An Introduction to Transatlantic Black Art History: Remarks in Anticipation of a Coming Golden Age of Afro-Americana

ROBERT FARRIS THOMPSON

Yale University, New Haven, U.S.A.

THERE ARE, it seems to me, at least three parts to any study of Afro-American visual creativity in transatlantic perspective: (1) the identification of strategic West and Central African visual traditions, travelling in the minds of blacks to the Americas during the period of the infamous Atlantic Trade; (2) the citation of persisting strands from these ancestral patterns, now richly interwoven and recombined by Afro-American artists, and the definition of their vibrant creativity on its own terms—i.e., taking pains to scan the horizon for signs of departure, development, and grand cultural achievement, as well as originating impulse; (3) the definition of a common ground of philosophic assumption, the mediating process of world-view, accounting in part for similarities in form and function characterizing Afro-American creative vision.

African formal influence, in American-born black art history, can be inferred where resemblances are consistent and multifaceted. The criterion of identification therefore is: complexity of relationship. Just as systematic differences reveal the special bond linking Spanish and Portuguese to common Italic roots, so degree and kind of shared visual themes argue for historical links between African and Afro-American creativity.

The method used to identify such influences is straightforwardly comparatist. In the sheer act, for example, of juxtaposition of one form of Nigerian wrought-iron staff with a similar Afro-Brazilian iron object from Rio de Janeiro whole histories of formal persistence suddenly leap to life. In Yoruba cities the presence of the herbalist-diviner may be identified by the possession of such staffs, often shaped with a circle of iron birds at the top, disposed under a (usually larger) iron bird which culminates the staff. The same staff occasionally turns up in the Yoruba-influenced sectors of Rio de Janeiro around 1941: same iron medium, same circle of birds under a bird of commanding position at the summit of the staff.
Mechanically, the theme's continuity can be "explained" by a history of slaving, linking portions of the traditional culture of the Yoruba of west Nigeria to the culture of certain ports of Brazil – as well as western Cuba. These slave trade mediated contacts were recent, persisting well into the middle of the last century and in some instances they were massive. Yet the deeper level of intellectual communication, embedded in the function of such staffs, related to healing and collectedness of mind, seems the real key to their amazing motion across time and space. For how to explain, otherwise, the fact that during the period 1945–1974 the use of such staffs has spread from the Yoruba-influenced barrios of western Cuba to Puerto Rico and the Puerto Rican sectors of the United States urban northeast. The secondary migration of the bird-staff, now sometimes merely suggested by new shapes which seem closer in form to the Western weather-vane than to originating Yoruba impulses, can only partially be related to original slaving histories and ethnicity. Clearly larger issues of universal intellectual appeal and the fulfilling of spiritual needs across cultures are involved now. Yet the focus achieved by such forms, however changed, in cultic presentation is still strongly flavored with African influence. Yoruba bird-staffs, wherever they appear in the New World and the Old, honor the god of medicine, Osanyin, guardian of the personal balance, health and mental equilibrium of a human being. They honor the deity with the sign of mind (the commanding bird at summit), the sign of the head or intellect, sometimes complicated by the conquest, also by mind, of all evil, the latter symbolized by the gathering of minor birds. Leaves which assuage fevers and clarify a person's mind are logically associated with such staffs. Significantly, most herbalists in the Yoruba religion, whether in Nigeria or even in Union City, New Jersey own such staffs or know something of their use and meaning.

Confirmation of an artistic influence is always delicate. But I think that in the illustration just given, deliberately chosen for its density of philosophic reference, historical imprint is so clearly rendered that we can concentrate on problems of meaning and iconic communication and take the fact of on-going diffusion for granted.

This point applies to those provinces of western Cuba, namely Matanzas and Havana, where scraps of at least two vernacular languages of eastern Nigeria, namely Efik and Ejagham (Abakpa), in Cuba called Efi and Abakuá, and possibly a third, Efot (Afro-Cuban: Efó), are spoken by a few thousand men belonging to an important all-male society (Ngbe) which came from these parts of the Bight of Biafra during the first half of the 19th century. Unsurprisingly, in a context of linguistic reinstatement, the visual parallels linking Nigerian Abakpa and Afro-Cuban Abakuá are striking. In both West Indian and African manifestations of Ngbe (leopard) society ritual the same masked spirit-messenger, representing a leopard king from another world, come to judge the quick and the dead, dramatically appears and postures with virtually identical sacred gestures. The form and decorative details of the messenger's costume, allowing for minor modification in Cuba, are almost indelibly persistent: checked fabric, raffia ruff at the joints, generous sash about the waist, conical