

Local Situation and Knowledge Construction of African Artworks in Taiwan: Inspirations for Taiwan's Art Education

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Summary

This article describes the local market, exhibition and knowledge construction of African artworks in Taiwan. It aims at showing a general picture of the import, marketing, collection, display, and promotion of these artifacts, as well as the significance of these activities on shaping people's knowledge, understanding and imagination of African art. By doing so, this article further presents inspirations for art education in Taiwan. The research is based on my fieldwork conducted in Taipei, Taichung, Miaoli and Hualien from 2006 to 2009. My data came from seven importers, sixteen retailers, sixty-six buyers, six museums and four elementary schools. In total, I interviewed twenty-six people including sellers, collectors, museums staff, and elementary school teachers. In addition to conducting interviews, other data collection methods include participant observation, photographing, voice-recording, video-taping, and collection of documents. To deepen my understanding of the theory and practice of cultural anthropology, I audited five courses in four semesters at an anthropology department, fully participating in class reports and discussion.

This ethnographic study finds that the local market can be divided into three sectors: the sales sector, the collection sector and the promotion sector. The production of knowledge begins with the sales sector, while the circulation of artifacts and the distribution of knowledge overlap and gradually induce the phenomenon of collective knowledge construction. The texts of knowledge, represented in oral narrative or writing, are

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interpreted from seven kinds of foci: “artifacts,” “lineage,” “culture as an integrated whole,” “life cycle,” “aesthetic hermeneutics,” “sculptural art,” and “introduction to African art.” Knowledge focusing on “artifacts” happens with the highest ratio, covering all knowledge constructors and divergent textural formats. The contents include visual knowledge of the style, aesthetic, and function of objects, as well as knowledge about the legends or stories of artifacts, which contain dramatic, symbolic and imaginative components. Motivations behind the knowledge construction can be approximately characterized as six types: marketing, employment, promoting cultural education, appreciation, recognition, and identification. Sources of knowledge come from artifacts, websites, professional literature, conversation, and the educational background of each interviewee. Methods of construction include observation, cross-reference, reading, translation and editing, analogy, association, and parallelism.

The interpretation behind this knowledge construction considers that African art is a self-sustaining system, standing on the same plane with the Eastern and Western art. It is functional but touches people’s heart, full of creativity, surprise, wildness and passion, so that “their culture” is definitely not primitive, backward, or barbaric. But it also exposes that this knowledge constructed by the three sectors is piecemeal, unsystematic, and fragmented, or even uncertain. Many aspects of African art such as its historical development, geographical information, cultural context, and human perspectives, were ignored, resulting in a disconnection with contemporary life in Africa.

Most people are unfamiliar with African art and regard it as something that belongs to “the other” or “alien cultures.” Yet, the three sectors have infused new elements into Taiwan’s pluralistic culture, and become important channels for African art in Taiwan, providing the tourist objects with new meaning. Participants of the sales, collection and promotion sectors use their own ways to understand and construct African art, meanwhile blending in Taiwan’s culture unknowingly. This can be seen as a kind of transcultural and localized construction of knowledge, which may bring a subtle artistic change into Taiwan. This collective knowledge, contributed by a majority of people instead of a minority of scholars, manifests not only a different sense of beauty and value, but also the significance of a plebeian aesthetics generated and nurtured by local communities.

As a social phenomenon, this locally constructed knowledge has inevitably some

government administration and management involved in the process, yet it discloses an even deeper meaning for the overall art education in Taiwan. The knowledge is constructed, owned and distributed by the buyers and sellers who are not typically considered as experts of knowledge production. In terms of the knowledge transmission, they have subverted the authority and legitimacy of traditional art education, which believes that knowledge is restored in textbooks and possessed by teachers. They have added knowledge of African primitive art, which is not only helpful to make up for the gaps and shortage in extant knowledge, but also beneficial for developing and expanding the body of knowledge about art education. The constructivist method of learning demonstrated in this study crosses intellectual boundaries, bridges between different individual and group cultures, and engages multidisciplinary educational backgrounds. It illuminates a holistic possibility for art education by increasing the depth, width, and effectiveness in the method of obtaining new knowledge. While it reminds the art educators that they can construct their own knowledge, it also emphasizes that the most valuable aspect in teaching is the process of knowledge construction, but not the end result of it.

To sum up, the knowledge construction phenomenon presented in this article shows the value of ethnography on the research of art and art education. The collective consciousness and behavior revealed in this phenomenon reflect a model of approaching alien cultures in Taiwan; they also uncover the reality that the change and development in the knowledge construction of African art can be a group effort by a majority of people, and these people are not necessarily experts. Even though the experts are normally regarded as producers of knowledge, they are not the main characters in this study. Therefore, this research witnesses the participation of common people in the construction of aesthetics, and hopes to add cultural perspectives to the artistic and educational discourses of art education. By looking at the processes of enculturation and acculturation in the pluralistic society of Taiwan, this study also hopes to provide a space for reflection and raise people's cultural awareness.

Keyword: African art, primitive art, material culture, art collection, tourist art, art education, knowledge construction

