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Art, Authenticity, and the Baggage of Cultural Encounter

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Whereas in the Western ideal the artist is a fiercely independent, even rebellious, creator of art for art's sake, the African artist aims to please his public. This does not make all African artists crassly commercial, although that epithet can be justly applied to those who turn out knick-knacks for the tourist trade.

"AFRICAN ART BLACK MAGIC," *ECONOMIST*, DECEMBER 24, 1994

Throughout history, the evidence of objects has been central to the telling of cross-cultural encounters with distant worlds or remote Others. The materiality and physical presence of the object make it a uniquely persuasive witness to the existence of realities outside the compass of an individual's or a community's experience. The possession of an exotic object offers, too, an imagined access to a world of difference, often constituted as an enhancement of the new owner's knowledge, power, or wealth. Depending on the circumstances of their acquisition, such objects may evoke curiosity, awe, fear, admiration, contempt, or a combination of these responses. The exotic object may variously be labeled trophy or talisman, relic or specimen, rarity or trade sample, souvenir or kitsch, art or craft.

For the past century or so, the objects of cultural Others have been appropriated primarily into two of these categories: the artifact or ethnographic specimen and the work of art. They have, that is, been fitted into the scholarly domains defined in the late nineteenth century when anthropology and art history were formally established as academic disciplines. As a construction, however, this binary pair has almost always been unstable, for both classifications masked what had, by the late eighteenth century, become one of the most important features of objects: their operation as commodities circulating in the discursive space of an emergent capitalist economy. Although the growth of a consumer commodity culture in Europe and North America has undoubtedly been one of the most important organizing forces of social and economic life during the past two centuries, there has been a surprising silence about processes of commoditization in standard art histories and ethnographies.[1] Scholars whose theories privileged this new reality—

from Marx to Veblen, Baudrillard, and Bourdieu—were, until quite recently, marginalized within orthodox art history and anthropology.

The inscription of Western modes of commodity production has been one of the most important aspects of the global extension of Western colonial power. Moreover, the role of this process in transforming indigenous constructions of the object has intensified rather than diminished in many parts of the world since the formal demise of colonial rule. This volume explores instances of this inscription, together with other equally significant processes of mediation and negotiation engaged in by the inhabitants of colonial and postcolonial worlds. In every case, important consequences have flowed from innovations in the design, production, and marketing of objects, not only to those who consumed them but also to those who produced them. The makers of objects have frequently manipulated commodity production in order to serve economic needs as well as new demands for self-representation and self-identification made urgent by the establishment of colonial hegemonies.

The studies in this book range broadly both geographically and historically. The comparative perspective they offer reveals repeating patterns of imperialist encounter and capitalist exchange, as well as specific cultural and historical factors that give local productions their unique forms. Although the objects under discussion originated in such diverse times and places as mandarin China circa 1850, the American Plains circa 1880, and Kenya circa 1994, they are all equally difficult to contain within the binary schema of art and artifact. In some instances, where the fact of commoditization could be hidden, the objects have been accorded a place in one or the other category. In others, where their commoditized nature has been all too evident, they have most often fallen into the ontological abyss of the inauthentic, the fake, or the crassly commercial. A particularly dense aura of inauthenticity surrounds objects produced for the souvenir and tourist trades because they are most obviously located at the intersection of the discourses of art, artifact, and commodity. Many of the essays in this collection focus on "tourist arts" and offer particularly concentrated examples of the clash and resolution of culturally different ideas about the nature of authenticity.

Unpacking Culture is, in many ways, a successor to the groundbreaking anthology edited two decades ago by Nelson H. H. Graburn, *Ethnic and Tourist Arts: Cultural Expressions from the Fourth World* (1976). That volume was the first major publication to pay serious scholarly attention to the art commodities of marginalized and colonized peoples and to recognize their importance in the touristic production of ethnicity. In his introduction Graburn established a model that set the terms for the discussion of these arts. For the present volume, Graburn has provided a concluding essay, which discusses trends in the study of tourist art during the intervening years and the

relationship of the individual essays in this volume to the current field of study.

Scholars today also build on recent discussions of primitivism and of the representation of non-Western arts, subjects that have achieved a new prominence in postcolonial art history and anthropology. For example, Arthur Danto et al. (1988), Sally Price (1989), Marianna Torgovnick (1990), Susan Hiller (1991), Thomas McEvilley (1992), Michael Hall and Eugene Metcalf (1994), Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush (1995), George Marcus and Fred Myers (1995), and Deborah Root (1996) have investigated the appropriation of non-Western artists into Western aesthetic discourses. Graburn (1976a, 1984), Bennetta Jules-Rosette (1984), and more recently James Clifford (1985, 1988, 1997), Suzanne Blier (1989), Sidney Kasfir (1992), Shelly Errington (1994a), Barbara Babcock (1995), and Marta Weigle and Barbara Babcock (1996) have examined the circulation of objects among categories of scientific specimen, art, souvenir, and others. Arjun Appadurai (1986b) and Igor Kopytoff (1986) examine anthropological conceptualizations of commoditized exchange, and Nicholas Thomas (1991) and Ruth Phillips (1998) scrutinize specific historical negotiations of commoditization and art in the western Pacific and northeastern North America, respectively. Steiner's study of the contemporary West African art market (1994) focuses most closely on the mediation of knowledge that accompanies twentieth-century manifestations of art and artifact commerce, a complex network of cultural transactions similar to those addressed by many of the essays in this book.

Much of the literature on the reception of non-Western arts takes the dualistic art/artifact distinction as a given and focuses on its ambiguities and inadequacies. Confining the problem within these parameters, however, puts us in danger of validating the very terms that require deconstruction (see Faris 1988). Similar difficulties were articulated in the 1980s by Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock (1981) in relation to the feminist revision of standard art-historical discourse. They argued for the deconstruction of the conventional classification of art into major and minor genres ("fine" and "applied" arts) because those hierarchies have devalued women's art. Like Parker and Pollock, we do not underestimate the difficulty inherent in challenging the categories with which scholars have been trained to think, but we concur that this process is crucial to the "radical reform" of the disciplines that is now under way.[2]

In the remainder of this introduction, we outline the historiographical context that has given rise to problematic aspects of contemporary Western practices of representation and evaluation of non-Western arts particularly pertinent to the essays in this book. We examine the formation of three parallel discourses about objects, formalized during the second half of the nineteenth century, which continue to inform the thinking of both scholars and

consumers about these arts. These three discourses arose from (1) the art-historical classification system of fine and applied arts, (2) anthropological theories of the evolution and origins of art, and (3) Victorian responses to the industrial production and commoditization of art. We aim, in particular, to add to the dichotomy of art and artifact a third, pivotal category, the commodity, and, further, to discuss how some aspects of the discourses surrounding all three were complementary and mutually reinforcing while others were intersecting, contingent, and contradictory. In the last section of this introduction we demonstrate the continuing operation of these paradigms, together with their contradictions, by examining the Western context into which most global art commodities are absorbed and which therefore can be said to provide their primary raison d'être, the interior decoration of the "modern" home.

FOLDING NON-WESTERN OBJECTS INTO WESTERN ART HISTORY

Despite the mythology of "discovery" that surrounds the promotion of non-Western art by early-twentieth-century modernist artists, this encounter is only the latest in a succession of appropriations of non-Western objects into the Western art and culture system. By 1907 the ground had been well prepared by half a century of theoretical work by Victorian art theorists and anthropologists (see Goldwater 1967; Jonaitis 1995). The growth of the two bodies of theory generated by these scholars was, furthermore, closely entwined. Anthropologists and art theorists thought with each other's categories, swapping between them particular concepts of the "primitive" and exchanging standard typologies of media and genre.

The standard Western system of art classification has its origins in the sixteenth century in the emergence of the concept of the artist as an autonomous creator, but its intellectual armature was provided three centuries later by the new discipline of art history in texts written by a group of Germanic scholars whom Michael Podro (1982) has termed the "critical historians of art." As he has written, these scholars grounded their work in "the Kantian opposition between human freedom and the constraints imposed by the material world" (xxi). Human beings, according to Kant, are fettered by their physical dependency on Nature, but are free in their exercise of Reason. "The role of art," Podro summarizes, "was seen as overcoming our ordinary relations to the world." Within the realm of the aesthetic, therefore, the highest forms are those that are most free—"art for art's sake"—and the lowest are those that are the most utilitarian. The defining force of the concept of fine art as free creation was further supported in the 1930s by the Idealist aesthetics of Collingwood and has remained relatively undisturbed since then in mainstream art history.[3]

The incorporation of non-Western objects into the disciplinary fold of

art history that began around the middle of the twentieth century was a liberal gesture of inclusion typical of its era. Formal recognition was extended, like the political sovereignty granted to a newly independent colony, but the infrastructure of Western knowledge formations remained firmly in place. To be represented as "art," in other words, the aesthetic objects of non-Western peoples had to be transposed into the Western system of classification of fine and applied art.[4] Feminist and Marxist art historians have revealed how this system reinforces hierarchies of gender and class. Its hegemonic implications for race have, however, been less clearly set out, in large part because the highly selective promotion of non-Western art by modernist artists has constructed the illusion that a universalist inclusiveness has been achieved.

The worldwide distortion of indigenous systems for attributing value to objects through the modernist inscription of a discourse of "primitive art" is particularly well illustrated by the example of Native American arts. The visual aesthetic traditions of the majority of these peoples are a particularly bad "fit" with the Western classification system, for Western hierarchies of media, genre, and conditions of production rarely match those that have historically operated within Native American communities. In order to identify a corpus of objects that could be identified as fine art—that is, sculpture (monumental, if possible) and graphic depiction (painted, if possible)—scholars have often privileged objects of lesser status within their producing communities, arbitrarily promoting some regions of the continent over others and ignoring the indigenous systems of value and meaning attached to objects.[5]

ANTHROPOLOGICAL THEORIES OF THE ORIGINS OF ART

The nineteenth-century critical historians of art also grounded their work in a Hegelian notion of progress in which the increased freedom of the artist and the greater incidence of fine art become signs of advanced civilization. The idea of progress in history closely parallels the belief in the historical evolution of human material cultures formalized during the second half of the nineteenth century by early European anthropologists such as Semper, Stolpe, Grosse, Haddon, and Balfour. These men saw in the "primitive" peoples of the European empires a great laboratory for the investigation of human cultural evolution.[6] Art assumed prominence within their larger project precisely because it constituted, for Westerners, the ultimate measure of human achievement. The presence or absence of "true art," defined as free creation unfettered by functional requirements, could be used as a kind of litmus test of the level of civilization a group of people had supposedly achieved.[7]

Although they debated the specifics of historical patterns of evolution,

the early anthropologists all assumed both the universal validity of the Kantian equation of progress, freedom, and art and the Western scheme for classifying and evaluating art. In addition to adducing the macro-categories of fine and applied arts, they often did further violence to their subject matter by categorizing it by material—textiles, ceramics, jewelry, etc. These assumptions built into their arguments a teleological fallacy that reproduced Victorian and imperialist hierarchies of race and gender and ultimately doomed to failure the Victorian project of investigating the origins of art. The evidence of this is contained in a number of contradictions within cultural evolutionist texts. The arts of hunter-gatherer groups like the Eskimos and the Australian Aborigines, for example, became the focus of study because these peoples were perceived to live in an extreme state of dependence on nature. Because the "primitiveness" of their arts was taken as a given, Victorian anthropologists focused almost exclusively on the "inferior" category of "ornament" and often willfully blinded themselves to the existence of objects that could have fit their fine art category.

The cultural evolutionists also identified the sculpted or graphic images on weapons, tools, fabrics, and the human body as applied art because they were imagined to serve utilitarian purposes and were therefore insufficiently autonomous to be regarded as "purely aesthetic" or as fine art objects. Grosse, for instance, asserted in 1897 that apparently abstract geometric designs on tools or weapons could be found to be stylized representations of animals or humans made for magical or religious purposes. "Figures constructed with entire freedom nowhere play any important part in ornamentation" (1928: 116). The inconsistency that arises here is that, while in Western art the symbolic was identified with fine art and the natural and imitative with decorative art, the reverse became true for "primitive" art.

A spate of publications on the evolution of art appeared during the 1890s, and this body of theory continued to inform the work of anthropologists throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Frank Speck, for example, in what has become a classic text on eastern Cree ritual art was in 1935 still using dialectically opposed categories of the "purely aesthetic" and the "symbolic," the commercial and the "magical" (1977: 127). Within only a decade of the earlier publications, however, the modernist revolution in European art had begun to displace this body of theory and to refocus the discourse of "primitive" art. In sharp contrast to the emphasis the anthropologists placed on ornamentation, the modernist artists appropriated a different set of non-Western objects, those that most closely fit the Western fine art categories of sculpture and painting. They adopted a form of tunnel vision every bit as narrow as that of the cultural evolutionists, though differently directed. Their exclusion of textiles, basketry, and beadwork, of the stylistically naturalistic, and of anything seen as artistically "hybrid" meant that the most important aesthetic traditions of many peoples were denied the status of fine art.

COMMODITIZATION AND THE HYBRID

The different kinds of objects that interested ethnologists and modern artists stimulated different kinds of demand. Markets for art and artifact coexisted, furthermore, with a souvenir trade that had greatly expanded in response to the rapid growth of tourism during the Victorian era. During this period, too, the interactive process between producer and consumer intensified, resulting not only in greatly increased replications of "traditional" objects but also in the production of many innovative hybrid art forms. The interactive process between producer and consumer, which began almost everywhere as soon as contact with the West took place, entered a new phase in the Victorian era, during which far greater quantities and varieties of objects were produced by efficiently organized cottage industries. These new art forms, typified, for example, by the wares Woodlands Indians made to sell at Niagara Falls, signal the entry of colonized peoples into industrial-age consumerism, an economic integration forced on many by the destruction of their former modes of subsistence and on others by the introduction into traditional material culture both of labor-saving manufactured materials and of attractive new mass-produced Western commodities that could only be acquired with cash.

Neither the speed and acuity with which indigenous artists responded to changes in taste and market nor the dialogic nature of their creative activity has been adequately recognized. Rather, until recently, both art historians and anthropologists have resoundingly rejected most commoditized objects as spurious on two grounds: (1) stylistic hybridity, which conflicts with essentialist notions of the relationship between style and culture, and (2) their production for an external market, which conflicts with widespread ideas of authenticity. Although both of these reasons for rejection arise directly from the nineteenth-century philosophical foundations of art-historical and anthropological thinking, they are inconsistent with key aspects of these same intellectual traditions.

Objections to stylistic hybridity, for example, diverge in several ways from the general positions many theorists held on this subject. First, the negative view of stylistic mixing conflicts with the general cultural evolutionist principle that contact and cross-fertilization were important, if not essential, to the advancement of cultures. In Alfred Haddon's 1902 treatise *Evolution in Art,* for example, the author drew on a biological metaphor to conclude that "the isolation of a people and uniformity in their existence will tend to stagnation in art, and . . . intercourse with other peoples, whether by trade, war or migration, serves as a stimulus to artistic expression" (317).

Yet this principle is not followed in the judgments routinely made of specific bodies of material culture. In 1896, for example, Stolpe lamented the "difficulty" of working with one Native American collection, because "It so

often bears obvious traces of the influence of the white man's industry. The furniture nails driven into clubs or pipe-stems, the garniture of glass beads on all sorts of articles, prove that the style is no longer genuine, but spoiled by European importations" (1927: 93).

He regarded the widespread use of floral motifs as particularly "suspicious," commenting that "in all these plant designs I see nothing but the debasing influence of a vicious style of drawing on the white man's gaudy bartered wares" (94). As this statement makes clear, one reason for the rejection of stylistic hybrids was pragmatic: they greatly complicated the scholarly project of reconstructing evolutionary histories of "primitive" art. Another, more profound, reason had to do with the Victorian biological discourse of race, in which hybridity was defined as degenerative and weakening of a racial "stock" (Young 1995).

Accusations of inauthenticity were also based on the assertion that commodities were produced for external markets and not used by the producers themselves. This allegation ignored plain facts. Colonized peoples all over the world often did wear the same kinds of garments and ornaments they sold as souvenirs, and many forms of aesthetic expression within indigenous communities were profoundly transformed by their makers' intensified involvement in market production. In tying the definition of authenticity for non-Western arts to these arts' putative preindustrial quality, scholarly practice also denied art makers their place in modernity. A particular irony of the authenticity paradigm, finally, is revealed by the mounting evidence that many of the objects purchased both as ethnological specimens and as art objects during the heyday of collecting in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were, in fact, commercially produced replicas, although curators and collectors were frequently either unaware of this fact or chose to suppress it (R. Phillips 1995). This is equally true of masks and carvings collected during the early colonial period in Africa (Schildkrout and Keim 1990) and from the Canadian Northwest Coast; many Eskimo toolkits now in museums were made for the market (Lee, this volume), as were many forms of Plains Indian weaponry and beadwork (Bol, this volume).

Objects that incorporated Western materials, styles, and forms failed, however, to satisfy the longing among Western consumers for the lost authenticity of the local and handmade that accompanied industrialization. Finally, rejection on the grounds of hybrid and acculturated elements contradicted widely held positions on progress. The same scholars and collectors who complained about inauthenticity subscribed to one of the basic rationales for the global imposition of colonial rule: that the desired outcomes of the "civilizing" of indigenous peoples would be their own increased "industriousness," as evidenced by their more efficient production of "manufactures," together with the transformation of these populations into consumers of Western manufactured goods.

Ambivalence about commoditized forms of "primitive" art was part of a much wider discomfort with industrial production in Victorian society. This unease found its most concentrated expression in the reactions of intellectuals to the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London. Popularly known as the Crystal Palace, the Great Exhibition was based, as Thomas Richards has written, on the idea that "all human life and cultural endeavor could be fully represented by exhibiting manufactured articles" (1990: 17). The development of this system brought two schema for ordering things into uneasy relation: the old art hierarchy and a newer hierarchy based on commodity type. As Richards notes, Prince Albert initially urged the adoption of a traditional categorization of the things of the world into four divisions: raw materials, machinery and mechanical inventions, manufactures, and sculpture and plastic art. Through the efforts of the exhibition's planning commission, however, these were later supplemented by twenty-nine additional categories, "which cross cut the others, like a department store," and "by which articles of a similar kind from every part of the world could be disposed in juxta-position" (Richards 1990: 32). In other words, the old hierarchy was placed side by side with the essentially democratizing, leveling representation produced by capitalist production. Objects from all parts of the world were presented in these displays as manufactures and commodities and were eagerly purchased by the hordes of exhibition visitors. "In effect, though hardly by intention," notes Richards, "the Crystal Palace advanced a prescient vision of the evolutionary development of commodities" (27). Many of the wares exhibited at this and other exhibitions form today the core of ethnological and art museum collections. Science here follows the model of commerce rather than the reverse, as is often supposed; the universalizing typology used in the 1851 exhibition predated by several decades its employment in museum displays such as that installed at the Pitt Rivers Museum at the end of the nineteenth century (Chapman 1985).[8]

The enthusiastic consumer response to the exotic commodities at the Crystal Palace—most of which were stylistic hybrids—was typical of all such exhibitions and contrasted with the rejection of these same objects by the intellectual establishment (Richards 1990: 32–33).[9] Indeed, the Great Exhibition and its successors revealed to contemporary intellectuals the disjunctions that were emerging between the old elitist hierarchical schematization of art, with its reliance on rarity and the handmade, and the democratization of art made possible by new forms of industrial production. The exhibition acted as the catalyst for several important theoretical formulations.

It is not coincidental, for example, that the nineteenth-century theorist Gottfried Semper wrote major treatises on Western architectural and ornamental style as well as on the origins of art. Both interests were stimulated in important ways by the Great Exhibition, for which he was com-

missioned to design displays for the products of four different countries.[10] His major early treatise of 1852, *Science, Industry, and Art: Proposals for the Development of a National Taste in Art at the Closing of the London Industrial Exhibition,* was directly stimulated by this experience. In this rich text we can trace the great debates of the era as Semper struggled to rationalize his own seemingly contradictory responses. He acknowledged his attraction to many of the commercial products of non-European nations, although he disdained commercial motivations for the production of art; he respected the high level of craftsmanship of "barbaric" peoples in comparison to that displayed by the new Western industrial products, although he remained convinced of the essential superiority of Western aesthetic achievement; he was led, ultimately, to consider Western industrial and exotic commercial forms of production as equally inferior. He wrote, for example, "*A work of art destined for the marketplace cannot have this relevance, far less than an industrial object can, for the latter's artistic relevance is supported at least by the use for which it is expected to have. The former, however, exists for itself alone,* and is always distasteful when it betrays the purpose of pleasing or seducing a buyer" (Semper 1989: 143).

Semper's was by no means a lone voice. The Great Exhibition also inspired William Morris and his colleagues to attempt to revalidate the decorative arts through a revival of medieval forms of handicraft. Ultimately, however, the effort to reconcile the fundamental contradictions failed. The emerging disjunctions between the cultural arrogance of art connoisseurship and the leveling of art appreciation that flowed from new technologies for mechanical reproduction could not, in the end, be reconciled. Consumers were motivated both by a genuine admiration for the technical expertise and aesthetic sensibility of non-Western artists and, like the anthropologists, by a romantic and nostalgic desire for the "primitive" induced by the experience of modernization.

It is important to emphasize that the sentimental quest for simplicity, with its attendant, but ambivalent, rejection of modernity, was neither new in the Victorian era, nor limited to the realms of art and visual culture. Suspicion of mass manufacturing and mass marketing and the desire to retrieve the authenticity belonging to the rare and the singular lost through the new modes of production both go back to the eighteenth century, and they have permeated many other domains of consumption from then until now. A telling eighteenth-century example having to do with cuisine is provided by Brillat-Savarin's famous disdain for mechanically ground coffee. As Roland Barthes comments, the great gastronome's objections probably arose more from semiotic and epistemological considerations than from a truly palatable discrimination: "The grinder works mechanically . . . its produce is a kind of dust—fine, dry, impersonal. By contrast, there is an art in wielding the pestle. Bodily skills are involved. . . . The choice between pounding and

grinding is thus a choice between two different views of human condition and between metaphysical judgments lying just beneath the surface of the question" (quoted in M. Douglas and Isherwood 1979: 73–74).

Brillat-Savarin's sentimental preference for *hand*ground coffee beans parallels the enthusiasm of consumers for *hand*made objects; both are located at the intersection of a scholarly discourse of authenticity and an emerging discourse on the canons of "good" or "refined" taste (see Bourdieu 1984). Both tapped into a deep current of sentimental nostalgia for the loss of the handmade and the unique. If industrially produced objects could not satisfy these yearnings, recourse to invented notions of the "primitive" and the preindustrial would have to.

More often than not, these needs were displaced onto a special category of exotica, tourist art, which was constructed not just to represent the idea of the handmade, but also to display iconographic motifs and forms that signified "old" ways of life imagined as simpler and more satisfying. In this sense, Victorian ambivalence toward the commoditization of folk or non-Western art directly paralleled a discourse of tourism and anti-tourism identified by James Buzard (1993) as a major theme in nineteenth-century literature. "Anti-tourism," as defined by Buzard, corresponds almost exactly to the discourse of authenticity that cleaved the community of consumers of art commodities into two opposed camps of fine art cognoscenti and populist collectors of tourist art. The irony here, however, is that the possibility of evading commoditization was as illusory as the efforts of Victorian intellectuals to identify themselves as "travelers" rather than "tourists."

EMBEDDED CONTRADICTIONS

As we have seen, the exclusion from the canons of art and science of the stylistically hybrid and openly commoditized forms adopted by many commercial and souvenir productions resulted from the same discursive matrix. Moreover, notions of the essential value and uniqueness of "art" and of the scientific interest of the "artifact" were givens that became part of the inscription of colonialism. Despite contemporary deconstructions of these terms, they remain operational concepts that outsider-producers have to negotiate together with the contradictions embedded in essentialist and evolutionist approaches to style and authenticity. Two further examples can be added to those already mentioned. Stolpe's aversion to hybrids and souvenir art, typical of his influential scholarly generation, led him to make some gross errors of fact. He praised, for example, the sculptural qualities of Haida argillite carving, an art form invented during the first half of the nineteenth century exclusively for trade to Westerners, under the mistaken impression that it was an ancient art form (1927: 114–15). At the same time, he rejected out of hand the majority of Plains and Woodlands museum objects (which

conformed, for the most part, to age-old generic types) because they incorporated some European motifs and materials. As such they were, in his words, "proof of the helpless decadence of the native style" (94).

A second, slightly more recent example illustrates, through a richly ironic and unexpected incident, the contradictions embedded in essentialist attempts to distinguish "art" from "commodity" on the basis of particular craft processes and materials or an allegedly pre- or non-industrial style. In 1928 Edward Steichen attempted to import into the United States Brancusi's abstract bronze sculpture *Bird in Space.* The sculpture was blocked in New York City by U.S. Customs, which declared that nonrepresentational and abstract forms fell outside the limitations of paragraph 1807 of the U.S. Customs Tariff Act of 1922, which allowed "original" works of art to enter the country duty free. Brancusi's *Bird* was to be charged the normal duty for objects of utility or industrial use that are "composed wholly or in chief part of copper, brass, pewter, steel or other metal" (*United States Treasury Decisions* 1928). The importer asked the U.S. Customs Court to determine "whether the *Bird* was art or merely bronze in an arbitrary shape" (MoMA 1936: 5). The judge in the case ultimately ruled in favor of the appeal and determined that Brancusi's sculpture was indeed a work of art and not an industrial metal commodity. For the record, he stated:

> The decision [that works of art as defined in paragraph 1807 refer to imitations of natural objects] was handed down in 1916. In the meanwhile there has been developing a so-called new school of art, whose exponents attempt to portray abstract ideas rather than imitate natural objects. Whether or not we are in sympathy with these newer ideas and the schools which represent them, we think the fact of their existence and their influence upon the art world as recognized by the courts must be considered. (*United States Treasury Decisions* 1928: 430–31)

The clash over definitions of art between collectors and connoisseurs and the U.S. Customs bureaucracy did not end with the debate over Brancusi's *Bird.* A few years later, the Museum of Modern Art encountered the same problem when it tried to import objects of African art for an exhibition in 1935. As it was reported in the *Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art:*

> Many objects in its exhibition of African Negro Art had been refused free entrance [into the United States] because it was impossible to prove that certain sculptures were not more than second replicas, or because the artist's signature could not be produced, or because no date of manufacture could be found, or because ancient bells, drums, spoons, necklaces, fans, stools and head rests were considered by the examiners to be objects of utility and not works of art. (MoMA 1936: 2)

It is fitting perhaps that the struggle over proper definitions of "art" and "commodity" should have taken place in the early decades of the twentieth cen-

tury at a port of immigration—a point of respite and cultural evaluation wedged momentarily into the otherwise rapid transnational circulation of goods and objects. Definitions of art, artifact, and commodity typically occur at such interstitial nodes—sites of negotiation and exchange where objects must continually be reevaluated according to regional criteria and local definitions. At each point in its movement through space and time, an object has the potential to shift from one category to another and, in so doing, to slide along the slippery line that divides art from artifact from commodity.

SHIFTING DISCOURSES

Within recent historiography it was only through the renewal of an ideological analysis of art practice mounted by scholars such as Janet Wolff in the 1980s that the Kantian basis of art-historical representation was again challenged. "The division we generally make between the 'high' and the 'lesser' or 'decorative' arts can be traced historically, and linked to the emergence of the idea of 'the artist as genius,'" Wolff wrote, arguing that "it is difficult to defend the distinction between, say, the painting of an altar-piece and the design of furniture or embroidery on any intrinsic grounds" (1984: 17). She also refuted the notion of the freedom of the artist from market forces, quoting Vacquez's statement that "'the artist is subject to the tastes, preferences, ideas, and aesthetic notions of those who influence the market . . . [and] cannot fail to heed the exigencies of this market; they often affect the content as well as the form of a work of art'" (17–18).

Since then, two processes have simultaneously challenged and reconfigured the art-artifact-commodity triad. On the one hand, serious studies by anthropologists and art historians of non-Western objects intended largely for trade and export have recognized the artistic nature of objects classified as artifact and commodity. Far from being a "mere" commercial craft, many forms of tourist or export art have been shown to exhibit all the communicative and signifying qualities of "legitimate" or "authentic" works of art. On the other hand, studies of mainstream Western artworks and artists have argued the importance of dynamics of commoditization in much post-Renaissance Western art (e.g., Alpers 1988). Far from being either produced or consumed without regard for matters of money or market, works of art, aesthetic valuations, and judgments of taste are indeed highly dependent on an object's commodity potential and economic value (Bourdieu 1984). Most recently, Robert Jensen has suggested in his book *Marketing Modernism in Fin-de-Siècle Europe* (1994) that the avant-garde movement in European art actually thrived on the commercial appeal of anti-commercialism at the turn of the twentieth century. Thus, one might say that the delicate membrane thought to encase and protect the category "art" from contamination with

the vulgar "commodity" has been eroded and dissolved from both sides. No longer treatable as distinct and separate categories, the art-artifact-commodity triad must now be merged into a single domain where the categories are seen to inform one another rather than to compete in their claims for social primacy and cultural value.

THE DECOR OF NOSTALGIA IN THE 1990S

If the public space of the museum is the site of art and artifact, then the private space of the home is the site of the commodity. A wider public acceptance of "ethnic" and "tourist" arts, whose legitimacy was cogently argued by such scholars as Graburn (1976a) and Jules-Rosette (1984), has in recent years become routinized through a series of publications that seek to justify the use of "natural" objects in modern home and interior design. Coffeetable books with such alluring titles as *Living with Folk Art* (Barnard 1991), *Ethnic Interiors* (Hall 1992), and *Ethnic Style* (Innes 1994) perpetuate many of the myths of authenticity and primitivist nostalgia that flourished during the Victorian era. The consumption and recontextualization of the art commodities within domestic settings have, for more than a century, provided the ultimate rationale for their production, for it is the private consumer rather than the museum or the scientific investigator who provides a market on a scale that motivates global production and circulation of these objects (see Halle 1993b). The museum increasingly acts as a purveyor of goods as well as a custodian of art and artifact. Gift shops, offering "museum reproductions" and commoditized "fine arts" and "ethnic arts," bridge the boundary between the academic precinct and domestic consumption (see Zilberg 1995).

The long-standing continuity between public and private space is well illustrated by the writings of a turn-of-the-century British colonial officer named T. J. Alldridge, a man of middle-class background and average talents who nevertheless played an instrumental role in establishing colonial rule over the rural interior of Sierra Leone. In his two books on the new Sierra Leone protectorate, Alldridge regularly expressed admiration for traditional forms of Mende textiles. As early as the 1880s, at an initiation celebration held only fifteen years or so after the establishment of direct contact, he already expressed nostalgia for the passing of older forms of "handicraft." The display of traditional country cloths was, he wrote, "a pleasure to behold, and reminded me of past times. Such large and elaborately hand-worked cloths are not now to be obtained, as the choice country-grown cotton and the subdued tints of the vegetable dyes are giving place to imported yarns of harsh and crudely bright colours, as distasteful to the eye as the others were inviting. That, however, is in the march of trade and the creating of new wants" (1910: 227).

Elsewhere, Alldridge noted his negative response to the hybridization that had inevitably occurred as the result of "the march of trade," specifically to the new uses the Mende found for imported cloth. "I must admit," he wrote, "that these modern things do not harmonise with the bulky fibrous costume [of the masked spirit impersonators], and considerably detract from the characteristic effect of this barbarous dress with which so much fetish and mystery is associated" (1910: 223–24). Alldridge's ultimate response to the perceived dilemma of the Western witness to modernization is almost shockingly contemporary: "A few of us, at any rate, regret the good old country-made cloths, and are thankful we managed to secure enough of them to make our English home a pleasure to the eye of every artist who sees them there" (58). Alldridge's remarks reproduce with remarkable economy the characteristic form of class discrimination based on taste, rare art collecting (Alsop 1982), and domestic display (as theorized by Bourdieu 1984). They also convey with an equally remarkable transparency the way in which the paradigm of authenticity was directly generated by imperialist economics, its problematic results, and its characteristic form of resolution: consumption. The example of Alldridge demonstrates, finally, the parallelism of public and private forms of consumption—of the ethnology museum and the intimate domestic display, for he collected not only for his living room but also for important British museums.[11]

Modern texts on interior decorating articulate and further develop similar views. In particular, three major themes may be discerned: (1) that "ethnic" art is closer to nature and therefore less artificial than its modern counterpart; (2) that the "ethnic" arts of all regions share a common denominator, making them largely interchangeable and somehow comparable on a formal level; and (3) that "ethnic" art represents the final, fleeting testimony to the tenuous existence of rapidly vanishing worlds.

One recent book on interior decoration, subtitled "Decorating with Natural Materials," opens with an approving nod toward a passage from Owen Jones's 1856 treatise *The Grammar of Ornament:* "'If we would return to a more healthy condition, we must even be as little children or as savages; we must get rid of the acquired and artificial, and return to and develop normal instincts'" (quoted in Hall 1992: 10). The author goes on to distinguish, however, between the "return to the natural," which characterized the period of the 1960s and early 1970s—"the much-reviled 'hippy ethnic' . . . with its joss sticks and Indian bedspreads"—and what is happening in Europe and North America in the 1990s. Interest in "ethnic" arts, according to the author, "is not a rejection of the way we live, it is almost a way of coming to terms with it by keeping in touch with our fundamental sensual appetites for beauty and creativity. . . . [Ethnic arts] work best in the most modern interiors, where crudeness and sophistication can act as a foil to each other" (Hall 1992: 13, 16). Thus, the "return to the natural" is viewed more as a frivolous or con-

trastive enhancement to the modern than as an outright rejection of the fundamental triumph of industry and capitalism. Just as the threatened indigenous inhabitants of the world's rainforests can putatively be saved by watching rock stars' heartfelt music videos, filmed on whirlwind jaunts through the Amazon, ethnic arts purport to evoke the barbarity of untamed nature without encroaching too deeply on the creature comforts of modernity.

And just as all "ethnic" worlds are thought somehow to be closer to nature than their "modern" counterparts, so too these ethnic worlds are thought to share attributes that bond them together in a "fraternity of otherness," making them mutually intelligible to one another while remaining uniformly foreign, and sometimes wondrous, to those who inhabit the West. "It is interesting to realise," writes the author of *Ethnic Interiors,* "that ethnic cultures, even those from opposite corners of the world, have always shown a striking similarity of expression and inspiration; the ethnic motifs and artefacts from one continent often sit happily with those of another" (Hall 1992: 18).[12] This Disney-like portrait of a world united by the simplicity of common attributes—the "erasure of inequality" that binds the "family of nations" together in the sentimental theme-park lyrics of "It's a Small World" (see Maalki 1994: 51–52)—is sometimes played against the academic dogmatism that supposedly seeks to complicate this paternalistic model. In advising her readers how to create the perfect "ethnic" interior, one design author suggests, "Authenticity is all very well, but harmony of decoration and colour are more satisfying to the humble amateur of interior design—you want to create an atmosphere that gives you pleasure, not research a dissertation" (Innes 1994: 76–77).

The discussion of "authenticity" in the above passage reveals an interesting twist in the overall concept of cultural "purity," which has generally characterized definitions of authenticity in non-Western art (see Steiner 1994: 100–103). The quest for the pristine and nonhybrid is criticized in this new literature as a haughty pursuit of pedantic scholars and learned connoisseurs. The "masses" are told to celebrate hybridity because, the argument goes, in the end all ethnic cultures are pretty much alike. So, ironically, whereas earlier writings on collecting "primitive" art stressed the importance of cultural homogeneity, the new argument celebrates hybridity by denigrating the uniqueness of different cultural identities. One argument constructs an artificial world in which there is ideally no contact among cultures; the other portrays a kind of Lévy-Bruhlian world, in which contact is irrelevant because primitiveness is a quality shared by all those deemed Others.

Finally, recent publications on "ethnic style" continue to inscribe the idea, articulated a century earlier by Alldridge, that objects of "ethnic" art are being rescued, like victims off a sinking ship, from vanishing cultural worlds (see Clifford 1987: 122). As Nicholas Barnard writes in *Living with Folk Art:* "When the collector takes time to visit an ethnographic museum, or attends

a private view of a tribal art exhibition at a culture centre or gallery, sipping wine amongst fellow guests, he or she is surrounded by the wonders of a world now extinct or near-extinct, and will have cause to dwell upon what has now been lost in the tides of acculturation" (1991: 65).

From the earliest times of contact and colonialism to the present day, the worlds in which "ethnic" arts are produced are said to have been teetering precariously on the brink of extinction. Producers, middlemen, and consumers have all capitalized in their own ways on this myth of imminent demise and on the frenzied acts of collecting engendered by the fear of extinction. In the end, however, it is apparent that each generation reclassifies the arts of world cultures in order to set high against low, authentic against touristic, traditional against new, genuine against spurious.

The illusion of "authentic art" could probably not persist were it not for the invention of its baser counterparts against which aesthetic merits can be measured and judged. Just as Mary Douglas demonstrated so convincingly in *Purity and Danger* (1966) that the category "sacred" could not exist without its "profane" opposite, so too the authentic could not survive without its unorthodox antithesis—the inauthentic (see Steiner 1996a: 213). But the very impermanence of the boundaries that separate the "good" from the "bad" reveals the mystification imposed by the whole system of classification and its judgments of taste. Distinctions between categories of art, artifact, and commodity are projections of individual experience that reveal, in the end, far more about those who collect objects than those who produce them. One author of a how-to book on ethnic interior decor, for example, asks her readers to consider the question "When does ethnic art become the much-disdained 'souvenir'"? (Hall 1992: 16). Her own answer is disclosed in an anecdote. "Back home, a cheap blue and white Moroccan plate, even though it was one of hundreds on a market stall, will continue to give the same thrill that made your heart beat faster when you first saw it on the streets of Marrakech. The expensive panic-buy at the airport, however, will always be a souvenir in the worst sense" (16).

Thus, the solution to defining the authenticity of an object circulating in the networks of world art exchange lies not in the properties of the object itself but in the very process of collection, which inscribes, at the moment of acquisition, the character and qualities that are associated with the object in both individual and collective memories (see S. Stewart 1984). In order to interpret such objects we must begin to unpack the baggage of transcultural encounter with which they travel and search for the meanings and memories stored inside.