A Companion to Modern African Art

Edited by Gitti Salami and Monica Blackmun Vissonà

This final addition to the Wiley Blackwell Companions to Art History series provides a multi-disciplinary perspective on the art and culture of Africa and examines the ground for a fruitful debate on the nature of African Modernist art, often ignored by a conventionally Western engagement with Western Modernism. The 26 essays that constitute this volume offer a wealth of analytical approaches, particularly those relating to African epistemologies and philosophical theory. They cover twentieth-century photography in Liberia, early twentieth-century ceramics in the United States, the development of postcolonial art education in Ghana, studies of the Songye, revolutionary painting in Nigeria and Ethiopia, and African influences on Western design firms, among many other topics. Contributors also explore broader themes such as the political economy and social history of African art and its consumption, the role of collectors and institutions, and historical and contemporary African art and the African diaspora.

Featuring original works by authors from Africa, Europe, and North America, the series explores Africa's changing relationship with modernity, tracing the influence of the modernist movement, as well as its impact, from the Atlantic to the Mediterranean. The volumes provide historical contexts and a guide to the work of contemporary artists in the transform and commodification of modernity and postmodern Africa, replacing that often overlooked by publications that utilize non-white-only known African contacts. It showcases the richness and vitality of the continent's visual culture and adds depth to the theoretical debates in emerging studies of global modernism.
A Companion to Modern African Art
These invigorating reference volumes chart the influence of key ideas, discourses, and theories on art, and the way that it is taught, thought of, and talked about throughout the English-speaking world. Each volume brings together a team of respected international scholars to debate the state of research within traditional subfields of art history as well as in more innovative, thematic configurations. Representing the best of the scholarship governing the field and pointing toward future trends and across disciplines, the Blackwell Companions to Art History series provides a magisterial, state-of-the-art synthesis of art history.

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6. *A Companion to Modern African Art*  
edited by Gitti Salami and Monica Blackmun Visonà
To Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie
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Atta Kwami is an independent artist, art historian, and curator. He taught painting and printmaking for 20 years at the KNUST, Kumasi. His paintings are held in public collections: the National Museums of Ghana and Kenya; Newark Museum, USA; the Victoria and Albert Museum, London; the National Museum of African Art, Washington DC; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York and the British Museum. He is a research fellow (2012/2013) with the Cambridge/Africa Collaborative Research Programme, Art and Museums in Africa.

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Monica Blackmun Visonà is associate professor of art history at the University of Kentucky, and was the principal author of both editions of *A History of Art in Africa*. In addition to numerous articles (including an essay in *Art Bulletin* on “Agent Provocateur: the African Origins and American Life of a Statue from Côte d’Ivoire”), she has published *Constructing African Art Histories for the Lagoons of Côte d’Ivoire* (2010). She is currently investigating cross-cultural notions of artistic identity and practice for an exhibition on divinely inspired artists of the Lagoon peoples.

Mary Vogl is associate professor in foreign languages and literatures at Colorado State University. Her publications include *Picturing the Maghreb: Literature, Photography, Representation* (2002), articles on Orientalism and explorations of inter-art relations. Her current book project, developed with a Fulbright research grant, is called “Articulating Morocco: The Role of Art and Art Criticism in Defining National Culture.” In 2010 she co-curated an exhibition of Middle Eastern and North African art at Colorado State University’s Hatton Gallery.
Several weeks before a Triennial conference of the Arts Council of African Studies Association in 2007, Sylvester Ogbechie contacted a group of colleagues in the USA and South Africa and assigned everyone a task. Never mind that the scholars were all in the process of writing their own lectures – he wanted each of them to prepare a presentation on a specific approach that authors could take in writing a book on modern African art. Such was his fervor, and his powers of persuasion, that every colleague agreed, and the hastily convened panel was packed with informed and vociferous Africanists at the conference. Gitti Salami gave the group’s presentation on thematic approaches to modern African art, while Monica Blackmun Visonà mapped out a chronological approach that was to eventually serve as the structure of this volume. It was thus the determined efforts of Ogbechie that launched this project, one of several initiatives he has pursued in order to focus scholarly attention on the modernity of Africa’s artists.

Yet many other Africans, Americans, and Europeans have shared Ogbechie’s passionate desire to introduce a broad spectrum of students and scholars to African modern art, to allow the voices of African artists to be heard in art historical discourse. Robin Poynor surveyed colleagues who taught contemporary African art, and he assisted Sylvester Ogbechie and John Peffer in presenting the results of his findings at an earlier Triennial meeting. Lectures, publications, journals, exhibitions, and other endeavors that have inspired this project were spearheaded by Janet Stanley, Jean Kennedy, John Picton, Salah Hassan, Olu Oguibe, Okwui Enwezor, Susan Vogel, Achamyelah Debela, Moyosore Okededji, Sidney Kasfir, Simon Njami, Jean-Loup Pivin, and other committed advocates of modern art who are too numerous to mention here; some graciously accepted our invitation to contribute to this volume. Gitti Salami thanks Okwui Enwezor for his conversations with her about his own engagement in these efforts. She was able to devote time and energy to planning this volume thanks to a West African Research Association fellowship and residencies at the National Museum of African Art in Washington, DC and the Sainsbury Research Center at the University of East Anglia. She further thanks Judith Arnold for her support. Monica Blackmun Visonà is grateful for a Zora Neale Hurston fellowship that
allowed her to begin surveying material on African contemporary art at Northwestern University in 1993. She is deeply indebted to Mark Getlein, and to her co-authors for *A History of Art in Africa*, for insights into the writing and editing process.¹ Both Salami and Visonà have profited from the wise counsel and extensive knowledge of Janet Stanley.

This volume would not have been possible without Jayne Fargnoli’s courageous decision, supported by the careful feedback of anonymous reviewers and her editorial board, to devote a Wiley Blackwell Companion to this new and energetic field of enquiry in the African humanities. Visonà thanks Rebecca Brown for recommending us to Wiley Blackwell, allowing practical discussions on this ambitious project to begin. Heartfelt comments in public discussions at conferences of the College Art Association (in Los Angeles) and the African Literature Association (in Athens, Ohio) have helped the editors identify many pitfalls (if not avoid them altogether). Most of all, we thank all of the authors who graciously endured our challenges, queries, and unsolicited suggestions, responding with aplomb to our intrusive, dialogic approach to the editing process. Particular thanks are due to the authors who patiently assisted us as the editors struggled through the task of translating their sophisticated concepts into English idioms.

Note

Part I

Introduction
Narrations of Modernism and Modernity

Modernity has taken many forms. It may be understood as the emergence – after centuries of global commerce – of cosmopolitan outlooks adopted by local cultures negotiating with one another across vast geographic distances, and across gulfs of profoundly incompatible cultural conceptions. Exchange of material culture has been accompanied by trade partners’ cultural translations and highly selective rejection or incorporation of foreign objects and ideas. Genuine mutual admiration for the trade partner’s respective “Other” at times characterized this traffic in newness. However, significant power imbalances governed the terms of these exchanges during much of their duration, and continue to do so today.

Modernism, modernity’s expressive aspect, has as many local and regional variants as modernity itself. Until recently, those in control of the discourse within the international art world saw modernism’s European variant – in reality, one of many local forms – as normative. Specific features characterizing French artistic movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century are still regarded as a set of universal principles, standards that might be used to evaluate modernism worldwide, and Paris was seen as a center to peripheral modernisms located elsewhere. The notion of a French “avant-garde,” as an example, as Gitti Salami (chapter 29) points out, has militaristic connotations, suggesting that its intellectual feats typically entail rupture, shock, and conquest of unknown territory. Such paradigms are alien to those African societies that embrace newness via conceptual frames stressing ancestral authority and continuity within egalitarian principles and consensus-building. The notion of the “avant-garde” is only one of the filters rendering African modernisms simply invisible to art historians. As dele jegede (chapter 18) notes, Paris, London, and New York were cities teeming with African, African American and Afro-Caribbean intellectuals and artists throughout the twentieth century, yet African epistemologies were never
considered when “standard” art historical canons were established. This volume provides many perspectives that challenge dominant, yet unexamined, paradigms. It thus contributes to a broad international endeavor, shared by artists, critics, and art historians alike, that would move beyond Eurocentric models to less parochial representation.

For African artists in particular, being modern has implied a progressive outlook, a desire to inscribe new contemporary experience with meaning. Just as European and American modernists have absorbed insights offered by African figurative representations in their painting and statuary, utilized knowledge of African ceremonies and body arts in their performances, and drawn on their impressions of African shrines in their installations, African modernists have studied the “traditional” art of Europe and Asia. They have incorporated responses to Chinese painting in their pen and ink washes, Turkish imagery in their reverse-glass paintings, Italian Renaissance figures in their sculpture, and, as Monica Blackmun Visonà shows (chapter 9), top hats in their performances. As citizens of the world, generations of African artists have sought to contribute to an international art world. Acknowledgment of their successes in the past usually omitted their names; though, in rare cases, as Sylvester Ogbechie has shown, some African artists were afforded short-lived celebrity status within international art circuits, but were subsequently written out of history.2

African modernist explorations can be traced as far back as the late fifteenth century. Frequently, these are a matter of continuously adapting indigenous institutions and practices to new circumstances, as many of the chapters in this volume demonstrate.3 Other African modernisms have been intellectual, interdisciplinary responses to new educational models and artistic frameworks. As contributors to this volume explain, some of the new venues in which African artists were trained upheld the standards of elite foreign institutions. Others were products of a colonial system that sought to train workers for the colonial empire – and in many cases both types of educational institutions had been altered for a local or national context. Individuals of varied backgrounds, including custodians of “traditions,” masters of workshops or royal guilds, commercial artists, and academically trained artists, have shaped local and national art infrastructures that promote particular forms of art and train future artists. Two strands of modernism – one based in indigenous culture and the other in foreign-derived institutions – variously coexist as separate platforms for artistic creativity, but they are simultaneously intertwined, often inextricably so. Together, they reflect not only the tension between the local and the global that typifies modernisms worldwide, they also model tremendous command of the paradoxes induced by the meshing of diametrically opposed value systems. Writ large, modern African art brings the expertise of sophisticated artists (at work on the continent for centuries) into the academic discourse swirling around the “antinomies of art and culture” in the contemporary, postcolonial world.4

Centering Narratives on Africa’s Art Worlds

A Companion to Modern African Art foregrounds just one slice of a larger corpus of artistic production tied to Africa; it highlights African artists who live and work (or who have lived and worked) on the continent (Figure 1.1 and Figure 1.2). The 29 case studies place a premium on African artists’ agency and their grounding in African
epistemologies. This focus upon Africa challenges sophisticated arguments, some of which are raised by the contributors themselves. In her chapter on Swahili visual culture, Prita Meier (chapter 5) critiques the practice of grouping artists by their place of origin or the current location of their practice, reminding the reader that the dominant discourse on modernism foregrounds time rather than space; by writing about art that is geographically bound – particularly if writing about art on the African continent – Africanists write its artists out of history. Okwui Enwezor and Chika Okeke-Agulu also feel that Africa as a classification has outlived its usefulness, for the mechanisms of the contemporary world are global. While these perspectives are
Figure 1.2  West Africa, detail from the map of the African continent. Richard Gilbreath, Gyula Pauer Center for Cartography and GIS, University of Kentucky.