

Tourist Art and Authenticity

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Western art dealers and 'connoisseurs' are the first among others to discard tourist art as being the lowest of the lowest in the art world, that is, if they regard it as art at all. This is because it is a commoditized art form, and the objects made are often seen as being cheap and crude imitations of 'traditional' art objects. Although commoditization, change and innovation are seen as desirable in the West, when these processes are found in so-called 'primitive' societies we frown upon them.

Phillips and Steiner (1999) point out that in the past century, objects of non-western cultures have been appropriated primarily as artefacts/ethnographic objects or as artworks. These labels obscure that by the late eighteenth century the objects falling in these two categories have been first and foremost commodities circulating in an emergent capitalist economy. Phillips and Steiner note the "surprising silence about processes of commoditization in standard art histories and ethnographies" (1999: 3).

Kasfir provides an example of this obscuring of commoditization in the form of Yoruba resist-dyed textiles. Only after the importation of factory cloth from Manchester, complex adire techniques and patterns were able to develop. Prior to the import of Manchester factory cloth, the resist-dyed textiles were made from hand-spun, hand-woven cotton that was too coarsely textured, too soft and too thick for these adire techniques. But the elaboration of adire and the growth of its production were not seen as inauthentic by collectors until the 1960s, when it began to be produced for Peace Corps volunteers and tourists in colours other than indigo. It was not the intervention of Europeans and subsequent modification of a tradition that marked the periods of perceived as 'authenticity' and later on 'inauthenticity' of these textiles. 'Authenticity' was rather defined in terms of the collector's taste (Kasfir, 1992: 42-43).

Authenticity as an analytical term could be useful in the anthropology of art, if we would only be looking in terms of the provenance and history of objects. But it is definitely not useful as a concept for evaluating artworks as 'high' or 'low' art. This souvenir form colonial times, 'authenticity-as-pure-origins', is no longer tenable in analyzing art cross culturally. Instead of looking for authenticity in other societies, we can maybe try to discover why notions of authenticity are so important to us. What does this tell about our own society?

In our own society it has been constructed in a discourse that is about political or ideological domination, but which hides itself behind ideas of authenticity / inauthenticity, art / craft and artwork / artefact. What these notions are trying to do is render practices of art that are non-western and not dominated by western dealers and collectors less valuable and lower on the scale in which art is evaluated, just in order to keep the West dominating the art scene. It is thus a Eurocentric concept that definitely does not serve the anthropology of art, which tries to understand art practices cross culturally, and not from a western point of view. Notions of authenticity may be studied in relation to anthropology of art, by looking at how it is defined, by whom and what

purposes it has to serve. It might be useful to study if other cultures have similar occupations with ideas of pure origins and, if so, how they came into being. A historically informed analysis would be useful in relation to this.

We should not only do away with our western constructs of authenticity and distinctions such as art/craft in analyzing art practices from all over the world, we should equally do away with the idea that the West is the standard against which other cultures' practices could be measured. We should try to analyze the western art scene as well, and not see it as a given.

References:

- Kasfir, Sidney Littlefield, 1992, 'African Art and Authenticity: A Text with a Shadow', in: *African Arts* 25 (3): 40 - 53
- Phillips, Ruth B. and Christopher B. Steiner, 1999, *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press