ART AND RELIGION IN AFRICA:
SOME OBSERVATIONS AND REFLECTIONS

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Preamble

Africa's artistic and religious traditions offer primary evidence of the expressive and intellectual vitality of a vast and fascinating continent (cf. McNaughton 1988:50). Art objects, whether sculpted figures, textiles, paintings or pots, are generally enjoyed, critiqued and used by communities or groups, rather than being the prerogative of individuals alone. Hence they provide important points of entry into people's conceptual worlds. African art is held to be successful at evoking and abstracting the powers which are central to human life because artists are not bound to produce forms that resemble or portray individual humans. Yet, despite this and the obvious ritual significance of many artistic objects, the interactive relationship between art and religion in the African context remains remarkably understudied and misunderstood. Few monographic studies exist which explore this relationship in any systematic or comparative way. There exist a number of localized case studies of the range of ritual art forms in a particular culture, which are undeniably valuable in that they permit the reader to compare the range of artistic techniques and forms employed by a particular people to express, manifest and control the spiritual forces believed to be active in their environment. Promising titles of museum exhibitions and catalogues often prove disappointing as they seem more concerned to promote the 'exoticism' and 'otherness' of African art by emphasizing its religious aspects, or they seem satisfied with undeveloped observations regarding its 'symbolic,' 'ancestral' and/or 'ritual' function, rather than to explore the fascinating conceptual fields of art and religion in the African context.

How has such a situation of neglect and misunderstanding come
about? This essay looks critically (albeit briefly for such a complex topic) at the dominant discourses which have shaped the study of religion and art, more especially its interrelationships, in Africa today. Such considerations are part of a wider project undertaken by myself—the production of a volume on Africa for a new series on 'Religion and the Arts'. Both art history and religious studies are relatively young fields of study, but the roots of contemporary scholarship reach back into the colonial past. In the early seventies (and even before) William Fagg, one of the earliest British scholars of African art, called for British social anthropologists to loosen their pragmatist grip on the study of the African visual arts and material culture to allow questions of meaning and the ‘philosophical nerve ends’ to receive their analytical due (Fagg 1973:161). He was equally critical of scholars of African philosophy (having been overly influenced by Western rational thought) for failing to include in their ambit the visual arts. Fifteen years later another indictment was served by the art historian, Suzanne Preston Blier, in her review of Sieber’s and Walker’s African Art in the Cycle of Life (1987). She notes that the section on religion relies on scholars of religion (such as Mbiti) rather than African-art scholars ‘probably because this is an issue few, other than Leon Siroto (1979), have really dealt with critically, even though religion is an important secondary topic of nearly all African-art scholarship’ (my emphasis) (Blier 1988a:23). The present issue will go even further in demonstrating its primary importance, and in examining the converse problem—why scholars of African religions, have by and large ignored the significance of the visual arts in their studies.

The various essays in this issue are written by a group of art historians and ethnographers, and myself, a religious studies scholar, who wish to see the religious and philosophical aspects of African art receive greater consideration. At very least this serves to challenge Western perceptions of what is important in terms of artistic representation (in other words, as Quarcoopome shows in his work, what is small, hidden and unelaborate may be the most spiritually empowering). Ceremonial art—generally favored by Western museum curators and collectors—is not the only, nor by any means the primary, artistic expression of religious beliefs and values. Everyday objects and more personal items may be laden with mythological and symbolic significance, as Dewey illustrates in his essay. In his book, L’Art sacré sénofo: ses différentes expressions