The Contemporary Production of "Antique" Benin Bronzes in Benin City and Cameroon[1]

Barbara Plankensteiner

Fig. 1 Oba and Queen, Benin City 2006. Coll. Museum für Völkerkunde Vienna, inv. no. 184.376 a, b. © KHM with MVK and ÖTM. Photo: Alexander Rosoli.

Berswordt-Wallrabes' and the Stiftung Situation Kunst's initiative to organize a conference at Ruhr-University in Bochum on *Original – Copy – Fake?* is an important step in raising public awareness for a problem that is troubling experts. It could compel collectors, dealers and curators to evaluate artworks offered on the market more critically. The conference enabled a range of experts from various fields of study – art historical, anthropological and the technical/natural sciences – to openly address concerns about the increasing appea-

rance of copies and fakes on the African and Asian antiquities market and harbored in collections.

Whether or not the conference proceedings offer a handbook that could serve as a guideline for detecting fakes, the findings may convince the interested collector, dealer or appraiser to apply caution in judging the authenticity of presumably antique artworks with unclear provenances. Indeed, they could also help those who dared to express reasonable doubts on the authenticity and quality of certain art objects.

Prominent experts in the field have recently warned of the proliferation of fakes in African art, especially Benin art (Cole 2003, Blackmun 2003, Nevadomsky 2004, Homberger and Stelzig 2006). These appeals have been neglected by most emerging collectors in the field, either because they are not aware of the journals in which these scholars publish, or because these issues are not discussed by journals addressed to collectors and the art market. Further, there is the emergence of presumably scholarly journals, largely distributed and easily available on the book market. Serious scholarly essays are interspersed with other contributions aimed at publicizing collections of doubtful artworks or which give prominence to testing methods that have a doubtful validity, or a validity based on shaky testing and analysis criteria. In this whirl of lab analyses and ruffled collectors' collars, uninitiated art lovers and even museum professionals have difficulty separating serious from spurious approaches, authentic pieces from copies, and in finding an exit out of a labyrinthine mixture of appraisals.

This paper sketches a research project concerning the production of so-called Benin and Ife art in Cameroon, a major center of production and distribution for copies of artworks from major historical art traditions in Africa. It relates this production to comparable works from Benin City which are further analyzed by Barbara Blackmun in this volume.

For the last 5 years I worked on a large international exhibition project on Benin art and culture, that opened in Vienna on May 8, 2007.[2] The exhibition is exceptional because it reunites for the first time major artworks from museum collections worldwide after their dispersal as a consequence of the British invasion of Benin in 1897 (Plankensteiner 2007). Our selection of Benin artworks was entirely confined to museum collections and provenances related to the Benin expedition – apart from some 20th-century works which we included to show contemporary styles (fig. 1). One reason for these choices was that we sidelined involvement of objects with undocumented provenances despite attempts to convince us to include them. There are several good and documented Benin artworks in private collections, but many more that are not.

In preparing for the exhibition I visited the major Benin collections worldwide and documented their holdings. Many are not published apart from early publications around the turn of the 20th century, especially, and most obviously, in Felix von Luschan's compendium, still a most valuable resource book for an overview of the complexity, range of styles, and types of Benin artworks. This experience gave me a valuable inside view of the kind and quality of Benin works existing in such "old" collections and of the characteristic Benin iconography.

Fig. 2 Figure of a Benin dignitary produced in Cameroon. Private collection. Photo: Barbara Plankensteiner, with permission of the owner.

Fig. 3 Copy of a Benin plaque and two leopard figures in Benin style produced in Cameroon. Private collection. Photo: Barbara Plankensteiner, with permission of the owner.

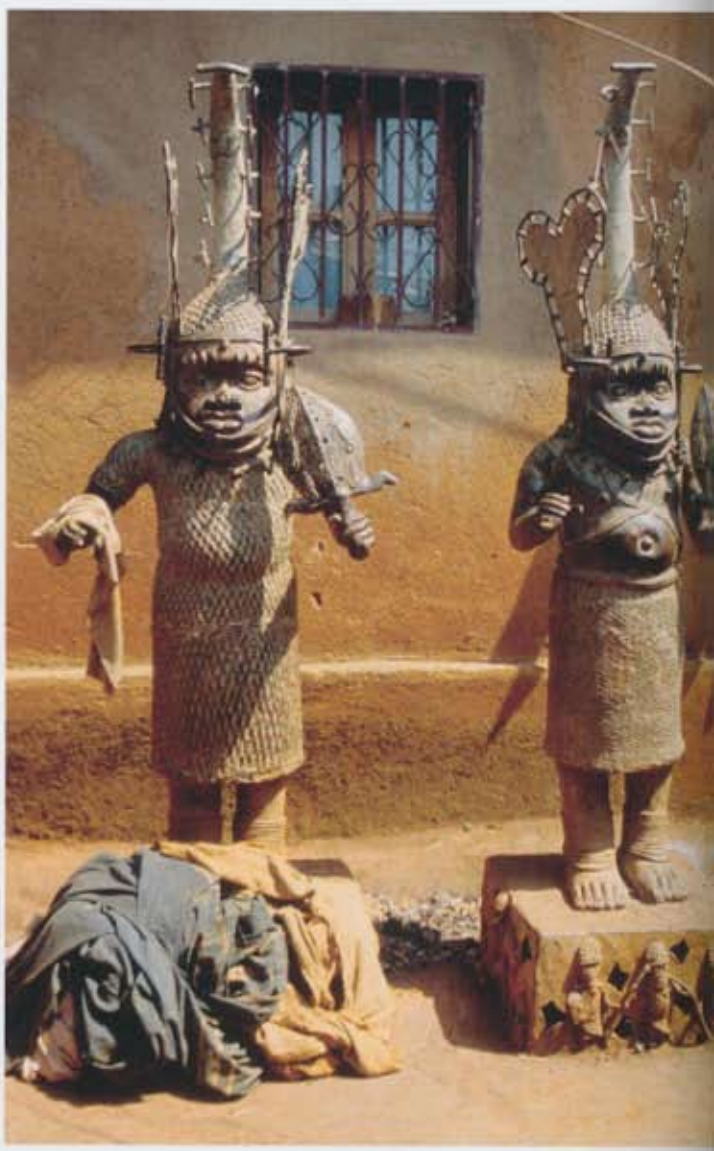

Fig. 4 Two brass figures depicting Benin kings, Fumban 2004. Photo: Barbara Plankensteiner.

The Vienna Ethnological Museum owns one of the most well known collections of Benin art. It has been published in a still-distributed volume that provides an illuminating introduction to the study of Benin art (Duchâteau 1994). The Vienna museum is therefore often approached by people owning "Benin" pieces and seeking assessment of objects in their possession. One of the duties of museum curators in a public institution consists in attending to such requests. However, no written evaluations are provided, nor are appraisals given. Museum professionals are not commercial experts. They do not offer such services, nor do they charge fees, and they are only tangentially connected with the art market, and do not generally depend upon it.

For the past few years, I have been confronted with an increasing number of rather odd Benin artworks with unproven provenances that seemingly appeared from nowhere and had no relation whatsoever to the immediate art historical consequences of the so-called Benin expedition. Suddenly, several persons (in Austria and Germany) – let me call them amateur collectors – own Benin art works supported by TL test results that prove their antiquity (all having related sources).

In the last decade or so, similar so-called antique artworks from Benin and Ife have swamped the American and European market. Suddenly, a new generation of collectors has emerged, convinced they possess valuable antique art pieces rescued from the nooks and

Fig. 5 Copy of a so-called Benin messenger figure, Fumban 2004. Photo: Barbara Plankensteiner.

crannies of the "dark continent," bought at enticingly low prices in relation to a presumptive actual market value. Large art collections including presumed Benin antiques appeared also in Africa, notably in Nigeria. Benin and Ife objects from such collections or from dealers have started appearing in African art exhibitions, mainly in provincial museums or museums in the metropolitan areas with no or little previous experience in African arts. The institutions hosting such exhibitions typically have no in-house specialists in African art, or their personnel has knowledge limited to the mainstream texts and generic African art books. Projects of this sort are known to have taken place in Europe, the US and in the newer Asian markets. All feature Benin artworks that resemble the published and well known pieces. Generally, they are of lesser quality, but disguised by first-class photography in glossy catalogues. Most curious and puzzling is the collaboration of known scholars and museum curators, who contributed texts and object descriptions for the catalogues; such collaborations in their way authenticate the objects on display or pictured. Some of these experts were caught unawares, with the real intent and contents of the exhibition obscured. Some have experienced a shocked awakening in seeing the final published product, when it was too late to act and to withdraw their texts. Others might have left critical issues open, obscured or ignored them.

In 2001 a museum expert was sued and involved in a lengthy lawsuit because he had declared in an interview that some artworks in an exhibition on Ife, Benin and Akan art at the Pforzheim Schmuckmuseum were forgeries. This was followed by a lengthy dispute on whether TL results suffice to prove the antiquity of an object, or if an expert's view based on experience and stylistic comparison is more valuable (Schmuckmuseum Pforzheim und Stiftung Vergessene Kulturgüter 2000; Binanzer 2001, Mostbacher-Dix 2001; Forkl 2002). Only recently, Homberger and Stelzig (2006) critically evaluated another exhibition project focusing on Gabon art presented in a museum in Heidelberg. They pleaded for quality control and the involvement of trustworthy experts, and underscored the public responsibility of museums. Another case in point is the Kreissl collection in Prague, exhibited at the Hradshin and presented as a gift to the Czech National Gallery, which formerly did not own any African art. After the show's opening with Vaclav Havel, the collection received acclaim in the renowned German art journal *Weltkunst*. Only later was the show de-masked as a burlesque (Schweizer 2002). The critical voices of African art experts at the Prague Ethnological Museum were not heeded, and only after consultation with outside experts were the objects withdrawn, the conclusion being that they were crude copies of known artworks, i. e. Fang figures copied from artworks at the Berlin Ethnological Museum or well known Congolese nkisi figures from Tervuren, but in gigantic sizes, probably originating from Cameroonian workshops (specializing in characteristically larger size copies).

All this nourished my suspicion when by chance I met an Austrian private collector who invited me to see his possessions. I was amazed! He had amassed hundreds of artworks, masks, sculptures of all

Fig. 6 Clay cores partly covered with wax for leopard figures and leopard heads in Benin style, ready to be finished in the storage of a caster at the rue d'Artisanat in Fumban 2004. Photo: Barbara Plankensteiner.

Fig. 7 Copies of Ife heads and a Benin hornblower figure at a workshop in Bamenda 2004. Photo: Barbara Plankensteiner.

sorts, copies of Nok terracottas and large numbers of Benin bronzes in unusual sizes and iconographies (figs. 2, 3). Several reminded me of pieces I had encountered earlier in assessing objects shown to me. The collector shared some of my doubts concerning the authenticity of parts of his treasures but had plans for an exhibition and was thinking of employing testing methods to verify the authenticity of his holdings. He had two certificates written in French and signed by "Le Roi Ogoni du Benin" with a stamp "Palais Royal sa majeste Roi Ogoni, Benin" testifying to the authenticity of the Benin pieces and their legal export. One certificate states that a figure of the king of Benin 110 cm high, a Benin plaque and some bronze objects originate from Benin and the second, that the collector and the trader are authorized to "commercialize" all the objects (that already reside in Austria). The authorization even bears the stamp of a Benin ministry of information and culture (Ministère de l'information et de la Culture du Bénin) with an image of an Ife head in the center.

Such documents are just one example of how clever deception works to create a scam that collectors fall for. The deception in this case used the common confusion of the French-speaking Republic of Benin with the former Benin kingdom, now the province Edo State in Nigeria. Often Ife and Benin works are confounded by gallery owners who haven't a clue and fail to become suspicious. In fact, the confusion between the Republic of the Benin and Benin kingdom as well as that between Ife and Benin could be taken as an easily detectable feature testifying that objects originated in Cameroon. There I often encountered this confusion in talking with dealers or casters. As we know, narratives often travel with the objects (see Steiner 1994).

The most important consequence of my encounter with the abovementioned collection was that it disclosed to me the source for a special kind of "Benin art," which I had not seen in any of the bronze casting workshops in Benin City, and that produced artworks and replicas of antiques in a clearly different fashion. The private collector had bought most of his objects from a friend that was a Cameroonian art dealer and he asked me to accompany him on his next trip to Cameroon. This was an exciting opportunity to get in touch with dealers who work worldwide. I lived in the house of a young entrepreneur in Fumban who exports so-called antiquities to France and from there to Germany, where he meets the collector's friend, who operates from Belgium. I visited brass casting workshops, with the hope of documenting production and styles. Together with Christraud Geary and Michael Rowlands, scholars who have worked for decades in the area, we discovered a range of production and a quality of works that was breathtaking (fig. 4).

Of nine workshops I visited in Fumban, eight produce Benin and Ife-style objects (figs. 5, 6). Other workshops exist in Bamenda (fig. 7). The artists in the workshops specialize according to styles: there are artists catering to Benin-style pieces (Ife included) or Bamum-style (sometimes also called Tikar). Often, these intersect in hybrid styles merging Benin and Grassfields iconography. The raw material for the casts is scrap material, e. g. discarded water pipes on faucets; for the large sculptures I was told that the brass is imported from Chad.

At this point it is not possible to ascertain when and how this production of Benin-style castings began. Its appearance, however, is no doubt closely linked to a boom in the art trade, with art traders or the middlemen being the major patrons.

The earliest documented artworks in brass pointing in this direction are three brass heads collected by Paul Gebauer from Salefou Mbetnkom, which he cast in 1946 in Bamenda. According to Gebauer, Salefou was inspired by an Ife head on a Nigerian six-pence stamp, which he copied in the round (see Cosentino 1991:253, fig. 14a, b). The head clearly combines characteristic features of Bamum art, such as the rendition of the bulging eyes, with ones imitating the original Ife piece. Gebauer (1979) maintained that Salefou cast another two portrait heads, this time in a distinctive Bamum fashion, although in one he borrowed elements from Ife examples, such as the so-called cat's whisker markings also found in Benin art and the neck-rings.

His method anticipates the approach of the contemporary casters, likewise characterized by such syncretistic styles. The Salefou examples are the only ones documented for that period. Walter Hirschberg, the Austrian anthropologist, visited Fumban in 1959 and documented the art production with a special focus on the brass casters. In his reports, including a detailed account of the brass casting technique, he gives an overview of the types of objects produced but does not mention the existence of any artworks influenced by foreign models (Hirschberg 1960, 1962). He had visited the workshops on the Rue d'Artisanat in Fumban and near the palace. At that time Salefou still worked in Bamenda and only after the 1960s did many of his earlier apprentices or relatives move back to Fumban and open workshops. Two workshop owners in Fumban learned their craft in Bamenda and opened their own business in Fumban in the 1970s (Geary 1982). However, researchers working in Bamum at that time

did not record any information on foreign styles being copied. Either no such pieces were produced during the 1960s and 70s or nobody considered them worthy of attention because they were categorized as commodities (export art) or because of their hybridity. Daniel Crowley's (1979) report on the art market in Duala and Yaounde only mentions the innovative huge Tikar brass thrones and figures, which for him were a revelation because he had never seen anything like that before.

The earliest record I could find for a Benin-style piece is a 1981 photograph of works by a caster and owner of a large brass casting workshop in Fumban. He opened his business in 1972. In this photograph are two clearly Benin-inspired objects, a plaque and a queen mother figure, with two brass heads reflecting Salefou's earlier attempts but in a newer Ife-derived version (fig. 8). Two of this caster's relatives went to Nigeria during the Biafra War in about 1975–78 and brought back some Benin pieces to sell them in Fumban. He copied them and that's how he recalls having started this production. Before that, he made only Bamum-style pieces that included masks, statues or the popular horse rider figures. He claims to have invented the large Bamum or Tikar figures (fig. 9) and owns a photograph of one of his early pieces dated 1979. Now, along with those, he creates the most impressive Benin-derived artworks I have seen. He also explains that he was the first to cast spectacular large-size Benin figures, of which the earliest date back to 1994 (fig. 10). A group of gigantic figures of a king with retainers was sold to Spain in 2003 according to the caster (fig. 11). In the meantime, such figures are being copied by former apprentices. It takes about two years to complete such a large sculpture, on which seven to eight persons labor. The sculptures are cast in several parts, then welded together (fig. 12). This is a technique also employed for smaller figures such as the leopards and even for gigantic plaques, and is not a feature of the authentic antique Benin artworks, which were cast in one piece.

The casters draw their inspiration mostly from books (fig. 13). Several artists showed me publications they copied from; they also used photocopies which were sent to them by foreign patrons ordering such pieces. Many have internalized the features of Benin pieces and out of memory create their own personal Benin style. For a caster interviewed on the Rue d'Artisanat, this specific feature of inventing new categories or enlarging the Benin canon adds to the quality of "Benin artworks" produced in Fumban, which to his view are more imaginative and ingenious than their Benin City counterparts. Compared to the contemporary Benin City castings even of the antique types, the Bamum Benin-style artworks are recognizable because of their free combination of iconographic elements and their neglect of Benin art traditions. Edo casters are faithful to traditional iconography and their innovations are instead new genres within contemporary styles (figs. 14, 15). The Bamum casters deliberately create new figurative sculptures fashioned after dignitaries or court officials depicted on the antique Benin plaques, which in old Benin did not exist as freestanding figures. Such figures are placed on quadrangular bases densely covered with relief images. Since on the plaques the prototype figures are depicted frontally, Cameroon casters have to invent their backs. These are ironically often crafted after one of the Vienna dwarfs, which is also published in a side view (Duchâteau 1994: 75), and his humpback is often adopted.

Fig. 8 A 1981 photograph showing copies of an Ife head, a Benin plaque, a Benin queen mother figure and an Ife-inspired Bamum head. Photo: Barbara Plankensteiner.

Fig. 9 Two over-life-size "Tikar" or "Bamum" figures at a casters' workshop in Fumban 2004. Photo: Barbara Plankensteiner.

Fig. 10 Two Benin-style figures nearly 3 meters in height of a warrior and a king. Fumban 2004. Photo: Barbara Plankensteiner.

Fig. 11 Gigantic group of Benin-style figures of a king with retainers sold in 1994. Photo: Barbara Plankensteiner.

Another characteristic feature of the Benin bronzes from Bamum is their mixed iconography. Several king or dignitary figures combine elite symbols from Benin and Bamum; sometimes even incorporating Ife elements. One example is a Benin king wearing his royal coral-beaded skirt but having a bare upper body, something unsuitable with the coral crown. In one hand he holds an eben sword, and in the other a drinking horn, a characteristic feature of Bamum or Grassfields royal imagery and also known from Ife sculpture, where the horn contains powerful substances (fig. 16). This horn is a misinterpreted Benin royal item, a proclamation staff similar to a gong, reserved for the Benin kings but an uncommon object in Bamum. Another example is the dignitary figure carrying a bag on his arm, a characteristic feature for the Grassfields nobility but unknown in Benin (fig. 17). Other figures hold a spear in one hand, bow (but no arrows) in the other and on the arm a shield, a rather peculiar combination. Such syncretistic objects are produced in a range of sizes from 15 cm up to 2.5 meters.

Most of the workshops sell to Cameroonian intermediaries or to so-called "antiquiaires," who travel abroad where they have their own networks of dealers and collectors. Important markets are

Spain, Germany and also South Africa. Some objects are sold in Cameroon to expatriates or tourists.

The workshops in Fumban act as powerful competitors to the brass-casting industry of Benin City, catering to the same market demands for Nigerian antiquities. Several Bamum casters point out that workshop members or relatives have visited Benin City, returning with brass objects that are then copied and transmuted in Fumban. For instance, the enormous copies of the so-called "pot of life" sculptures introduced in Benin City as a new genre in the early 1990s (see Gore 1997) are in Bamum referred to as "royal palm wine calabashes" or "dynastic columns" (fig. 18). It is well known in Benin City that emissaries from Bamum casters are spying around, and they have to hide their agenda so as not to be driven from the casters' quarter.

The scale of the Bamum production represents a threat to the market for the Benin City casters. The competitive advantage is that the Bamum bronzes are cheaper and are produced in much larger numbers. And the export laws from Cameroon are much less restrictive than in Nigeria.

Many Cameroonian copies of Benin bronzes are now offered for sale at market stalls near expatriate hotels in Lagos, along with artificially patinated Benin copies crafted in Benin City. Several have already entered private Nigerian collections, where they are sometimes considered to be provincial styles by local experts.

Most of the fake antique artworks circulating are copied from publications. Therefore, objects in easily available books are the most common. For Benin City, these have been mostly William Fagg's (1990) and Ekpo Eyo's (1977) books, the reprint of Pitt Rivers'

Fig. 13 Caster in Fumban showing the Spanish exhibition catalogue *Magia y Poder* from which objects are copied, 2004. Photo: Barbara Plankensteiner.

Fig. 12 Fashioning of the wax model for the upper body of a gigantic figure in Benin style. Photo: Barbara Plankensteiner.

Fig. 14 Copies of antique leopard figures, a royal ancestral head and a loop figure of a king in the background displayed at a brass casters' workshop in Benin City 2006. Photo: Barbara Plankensteiner.

Fig. 15 Copy of the 18th century royal stool of Oba Eresoyen, a contemporary pot of life sculpture, a copy of an 18th century ram aquamanile and of an Osun head on the shelf of a brass casters' shop in Benin City 2006, all artificially patinated. Photo: Barbara Plankensteiner.

Fig. 16 Two Benin-style figures, the right one depicting a king with a disfigured eben sword, the left holding a horn, Fumban 2004. Photo: Barbara Plankensteiner.

Fig. 17 Benin-style figure showing a dignitary holding a sword in his right hand, a bag on his left arm and a spear, Fumban 2004. Photo: Barbara Plankensteiner.

Fig. 18 A so-called "royal palm wine calabash" in brass crafted after a Benin City innovation (see fig. 16), Fumban 2004. Photo: Barbara Plankensteiner.

Fig. 19 Copies of published antique Benin artworks in Benin City, ca. 1985. Photo: Joseph Nevadomsky.

(1990) book on his collection and also the objects exhibited either in the Benin or Lagos museums (fig. 19). Most popular are the pairs of leopard figures fashioned after the famous pair in the Lagos museum, and the queen mother head from that same collection is likewise reproduced in large numbers. Armand Duchâteau's (1994) book on the Vienna collection is popular: hence the existence of so many dwarf figures or horse rider plaques (figs. 20–23). This book is also well known in Cameroon, as is the recent book on the African art collection of Berlin by Joachim Koloss (1999), which suddenly generated examples of the well known Berlin plaques such as the one showing the interior of the royal palace, or the singular plaque of Portuguese leopard hunters in several variations. In Fumban I also encountered *Magia and Poder* (see fig. 13), a Spanish exhibition catalogue of the late 1990s featuring Benin bronzes from museums in Nigeria and Vienna (Fundación La Caixa, 1998). A particular trait of the copies is their variety of sizes, which do not conform to the originals.

Narratives are fabricated to craft authenticity of the objects. There is a notion that not all the antique Benin bronzes and ivory carvings left the African continent at the time of the Benin expedition, as is commonly supposed, but that some survived in Nigeria – hidden on shrines or excavated in the bush – and have appeared only now. This could be the case for single pieces, but how could this possibly be true for thousands of artworks, all of very close appearance, styles disparate from the known artworks in the historic collections? Another argument is that these so-called new finds are provincial styles and therefore not accepted as part of the Benin canon and dismissed by stubborn experts. Yet, several objects in provincial styles reside in museum collections; they are fairly well known, little researched, not published, and they look completely different from what is offered today on the market. Blackmun (2003) also refers to another favorite story told: that an actual chief inheriting his family's shrines sells their furnishings to make some quick cash. This could well be the case for real, but as we know from research in the 1960s by Bradbury or particularly William Fagg, who documented several local shrines,[3] only few antique artworks have survived on such shrines of court dignitaries or village chiefs and particularly not bronze plaques, cast leopard figures or queen mother heads in styles inspired by artworks attributed to the 16th or 17th centuries. Objects handed down for generations are more likely to be smaller or less prominent items that chiefs use, such as pendant masks. Nevadomsky (2004) refers to one such object.

Behind much of this is the conceptual aura of Africa as mystic, ritually endowed, a far-away and dangerous continent. It is an imagined Africa, where valuable hidden treasures await discovery by Western art lovers, lost and secret treasures of the jungle – the perfect play-

Fig. 20 Two Benin brass figures of court dwarfs, 14th–15th century. Museum für Völkerkunde Vienna, inv.nos. 64.743, 64.745. © KHM with MVK and ÖTM. Photo: Alexander Rosoli.

Fig. 21 Copies of the antique Benin dwarfs at a workshop in Fumban 2004. Photo: Barbara Plankensteiner.

ground for smart dealers catering to the beliefs of naïve collectors. Christopher B. Steiner (1994) in his study of the mechanisms of exchange of African art, following its route from the centers of production to the Western art market, has amply described the cherished illusion of discovery as one of the main market mechanisms, along with the manipulation of contexts and the perception of African art dealers as mere suppliers of raw material, unaware of the real value of their traded pieces. Adept African producers and middlemen play upon the Western trope of the African Continent.

Steiner also relates a telling episode he witnessed at an Abidjan market between a European tourist and a local trader. The European offered a watch of a specific brand in exchange for a mask the art trader was selling. The dialogue between the two centered on the authenticity of the two items to be exchanged. The European questioned the authenticity of the mask, the trader was concerned about the genuineness of the brand of the watch. The buyer was looking for an authentic symbol of "traditional" Africa and the African seller for an authentic symbol of Western modernity. In both of their searches for a genuine object of the other's culture they were driven by an imagined reality and only got approximations of the real (Steiner 1994:128–129).

Could this all be an explanation for collectors' conviction that they own authentic pieces even though they often paid 100 times less than what well documented Benin artworks usually go for? How could they possibly believe that the sellers of these objects would not be aware of their real market value, and sell them at such low prices?

This coincides with the perception of a degeneration of African art due to colonialism and modern consumption and of an inability of contemporary artists to produce artworks in a high quality comparable to that of their forefathers. I hope this paper offers evidence that this is definitely untrue and that the art of brass casting is very much alive. The customer can commission whatever he wants and he'll get it. In Cameroon the Benin and Ife copies are mostly produced in patinated versions. In Benin City most of the pieces are left with a shiny surface, but if a customer prefers an antique finish, that can be done while he waits. There are several methods to do it.

To conclude, it would be completely misleading to term brass casters' workshops either in Benin City or Fumban as forgers' workshops. They produce objects that are commissioned and, even if they are copies of antique artworks, they are produced openly. For the casters there is no hidden agenda; they are clear about the

things they produce being replicas and in some instances artificially patinated to suit European tastes. These objects only turn into fakes when they are later sold by intermediaries as real antiques, sometimes supplied with artificial clay cores that allow TL testing that results in a deceptive age determination. Or, as Steiner remarked (1994:156):"(...) although traders fashion and market images of Africa and African art, these images are constrained by the buyer's *a priori* assumptions about what is being bought – the images are constructed to *satisfy* demand rather than to *create* demand".

As a final remark, what remains is to underscore an appeal that has been repeatedly made over the last years: Scientific/ technological methods alone can't prove conclusively the authenticity of presumed antique bronze/brass castings. Only together with a stylistic, art historical or anthropological analysis by an expert in the field can they offer helpful results. Or, as Joseph Nevadomsky (2004: 1) has put it: "Good science combines method and intuition." Such intuition can be interpreted as connoisseurship, a competency that has to grow over many years of intensive object study and long-term experience with the artworks in question: "This aspect of connoisseurship is aesthetics. The understanding of "beauty" and, in a larger sense, quality, the appreciation or analysis of form in art ..." (Cole 2003:86).

[1] In this essay I express my personal scientific viewpoints.
I thank Joseph Nevadomsky for his help in editing my English.

[2] The project has been developed in cooperation with the Berlin Museum of Ethnology, initially with the Bundeskunsthalle Bonn and Gisela Völger as their external curator, and the Chicago Art Institute. After Vienna, the exhibition will be shown at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris, then in Berlin and finally in Chicago. Several Benin experts have assisted in the development of the concept and the selection of artworks; Barbara Blackmun and Joseph Nevadomsky have been deeply involved and shared their knowledge as major consultants to the project. Close cooperation with the Nigerian authorities and the Royal Palace in Benin helped to engage academic and amateur historians to contribute to the catalogue and include their interpretative views and the appreciation of these artworks in Benin today.

[3] See for instance his large photo documentation at the Royal Anthropological Institute in London.

Fig. 22 Relief plaque with horseman, Benin style, brass. Thermoluminiscence analysis: 500 years old; metallurgical and patina analysis: 16–17th century; Pb-210 analysis: 20th century.

Fig. 23 Benin relief plaque with horseman, brass, 16–17th century, Museum für Völkerkunde Wien, inv.no. 64.796. © KHM mit MVK und ÖTM. Photo: Alexander Rosoli.

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