



Yoruba Art and Language: Seeking the African in African Art

By Rowland Abiodun

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The Yoruba was one of the most important civilizations of sub-Saharan Africa. While the high quality and range of its artistic and material production have long been recognized, the art of the Yoruba has been judged primarily according to the standards and principles of Western aesthetics. In this book, which merges the methods of art history, archaeology, and anthropology, Rowland Abiodun offers new insights into Yoruba art and material culture by examining them within the context of the civilization's cultural norms and values and, above all, the Yoruba language. Abiodun draws on his fluency and prodigious knowledge of Yoruba culture and language to dramatically enrich our understanding of Yoruba civilization and its arts. The book includes a companion website with audio clips of the Yoruba language, helping the reader better grasp the integral connection between art and language in Yoruba culture.

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Editorial Review

Review

"*Yoruba Art and Language: Seeking the African in African Art* provides a seminal and authoritative work pertaining to Yoruba art and languages of Nigeria. Rowland Abiodun, the John C. Newton Professor of Art, the History of Art and Black Studies at Amherst College, is an astute art historian, researcher, and culture activist, whose work will withstand the test of time and critical appraisal." ~Tunde Babawale, AFRICA TODAY, 2015

"With a robust research career that spans over four decades, Rowland Abiodun has consistently advocated for the inclusion of the language of the people when their art is being studied. He lucidly articulates that idea, using the Yoruba esthetic thought and language embedded in the oriki (praise or citation poetry) as valid exemplars." ~Ndubuisi C. Ezeoluomba, AFRICAN STUDIES QUARTERLY, 2016.

"Abiodun states boldly: "the urgent task before us is to ensure the survival and essential role of African artistic and aesthetic concepts in the study of art in Africa." ... "He provides new analytical techniques that can provide models for art and culture scholars not only in the Yoruba world but also in sub-Saharan Africa, as well as for those in other parts of the world who need knowledge of indigenous perspectives to enrich their understanding of African visual culture." ~ Ropo Sekoni, Ooduapathfinder.com 2016

"It is possible that with this publication Professor Rowland Abiodun has consolidated a recognizable 'school of African art history one that is genuinely African, in terms of its geographic origin certainly, if not necessarily wholly in its approach towards the discipline ... It is to compliment Professor Abiodun's work that his book as a history of (an)art (or arts) stands comparison to Michael Baxandall's close reading of art and language in fifteenth-century Italy." ~W. Rea - AFRICA: THE JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL AFRICAN INSTITUTE, 2015

"For scholars of African art, Abiodun brings new levels of understanding, nuance, and insights for consideration to already familiar works and forms. Applicable to all art historians, *Yoruba Art and Language* emphasizes the need to beware of the cultural, and specifically the linguistic, contexts in which art is made." ~Lynne Ellsworth Larson,caa. reviews, 2016.

"... he questions the validity of recent claims that associate particular sculptures with a past king of Ile-Ife, Obalùfòn. Since such claims rely on contemporary information about sculptures that derived from archaeological excavations and accidental discoveries, how can we be sure that these informants were not simply fitting these finds into their own preconceptions and narratives of the past? The methodological sloppiness of accepting such claims as gospel truth (especially when cited as information provided by a king, priest, or chief) raises questions about the misuse of oral traditions and informants... Yoruba Art and Language will serve as an enduring source of knowledge and wisdom for scholars and the general public. It will also inspire new works that seek to understand the experience of time in Yoruba visual art. Rowland Abiodun has taken us to the right place to start the next generation of scholarship on African art and Yoruba cultural history." ~Akinwumi Ogundiran, AFRICAN STUDIES REVIEW, 2015

"If we take Abiodun's points seriously, facile extrapolations from a static Yoruba "there" to an essentialized Yoruba "here" cannot but undervalue the ways in which descendants in the diaspora have made their lived circumstances meaningful through art. Just as the notion of "Yoruba" in the Americas has acquired new

symbolic resonances that spur interest in the past, this fine book will inspire attentive readers to bring fresh insights to the complementary relationship between language and art. Sections of the book will be excellent additions to college and university courses, particularly those making the point clearly that whatever their permutations, Yoruba concepts and arts in the America have been relocalized and translated, and thus changed: still grounded in language and culture, but transformed through imposed limitations, negotiated mixtures, and transnational migrations. Abiodun reminds us that such dialogic relationships are widespread throughout Africa; certainly the coding of proverbs and praise names in material forms, for example, bears this out. This dialog offers much for those who work in the Americas to ponder." ~Grey Gundaker, AFRICAN STUDIES REVIEW, 2015

"Abiodun's Yoruba Arts and Language challenges art history to invest in methodologies that champion intercultural perspectives. In a small field such as African art studies, it is easy to mistake the criticism this challenge implies as personal attacks on individual scholars. Such a reading makes it difficult to engage previous research, which often reduces research on specific African art and cultures to the work of a single interlocutor. A field where extant research cannot be subjected to criticism is moribund and unprofessional, since challenges to existing orthodoxy are the only way to advance knowledge. Abiodun calls for radical interrogations of research protocols and methodologies in order to make the study of indigenous African art newly relevant to a younger generation of art historians. Such significant revision is necessary if the study of indigenous African art is to survive without as Abiodun contends, effacing the "African" from African art." ~Sylvester O. Ogbechie, AFRICAN ARTS, 2016.

Rowland Abiodun is one of the most distinguished historians of African art in the world and his latest work is a crowning achievement... In *Yoruba Art and Language* Abiodun demonstrates that the meanings of Yoruba visual arts - so prized by collectors and museums - can and should be illuminated by the recognition of complementary verbal arts...The verbal "de-riddles" the visual...Nowhere is this "de-riddling" more effective than when Abiodun reviews some of Yorubaland's most famous artistic creations, the copper and terra cotta portrait busts excavated at Ife and determined to date from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries CE...Each chapter of *Yoruba Art and Language* is concerned with a different religio-aesthetic concept in Yoruba thought and how it is expressed in intertwined verbal and visual media...The total effect is a master work from a master scholar and the most thorough illumination of Yoruba religious art to be found. ~ Joseph M. Murphy, MATERIAL RELIGION, 2016.

In sum, *Yoruba Art and Language: Seeking the African in African Art* is a book written with wit, argued with verve, supremely confident in its thesis, and exhaustively documented. Most important, this is a breathtakingly original book that is destined to alter our understanding of Yoruba art and aesthetics forever. ~Olufemi Taiwo, NKA: JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN ART, 2017.

About the Author

Rowland Abiodun is John C. Newton Professor of Art, the History of Art, and Black Studies at Amherst College, Amherst, Massachusetts. He is the author of *What Follows Six Is More than Seven: Understanding African Art* (1995); co-author of *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought* (1989), *Yoruba Art and Aesthetics* (1991), and *Cloth Only Wears to Shreds: Yoruba Textiles and Photographs from the Beier Collection* (2004); and co-editor of *The Yoruba Artist: New Theoretical Perspectives on African Arts* (1994). Abiodun was a consultant for, and participant in, the Smithsonian World Film, *Kindred Spirits: Contemporary Nigerian Art*. A former member and chair of the Herskovits Book Award Committee of the African Studies Association, Abiodun has also served on the Board of Directors of the African Studies Association and as the President of the Arts Council of the African Studies Association. He chaired the Executive Board of the Five College African Scholars Program, Amherst, Massachusetts, and has been interviewed by the BBC World Service on the Art of Africa. In 2011, he received the Leadership Award of

the Arts Council of the African Studies Association in recognition of his excellence, innovative contributions, and vision in the fields of African and Diasporic Arts.

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