Alien or Accepted? African Perspectives on the Western 'Other' in 15th and 16th Century Art

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The visual record of Africa's interaction with the West is proving to be a rich source of information concerning the changing natures of ethnographic perception. Post-contact imagery reflects shifting attitudes shaped by political, economic and historical events and trends; examination of an individual artist's treatment of "the other," and his departure from or conformation with prevailing cultural attitudes can reveal a range of responses and interpretations of the outsider as enemy, a part of daily life, a being with religious or prestige associations. Artists' visual choices have often encoded expressions of control, both political and economic. Do they perceive the other as threatening or harmless? Ghettoized, or part of the host culture? Scorned, celebrated or merely noted? Interpreted as an individual or as a type?

European perceptions of Africans, probably best represented in the Menil Foundation's multi-volume series The Image of the Black in Western Art, have so far received more detailed scholarly attention than have works from the African perspective, partly because the tradition of portraying the African "other" is better documented and includes many extant older works, partly because Western researchers have been more interested in exploring their own culture's attitudes and psyche. A comprehensive examination of this interaction from an Afrocentric viewpoint is more problematic.

Most available African depictions of the Western "other" date from the late 19th and 20th century, and thus inform the viewer of colonial and post-colonial African-European interactions. Earlier representations do exist, but are relatively uncommon; although Africans appear to have made a great impression on European artists over the centuries, the reverse does not seem to have held true. A set of late 15th and early 16th century artworks from two West African regions—Sierra Leone and Benin—does, however, prove an exception. By representing the Western "other" of the early contact period, these pieces provide comparative information regarding not only chronological, spatial and political differences between the two regions, but also contrasting interactions between patron and artist.

Fifteenth and sixteenth century contact with Africa, the Americas and Asia excited the imaginations of European princes and scholars, who began gathering unusual natural and man-made objects for their "curiosity cabinets." These rooms or suites were devoted to collections of exotica from newly-reached foreign lands, brought back by merchants and other travelers for sale or as gifts to patrons. The Portuguese, the first Europeans to establish extensive contact with Sub-Saharan Africa, there acquired a number of rare and valuable "curiosities" which included well-crafted mats, raffia bags, ivories and a few wooden objects. For the most part, these pieces were not made specifically for the Portuguese; humbler items would have been available in the market, while more prestigious works were probably part of the gift exchanges between African rulers and those foreigners who were anxious to establish trade relations. Also destined for curiosity cabinets, however, were works conceived of and executed as export items. The medium of choice was ivory, intrinsically valuable in Europe for centuries, and a chief West African trade item from the earliest decades of contact.

In choosing to commission worked ivories, the Portuguese of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries were quite selective. Although they traded with a number of Sub-Saharan cultures which had ivory-carving traditions, Sierra Leone and Benin were apparently the only regions where their interest stimulated an export industry. Although their recognition of the artists' skill could only have occurred through their observation of traditional artworks, it apparently did not make them devotees of African art. Instead, they commissioned works of a more familiar nature—object types which were already prestigious in Europe, and whose valuable material and exotic African origin would further attract wealthy collectors. Such pieces included saltcellars, pyxes, hunting horns and cutlery, often with the European forms and motifs their ethnocentric patrons were
most comfortable with. The works nonetheless retain an essentially African character, for the artists persisted in carving in their habitual manner and including motifs which allowed the objects to be acceptable in their own eyes.3 Because of their hybrid mix of style, form and imagery, William Fagg dubbed these works “Afro-Portuguese ivories” when he first isolated them from other West African pieces in 1959.4

Despite a common impulse—the Portuguese—and overlapping time frames the Afro-Portuguese ivories from Sierra Leone and Benin contrast sharply in appearance. To a great extent, this is due to dissimilar traditional styles of the areas in question, although the prototypes supplied were also a contributing factor. Most notable amongst these distinctions, however, is the manner in which the Portuguese themselves were portrayed, which seems to stem from differences in outlook towards and acceptance of these foreigners.

Sierra Leone

By 1462 the Portuguese had sailed as far as the Sierra Leonean coast, where they encountered the Temne and Bullom peoples. These groups were politically organized into village clusters, each with its own leader, and socially controlled by powerful men’s and women’s societies. The carvers the Portuguese encountered worked for these societies, as well as for other traditional patrons; wooden masks, statues and household furnishings were observed by early travelers, as were ivory and stone figures.6

Historical interaction between Sierra Leoneans and the Portuguese during the 15th/16th centuries took three forms: ships on the Indian run occasionally put in at the mouth of the Sierra Leone estuary for fresh water and supplies, Cape Verde residents made regular licensed and unlicensed voyages from their islands to various points on the mainland; and renegade Portuguese known as lançados or tangomados defied a Crown ban on mainland settlement, placing themselves under the protection of Sierra Leonean leaders, marrying Temne and Bullom women, and often adopting traditional practices, including scarification and Poro initiation.7 These lançados usually served as middlemen brokers, trading to both “legitimate” Portuguese visitors and smugglers. They and their Eurafican descendents valued their cross-cultural status, retaining Portuguese dress and language while adopting the social mores of the area.

Over 100 Afro-Portuguese saltcellars, pyxes, horns, spoons, forks and knife handles from Sierra Leone survive. They fall into two distinct groups, which I call Type A and Type B,8 characterized respectively by the conical or cylindrical form of their saltcellar bases (Plate 1). The shape of most type A works clearly indicates European metal prototypes, and many also include specific European heraldic, mythological and religious references which indicate patrons supplied artists with drawn and/or printed sources.9 Type B ivories, on the other hand, often have forms which seem to be of local origin and show distinctly less exposure to Portuguese models. These differences probably relate to the type of contact which existed between the artist and his foreign patron; Type A workshops seem to have been accessible to visiting ships, while B workshops seem to have been positioned in areas with less external interaction. The ethnic origin of the artists (for the Portuguese noted only that both Temne and Bullom carvers produced works for them; they did not distinguish their styles) may also have been an operative factor.

The kind of foreign influence apparent in Type A works also reflects the periodic nature of contact which India-run ships would have had with the estuary area; their cargos, rather than those of the more local Cape Verde island traders, are more likely to have included the books, coins, Indian textiles and religious articles which were used as foreign motif sources. Though these inclusions would at first suggest intense interaction with the Portuguese, it appears to have been episodic. Many Type A works, for example, include such free, almost indiscernible interpretations of the Portuguese coat-of-arms that is inconceivable their production was directly supervised by patrons. It seems likely that once export manufacture was underway, artists began to stockpile works against the arrival of ships. Such pieces, indirectly commissioned, incorporated previously requested motifs to ensure sales; that such motifs were often garbled reflects both on the lack of importance these symbols had for Sierra Leoneans and upon their confidence that foreigners would buy the ivories, no matter their appearance. They were correct in this assumption, for the material and curio value of the pieces ensured their sale and admission into curiosity cabinets, even in those cases when inferior workmanship and illegible motifs occur.

Type B works, on the other hand, with their lack of European forms and alien imagery (other than representations of the Portuguese themselves), are unlikely to have been commissioned either directly or indirectly by occasional vis-

PLATE 1. Temne/Bullom, Sierra Leone, late 15th/early 16th century. This Type A saltcellar has a typical ball-on-cone construction, its gadrooned surface imitating European lace work. Parts of the final figure may have been recarved, and the right arm is a restoration. 13.25”. Allen Memorial Art Museum. Oberlin College, Ohio. Gift of Gustave Schindler, 56.5.
PLATE 2. Temne/Bullom, Sierra Leone, late 15th/early 16th century. This Type B spoon includes an armless figure who seems to be wearing a jerkin. 9.25 The Metropolitan Museum of Art. The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection of Primitive Art, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller.

Depictions of Portuguese figures are common to both Type A and B pieces; incorporation of such figures occurs on 63% of Type A ivories and 44% of Type B works. Originally this number may have been much higher; Portuguese customs records for the year 1504-1505 show that 134 Afro-Portuguese ivories were imported during that period alone.11 Many extant pieces are now only fragments which may once have included such representations.

Sierra Leonean artists stressed the foreign qualities of Portuguese dress as well as their long straight hair. In a number of cases peculiarities of costume are carefully noted, and include details of the codpiece, belt buckles, the broad-brimmed hat or the jerkin. Other ivories illustrate these modes of dress in a more summary, generic fashion (Plate 2). Representations of foreign women were inspired by prints of the Virgin (supplied by Portuguese patrons) rather than actual observation of such women and their clothing, and frequently demonstrate the artist’s struggle to translate an unfamiliar form from two to three dimensions.

Interestingly enough, any differences between Sierra Leonean and Portuguese physiognomy were ignored. Facial features were rendered according to traditional canon which emphasized prominent eyes and a prognathous jaw, features common to the maheno, yafe and nomoli, contemporaneous stone heads and figures sculpted for local patrons and also to surviving non-export ivories.12 Also common to domestic and export works is a lack of interest in individualizing the features. Whether an individual artist’s style inclined toward a flattish, soft-featured face or a more forward-thrusting head and sharply delineated features, his depictions of African and European faces on the ivories were consistently identical.

This conformity is, in fact, so thorough that, in those cases where hair is not visible, it is impossible to determine whether the represented figures are meant to be Portuguese or not. The presence of breeches would seem to indicate Europeans, but the figures are bare-chested and frequently show signs of scarification. Such figures could, as previously noted, represent lançados or their descendants wearing incomplete Portuguese dress, but might conceivably portray Sierra Leoneans in European clothing, or perhaps remembered or imagined Portuguese; so far thirteen of these confusing renditions are known. Although the inclusion of Portuguese figures in clearly domestic artworks is rare, an occasional stone nomoli in what seems to be European dress creates a similar ambiguity.13

PLATE 3. Print of a Temne/Bullom horn, illustrated by Ole Worth in his 1643 Danicorum Monumentorum. The horn, formerly in the Medici collection as Norm noted, is now in the Hermitage.
Positions of the Portuguese on Sierra Leonean works vary. Relief figures on the horns and pyxes form parts of European hunting, mythological, heraldic or religious scenes and are copied from foreign prints (Plate 3), though with proportional and stylistic alterations. Those depicted on high relief on the saltcellars stand, sit and squat—all poses known amongst the nomoli as well. Occasionally an effort was made to indicate a figure in motion, a decidedly un-African treatment which is probably traceable to European prints as well. On Type A saltcellars, the Portuguese are usually posed frontally, their arms frequently held against the body, while Type B frontal figures usually clutch side supports. In several instances, Portuguese men clasp their hands in a gesture of Christian prayer (Plate 4); unfortunately it is impossible to determine whether this position was included at the request of the patron or observed and chosen by the artist.

When Type A or Type B saltcellars include Portuguese figures, these works are not usually restricted to depictions of the "other", but also include representations of Africans. Approximately 714 of such saltcellars pair Portuguese men with Sierra Leonean women, either in alternation around the base or arm in arm; one Type B example includes a man who amicably clasps his partner by the nape of her neck. The thematic device of the male-female pair has a long history in African art, with its references to continuity, the primordial couple and the mystical interplay of the sexes; that remains a strong theme in export art reinforces the strong African contribution to these works. The pairing of a Western male with an African female was certainly observable behavior amongst Sierra Leone's lançado population; that this was recorded by area artists indicates a measure of the "other's" psychological integration with the community. The alien, to some degree at least, has become part of the artist's world.

In fact, viewing some Portuguese as a part of the Sierra Leonean world extends even further. The ivories—both Type B saltcellars and products of the same workshop—depict figures who are clearly foreigners, marked by their long straight hair, breeches with codpieces, and foreign hats. They are cast in African leadership modes; that is, one features a Portuguese astride an elephant, a local power metaphor which also occurs amongst the nomoli, while the other shows a similar figure triumphantly surrounded by trophy heads, again an indication of authority and power which exists in stone. What incentive would these artists have had for such prestigious representations? As Type B works, these two ivories may have been the products of contact with lançados. Although these men were absorbed by their host societies, there is no record of their having exercised political control; indeed, their continued existence in Sierra Leone was dependent upon their acceptance of the local rulers' authority and protection. However, it is possible that the artists, having been informed by their patrons that the ivories would ultimately be presented to important or royal foreigners, cast Europeans into those situations appropriate...
ate to their own royals. As such, the images would have served as generalized representations meant to convey powerful men, no matter their nationality; they were Europeanized by the addition of their long hair and national dress. In a parallel vein, European artists personally unfamiliar with African rulers depicted them in travel literature as if they were merely darker-hued European kings, albeit in somewhat fanciful warm weather dress (Plate 5).

This kind of social integration, whereby foreigners are shown side-by-side with African figures, and even in characteristically African interpretations, did not occur in Benin, the second site of Afro-Portuguese ivory production.

**Benin**

The Portuguese reached Benin in the early 1470’s, encountering a strong, centralized Edo state led by a divine ruler known as the oba. The arts of the area were highly developed, centering around a court whose artists were organized into palace guilds. Their products included the ivory workers' carved tusks, pendants, bracelets and other objects, as well as the brasscasters' heads, plaques, figures and miscellaneous works which have, since the British Punitive Expedition’s 1897 sack and subsequent transport of the pieces to Britain, become so well-published and exhibited.18

Portuguese interest was again sparked by local production, but their tempered appreciation led them once more to commission objects of a more acceptable nature, i.e., those with a Europeanized flavor. The approximately 70 surviving Bini-Portuguese ivories exhibit far less variety in form and motif than their Sierra Leonean counterparts, and the artists’ view of the “other” is even clearer and more consistent, though it takes a different turn. On the export ivories, the Portuguese foreigner is regularly interpreted as an isolated outsider.

This should not be surprising. Portuguese contact with Benin was, for the most part, periodic in nature. Trading vessels from both Europe and the offshore Portuguese island colony of Sao Tome entered Benin’s port, Ughoton (Guato), and conducted negotiations with the oba’s officials. Many never reached Benin City itself. The few missionaries and mercenaries who did visit the palace during the 15th/16th centuries were bound by the strict protocol and social stratification of the court. They may have interacted with Bini society, but as foreigners would not have been fully accepted by it.19

The export works carved by Bini court artists consist of saltcellars (which in Benin have a tripartite, double bowl construction), hunting horns and spoons. All saltcellars include multiple depiction of the Portuguese, as do the horns, and although only one surviving spoon includes a human representation, it too shows a foreign male.

The portrayal of Portuguese on these saltcellars is consistent with works made for the traditional market. The foreigners are depicted either as officials with attendants (Plate 6) or astride horses, both poses also used by court artists to represent Edo men of position. Figures are presented formally: bearded frontal figures have the highest status and the most elaborate costume, while their clean-shaven counterparts are more plainly dressed and appear in the less hieratic, un-African three-quarters view. Smaller Portuguese figures, representing persons even lower on the social scale, occur on some examples, as do nude angels. Again, in an echo of court art, faces are not individually distinguished, emphasis instead being placed on dress as an indicator of rank. With striking accuracy, the rosetted hose, keys, gathered sleeves and fashionably slashed capes of the foreigners are detailed.

No Edo figures ever appear on the export ivories, nor do these works include any companionable touches which would imply the Portuguese were considered part of local society. This sense of separateness is true of Bini-Portuguese horns and spoons as well.

The social estrangement of the figures is stressed not only by the absence of accompanying Africans, the foreign costume and the straight hair of the Portuguese, but by their alien physiognomy. In contrast to the facial features of Edo figures on sixteenth-century palace ivories, the Portuguese frequently have flowing, straight beards, the form of the foreign nose is interpreted as long, projecting and sharply-pointed, while the mouth is stereotyped as downturned and sometimes lipless (Plate 7).

Court art of the period includes many depictions of the European “other” in both bronze and ivory. Many iconographical references to the Portuguese as freestanding arquebusiers, standing, mounted or partial figures on plaques or bracelets, and as simplified representations on Edo costume or hairstyle details exist. These images likewise focus on the distinctive hair and costume of the Portuguese. The alien quality of their facial features is not, however, always as remarkable as it becomes on the export pieces, although a tendency to portray them in relief
profile, emphasizing their beak-like noses, is notable on many plaques.

The prevalence of foreigners incorporated in palace art does not reflect any great political or numerical presence on the part of the Portuguese, but rather their inclusion into the Edo symbolic system, indicative of the wealth associated with the god Olokun and his watery realm. As purveyors of luxury goods who traveled by sea, their link to the water deity, the oba's spiritual counterpart who possessed and distributed riches, was a logical extension of the traditional belief system. Many plaques further emphasize this affiliation, for they represent the Portuguese holding or surrounded by manillas, bracelet-like metal currency which served as a major Portuguese trade item. Additionally, their figural treatment in a number of sixteenth-century palace works often take on a summary, abstract form, consisting solely of fragmented, partial figures or completely disembodied heads, a treatment never accorded representations of the Edo themselves. When Portuguese images are combined on a given work with those of Edo figures, they are confined to this incomplete, subordinate role rather than interacting or relating to the Edo in a comparable manner. This fracturing of the Portuguese figure—appropriate treatment for a people viewed as symbols, rather than social equals or members of the same society—also occurs in relief on the export saltcellars, in both realistic and abstract renditions.

The symbolic function of the Portuguese may occur elsewhere on the Benin export ivories. Only 27% of these extant works actually include direct representations of Europeans, for the bulk of the corpus consists of spoons, only one of which is figural. The majority of spoons do, however, incorporate animal carvings as part of the stem, and most of the animals represented are other denizens of Olokun's realm—fish, pythons, snails and crocodiles. Crocodiles and fish regularly accompany the Portuguese on the plaques, and their occurrence on Bini-Portuguese works may again allude to the symbolic associations of the European other with Olokun and wealth.

Conclusion

Late 15th/early 16th century interpretations of the Portuguese "other" occur on both export and domestic artworks from Sierra Leone and Benin. The contrast in the appearance of the Portuguese on these works—physical and social integration in Sierra Leone, accentuated foreign characteristics and social isolation in Benin—mirrors the dissimilar positions the Portuguese held in these very different societies. That these interpretations on the Afro-Portuguese ivories reflect cultural viewpoints, rather than solely the individual perceptions of the artists involved or the directions of Portuguese patrons, is evident by the overwhelming similarity of projected attitudes within each area's export and domestic works. In each case, the political strength and confidence of the host culture was a critical factor in the formation of the images; in neither instance is the foreigner interpreted as a threat or dominant figure; he thus keeps his dignity and is not satirized. Although economic incentives may have prompted the carving of Portuguese figures on the export works, the artists' manner of representing the foreigner—as an accepted, if marginal, part of society, or as a segregated alien—were affected by the nature of their interaction, a process under African, not European, control.

Notes

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2. It is, perhaps, a reflection of the persistence of ethnocentric behavior that studies relating to the "other" in Africa are still concerned with the European foreigner, rather than intra-African "others".
3. For a fuller discussion of why these works are more Afrom than European, see Kathy Curnow, The Afro-Portuguese Ivories: Classification and Stylistic Analysis of a Hybrid Art Form (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1983) or Idem, forthcoming publication of "Tradition and Tenacity in 15th/16th Century Sierra Leone," 1989 paper at 8th Triennial Symposium on African Art, Washington.


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