in the late sixties to study Senufo art and ritual. The existing literature had led her to believe that Senufo art consisted largely of wooden masks and sculptures controlled by the men's Poro society and used for their benefit. (Poro is a secret male governing society found among the Senufo and a number of other ethnic groups throughout Western Ivory Coast, Liberia, and Sierra Leone.) To all appearances, Senufo women played no part in Poro-related art. But Glaze's efforts to penetrate beyond the surface of things revealed much more.

Her main focus was the funeral event, where she saw all Senufo arts coming together in a dramatic way for the benefit of the dead. Glaze's careful analysis of the various contributing components of this multimedia event caused her to move beyond the study of masks and sculptures. Within this broader vision, women's participation became glaringly apparent.

Glaze's survey of the total range of Senufo arts revealed a series of lineage-based occupational groups of *both* female and male farmers and artisans. For each male art, a female counterpart existed that few scholars before her had recognized. She observed that blacksmiths' wives were specialists in ritual basketry while brasscasters' wives were potters.

She also recognized the coexistence of two separate but complementary arenas of power, one controlled by men and the other by women, each exercising authority within different social domains. Poro, the men's secret society, was responsible for maintaining social and political order, whereas Sandogo, a predominantly women's divination society, was more concerned with order and continuity along kinship lines. Each derived its power from supernatural forces but manipulated those forces through different categories of art. For example, masks fell within the male domain while sculpture was a female province.

Complementarity between the two power spheres meant that men could function as diviners and women as participants in Poro events. Women's participation derived from the Senufo belief that women possess clairvoyant powers enabling them to communicate best with the spirits. Because of these powers, they serve as

³ Anita Glaze, *Art and Death in a Senufo Village* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981). See also Anita Glaze, "Women Power and Art in a Senufo Village," *African Arts* 8, no. 3 (Spring 1975): 25-29, 65-68, 83.

spiritual consultants and even belong to the Poro society itself. Moreover, their spiritual powers could give them control over the use of sculpture. Sande diviners (mainly women) were responsible for arranging Poro sculptures on the shrine as dictated by the spirits with whom they were in communication. So, while Senúfo men carved the Poro-related sculpture, it was the women who understood its placement and thus how to increase its communicative potential. Likewise, representations of idealized women enhanced the effectiveness of Poro sculpture.⁴

Glaze's work was important for recognizing a female arena of power and arts produced by women as complements to those of men. She concluded that men's and women's arts "combine in a vital process whereby conflicts and tensions, in both a real and an ideological sense, are harmonized and resolved."⁵

Still, it was the Poro-associated masquerades, the most obtrusive in the funeral event, that drew much of her attention. Less consideration was given to the women's artistic sphere contributing to that event or in general. She alluded to various women's masking traditions but gave no inkling of their ultimate purpose or the ways they compared to or interacted with men's. She drew our attention to women's production, in ceramics and basketry, for example, but elaborated little on the dynamics of that production or on women's use of those objects. Finally, in her desire to see Senúfo arts function harmoniously, she avoided examining any gender-related conflicts that the arts purportedly resolved.

Nonetheless, such questions—whether implicitly raised or not—opened new avenues of research on gender issues in masquerading that few had ventured upon until Monni Adam's recent work on the "We/Guere" of Ivory Coast. Like Glaze, Adams acknowledges that women participate predominantly in the public sphere of men's masquerade festivals.⁶ But she goes further than Glaze and

⁴ In a subsequent study, Glaze outlines some ideological reasons why female imagery so frequently appears in male-dominated masquerades (Anita Glaze, "Dialectics of Gender in Senúfo Masquerades," *African Arts* 19, no. 3 [May 1986]: 30–39, 82). For other studies concerned with female representation in African art, see Herbert M. Cole, *The Mother and Child in African Sculpture* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1986); Henry Drewal, "Art and the Perception of Women in Yoruba Culture," *Cahiers d'études africaines* 17, no. 4 (1977): 545–67; and Henry Drewal and Margaret Drewal, *Gelede: Art and Female Power among the Yoruba* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983).

⁵ Glaze, *Art and Death in a Senúfo Village*, xii.

⁶ M. J. Adams, "Women and Masks among the Western We of the Ivory Coast," *African Arts* 20, no. 2 (February 1986): 46–54, 90. Also see Danielle Gallois Duquette, "Woman Power and Initiation in the Bissagos Islands," *African Arts* 12, no. 3 (May 1979): 31–35.

links their ceremonial roles more specifically to their culturally constructed female roles in everyday life. In the ceremony they act as official preparers of the festival food, without which the event could not take place. Women transform and contribute resources for the ceremony as they do within the household sphere. Also, their nurturing, supportive roles as women and mothers are reflected in the way they praise or taunt the mask spirit and administer the medicine that protects the maskers against sorcery attacks. Adams contrasts this behavior to the more aggressive and forceful character of the male spirit figure (*gela*), which more closely mimics the male world.

Adams also gives close attention to We women's domestic arts and to their own form of masking as expressions of female power. The women's masquerade (*woodhoe*) has its own unique female aesthetic (a painted face and an elaborate headdress, which is inherited through the female line), combined with qualities imitative of the men's (e.g., the woman's mask performs in the public arena, but much later than the male mask, and wears the same type of skirt; Adams sees that the muted aesthetic of the *woodhoe* masquerade enables women to perform on the same level as men and, by so doing, to "gain public recognition through aesthetic display and to exercise the kind of spiritual forces available to men").⁷

Division of labor in the arts

Artistic endeavor, like all production in Africa, is clearly divided by gender. There are always exceptions to the rule,⁸ but generally speaking women work with clay and other natural substances for making pottery and painting exterior walls, while men work with wood and metals to make sculpture. Where a particular category of art is shared—weaving, for example—the technologies are likely to differ. In West Africa, men weave long, narrow strips on a horizontal foot-treadle loom while women weave a wider cloth on a vertical fixed-frame loom with a continuous warp.

⁷ M. J. Adams, "Art as a Gender Strategy among the We-Guere of Canton Boo, Côte d'Ivoire" (paper presented at African Studies Association meetings, Denver, November 1987).

⁸ Men do pottery among the Hausa of Northern Nigeria, the Moba of Togo, the Baganda of East Africa, the Bemba of Zambia, and the Azande of Southern Sudan; on rare occasions, women are known to do wood-carving. For a reference to this, see Barbara Johnson, *Four Dan Sculptors: Continuity and Change* (San Francisco: Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, 1987).

Some studies attempt to spell out or question these divisions. Simon Ottenberg, in his careful analysis of sexual division of labor among the Limba of Sierra Leone, notes differentiation in men's domination of plastic modes and women's domination of performance.⁹ Robin Poyner remarks that Owo Yoruba women weave ritualized burial and title cloths while men weave for more mundane use, suggesting separate social spheres of responsibility.¹⁰ William Dewey notes that Shona male artists derive their artistic inspiration from the spirits while the female do not, because, he says, men produce objects for spiritual use whereas women produce solely for domestic purposes (although one might question whether the women's arts as he describes them are solely domestic arts).¹¹ Fred Smith questions why Gurense (Ghana) men's and women's baskets differ in type and weave. His answer suggests the importance of one's gender-specific social sphere in determining what to make. Gurense men explained to him that they never made flat-bottomed baskets of the kind made by women, because women used them to carry things from the market; thus, the baskets originated in the woman's world and not theirs.¹²

Some fascinating research on sexual division of labor comes from studies of blacksmithing. Blacksmiths operate by a strict set of rules aimed at maintaining control of their process. Among other things, these rules succeed in keeping outsiders, including women, from learning the knowledge and secrets of their profession.¹³ Biological factors are used to construct an ideological justification for this exclusion. Eugenia Herbert notes that blacksmiths, who act on all available forces to ensure safety in their profession, taboo menstruating women for fear they will pollute the difficult iron-smelting process.¹⁴ Mental constructs and ideologies are created to

⁹ Simon Ottenberg, "Artistic and Sex Roles in a Limba Chiefdom," in *Female and Male in West Africa*, ed. Christine Oppong (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983), 76–90.

¹⁰ Robin Poyner, "Traditional Textiles in Owo Nigeria," *African Arts* 14, no. 1 (November 1980): 47–51.

¹¹ William Dewey, "Shona Male and Female Artistry," *African Arts* 19, no. 3 (May 1986): 64–67.

¹² Fred Smith, "Gurense Basketry and Pottery," *African Arts* 12, no. 1 (November 1978): 78–81.

¹³ Along the same lines, Tonkin argues that men deny women the opportunity of experiencing masquerading and related initiations as their strategy to gain male power within that domain (Elizabeth Tonkin, "Women Excluded? Masking and Masquerading in West Africa," in *Women's Religious Experience*, ed. Pat Holden [London: Croom Helm, 1983], 163–74).

¹⁴ Eugenia Herbert, "Paradigms of Procreation: Meditations on Gender and Technology in African Iron Working" (paper presented at the Smithsonian-sponsored Conference on African Material Culture, Bellagio, Italy, May 19–28, 1988). See also

reinforce these gate-keeping strategies. Discussing a survey she conducted of male woodcarvers, Adams notes that some view their artistic work in opposition to the female creative sphere of childbirth; each context operates similarly in its exclusion of the opposite sex.¹⁵ Yet some complementarity is suggested. Blacksmiths refer to the iron bloom as a creation resulting from the copulation of the male phallic-like bellows and the female belly-like furnace.¹⁶ The wives of blacksmiths are often potters, which is a significant component of blacksmithing that scholars frequently overlook. Moreover, the female potters seem to share the male blacksmiths' ideology. In a recent study, Nigel Barley notes that women potters taboo menstruating women from approaching the most dangerous stage of their process, the firing.¹⁷ Also, like blacksmiths, the potters derive curative powers from their products, exercised in female-related areas such as childbirth and womb disorders. If we are ever going to broaden our understanding of power strategies within the female artistic sphere, we must pay more attention to the ideological concerns of women potters and other female artisans linked to blacksmithing.

Paula Ben-Amos gives further insight into the ideology behind artistic creativity in her study of female (and male) artists (*omebo*) who make clay sculptures and chalk markings for Olokun, the Benin god linked with creation. Their art is defined as a creative process synonymous with divine creation (the Edo word for create, *yi*, means creation in both the divine and artistic sense). Linked in this way, Olokun artists' work, while done in soft, malleable materials, is of the highest order in its parallel to that of the creator god himself. As Ben-Amos states: "While it is true that the material *omebo* use to mold these shrines—clay from the riverbank—is soft, pliable and common, it is not associated with 'home, garden, cooking, and childraising' in the Benin view, but with the moment of creation, for it is the very material that Osanobua, the father of Olokun, used to form the first human beings. Thus, the creativity of

Michael Rowlands and Jean-Pierre Warnier, "The Magical Production of Iron in the Cameroon Grassfields" (paper presented at the Smithsonian-sponsored Conference on African Material Culture, Bellagio, Italy, May 19–28, 1988).

¹⁵ M. J. Adams, "Afterword: Spheres of Men's and Women's Creativity," *Ethnologische Zeitschrift Zurich* 1 (1980): 163–67.

¹⁶ See Herbert.

¹⁷ Nigel Barley, "Placing the West African Potter," in *Earthenware in Asia and Africa*, ed. John Picton, Colloquies on Art and Archaeology in Asia series, no. 12 (London: University of London, Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art, 1984), 93–101. Carol Spindel, "Kpeenbele Senufo Potters," *African Arts* 22, no. 2 (February 1989): 66–73, provides a good overview of artistry according to caste among the Senufo.

these *omebo*—women and men—refers not only to a parallel reality but to a primordial time, and the artist becomes not only a molder of the gods but a molder *like* the gods.”¹⁸

Women’s arts and the domestic sphere

Ben-Amos’s study touches on the issue of African women’s arts and the domestic sphere, including the woman’s role in childbearing, child rearing, and household management. It has already been suggested that domestic roles channel African women into certain areas of artistic production such as pottery, basketry, or textiles.¹⁹ But it is also true that women’s artistic work, though confined to certain media and done within the household, can extend into the public sphere in significant ways. These data corroborate what we know in general about small-scale societies where, Eleanor Leacock observes, domestic realms are not easily separated from public ones. Instead, the former often serve important economic, political, and religious functions for the larger community.²⁰

Studies on women’s arts support—or, at least, provide descriptive data to support—Leacock’s observation. Typologies in a number of studies on women’s pottery suggest that not all pots are meant for domestic purposes. For example, Carol Spindel documents twenty-nine types in the Senufo potter’s repertoire, of which nine are intended for ritual use by both women and men.²¹ (See,

¹⁸ Paula Ben-Amos, “Artistic Creativity in Benin Kingdom,” *African Arts* 19, no. 3 (May 1986): 60–63, 83. Ben-Amos’s study challenges Teilhets’s theory regarding the cross-cultural differences between men’s and women’s arts. Teilhets argues that men’s arts are more highly valued because of their durability and skilled craftwork, whereas women’s arts, usually being of soft, impermanent materials, reflect their femininity and, by association, the common domain of household and child rearing (Jehanne Teilhets, “The Equivocal Role of Women Artists in Non-literate Cultures,” *Heresies* 4, pt. 4 [Winter 1978]: 96–102).

¹⁹ Smith, “Gurensi Basketry and Pottery.” For specific examples, refer to Lisa Aronson, “Women in the Arts,” in *African Women South of the Sahara*, ed. Margaret Jean Hay and Sharon Stricter (London: Longmans, 1984), 119–28.

²⁰ Eleanor Leacock, “Women’s Status in Egalitarian Society: Implications for Social Evolution,” *Current Anthropology* 19, no. 2 (June 1978): 247–75.

²¹ Carol Spindel, “‘Our Mothers Had More Courage’: Style and Technology among Senufo Potters” (master’s thesis, University of Illinois, 1988). See also Spindel, “Kpeenbele Senufo Potters.” For other studies on pottery that list the potter’s repertoires, see A. R. W. Cross-Upcott, “Barikiwa Pottery,” *Tanganyika Notes and Records* 40 (September 1955): 24–29; Margot C. N. Gill, “The Potter’s Mark: Contemporary and Archaeological Pottery of the Kenyan Southeastern Highlands” (master’s thesis, Boston University, 1981); A. K. Quarcoo and Marion Johnson, “Shai Pots: The Pottery Tradition of the Shai People of Southern Ghana,”



FIG. 1 A Senoufo woman from the village of Katiالي, Ivory Coast, puts the finishing touches on a large water jar (*funjoho*). The *funjoho* is among the gifts a Senoufo bride receives from her family at marriage. (Photo: Carol Spindel, 1982.)

e.g., fig. 1.) In some cases, the context determines whether the pot will serve household or ritual needs.

Other studies on pottery imply that ritual pots require special treatment during production. For example, Yoruba potters must use special clays and adhere to ritual taboos, such as drying the pots away from public areas, when making ritual pots.²² More than one study suggests they are made by postmenopausal women who can no longer endanger the delicate process and who carry with them years of experience in making simpler varieties.

Robert Thompson has documented the life and work of one such potter, Abatan, who makes pots in honor of the Yoruba deity Eyinle.²³ His study is concerned mainly with continuity and change

Baessler-Archiv 16 (1968): 47–88; Robert Thompson, “Abatan: A Master Potter of the Egbado Yoruba,” in *Tradition and Creativity in Tribal Art*, ed. Daniel Biebuyck (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 120–82; S. A. C. Waane, “Pottery Making Traditions of the Ikombe Kisi, Mbeya Region, Tanzania,” *Baessler-Archiv* 25 (1977): 251–317.

²² Maude Wahlmann, “Yoruba Pottery-making Techniques,” *Baessler-Archiv* 20 (1972): 313–46.

²³ Thompson, 120–82. Thompson’s study is one of the few biographies of an African woman artist. See also Anne Cassiers, “Mercha: An Ethiopian Woman

in Abatan's ritual pot tradition over several generations. From his discussion, we learn that Abatan makes the Eyinle pot, her most sophisticated form, only after years of perfecting the domestic varieties, which he briefly lists. Once again, domestic and ritual pots figure prominently in a potter's repertoire. Indeed, a domestic pot form provides the very foundation onto which the sculptural figure on the ritual Eyinle vessel is placed.

Most studies of women's domestic arts, including those of pottery cited above, spell out the various domestic and ritual modes but fail to examine seriously their place in the household economy or their significance as power symbols derived from that context. An exception is the work of Labelle Prussin. An architectural historian, Prussin views architecture as a symbolic expression of culture, one important component of which is gender. From this broader perspective, she recognized rather early in her studies that women's domestic responsibilities contribute significantly to the formation and meaning of architecture. For example, men and women engage in complementary building construction tasks that derive from their respective social roles.²⁴ In particular, in the few areas where bricks are dried in kilns, this task is performed by women because of their role as potters, which, in turn, derives from their socially assigned responsibility for collecting fuel for domestic use.

In her recent work on African nomadic tent architecture, Prussin more fully explores the correlation between women's domestic work and architecturally related tasks.²⁵ Women *are* the architects in nomadic cultures in the sense that they erect the tents (as often as once a month!) and construct all of the materials used in the tent structure, including woven mats as liners, coiled basketry, and leather goods.

Furthermore, by controlling all aspects of tent construction, women significantly shape culture, including gender roles as they are matrilineally constructed. This can be seen in marriage rituals where mothers disassemble their tents in order to give parts of them to their daughters for their own construction. The mother then

Speaks of Her Life," in *Life Histories of African Women*, ed. Pat Romero (London: Ashfield, 1987); and Lorette Reinhardt, "Mrs. Kadiato Kamara: An Expert Dyer in Sierra Leone," *Fieldiana Anthropology* 66, no. 2 (June 14, 1976): 11-33.

²⁴ Labelle Prussin, "An Introduction to Indigenous African Architecture," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 33, no. 3 (October 1974): 182-205, esp. 193.

²⁵ Labelle Prussin, "The Dynamics of Household Production and Consumption in the Nomadic Context: Studies of Stylistic Variation and Change in the Sedentarization Process" (paper presented at the Smithsonian-sponsored Conference on African Material Culture, Bellagio, Italy, May 19-28, 1988).

reconstructs her own tent but in a smaller size, now that portions of it have been passed on to her daughter. In this way, the tent symbolizes not only hearth and home but also continuity through the female line. An older woman's unusually small tent is a symbol of prestige, since it implies that she has married off many daughters.

Two studies on decorated calabashes (gourds) among the Fulani, Ga'anda, and other groups of the Benue Valley of Nigeria, one by T. J. H. Chappel and the other by Marla Berns and Barbara Hudson, are worth mentioning.²⁶ In particular, Berns and Hudson write a lengthy and vivid account of the techniques and designs employed in calabash decoration and their domestic and ritual uses. Data from both studies point to the power and gender-laden meaning that calabashes can have in the culture. Not only do they function in both domestic and sacred contexts, but it is the gourds' domestic associations that warrant their use in the sacred realm. Chappel notes that decorated gourds for the cattle-keeping Fulani are both domestic, in their use as containers, and ritual, in the ways they symbolically mark important stages in the life cycle, often through their ritual exchange at marriages and during childbirth.²⁷ The decorative gourds used in these contexts can have "a generalized expressive significance deriving from their direct association with ideas about femininity and motherhood, and the values attaching to these concepts."²⁸ By virtue of their maternal and household associations, they symbolize increase and order within the family. In this capacity, they can even serve as charms to ensure the health and fecundity of the cattle herd.

In other contexts, the gourd, as a female nurturing symbol, is combined with male symbolic forms to express the complementary value of the two spheres. Berns and Hudson note that Dadiya women give young male initiates gourds decorated with iron rattles with which they dance to celebrate their coming of age.²⁹ These rattles combine the female symbol of the gourd (women's nurturing, domestic role) with the male symbol of iron (referring to the iron tools the boy uses in his capacity as cultivator). In this and many other ways, women's gourd arts, like nomadic women's tent architecture, contribute significantly to the molding of culture.

²⁶ T. J. H. Chappel, *Decorated Gourds in North-Eastern Nigeria* (London: Ethnographica/Nigerian Museum, 1977). Marla Berns with Barbara Rubin Hudson, *The Essential Gourd: Art and History in Northeastern Nigeria* (Los Angeles: University of California, Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1986).

²⁷ Chappel.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁹ Berns and Hudson, 60.

Finally, Monni Adams discusses women's domestic arts from a different viewpoint by looking at ways in which the aesthetic of domestic arts affords them social status. Adams notes that We women decorate forms linked to areas where they exercise authority: the surfaces of their cooking pots, the walls of their houses, and the faces of young girls undergoing initiation.³⁰ By applying decoration to these areas, they draw attention and approval to their domain—people remark on them as they pass by—but in a silent way so as not to violate the acknowledged leadership both men and women accord the men. In other words, it is the women's more subtle or muted aesthetic that affords them recognition and status in the community.³¹

Women's arts and initiation

Women's aesthetic attention is also felt in women's puberty and other life-cycle rituals, processes through which women foster and take charge of the female-specific community. Arts associated with women's initiation rituals include various kinds of body and facial coverings in perishable materials.

A tradition of face painting is commonly practiced in Sande and related women's initiation societies found throughout Liberia and Sierra Leone. As noted earlier, Sande is the female counterpart of men's Poro, and, interestingly enough, both use the women's face-painting art during liminal stages in their initiation process.³² R. S. Leopold offers an intriguing interpretation of the meaning of such face painting that could explain why men use the women's facial mask.³³ Leopold reads the smeared white clay as a metaphor for an unbaked pot, implying some comparison in its unfinished state to initiates who have yet to become adults. Inasmuch as women make pots and work with clay, it is tempting to suggest that the initiates become the clay containers that women symbolically mold into adult beings, just as they mold their offspring in reality.

³⁰ M. J. Adams, "Art as a Gender Strategy among the We-Guere of Canton Boo, Côte d'Ivoire" (n. 7 above).

³¹ "Muted" is the term Ardener uses to characterize a mode of expression typical of groups, such as women, silenced by male domination (see Edwin Ardener, "Belief and the Problem of Women," in *Perceiving Women*, ed. S. Ardener [London: Dent, 1975], 1–17).

³² Glaze, *Art and Death in a Senuso Village* (n. 3 above).

³³ R. S. Leopold, "The Shaping of Men and the Making of Metaphors: The Meaning of White Clay in Poro and Sande Initiation Society Rituals," *Anthropology* 8, no. 2 (December 1983): 21–42.

As a rule, wooden masks are not featured in women's initiation rituals since they and their production tend to be under the control of men. One exception is the wooden type used in Sande or Bundu (Bondo) initiation rituals among the Mende and neighboring groups mainly in Liberia and Sierre Leone. The Bundu wooden masked spirit (called *Sowei* or *Sowo*) dances in front of the female initiates as a visual guide and model during their bush education. In its youthful female form, its symbolic attachments, and its graceful dance movements, the masked spirit represents the highest expression of female poise, propriety, perfection, and power.

Nevertheless, it is such a curious exception for women to be using a male-carved wooden mask in their initiation that many scholars have sought to explain it. Gola male informants explained to Warren D'Azevedo that, according to their myth, wooden masking was once the privilege of women; men copied it to create their Poro tradition with its own set of masks, and now the two masking societies exist side by side.³⁴ Unfortunately, D'Azevedo leaves out the female Sande perspective on this question. Those who have examined the two traditions side by side argue that Sande and Poro are closely interrelated and share a number of qualities, one of which is the wooden masked performance and another the clay facial coverings discussed earlier.³⁵ Closer comparison of men's Poro and women's Sande artistic activity may help us to understand gender relations in these societies and how they are symbolized or represented in masquerades.

At this point, most research has focused on the iconographic meaning of Sande masks. Particularly noteworthy is Fred Lamp's interpretation of the mask, its form and symbolic meaning, as a metaphor for transformation. He bases this interpretation on his careful analysis of oral tradition and the spatial and temporal components of the female-controlled performance.³⁶

Also worth mentioning is Sylvia Boone's book-length interpretation of the Sande wooden mask as a concrete visualization of Mende notions of female beauty.³⁷ The strength of her book is her carefully detailed and lucid analysis of that aesthetic, examined in

³⁴ Warren D'Azevedo, "Mask Makers and Myth in Western Liberia," in *Primitive Art and Society*, ed. Anthony Forge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 126-50.

³⁵ See Leopold for a good overview of the literature on the complementarity between Poro and Sande.

³⁶ Frederick Lamp, "Cosmos, Cosmetics, and the Spirit of Bondo," *African Arts* 18, no. 3 (May 1985): 28-43.

³⁷ Sylvia Boone, *Radiance from the Waters: Ideals of Feminine Beauty in Mende Art* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986).

the way women carry themselves when standing, sitting, and kneeling, as it pertains to every part of the woman's body (including hair, eyes, ears, neck, abdomen, buttocks, vagina), and in the way it is nurtured through continual massaging and rubbing with oils.

Less thorough is Boone's analysis of the Sande mask itself, the supreme expression of this aesthetic. The Sande mask—like all African wood sculpture—is carved by men, suggesting that the women commissioning the mask somehow transmit their female aesthetic to the male carver. Exactly how this process is done and who ultimately controls the outcome of the mask—the female patron or the male carver—are questions Boone never considers. Nevertheless, Boone's aesthetic treatise alone offers a uniquely feminist view of how female Mende women articulate, nurture, and ritually cultivate ideal notions of beauty.

As Boone and others have suggested, most female-produced initiation art falls within the category of body arts and coverings. Sarah Brett-Smith documents Bamana (Mali) mud cloths that girls must wear to protect themselves from the spiritual forces (*Nya*) released after clitoral excision.³⁸ By virtue of the powerfully charged imagery, derived mainly from the value contrasts in the design, the cloth absorbs the spirit so as to prevent it from dangerously reentering a girl's body throughout the critical period of healing and seclusion. At the same time it protects others from the potential sorcery associated with her unhealed wounds.

By far the most interesting work that has been done on women's arts and initiation concerns body markings. Marla Berns's study of Ga'anda (Nigeria) scarification deserves high praise in this area.³⁹ Berns makes it clear that marriage, prearranged in Ga'anda society, is something Ga'anda women anticipate and work toward from early childhood. Scarification (see fig. 2) is applied by women in a step-by-step process beginning at age six and proceeding until puberty, each stage of the application punctuated by prescribed rituals such as bridewealth payment. Some of the designs symbolize important stages in the girl's maturation process. For example, the first scar is placed near her navel to accentuate her child-bearing potential. The full communicative impact of these markings is felt at the end of years of painful and extensive ritual

³⁸ Sarah Brett-Smith, "Symbolic Blood: Cloths for Excised Women," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 5 (Spring 1982): 15–31.

³⁹ Marla C. Berns, "Ga'anda Scarification: A Model for Art and Identity," in *Marks of Civilization: Artistic Transformations of the Human Body*, ed. Arnold Rubin (Los Angeles: University of California, Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1988), 57–76.



FIG. 2 The scarification (*Sa*) on the Bena (B'gna) woman from the village of Du'a, Nigeria, results from applying close, shallow cuts to the skin to create small raised scars. Like their Ga'anda neighbors, Bena women apply the scars in stages. Such traditions persist in spite of Western, missionary influences such as the wearing of bras. (Photo: Marla Berns, 1981.)

preparation. Not only are they tactile and considered aesthetically pleasing, but they also mark her identity as an adult woman with all of its social connotations in Ga'anda society.

It is no coincidence that Ga'anda and other women apply initiation markings to other media to extend their identity to other realms and for other purposes. One domain where the markings often appear is on the surfaces of their architecture. For example, the Ndebele women of South Africa apply painted versions of their beaded initiation attire to the exterior walls of their compound dwellings to maximize the communicative effects of the initiation

beads they wear. Elizabeth Schneider argues that Ndebele women do this to attract men, even acknowledging this intent by regarding wall painting as a prerequisite for marriage.⁴⁰

But women also see that their female-associated markings go beyond the female sphere. Fred Smith notes that the Gurensi (Ghana) and Igbo (Nigeria) women paint female-specific imagery in male-specific areas (at the entranceway or near the shrine) to enrich the status and well-being of the patrilineal heads of the compound.⁴¹ Catherine Vogel observes that Pedi (South Africa) women's wall designs—some symbolizing female status, others male—are applied in ways that define social and physical boundaries.⁴² They may even mediate ambiguous areas of the compound, by being placed in ways that separate males from females in some places and bring them together in others. While her data are valuable, Vogel fails to investigate the intent of the gender messages that women's wall painting can have. What do women intend to communicate when they place male symbols of status (mainly weapons) on the benches built into the compound, or female symbols at entrance points?⁴³ Also, how do Pedi wall designs vary from one household to the next, and what does that say about Pedi kinship patterns?

There is some evidence that male artists occasionally appropriate women's body markings because of their power associations. Christine Mullen Kreamer notes that Moba male carvers of Togo incise patterns similar to women's body marks (bearing the same name, *warri*) onto the surfaces of utilitarian objects.⁴⁴ Included among them are the wooden floor pounders that women use to improve the compound and stools that both men and women use. Men refer to the objects as female-specific regardless of whether men use them. Similarly, Berns's findings show that Ga'anda men

⁴⁰ Elizabeth Schneider, "Ndebele Mural Art," *African Arts* 18, no. 3 (May 1985): 60–69. See also Suzanne Preibatsch and Natalie Knight, "Traditional Ndebele Beadwork," *African Arts* 11, no. 2 (January 1978): 24–27 for discussion of Ndebele beadwork.

⁴¹ Fred Smith, "Compound Entryway Decoration: Male Space and Female Creativity" *African Arts* 19, no. 3 (May 1986): 52–59.

⁴² Catherine Vogel, "Pedi Mural Art," *African Arts* 18, no. 3 (May 1985): 78–83.

⁴³ Braithwaite would argue that such decorations function as "ritual markers of particular breaches of the conceptual order," like the spaces of a compound that divide women's from men's areas (Mary Braithwaite, "Decoration as Ritual Symbol: A Theoretical Proposal and an Ethnographic Study in Southern Sudan," in *Symbolic and Structural Archaeology*, ed. Ian Hodder, New Directions in Archaeology Series [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982]).

⁴⁴ Christine Mullen Kreamer, "Spheres of Protection: Shrine Configurations among the Moba, Northern Togo" (paper presented at African Studies Association meetings, Denver, November 1987).

paint the women's scarification designs on granary surfaces to ensure a fertile crop. Ga'anda women apply the same body markings—that is, their own—to the surfaces of burial pots to ensure that the male or female soul contained within is properly nurtured on its journey to the spiritual realm.⁴⁵ Combined, these studies reinforce the idea that female-associated imagery and related tasks, such as wall enhancement, are sufficiently imbued with power to provide a basis for a symbolic system shared across gender lines and by the dead as well as the living.

Women's designs and techniques

What little work has been done on women's art production and methods of apprenticeship suggest strongly female- and family-oriented processes of instruction, a socializing pattern not inconsistent with those seen in initiation. Margot Gill observes that young Kamba girls of Kenya identify their own pots as the work of their mothers by signing them with their mothers' signatures. They cease doing this only after they have married and left the compound, at which point they are fully defined women.⁴⁶ Spindel argues that the typical mother-to-daughter mode of instruction can preserve and control the designs. This mode is reflected in the technology itself in a way that encourages continuity at the expense of innovation. She notes that young Senufo potters inherit their basic tool, an old pot that they reuse as a mold, from their mothers, implying that the young girls are channeled by the shape of the pot/mold to form their pots as their mothers did.⁴⁷

Any individuality occurs only in subtle ways, as Thompson has noted in his meticulous study of innovation and change in Abatan's ritual pots for the god Eyinle.⁴⁸ His evidence shows that Abatan's pots, as important "emblems of kingship and divinity," vary only slightly from those of her female predecessors. And yet change, however subtle, does have its place in her tradition, at least with respect to her ritual pots.

Control mechanisms transmitted via the senior women are also evident in media involving group activity. Fred Smith's data indicate that Gurense (Ghana) wall designs are first mapped out by the senior wife before being executed collectively by her co-wives

⁴⁵ Berns (n. 39 above).

⁴⁶ Gill (n. 21 above).

⁴⁷ Spindel, "Kpeenbele Senufo Potters" (n. 17 above).

⁴⁸ Thompson (n. 21 above).

and the wives of her husband's brothers.⁴⁹ In this sense, the design is a collective expression of group identity. The exception is seen when the senior wife designs her own room, in which case the choice of designs and their execution are her work alone, as a statement about herself.

Patricia Darish observes a similar dynamic in Kuba (Zaire) cloth production.⁵⁰ There the female clan head directs the creative production of the embroidered cloths, suggesting that Kuba cloth designs are clan specific.⁵¹ However, Kuba textile production is not an exclusively female operation; it involves both complementarity and interdependency among women and men. The women embroider their designs on cloths that men have woven, although men may also add patterns in the weaving process itself. These embellished cloths are then combined to make the full wrapper, the women being responsible for constructing the female variety and the men for producing the male's. Darish concludes that these clan-specific gender messages are fully and eloquently expressed at funerals, when vast quantities of men's and women's cloths enshroud the corpse. By virtue of its construction and display, Kuba cloth is a "manifestation of enduring social relationships," the most significant expression of which occurs in honoring the dead.⁵²

Women's arts and economics

The economics of women's arts has received minimal attention, particularly from art historians. Yet economics is essential for explaining some aesthetic rules, organizational patterns, and the important question of sexual division of labor in the arts. As discussed earlier, domesticity is not easily separated from more

⁴⁹ Fred Smith, "Gurensi Wall Painting," *African Arts* 11, no. 4 (August 1978): 36–41. Cole and Aniakor observe the same dynamic in wall painting among the Igbo of Nigeria (Herbert Cole and Chike Aniakor, *Igbo Arts: Community and Cosmos* [Los Angeles: University of California, Los Angeles, Museum of Cultural History, 1984], 97–101).

⁵⁰ Patricia Darish, "Dressing for the Next Life: A Reconsideration of Raffia Textile Production and Use among the Kuba of Zaire," in *Cloth and Human Experience*, ed. Annette Weiner and Jane Schneider (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989). See also her Ph.D. diss., "Kuba Textiles: The Dynamics of Creation, Style, and Meaning within the Kuba Kingdom" (Indiana University, 1990).

⁵¹ Monni Adams proposes women's marriage patterns as an explanation for the mixture of conformity and diversity that she observes in Kuba embroidery designs from one village to the next ("Kuba Embroidered Cloth," *African Arts* 12, no. 1 [November 1978]: 24–39, 106–7).

⁵² Darish, 137.

public concerns, including economic ones. Women's arts can be either exchanged in kind, for the benefit of maintaining household and gender relations, or exchanged within a larger market system. Either way, women's arts figure as an important part of the domestic economy, as the following examples suggest.

There is some evidence that pots were traditionally marketed by women in exchange for food, implying a craft economy controlled predominantly by women.⁵³ This control is even more strongly evident in that women artisans enforce taboos and exclusionary boundaries that, in the end, protect their economic interests.⁵⁴ Shai potters of Ghana, for example, taboo non-Shai women and all men from entering their profession, in an effort to protect their monopoly on that industry. Ikombe Kisi potters of Tanzania claim exclusive ownership of their pots so as to keep outsiders from capitalizing on them.⁵⁵ Ulla Wagner's detailed analysis of Gambian cloth merchants indicates the degree of control they impose on the cloth-dyeing industry: they subcontract female and male dyers to carry out the patrons' design requests.⁵⁶

In my own research, I noted that Akwete Igbo weavers of Nigeria used myth as a strategy to protect their economic interests in a tradition that underwent significant change during the past century.⁵⁷ The impetus for change was the flourishing palm oil trade that brought an influx of European and Indian cloth designs (see fig. 3), a new cloth patronage (the coastal Ijo), and new technologies. Once widespread throughout the clan, weaving became a complex artistic process confined mainly to the village of Akwete. To maintain control of the craft, Akwete women have created myths tracing the origins of weaving to their founding lineage compound. The myth certifies Akwete's ownership of weaving and prevents neighboring villagers from capitalizing on what has become a lucrative industry.

Other studies reveal that design and form in women's arts can be economically motivated. When Fred Smith asked Gurense women of Ghana why they apply designs to their pots, their response was

⁵³ Spindel, "Kpeenbele Senufo Potters" (n. 17 above); and Waane (n. 21 above).

⁵⁴ Quarcoo and Johnson (n. 21 above).

⁵⁵ Waane.

⁵⁶ Ulla Wagner, *Catching the Tourist: Women Handicraft Traders in the Gambia*, Stockholm Studies in Social Anthropology (Stockholm: University of Stockholm, 1982).

⁵⁷ Lisa Aronson, "Akwete Weaving: A Study of Change in Response to the Palm Oil Trade in the Nineteenth Century" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1981), and "To Weave or Not to Weave: Apprenticeship Rules among the Akwete Igbo of Nigeria and the Baule of the Ivory Coast," in *Apprenticeship: From Theory to Practice and Back Again*, ed. Michael Coy (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989).



FIG. 3 A woman from the Igbo village of Akwete weaves a cloth known as *george*. It imitates certain Indian imports like the cloth she wears introduced through trade. By the turn of the century, Akwete women had begun widening their looms to accommodate the weaving of such cloths. (Photo: Lisa Aronson, 1977.)

that they do it to make them more marketable.⁵⁸ Some women speak of striving for a high level of skill to ensure sale of their products.⁵⁹ Margot Gill's ethno-archaeological study of Kamba (Kenya) women's pottery provides an impressive and thorough analysis of the distribution and marketing of their pots. Her findings show that the desire to ensure excellence motivates Kamba artists to invent individualized identity markers, in contrast to the generic types, such as scarification, seen in initiation rituals. Gill notes that the potters sign their pots with geometric figures or dot and lines as a kind of trademark and guarantee of the vessel's quality.⁶⁰

In addition to generating designs, individualized or otherwise, economics also contributes to some sexual division of labor in the arts. How then is this division of labor affected by socioeconomic change? If women's arts are significantly tied to the domestic economy, how would they adapt to the development of a more

⁵⁸ Smith, "Gurensi Basketry and Pottery" (n. 12 above).

⁵⁹ Barbara Rubin, "Calabash Decoration," *African Arts* 9, no. 1 (Autumn 1970): 20–25.

⁶⁰ Gill (n. 21 above).

market-oriented system, and what would happen to women's artistic roles as a result? Because of the important gender issues they raise, such questions loom large in feminist scholarship. In mainstream African art studies, however, they are almost completely avoided for reasons outlined in the introduction to this essay. Consideration of these questions with respect to the arts has been left mainly to historians, sociologists, and anthropologists.

Richard Roberts, a historian, argues that increased commercialization can have a negative effect on women's art production.⁶¹ He traces the impact that the introduction of Islam, sometimes characterized as the religion of commerce, had on Maraka or Marka (Mali) women's indigo dyeing. His analysis pinpoints women's property rights as their initial claim to indigo dyeing. They owned and cultivated the land on which the indigo was grown. Indigo dyeing was also a part of the domestic economy, functioning both for profit and for household exchange. This scenario was thwarted by the spread of Islam into Maraka culture, resulting in a change in the division of labor. Islam called for an expansion in cloth production and at the same time for the seclusion of women, inhibiting women's participation in indigo production at a time when expansion was particularly needed. Such conditions enabled male slaves, who had previously only assisted women in indigo cultivation, to gain access to such property, appropriating an economic sphere that women traditionally claimed.

Benetta Jules-Rosette, a sociologist, observes that urbanization permitted Bemba men of Zambia to take up the female art of making pottery such that both women and men now do it.⁶² But she points out enough divergences in women's and men's pottery to suggest that men's and women's artistic spheres tend to evolve in separate ways in sub-Saharan African societies. Jules-Rosette notes that women continue to train from mother to daughter and to draw on their tradition of simple pot forms. In order to meet urban demands, however, the women have reduced their vast repertoire to the making of only traditional beer pots and have also carved out

⁶¹ Richard Roberts, "Women's Work and Women's Property: Household Social Relations in the Maraka Textile Industry of the Nineteenth Century," *Society for Comparative Studies in Society and History: An International Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (April 1984): 229-51. See also Etienne's study of the effects of colonialism on property rights and related cloth industries among the Baule. In the colonization process, women lost access to profits from cloth production (Mona Etienne, "Women and Men, Cloth and Colonization: The Transformations of Production-Distribution Relations among the Baule [Ivory Coast]," *Cahiers d'etudes africaines* 17, no. 1 [1977]: 41-63).

⁶² Benetta Jules-Rosette, *The Messages of Tourist Art: An African Semiotic System in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Plenum, 1984).

for themselves a new profession of making and selling the beer associated with them. In contrast, the men apprentice nonfamily members and produce representational pots, in nontraditional designs that convey nostalgic scenarios of traditional village life.⁶³

While it is a much rarer occurrence, changing socioeconomic conditions can allow women to gain entry into traditionally male arts. Norma Wolff observes that the Hausa aluminum spoon industry, once rooted in the traditionally male art of silversmithing, now includes women as well as men.⁶⁴ She cites three reasons: the lessening of traditional sanctions on metalworking; technological change, such as the introduction of a new metal (aluminum); and the availability of secluded Hausa women as a labor force. But again, men's and women's technologies and designs remain separate. The men stipple the background while women stipple the design itself. Moreover, men tend to adhere to traditional Muslim designs while women, not sanctioned by traditions, are freer to select from a broader range of patterns, including, in spite of their seclusion, public and topical themes (e.g., the Emir's walking stick).⁶⁵

What happens when men and women take up an art form never previously known in that area? Do divergences begin to appear? This was my own observation in southeastern Nigeria, where a long history of trade had prompted the introduction of narrow strip weaving never before known in the area.⁶⁶ While traditionally only men weave on such a loom throughout West Africa, I observed both men and women employing it in this region. I also noted that the woman's pace was much slower than the man's. She cited as her reason for working so slowly the demands of her domestic work, which inhibited her ability to work as steadily and, therefore, as efficiently as men. This suggests that while we see women's arts evolve and change, we also see threads of continuity reflecting women's traditional roles and their relationships with men.

⁶³ Jules-Rosette also documents an instance where a Kamba woman entered the men's wood-carving tradition (Benetta Jules-Rosette, "Aesthetics and Market Demand: The Structure of the Tourist Art Market in Three African Settings" [paper presented at the Conference on Popular Arts and the Media in Africa, University of California, San Diego, May 17–19, 1982]).

⁶⁴ Norma Wolff, "A Hausa Aluminum Spoon Industry," *African Arts* 19, no. 3 (May 1986): 40–44, 82.

⁶⁵ The Emir is the supreme Moslem leader in Hausa society. His walking stick, along with other items in his possession, are important emblems of his power.

⁶⁶ Lisa Aronson, "Popo Weaving: The Dynamics of Trade in Southeastern Nigeria," *African Arts* 15, no. 3 (May 1982): 43–47; Wagner (n. 55 above) also argues that women's involvement in the modern cloth industry is a function of their trading.

Where do we go from here?

This essay has presented an overview of the current status of literature on African women's arts organized according to the topics and areas of inquiry that up until now have received the most attention. Overall, it points to an increasing interest in gender- and female-related issues in African art studies. But it also suggests that there is still much work to be done.

We need to look more closely at women's arts linked to their initiation ceremonies, funerals, title societies, and groups in charge of a cult deity. Women's masking also requires more attention. But to do so, we need to broaden our conceptions of masking to include not only wooden forms, which are predominantly men's, but also the more ephemeral cloth, fiber, or painted varieties that are more often women's. What shapes do women's masks take and in what contexts and for what purposes are their masquerades performed? In what way is gender conflict confronted or power derived through their performance?

With respect to domestic arts, we need to do more than list typologies and describe techniques. To address gender issues truly, we must conduct more comprehensive and contextual studies on arts as they function in the domestic sphere. In what ways do those arts represent powerful female gender symbols derived from their reproductive powers or other domestic associations? Do men use those female-specific symbols, and, if so, why and how?

It is particularly important to examine the economics of women's arts both within the domestic framework and as part of a much larger market economy. In what ways do women's arts figure in the domestic economy (e.g., household exchange, dowry, or bride-wealth)? What factors (e.g., property rights) legitimize women's access to resources and related production? What happens to this equilibrium in the face of changing socioeconomic conditions? Is it true that women's arts are less likely to adapt to escalated market conditions? In what ways does the sexual division of labor change amid socioeconomic change brought about by increased commercialization or urbanization?

Finally, we need to break from the traditional art-historical mold in order to look at gender issues in contemporary African art. Why, for example, do far fewer African women enter the contemporary art world than men? When women do enter the male-dominated art world, what circumstances allow them to do so?

For Sokari Douglas Camp, a Kalabari Ijo woman (Nigeria) by birth, it was necessary that she move far from her Kalabari environment in order to become a successful contemporary artist.⁶⁷ Never-

⁶⁷ Sokari Douglas Camp studied and eventually married in England.

theless, her recent show of sculpture at the National Museum of African Art attests to the fact that African women can overcome barriers and enter the contemporary art world.⁶⁸ Titled “Echoes of the Kalabari,” the show contained life-sized metal sculptures, which, in their dramatic performance (the sculptures moved and made sounds), vividly recreated the sense of Kalabari Ijo spirit masquerades as Ijo women would have perceived them. Consciously, Sokari broke many traditional gender barriers by creating sculpture, working in metal, and orchestrating the simulated masquerade event. Contemporary art like the work of Sokari represents just one of the many rich avenues we have yet to explore in the area of African women’s arts.

*Department of Art
Skidmore College*

⁶⁸ Sokari Douglas Camp, “Echoes of the Kalabari,” sculpture show (National Museum of African Art, Washington, D.C., November 11, 1988–January 29, 1989).